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REDEMPTIVE FAILURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SPORTS LITERATURE

by

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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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A section of the discussion on memory and childhood from the chapter on the baseball narrative will be published in an upcoming edition of the journal *Aethlon*.

Abstract

This thesis explores America's fascination with its own sports as purveyors of national identity. American literature has found unique inspiration in sporting competition, not only depicting professional athletes, but drawing from the experiences of fans and amateurs. While the athlete's heroism and eventual fall has been analysed in previous discussions of this topic, my route of inquiry positions decline and defeat as more central and complex concepts. The focus of this thesis is on the remarkably diverse ways in which contemporary writers reimagine aspects of sporting failure both for their characters and within their own creative process. The centrality of failure seems an affront to the United States' celebration of success and victory. However, the common strand in the most ambitious contemporary sports writing is to portray experiences of loss and failure as paradoxical routes to self-affirmation. Postmodern writing on sports has taken from the drama and narrative implicit in sporting contest, but uses this framework to question ideas of masculinity, ethnicity, memory and myth. The writers I discuss incorporate failure into these themes to arrive at points of redemptive discovery.

Why Failing Matters: An Introduction to Failure and Sports Literature

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.¹

Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

With the farming of the verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress²

W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

It is little wonder that sport captures the imagination. When the spectator is engrossed in a game, or even the course of an entire season, they are enthralled by the emotional sweep of a narrative. Sport tells a story and people have a predisposition towards stories of one kind or another. Sport is simply a tremendous vehicle for our most rudimentary narrative urge. In *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004) Christopher Booker identifies a collection of key archetypal plots: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth. Each of these categories is played out perfectly in the steady stream of real-life sporting news reports that flood our television screens, social media spaces and radio waves. Sports narratives adhering to these basic plots fulfil our need for drama. These stories are also an infinite source; each climax leads only to the next game, to the next story.

¹ Beckett, 101.

² Auden, 62-65.

A collection of iconic cases spring instantly to mind. Consider first the trope of overcoming the monster with an element of voyage and return thrown in; look no further than Mohammed Ali's return from boxing exile. Ali was stripped of his heavyweight title and had his boxing license revoked after refusing to fight in the Vietnam War. Three and a half years later Ali returned to the ring, rebuilding his career and reputation. He eventually regained the world title with an improbable victory over the younger, stronger, unbeaten George Foreman in the "Rumble in the Jungle" fight of 1974. The rags to riches plot is one of the most common sports narratives. Few rival the story of Michael Oher who rose to American football stardom from poverty and a broken home. Oher's mother was a drug addict caring for twelve children, while his father spent time in prison. Despite these barriers, Oher went from homelessness to winning the Super Bowl in 2013 with the Baltimore Ravens. These are stories of triumph, but when the account is inverted, becoming the descent from glory to ruin, the narrative gains even greater poignancy. Here we see tragedy depicted in the Aristotelean sense. The fall of Oscar Pistorius is just such a case. The South African Paralympian overcame the amputation of his legs to run with specialist carbon-fibre blades and to become the first double-leg amputee to qualify and compete with able-bodied athletes at the 2012 Olympics in London. The subsequent dark chapters of his life culminating in the fatal shooting of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, depicted a fallen hero in a tragedy of Shakespearian proportions. Likewise the story of Lance Armstrong, who won seven Tour De France titles and overcame testicular cancer, shows the vulnerability of a sportsman placed on a pedestal. Armstrong's compulsive need for victory was his epic downfall. His titles were shown to be fraudulent as he was exposed for using performance-enhancing drugs throughout his career and then

stripped of his previous accolades. If sport provides a readymade story, then it seems natural for writers to depict games in their literary works. Sports provide all the raw materials a writer could want to construct a story of pathos or inspiration.

Sport in the novel has a longstanding tradition. Cricket features in Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) where, in one chapter, Mr Jingle provides detailed commentary for Mr Pickwick of a game between two local teams. Twenty years later, Thomas Hughes' classic *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) also features rugby and a memorable cricket match. Accounts of sports and games can be found in the works of novelists from Thomas Hardy to Salman Rushdie, from Jane Austen to J.M. Coetzee.³ With this in mind, and the authors mentioned, sports in fiction is by no means an American invention, but its centrality to American writing and its importance is unique. Sport in the works previously cited does not have a leading role. It fulfils a certain function, but is not the fulcrum of the plot; it is a theme, aside, or element of a chapter rather than a subject in its entirety. In Europe, a perceived separation between 'high' and 'low' culture has meant that sports have been widely considered unworthy of literary scrutiny. Alan Sillitoe's well-known short story 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner' (1959) and David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1960) are examples of British sporting fiction, but are not canonical texts; their stories incorporate class struggles into sports dramas but are not considered a genre of artistic depth. Even authors known to be great followers of sports have shied away

³ Austen's reference to baseball at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey* (1817) throws doubt on the myth of its American beginnings. In *Can We Have Our Balls Back, Please? How the British Invented Sport* (2008) Julian Norridge uses Austen's work as proof that the sport was invented in Britain forty years before the American lay claim to the game. I will analyse this American 'anxiety' to do with baseball's origins in much more detail in discussing the historical and cultural narrative of the game in the final chapter.

from depicting athletic feats or games as overarching metaphors. Albert Camus may have famously played as a goalkeeper in his youth in Algeria, but his writing rarely depicted 'the beautiful game'.

By contrast, in American writing sports have taken a vastly more prominent position at the heart of many classic texts. As America searched for a literary voice, the nation's newly discovered passion for sports and competition neatly fulfilled a dual purpose. Sports provided national identity and then a source of literary material unexplored to serious extent. Virginia Woolf brings together these two functions when commenting on the success Ring Lardner enjoyed with his baseball stories and novel *You Know Me Al* (1916). In her essay "American Fiction" published in 1925 in the London *Saturday Review*, Woolf concludes that sports "has given him a clue, a centre, a meeting place for the diverse activities of people whom a vast continent isolates, whom no tradition controls. Games give him what society gives his English brother" (123). Sports with a decidedly American identity could both inspire and break free from the 'burden' of a literary heritage and the encumbrance of British colonial rule. In this sense, sports fiction is a peculiarly American genre spawning works that take inspiration from athletes' struggles and fans' pining against a backdrop of desired cultural separation.

American writers who portray sports in the post-war period have forged new ways of engaging with competition unlike anything that has come before. The sports narrative is a useful tool, a skeletal framework, allowing authors to play with a set of standards and conventions. The sports novel is a loose genre because of the diversity of texts it incorporates. What cannot be escaped, however, is the theme of loss that has linked works of many styles over the last fifty years. I earlier mentioned the playing

out of tragedy as a common trope; sports fiction shows a fascination with tales of decline and its characters' doomed sense of inadequacy. If there is a unifying strand running through these novels, poetry and stories, then it is most notably the profound ways that authors have found to depict the individual's failure.

America's "national disease", William James argues, is "[t]he exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success" (260). America's obsession with succeeding and winning has been a defining feature of the nation's psyche, but its undeviating pursuit, often disregarding justness or morality, creates a sense of great unease. When unadulterated success is all that is valued, then failure is all the more inevitable and, when understood as solely in dichotomy, its damage is magnified and continually presented without contextualisation. In truth, from great failures challenges are so often fought and overcome, resolutions hardened and great discoveries are made. Christopher Columbus failed to find trade routes with the East when he discovered land in 1492. Yet in America, failure is still consistently portrayed as the ultimate disaster; that is until a recent change in popular thinking.

In April 2011, *The Harvard Business Review* published a special "failure issue" as a social fascination with the phenomenon reflected a type of "failure chic". This fashion articulates a wider cultural trend. In the business world, hardly surprisingly, it was widely recognised that success was so often dependent on an initial failure and therefore failing should no longer be framed as purely ignominious. More broadly, academic attention to studies of failure has become increasingly prevalent and revealing. Scott Sandage's *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005), Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Gavin Jones' *Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History* (2014) and Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failure of*

David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity and Resistance (2016) are four of the most engaging works tackling the subject with an American slant. These critics show how the dynamics of failure have allowed artists and academics to approach a range of disciplines from posthumanist theories of subjectivity, gender, history, sexuality, biopolitics, as well as literature from a perspective that offers alternative readings. These reworkings provide insight by undercutting the hegemonic order. An exploration of failure can expose the mythic foundations of cultural subtexts that perpetuate normative ideals to the detriment of polysemous narratives. Just as significantly, if 'history is written by the victors' then the voices of those deemed to have 'lost' become an intriguing absence worthy of academic scrutiny. Taking this notion further, I consider the remarkable amount of attention in American sports literature that has been given to the outsider, the lonely hero, and the failed protagonist.

Before the nineteenth century failure in America had slightly different connotations to those of its modern use now firmly embedded in our understanding of a notion of worth. Previously, the term 'failure' was predominantly applied to abhorrent or unmoral behaviour, particularly by men, displaying unchristian values linked to acts of corruption or vice (Sandage, 48). This concept played into a larger narrative of upstanding individuals losing their way due to mistakes in their personal choices. In this period, failure was an occurrence or "an incident, not an identity" (11) and therefore not a label against a man, but a situation that could occur without due diligence and particular conscientiousness of burgeoning yet powerful American ideals. At this time failure was a watchword in common accounts of hubris and misfortune. In *Democracy in America* (1831), Alexis de Tocqueville stresses the

essential aspects of ambition and driving endeavour as markers of American identity that carried great cultural weight throughout the nineteenth century. Failure would befall a man not willing to invest the appropriate work ethic deemed in accordance with American principles in the Constitutional “pursuit of happiness”.

The popular rhetoric of the United States has seen the progressive ideals of westward expansion, capitalist development and the language of exceptionalism extolled against the threat of the fear of unfulfilled promise. In 1871, Walt Whitman, in *Democratic Vistas*, proclaims: “The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time” (930). Whitman’s declaration leaves no space for the nation’s ambition to be tainted by compromise or doubt. In the thinking of the era, glory or failure were the only two alternatives. This type of language both reflected and fuelled broader cultural trends. As the United States economy expanded, failure as a measure of an inadequate self became co-opted by the capitalist narrative of entrepreneurial success. The genesis of the concept of the failed individual can be read into the acceleration of capitalism with the myths of the American Dream and a belief in success being an achievable reward for those with the rectitude and drive to grasp the opportunities that the country could offer. Failure holds particular resonance as the antithesis of the American Dream. In the dominant narrative of American culture, failure is a purely derogatory castigation of deficiency. However, as Sandage points out, the American Dream was a term only coined out of a dramatic failure. The expression came into popular parlance after the economic crash of 1929 when it was coined by writer James Truslow Adams in 1931 (12). Here too the rise of ‘the self-made man’ became common parlance and a culturally accepted phenomenon (Sandage, 236-237). This discourse

reiterated that the individual could choose to be a 'winner' or a 'loser' based on ethics and initiative rather than opportunity or privilege. For a capitalist economy, and still true of contemporary neoliberal societies, wealth and power became the predominant parameters for judging who would be deemed a success. Failure is far from solely an American preoccupation, but as Jones notes, "it takes especially provocative forms in a nation with such a self-conscious and fraught relationship to success" (158). An investigation of failure unearths a peculiarly American anxiety: a psychology beset by success and failure that pervades societal norms to crippling extent.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the association between the idea of failure and a lack of wealth and power was firmly established in the national consciousness. However, the oversimplification that success and failure are objective or dependent on an individual's aptitude to challenge oneself and work hard conceals a multifaceted system in America. In the United States, race, class and gender, to name just some factors, surely have greater importance or are at least as significant as a propensity to work; Halberstam writes that success is more an "outcome of the tilted scales" (3) of the American system. As Sandage and Halberstam have argued so well, crudely perpetuating the binary of 'winning' and 'losing' repeatedly asserts the illusion of the American Dream as an attainable goal in the lives of every citizen. Such an ascendant narrative drives the economic status quo by creating a self-perpetuating system and defence mechanism of the dominant order by offering the fantasy of individual escape: that the American Dream is readily achievable and open to everyone. Stories of meteoric rises to fame and fortune offer hope and promote aspirational myths. Nowhere is this more clearly depicted than in the narrative of the

sports star's rags to riches cliché. Such stories obscure the unlikeliness of such a romantic denouement coming to pass. As one person's success inevitably relies on another's failure, it is necessary to question how the failed individual is depicted and in what way they are forsaken and even punished for their perceived shortcomings and inadequacies. In fiction, a concern with failure is a strangely American preoccupation. For example, in the nineteenth century European novel, characters often make social errors of judgement. By contrast, within "the harsher world of the American novel [...] characters don't make mistakes: more radically, they fail" (Jones, 14). If, as Jones argues, characters in American fiction fail, I consider how authors respond to this dynamic both in terms of their protagonists' lives and their own aesthetic vision. I am interested in upturning the notion of failure to reframe its basic implications to demonstrate how it is worthy of more complex thought and how it can be used to explore the journeys of characters in sports fiction. I show how, conversely, failure can be regenerative and offer more than simply catharsis in a Nietzschean sense, through gaining strength from adversity, but clarity and insight in itself.

Vince Lombardi was a successful American football coach who led the Green Bay Packers to the first two Super Bowl titles in 1967 and 1968. Lombardi is perhaps best known for a motto that exemplified his no-nonsense training approach and the supreme importance he placed on victory: "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing" (Overman, 77). Lombardi's hyperbolic and infamous words reveal the power and centrality of sporting success in American ideology, within and beyond sport, which has rung true for generations of Americans. In 1972, the campaign team formed to gain Richard Nixon re-election adopted Lombardi's maxim as the slogan for their political drive (89). The campaign's ensuing actions and the Watergate scandal in

particular only served to underline its ethos of winning at any cost, regardless of the moral implications of dishonest tactics. The motto has become one of the most repeated quotations in American sports culture; it is synonymous with pregame coaching pep talks, morale-boosting halftime cajoling, and the locker-room bravado of teams at all levels and of all ages. Not until the counterculture movements of the Sixties and Seventies was there a reaction to the general philosophy of Lombardi's assertion in contrast to a more egalitarian sporting etiquette. However, the maxim was never truly overturned and the importance placed on winning remains an essential part of American national identity, and sport is often the vehicle that carries forward these beliefs.

It provides some context to compare Vince Lombardi's quotation with the famous motto of the Olympic Games attributed to Pierre de Coubertin. The Olympic creed states: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well" (Toohey and Veal, 64). Mainstream American sporting ideology encapsulated by Lombardi's legendary words is diametrically opposed to the values of the wider sporting community. To be more accurate, what is generally commended in American sporting traditions is either a source of shame, or not at all celebrated in other sporting cultures. Lombardi would later distance himself from the quotation, arguing he had said or meant something else; regardless of his regret, the power of those words encapsulates a popular worldview (Overman, 84-85). Traditionally American culture has little of the British sentiment for the valiant and dignified loser, or the self-deprecating notion of 'character-building defeat' or 'the taking part' as worthy in

itself. The positive facets associated with sports and games, in particular the scope for teambuilding, physical exercise, the virtues of dedication and athletic honour are almost entirely absent in popular American sporting rhetoric. American sport is enamoured with success, an exaltation of winning at all costs, and the consequential creation of stardom and great financial rewards.

To counter this rather limited construct positioning failure as a mortifying or purely shameful experience, I explore the concept of redemptive failure in sports fiction. In the works selected, the negative consequences of failure such as pain, disillusionment, anger, disenfranchisement, and anxiety are channelled as sources of inspiration in a variety of acts of artistic expression. This study does not analyse the rather pithy or aphoristic sentiment of learning lessons through failure or trite stories of overcoming adversity by simple moral teaching. These types of archetypal sports narratives tell the story of plucky underachievers who come good in the end to be crowned champions against the odds in a saccharine and heart-warming climax.⁴ Instead, I draw on more complex notions of failure in literary depictions, which can be ultimately cathartic or redeeming in themselves. I explore what it means to fail and most importantly, who defines what constitutes a failure? Is the American concept of failure so well established that it offers no multiplicity of interpretation? Can an individual define their own failure, or is this term always a socially constructed paradigm that offers no freeing alternative? I argue that certain sports writing has allowed authors to delve into a counterintuitive version of a specific type of American failure in post-war fiction. Postmodern American sports literature has shown an

⁴ Films such as David Anspaugh's *Hoosiers* (1986), Fred Schepisi's *Mr Baseball* (1992), Boaz Yakin's *Remember the Titans* (2000), and John Lee Hancock's *The Blindside* (2009) all follow this classic plot.

astonishing attention to characters and authors who embrace failure; they search for ways to transmute negative experiences into peculiarly American literary forms.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam asserts: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2). If opportunity is provided for failure to be rethought, then its greatest potential is to grant alternative modes of evaluating the most accepted aspects of experience. Halberstam finds liberation in reappraisal: “Failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (3). Halberstam’s theories offer a critique of the most ubiquitously repressive socio-political structures that serve only to exploit and disempower the weak and underprivileged. Halberstam’s quotation is particularly apt because of its inference of maturity, where failure takes us further from the child’s joy of play and creative expression.

In keeping with Halberstam’s thesis, I test the concept of redemptive failure and point to rereadings of texts where a nadir can be repositioned as an act of self-discovery and understood through empowerment. Failing is often a requisite of an alternative success and should not be in any way feared, but embraced. There is also the paradoxical sense that only through failure can one discover the value of attainment and triumph. In “Success is counted sweetest” (1864), Emily Dickinson poignantly reveals that triumph can only be truly valued by those who never achieve it:

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.
 Not one of all the purple host
 Who took the flag to-day
 Can tell the definition,
 So clear, of victory!
 As he, defeated, dying,
 On whose forbidden ear
 The distant strains of triumph
 Burst agonized and clear!

The vanquished opponent lies beaten on the battlefield, a space that becomes a metaphor for the sports field in many of the works I investigate. He alone can appreciate victory because it has been denied him. In defeat, he experiences the grief-stricken clarity of the unattained prize as the faint triumphant sounds of the victor twists the knife a little deeper. He, like the characters I explore, is more enamoured of success because he has defined himself in the context of failure. Yet, in Dickinson's poem failure is not fully overturned. Success is still the nectar craved.

Such an argument places emphasis on a particularly Western notion of failure by setting the concept in an American context. As a counterpoint, in *The Nobility of Failure* (1975), Ivan Morris charts Japan's literary tradition of admiration for the tragic hero, tracing its development from the fourth century. Japanese culture has a distinct predilection for failed heroes, specifically those whose moral standing is upheld even if their choices will lead to their inevitable destruction. Morris points to a number of examples, including the legend of Saigo Takamori who fought for a lost cause against insurmountable odds only to fail then commit Seppuku when his rebellion against Meiji failed. Morris identifies a public desire to be inspired by heroic defeat; he writes:

The submissive majority, while bearing its discontents in safe silence, can find vicarious satisfaction by identifying itself emotionally with those individuals

who waged their forlorn struggle against overwhelming odds; and the fact that all these efforts are crowned with failure lends them a pathos and characterizes the general vanity of human endeavour and makes them the most loved and evocative of heroes (2)

Japanese culture has celebrated the act of failing against crushing probabilities. Heroes in the Western tradition are much more commonly portrayed as brave and victorious with less sympathy shown for protagonists who ultimately fail. Even the rebellious and tortured Byronic hero is defined more by his personal struggle than by acts of defeat. Likewise, the monomyth, or hero's journey, is a familiar model for a broad range of classical works from Odysseus' quest to Ishmael's voyage in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). In these narratives the hero, through the course of his journey, overcomes setbacks to reach home. The protagonists I explore in postmodern American fiction bridge this cultural divide in a space that offers redemption. They fail in profound and diverse ways. They do not conform to the traditional Western notion of victorious warriors returning home from a journey, but neither do their failures conform to strikingly noble acts of tragic heroism as in the Japanese tradition.

It is unsurprising that the portrayal of traditional heroism has been the defining feature of criticism of larger works on sports fiction. The field of academic studies in American sports writing has broadened over the last twenty-five years. Serious critical investigation of American sports literature began in the Seventies with Wiley Lee Umphlett's *The Sporting Myth and the American Experience: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (1974), the first academic work to give American sports writing focused academic attention in its own right. As American sports have been more widely represented in 'highbrow' American fiction, the scope and level of critical appraisal

has responded to reflect this trend. Sports literary criticism was firmly established by the early Eighties with three thorough and substantial works: Christian Messenger's *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner* (1981), Robert J. Higgs' *Laurel and Thorn: The Athlete in American Literature* (1981) and Michael Oriard's *Dreaming of Heroes, American Sports Fiction, 1968-1980* (1982). No doubt inspired by these texts, *Aethlon: Journal of Sports Literature* was first published in 1989; the journal is still the most prominent journal specifically focused on American sports fiction.⁵

The beginning of the Nineties augmented critical awareness in sports fiction with notable follow-up works; Messenger extended his study by shifting focus to the post-war era in *Sport and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction* (1990). Oriard also continued his analysis changing his thesis somewhat with *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Literature* (1991), a study of the importance of sporting language in American culture over the last two hundred years. The author's project serves to reveal the episteme of American values through two centuries of sporting rhetoric; literary and non-literary sources are presented alongside one another and reinforce Oriard's theory of the power of sporting analogy. My methodology shares with Oriard an interest in charting American popular culture through obscure sources from juvenile fiction, and political rhetoric to film and advertising.. However, I focus on only a handful of literary texts. I analyse these works commenting on their relationship to archetypal narratives and illustrating how a branch of sports writing has found such scope in failure. I argue that the most

⁵ Although *Aethlon* is the only journal devoted solely to sports fiction writing, articles on sports in American literature appear frequently in a variety of scholarly periodicals including: *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Journal of American Studies*, *American Quarterly*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*.

important rift is in the representation of the sporting self outside of the athlete's triumph.

The athlete's own body is the central concern for the hero of much American sports writing. Messenger argues: "In essence, the sports hero begins in free play, delighting in the freedom and self-mastery of his body" (1990, 15). Higgs goes one step further; he contends that "the athlete is not merely the body performing but a self engaged in heroic transcendence of the body" (6). I show that the heroism at play in postmodern sports literature is far removed from its early incarnations and even the interpretations of these critical works. Where sports heroism once derived from classically valiant protagonists, in awe of their own physique and ability, the postmodern version is in greater debt to the existential anti-hero full of doubt and self-loathing. Transcendence may still be sought, but the route to its rewards is far less orthodox and comes as a result of failure not through it. My readings of the works in question draw on the fraught plight of characters overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their control, but able to reconstitute personal meaning. For these writers, heroism seems an antiquated version of identity. The anti-hero in sports fiction does not desire conformity or belonging, but freedom through separation. Veering from empty forms of integration, they are both enticed yet mistrustful of organic heroism, with yearnings beyond spatial chimeras and "temporal dreams" (Messenger, 245).

By highlighting the intersection between sports and failure I draw from the work of four academics who focus on aspects of failed experiences. Sandage's *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* provides background to my thesis by following the lineage of a concept of American failure from its roots and placing it in a historical context. Sandage points to a shifting definition of failure by charting it through one

hundred years of American history. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* broadens the argument specifically to how failure is attributed to the marginalised and how queer theory can articulate a process of revision and reclamation. I contend that it is not only gender theory that can be inspired by a cultural reconsideration of failure as the concept lends itself to other branches of discourse. In her study of David Foster Wallace, Hayes-Brady finds that failure and ineffability are defining features of the author's novels and go some way towards adding to the richness of his fiction. I will draw further on the link between failure and inexpressibility in postmodern texts that call attention to their own workings and even their irreparable faults and inadequacies. In *Failure and the American Writer*, Jones finds common ground in the failures experienced by Mark Twain, Henry James and Herman Melville among others, both in terms of their literary output, and their personal stories of misguided economic endeavours. With the authors he covers, Jones' work is essentially a "prehistory" recognising the parallel course of "[f]ailure's emergent coincidence with modernity" (161). My thesis draws from Jones' groundwork, but extends into the twentieth and twenty-first century towards writing that delves ever further into themes of textual inconsistencies, fragmented structures and the perilous plight of the artist doomed to fall short. The focus on sporting failure and redemption provides an original contribution to knowledge by addressing an aspect of sport fiction that unites a set of notably different texts. Postmodern sports literature outlines a new focus of critical attention on sports fiction. It does so by not solely emphasising the experiences of the athlete, but rather encompassing sport's multifaceted interrelation between spectatorship, media coverage, advertising, as well as the experiences of amateurs. The reshaping that I highlight shows how contemporary sports fiction can

utilise the themes of play, masculinity, identity, ethnicity, memory, and myth to find expression in the flux of athletic definition and through the often neurotic gaze of the sports obsessive.

I label the texts under discussion as fitting within the parameters of postmodern sports fiction. Although I deal with a diverse set of authors with distinct ways of addressing sports in their writing, I suggest that certain specific postmodernist traits are common to all of their works. By postmodernism I refer to not only to an historical period of post-war American society, but to an aesthetic trend. I chart the history of American sports literature, through the three most prominent games, but my focus is on works written from the late Sixties onwards. This time is a watershed moment of experimental American writing where authors such as John Hawkes, William S. Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon, although very different, represent a broad literary movement. This style of writing incorporated a shift in tone away from realism, with sardonic black-humour, where conspiracies and vast systems create unease. Tony Tanner recognises the paranoia this writing evokes in the American “dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action” (15). Furthermore, this genre featured an aesthetic of self-awareness, a tendency towards reflexivity, as well as a sense of absurdity, which would all become hallmarks of a branch of American writing of the Sixties and beginning of the Seventies. These characteristics are evident in the early works of Coover, Exley and DeLillo and would go on to influence writers including Alexie and Wideman. I explore the metafictional concerns of each author where language and storytelling become the basis of what Robert Alter describes in *Partial Magic* (1975) as self-conscious fiction in which a “novel begins out

of the erosion of belief in the authority of the written word” (3). In these texts the construction of narrative is part of the creative endeavour by playfully drawing attention to the artificiality of the artwork itself.

Postmodern writing and the popularity of spectator sports would come together with the publication of a collection of innovative novels. The writing produced in this genre and period often incorporated experimentation in form finding the spirit of play, so essential to games, a fitting metaphor for the inventiveness and possibilities of creative prose. Where sports literature had previously been relatively niche, a genuine canon was being established. The interest American authors afforded to sports after the mid Sixties marked a significant transition. A second reason for this change can be attributed to a common aspect of postmodernism that is typified by a blurring of boundaries, where the distinction of subjects worthy of artistic merit are less clearly defined. Authors were able to synthesise what had often be seen as low culture, as sports and particularly sports fandom had traditionally been perceived, with the high culture of sophisticated literary techniques through richly layered and complex novels. Although forty years earlier Virginia Woolf claimed that American writers were able to draw from sports in a way European writers were not, it took time for this assertion to gain traction. In the second half of the twentieth century where cultural hierarchies of high modernism in art gave way to a Warholian integration of popular culture, sports writing found its own unique space.

It is significant that this funnelling aspect of postmodernism coincided with a growth in sport’s commercialism and professionalism in America. As I trace in detail in the individual narrative sections, sport’s identity underwent serious change in post-war America, and particularly in the Sixties, breaking away from its early amateurism

and popular image as a pastime and leisure activity in the nineteenth century into a vast capitalist venture. In this era team franchises became hugely profitable businesses and sports became a corporate commodity. Mass cultural interest, partly created by the growth of televised coverage and the ubiquitous nature of print media reporting, meant American sport attained larger audiences than ever before. In so doing, sports as a mass spectacle incorporated elements of postmodernism, as Genevieve Rail argues, “in order to better constitute itself in an object of consumption designed for the citizens of postmodernity” (147). Thus sport, from the Sixties onwards, was ever strengthened by hyper-consumption so integral to the capitalist economy and societal change.

The level of interest in American games and the mass-mediated images of sport also served a more progressive cause. The popularity of professional sports reflected and influenced political and cultural change most pointedly by highlighting the transformations in race relations in America. Events such as the 1966 victory for Texas Western in a college basketball championship game with an all-black starting five against an all-white Kentucky team, or the black power salute made by two African American athletes on the podium at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, have become iconic of this period. The prominence of sports in relations to the counterculture movement, as well as indigenous and civil rights activism enabled athletics to be rethought, imbued with distinct narratives, in a shift from simply entertainment, to become a nexus of current cultural issues and concerns ripe for widespread public discourse as well as providing literary inspiration.

Depictions of failure in American sports literature is a vast subject and consequently certain parameters have been drawn to keep the thesis as a focused

study rather than an all-encompassing survey. It has been necessary to draw the boundaries of appraisal around the three major American sports: football, basketball and baseball. These sports are the triumvirate of American culture in terms of spectatorship, participation and nationalistic sentiment (Bairner, 2-6). In making these restrictions there is an inevitable omission of particularly literary sports. Most notably boxing has been deliberately excluded, meaning Leonard Gardner's *Fat City* (1969) is not discussed nor is Norman Mailer's reportage of Mohammed Ali's world heavyweight boxing title win in Zaire in *The Fight* (1974), Joyce Carol Oates collection of essays *On Boxing* (2006) and more recently F.X. Toole's *Rope Burns* (2000). Most significantly, the archetypal sportsman and author Ernest Hemingway receives only passing references to his depictions of boxing and bullfighting. Although he mentions football and baseball in his work, he deals with neither in any significant detail. Other noteworthy contemporary works of more esoteric sports omitted include James Salter's depiction of rock climbing in *Solo Faces* (1979), downhill skiing in Tim O'Brien's *Northern Lights* (1975) and David Foster Wallace's use of tennis in *Infinite Jest* (1996). However, the three sports I have chosen, as I argue below, can certainly lay claim to being the 'most American' and therefore particularly revealing in the cultural context of American failure at the centre of this thesis.

This study also refrains from exploring women's writing on sports. There remains an absence of women writers depicting the three major American sports; the huge gender bias that still exist in sports ought to be taken into account for this fact. The works of Susan Bandy and Anne Darden have begun the long process of redressing the balance in critical reading of women's sports fiction. Kathleen Sullivan's engaging study *Women Characters in Baseball Literature: A Critical Study* (2005) provides a

feminist framework to examine the, often negative, portrayal of women in writing on the national pastime. However, the authors chosen for analysis are some of the more ambitious and innovative male writers in contemporary fiction.

While it would be limiting to write about American sports fiction without referencing classic texts such as Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) and John Updike's *Run, Rabbit* (1960), I have endeavoured to cover new ground. I have made a concerted effort to draw in those authors who have been underrepresented in scholarship particularly Frederick Exley and Lawrence Shainberg, and to a lesser extent John Edgar Wideman, Robert Coover and Sherman Alexie. The works chosen for inclusion are decidedly postmodern texts, all containing playful qualities and self-referential elements. They are also works that relate to loss and failure in a variety of innovative ways, but all offer a complex and, often ambiguous, interpretations of the implications of defeat. I have not confined myself to examining one literary genre, hence my analysis of poetry, short stories, memoirs as well as novels. In some cases, the works in question cross multiple genres such as Wideman's non-fiction memoir *Hoop Roots* (2001) that blurs the boundaries between autobiography, fiction and political essay. Likewise, Exley's piece *A Fan's Notes* (1968) demands to be read as a novel, but crosses into a memoir piece. Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) is presented as a collection of short stories but, with its recurring characters and themes, suggests the fragmented structure of a postmodern novel.

Alan Bairner, Mark Dyson and J.A. Mangan, among many others, have highlighted the role of sports to maintain and promote the United States' insularity and belief in exceptionalism. This introduction will briefly explain the origins and development of the three major sports then follow the evolution of each game to their

present day versions. The purpose of this concise history of America's favourite sports is not to provide a complete overview, but to emphasise unique aspects of these games that will develop my explorations of the narratives of each sport. I will also begin to articulate a broader discourse on sports relationship with distinct facets of American culture. I argue that an essential aspect of football is rooted in the game's role in reasserting American masculinity particularly in times of crisis, basketball is linked to themes of racial segregation and exclusion, while baseball is bound to an evocation of national myth and the hazy quality of memory.

The three sports were invented by men whose names have become enshrined in their backstories. Each game has a distinct heritage with father-figure creators establishing the sports in the nineteenth century with distinct moral purposes. These games were then popularised as they had their rules refined; each followed a different trajectory in terms of their popularity and place in the national consciousness. As these games gained national attention the second facet of their narratives arose in the form of their depictions in art, the popular press and folklore. I chart how these sports have been portrayed in literature thereby establishing their identities, archetypal plots and themes. My methodology will be to illustrate and comment on these narratives further by drawing on different source material such as juvenile fiction, film, advertising and poetry to show how these sports have been embedded in ideas of American identity. These sports' narratives have reflected cultural change and upheaval. I highlight how they have been reimagined during the late nineteenth and twentieth century to convey shifting ideas about America's self-conception. Each chapter follows the same structure; I introduce each sport's narrative and literary history before exploring the works of two writers in details. The pairs of writers I have

selected are intended to be read alongside one another. Their similarities and differences provide routes for further inquiry. I show the convergent ways they undermine traditional sports writing, how they differ in their depictions, but how they each represent a movement towards the uplifting potential of different versions of defeat. I consider the ways these authors draw from the narratives of each sport, but through ideas of failure, reach distinct points of self-knowledge and redemption.

I refer particularly to redemption in failure in these texts where moments of loss, instead of being framed in anguish, are reinterpreted to provide uplift or shown to offer forms of insight as sources of rejuvenation. The idea of redemption that I explore is full of ambiguity; it is derived from a depiction of sporting experience that is originally judged to be catastrophic but, in diverse and complex ways, is lived through to offer the possibility of healing forms of compensation. Redemption may not be found in returning from a defeat to claim victory, but coming to express new understanding. Whether the failure experienced is through loss of control, an inability to fulfil a father's unhealthy ambition, or being overcome in an important game, I suggest that these works show there is invariably a restorative balance to be sought in failure itself. The concept of a vital aspect of failure initiating redemption is integral to my reading of each text. I argue that failure presents revelatory opportunities and the language of spiritual epiphany and salvation is routinely evoked in an American sporting context.

Redemption carries strongly religious connotations which develop my various routes of inquiry. This is most notable in Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968) with its religious subtext and my reading of the novel through its biblical allegory. From scenes evoking the biblical flood and the

sacrifice of Jesus Christ come the most unexpected revelations for the hapless protagonist, and what I will explore as the freeing theoretical play of the text. John Edgar Wideman's use of religious symbolism is equally abundant in his writing. I am interested in how these works depict sport, but hinge on shared themes of remorse leading to quests for self-knowledge and forgiveness. In Exley's *A Fan's Notes* during a scene of sporting humiliation, I will return to in more detail later, the protagonist longs for his father's death. Reflecting on the incident from his youth he writes: "Among unnumbered sins, from that damning wish I seek absolution" (206). Exley and DeLillo depict the father/son bond through the search for resolution with the central memory of adolescent betrayal.

The themes that DeLillo's early and mid-career works explore, drawing from his own Catholic upbringing, are inspired by a redemptive narrative arc with characters in pursuit of atonement from the guilt of their pasts. This is the case in the two works I consider. Firstly, Gary Harkness in *End Zone* (1972) initially retreats from football after his tackle causes the death of an opponent during a college match. Similarly, in *Underworld* Nick Shay lives with his own version of repentance after shooting his childhood friend, a local pool hustler, George Manza. Yet these characters' attempts to find peace from acts of sudden violence and causes of profound regret are invariably imperfect. Instead they become, as John McClure argues of DeLillo's characters' quests, "religiously inflected rites that produce a complex experience of partial redemption" (176). In DeLillo's writing the act of redemption may be incomplete, but the need to search for solace or even transcendence is a driving force. I argue that his protagonists seek meaning and refuge both in ascetic acts, but also in experiences of "sacramental communion" (McClure,

166) whether through the shared folklore of a sacred baseball relic or from the worship of football game rituals.

I examine how American definitions of masculinity and success are interwoven with the cultural significance of sporting endeavour. I am interested in how modern authors have drawn from and subverted the patriarchal and militaristic ideas of football fiction particularly in the era of the Vietnam War. Football fiction has generated only a limited number of texts with serious artistic scope. However, *A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley and *End Zone* (1972) by Don DeLillo portray the game very differently to the traditional narrative as characters struggle to find identity beyond the rigidity and violence of the complex game. Although DeLillo and Exley each portray the game in distinctive ways, it is significant that both choose damaged and unconventional protagonists who rebel against the dominance of football and traditional patriarchy through differing forms of rebellious inaction. Their failures constitute the paradox of self-definition through inertia.

Rebellion also features prominently in the chapter on basketball that discusses how the street game, rather than the professional version, has captured the imagination of contemporary American writers as a form of counter-narrative. In the works I consider, the creativity and freedom of street hoop, with its loose rules and flexible game parameters, has proved particularly analogous to the invention required in writing fiction. Street hoop allows the individual to flourish by providing a space for self-expression and a celebration of freedom and movement. Basketball's adoption by ethnic minorities has also been a central facet of its growth. The street version of the game has been used to foster a sense of identity in black culture as well as Native American communities. I focus on Sherman Alexie's use of basketball in his oeuvre,

where the game is often used to depict the tension between white and Indian characters. In these basketball contests the Indian protagonists inevitably lose, but Alexie is interested in reframing the sport through the lens of failure, from an analogy for battle, into a means of finding spiritual connection. The creativity of the game represents the imaginativeness of storytelling and the power of narrative to sustain and empower identity. Likewise, John Edgar Wideman's experimental work *Hoop Roots* is anchored in his love for the game, but shows how hoop itself can be an art form and overturn stereotypes of failure. Hoop played in the ghetto is transformed into both an immersive and transcendent game. Of the three pairs of authors I explore, Wideman and Alexie's use of sport is the most complimentary. Reading these authors together also provides an original source of inquiry as their affinities have not been analysed before in critical discourse.

Where basketball is focused on mesmeric speed, quickness of thought, and forward momentum, the languid game of baseball is concerned with introspection and gazing towards the fondly remembered past. The sense of loss that I show to be central to the baseball narrative is conveyed through a yearning for a purer and idealised memory of the country as it once existed. The first work I consider is Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* which establishes ideas of intertextuality and the mythopoeic in modern baseball writing. Coover's work, like Exley's, emphasises the loneliness of the outsider and fanatic as his protagonist, Henry Waugh, descends into the fantasy world of his baseball creation, a labyrinthine dice game, losing his grip on reality. In the two main texts in this chapter, I point to the troubling sanctuary of baseball nostalgia and memory, which leads characters towards isolation and obsession.

I will draw particular attention to the importance of the mythic in baseball writing. Classical tropes in baseball stories, alluding to Greek myth, and classical quests have become incorporated into the sport's symbolism. Baseball's mythopoeic character has dominated its twentieth century literature. Deanne Westbrook argues that baseball has "a greater tendency to approach the mysterious and the sacred, and more echoes of ancient myth that can be accounted for easily, given the secular topic and modern setting" (1). I analyse why this has been so common, posit several reasons, and also suggest how Coover and DeLillo have attempted to disrupt an adherence to this form, picking and choosing elements, rejoicing and satirising, becoming akin to bricoleurs of baseball fiction.

I conclude with a study of DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997). As I begin with *End Zone*, DeLillo's sports texts function as bookends to my thesis. Focusing on *Underworld*, I explore how DeLillo conforms to the archetypal baseball narrative and then subverts these simplistic notions by exploring the nature of failure. However, DeLillo's technique is rarely antagonistic or solely ironic. My reading of DeLillo's work is based on balancing the polemic characteristics of his prose as the need for the purity of baseball's centre is carried through *Underworld* with the same drive as the flight of the lost ball. Comparing DeLillo's and Coover's works, I investigate how the baseball narrative facilitates experimental sports writing to point to a failure in traditional representation. In many ways, postmodern writing moves away from realistic versions of sports literature that attempted to mimetically represent the game's detail in letters. Instead, each of the iconoclastic writers I consider have produced innovative texts whose power derives from their challenges to staples of sports writing such as

an authentic construction of masculinity and, most crucially, traditional versions of athletic heroism.

Football: A Cultural and Narrative History

I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfilment of all that he holds dear, is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle – victorious.⁶

Vince Lombardi

American football was created in the 1860s from variations of British rugby and types of mob football played in the Middle Ages. Although versions of the new form of football had been played in American universities for several decades in the early to mid-nineteenth century, it was not until the rules of the game became standardised by the cooperation of Ivy League universities that America's version of football was given an identity in its own right (Oriard, 1993, 26). In front of around one hundred people, the first intercollegiate American football game took place on the 6th November 1869 between the university teams of Rutgers and Princeton (Deardorff, 32). In its initial development football's structure borrowed from pre-existing ball games, but added elements that reflected America's burgeoning self-conception (Oriard, 1993, 26-28). Football was promoted as a game of order, rationality and drive – precisely the characteristics that the rhetoric of the age incorporated into nation-building identity. Early collegiate advocates of football praised the sport for its reliance on what was seen as its modern and scientific technicality. In addition to its displays of stamina and physical strength, the game fitted with specific American values about

⁶ This quotation from Vince Lombardi is taken from the epigraph to Oliver Stone's film *Any Given Sunday* (1999).

morality and particularly staunch masculine ideals at the end of the nineteenth century.

Walter Camp is the man credited with developing American football through his writing on the sport and his implementations of the rule changes that defined the game against the British forms of soccer and rugby union (Oriard, 35). Popularly known as the “Father of American Football”, Camp first proposed that games should be restricted to eleven players on each team. In his writing on football Camp continually stressed the significance of its fundamental virtue of instilling order over the chaos he saw in other ball games. He acclaimed the “rational efficiency” (40) of American football and his ideology of the sport was emphasised by its language of supreme logic. Camp’s most significant rule changes were born from a desire to expel any notion of luck from the game. The creation of the scrimmage (an imaginary transverse line across the field that separates the attacking and defending team at the start of each play) instead of the scrum, ruck or maul, all inherited from rugby, allowed the attacking team to maintain control of the ball rather than allowing both teams to scuffle for possession when players were tackled. Through Camp’s adjustments the element of chance, whilst still present in the game, was considerably reduced in favour of highly strategic cooperation between players allowing coaches greater control over tactical decisions. The consequence of this change further divided the players’ positions by rationalising specialist players for each role in the team, and simultaneously bestowing a definitive hierarchy within the game’s structure. Matches were generally reported to be games of attrition; the forward pass had not yet been legalised and players were often locked in battle attempting to push and drag their

team forward incrementally. In the melees that ensued biting, kicking and gauging were commonly condoned.

As it spread the game came under scrutiny for its level of violence. Football's ferocity represents contradictory ideas that its popular narrative simultaneously advocates and struggles to balance. Football is popularly portrayed both as a validation of male strength and power as well as an abhorrent battleground for masculine savagery. In football's early incarnations serious injuries and even fatalities were commonplace (Oriard, 148). The initial violence of football caused many to call for the sport to be banned. Both Yale and Harvard prohibited the game in the 1860s (170). Yet the brutality of its play has always driven the game's popularity. At the close of the nineteenth century, without a war to fight, American men looked to this new highly regimented and militaristic sport to ordain boys in a code of courage and physical battle that, it was felt, they would otherwise miss. Without the game, boys risked becoming what their fathers may have labelled, to use a common parlance of the day, "soft" (148). The sport was portrayed as an opposition to the imagined threat of effeminacy thereby reinforcing ideas of sexual identity and maintaining a stable symbol of traditional masculinity within the game. Camp's extensive writing on football claimed that the sport could revive the pioneering spirit of the original American experience. As American society became more industrialised, bureaucratic and urbanised, reinvigorating the concept of competitive physicality of the recent past became a national priority. To use Theodore Roosevelt's phrase from a speech in 1899, the "doctrine of the strenuous life" meant the violence of football was to be widely condoned rather than abhorred (Oriard, 2001, 351).

At this time the president himself was expressing concern with what was perceived as the 'feminising consequence' of the halt of westward expansion and the closing of the frontier. Men's roles, clearly defined for several generations, were no longer unequivocally distinct. Roosevelt alludes to a vital national agenda in reawakening the same ideology that fostered American patriotism implicit in the original creed of Manifest Destiny. Roosevelt took it upon himself to congratulate Camp for his promotion of the sport. In a letter from 1895 to Camp, Roosevelt extolled the qualities he saw in football:

I am very glad to have a chance of expressing to you the obligation which I feel all Americans are under to you for your championship of athletics. The man on the farm and in the workshop here [...] is apt to get enough physical work; but we were tending steadily in America to produce in our leisure and sedentary classes a type of man [...] and from this the athletic spirit has saved us. Of all games I personally like football best, and I would rather see my boys play it than see them play any other. I have no patience with the people who declaim against it because it necessitates rough play and occasional injuries. The rough play, if confined within manly and honorable limits, is an advantage (Des Jardins, 124).

Civilised American society in the nineteenth century recognised a distinct problem: they felt endangered by an inactive lifestyle to the detriment of the country's aspirations of becoming physically and politically strong. As with much of the rhetoric of this period, Roosevelt's praise of football is in its "manly" and "honorable" virtues where the young could be schooled through sport to adhere to the patriarchal values of American faith in exceptionalism and guided to become strong leaders. Roosevelt dismissed its "rough play" as an essential part of hardening boys to the rigors and knocks of the competitiveness of American life beyond the game.

In American literature, this common assumption about football's didactic quality has been routinely depicted, but a noticeable number of fictional former

players have not been strengthened by the game's lessons. I refer here particularly to three memorable but minor characters in canonical works. These are men no longer in the prime of youth. In each case their masculinity is challenged by their inability to retain their former strength and status. Willy Loman describes his eldest son, Biff, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949): "Like a young god. Hercules – something like that [...] God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away" (54). Willy's reverie towards Biff is tragically misguided. Biff is the former high school football star who is unable to turn his early promise into a sporting career. He becomes a disillusioned drifter who fails to settle on a vocation; Biff is psychologically damaged further by his father's memories and stories of his bygone glory when he is led to believe that the world was at his feet. When sporting accomplishment in youth is celebrated and promised as a guarantee of further success, then a less glamorous reality is felt all the more harshly. Biff is portrayed languishing in failure. Once celebrated, his feats have been forgotten by everyone but his deluded and nostalgic father. The implication in Miller's play is that Biff is destined for obscurity rather than stardom. His triumphs are far behind him and his father's fixations on the past further impedes his son's ability to move forward in his life. Biff desperately confides to his brother: "I'm like a boy, I'm not married, I'm not in business, I just – I'm like a boy" (23).

Biff Loman may be truly alone in the play, but he is far from alone in American literature. Other characters, all of whom have been college, high school or professional football stars, appear in classic American writing and share significant traits and ultimately tragic flaws. These characters have been defined by their sporting accomplishments and intense physical prowess on the football field. Yet, like Biff, their

success has not translated into their lives beyond the white lines of the field; when the game comes to an end the pressures outside sport, with their complexities and wider parameters of judging success and failure, prove crushing. In *The Great Gatsby* (1926) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tom Buchanan is a former football player described, to his annoyance, by his wife Daisy, as “hulking” (16). The physical strength that defined him and his former success is an ill-fit for the world of wealth and social positioning of East Egg where he and Daisy flaunt their garish prosperity. The achievements of his sporting youth render the rest of his life full of bitter frustration despite his lifestyle. The narrator, Nick Carraway, realises that nothing will quite match the triumphs of Tom’s college years. He is “one of those men who reach such an acute level of excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax” (11). A second facet of the former athlete’s decline to obscurity is marked by their desire to wield the control they once had on the sports field. His physique is described as “a body capable of enormous leverage – a cruel body” (12). The extent of Buchanan’s acrimony is released in his bullying demeanour towards his wife and mistress. I will return later to the football theme of the mistreatment and abuse of women.

Like Buchanan, in Tennessee Williams’ play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Brick Pollitt has been a successful football player. Like Biff, he was once a “godlike being” (57). He seems to have had everything: good looks, athletic ability and a beautiful wife. However, he is haunted. He has injured his ankle and now must use crutches. Once fast and graceful on the field, he is made immobile by his disability. He is literally broken, anaesthetised by steady drinking to dull his regret and pain. In contrast to Willy, his father, Big Daddy, does not cling to the brilliance of his son’s past. Instead, he sees the mendacity of Brick’s current life. In Richard Brooks’ 1958 version of

Williams' play, Big Daddy tells Brick: "Soon you'll be a fifty-year-old kid, pretendin' you're hearin' cheers when there ain't any. Dreamin' and drinkin' your life away. Heroes in the real world live twenty-four hours a day, not just two hours in a game" (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Just like Biff, Brick is infantilised by his failure to live beyond his football heroics.

The implications in these depictions are that Biff Loman, Tom Buchanan and Brick Pollitt will live only in the receding afterglow of their youths; the splendour of their success makes the rest of their lives seem all the more empty and desperate. They are ultimately destined for mediocrity and each struggles to come to terms with this unpalatable actuality. Once epitomes of male strength and resolve, they have each become confused and emotionally fragile. Vulnerability has replaced their physical authority and their confidence has given way to profound manifestations of self-doubt. In fact, Brick's repressed homosexual feelings cast him further from the archetypal football hero. Biff Loman sees that it is his school friend, the weak and intellectual Bernard, who has made good in the world, while he remains lost. In Fitzgerald's novel, Tom initially loses his wife to the eccentric dreamer Jay Gatsby. The footballer's virility and strength inevitably leave him; the glory of the game and the memory thereafter is a poisoned chalice.

These three characters have been tutored in the masculine ethos of football where the phallogocentric nature of the game is its most defining feature. Football's assertion of its 'manliness' is as overt as its sense of ostentatious spectacle. Exacerbating this picture, the discourse that pervades American football - from media coverage and sports talk show radio debates, to the rhetoric of high school coaches - perpetuates the institutionalisation of an archetypal masculinity. The essential

characteristics celebrated in the football player are interlaced with perceived masculine ideals, namely: patriarchal respect, strength, stoicism, an unambiguous notion of male heroism, virility, heterosexuality and playing on through pain or injury.

Recently, the demand for its players to disregard their own health has reignited much earlier arguments. The present controversy mirrors that of the nineteenth century where critics' calls for the game to be banned were widespread. In 2017, Donald Trump, at a news conference in Alabama, launched a tirade against the National Football League (NFL). It began as a spontaneous diatribe against the African American players choosing to kneel during the pre-game national anthem as a protest statement against racial inequality in America. He then went on to accuse the organisation of becoming too indulgent, not only in failing 'to deal' with these players by sacking them, but in how the game had been moderated. He said: "Today, if you hit too hard – fifteen yards!" This is the automatic penalty for excessive force meaning the offending team will lose ground when penalised. Trump continued: "I watched for a couple of minutes. Two guys, just really, beautiful tackles. Boom, fifteen yards! [...] They're ruining the game. That's what they want to do. They want to hit. They want to hit! It's hurting the game" (Crouch, 2017). The president's sentiment angered those seeking the necessary rule changes to protect its participants. One hundred and twenty two years after Roosevelt's letter to Camp, the incumbent president's opinions show the perpetual crisis in football and the propagation of a rhetoric almost entirely unaltered.

Such is the standing of the game, the abundance of definitive proof of the detrimental consequences playing professionally can have for the long-term health of its players has failed to prompt serious reform. Cases of head trauma and even the

increased likelihood of dementia have been given credibility by substantial research by the medical profession (Mez et al, 361-369). The masculinisation of football, through the training of its players and media coverage, has turned the game into something akin to gladiatorial combat. Players are routinely urged, by the president among others, to tackle hard and high, meaning the risk of harm is greatly increased. While for many years it was expected of players to accept on-field violence and concussions as simply part of the game, perceptions are now changing. The warrior script of self-sacrifice as a defining facet of football masculinity has been undermined by real concerns for player's safety and the increased threat of legal action. In August 2013, after several high profile cases, the NFL reached a huge settlement sum of \$765 million due to head trauma and concussion related injuries suffered by up to 18,000 former players (Reilly, 518). For a number of years the NFL had denied that they had any need to answer for cases of dementia, depression, and Alzheimer's that ex-professionals had claimed were a direct result of the head injuries they sustained during their playing careers. However, with the profusion of medical evidence the litigation process demanded that the League accept culpability in a landmark case for the many athletes afflicted (Mez et al, 367-369).

Well-documented cases of former players with extensive head trauma have caused a backlash against the sport's establishment. The debate around early-set dementia in football players has provoked the NFL and the public to again question the violence of the sport. The body-jolting impact of huge men careering into tackles and leaving opponents in seizure-like convulsions has become commonplace in a game that has always celebrated its extreme physical nature. Yet for all the demand for football to curb its aggression, its shocking violence sustains it. H.G. Bissinger,

whose award winning non-fiction work *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, a Dream* (2005) followed the Odessa, Texas high school team through one turbulent season, recognises the conflicted essence of the game's mass appeal. In his writing, Bissinger identifies the nation's reluctance to alter their beloved sport emphasising that what the public may abhor in the game also most enthralls them. Football does not only have aggression at its core; it is the very celebration of its violence.

With its complex systems and central brutality, the game's depiction in popular culture has followed a unique path from juvenile fiction at the beginning of the nineteenth century to mainstream chauvinist novels by former players. Yet, the fiction that has grown from the sport can be read as a progression of a particularly American literary tradition. My discussion of the football narrative is a clear chronological inquiry where I chart how stories incorporating the game have changed their agendas, but have always kept constructions of masculinity at their heart. The stories, like the game, are decidedly linear and seemingly unambiguous. Their violence is rooted in their sources of inspiration. The initial development of the football narrative should be understood as a continuation of the adventure or hunting story, with clear masculine values, that has commanded a significant place in American literature from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Stories about hunting and adventure are staples of American literary expression, from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), to any number of Ernest Hemingway's novels and stories including *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), and William Faulkner's *The Bear* (1942). The post-war era likewise adopted this theme, albeit with a more questioning tone with works such as Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), James Dickey's

Deliverance (1972) and Tobias Wolff's seminal short story 'Hunters in the Snow' (1983). The persona of the pioneer/frontiersman/hunter has considerable crossover with that of the athlete in their character traits of ruggedness, individuality and courage. The mainstream football narrative has tapped into this lineage of stories in a way that is absent in other sports fiction; it has been able to do so largely due to its association with 'macho' ideals that have been easily appropriated, echoed and continued in stories extolling a very definitive version of heroic masculinity.

As Michael Oriard argues in *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio & Newsreels, Movies & Magazine, The Weekly & The Daily Press* (2001), fictional portrayals of the game first came into being in the 1930s as a pulp genre inherited from the cowboy narrative of the previous generation (337-339). Seizing on the popularity of these types of stories, the football short story became a widely read source of entertainment for boys. Football stories in juvenile fiction incorporated a commonality of themes in their formulaic plots focusing on depictions of adolescent heroism; these stories tended to culminate in saccharine and sentimental victory. Publications such as *Post*, *Collier's*, and *Boy's Life* (the magazine of the American boy scout movement) were extremely popular; the stories they contained were recycled narratives in which the young male hero either redeems himself after a misdemeanour, proves himself to his father, or overcomes sizeable odds to prevail in an act of courage and glory on the football field (Oriard, 2001, 340).

Football stories capitalised on the market of melodramatic adventure that had a large readership at the close of the century. In these genre stories the protagonist invariably attests to his toughness by surmounting any mark of effeminacy, which is seen as a sign of weakness. The 'character failings' that have defined the footballer

are banished in a public rite of passage undertaken through a public act of football violence. The protagonist who has been questioned or, casually dismissed, thus attains affirmation of his status from the team but more importantly from the coach and/or father (Oriard, 2001, 340). The qualities that these narratives celebrated - specifically courage, or to use the phrases used in these stories, "grit" and "fighting spirit" - were the same characteristics commended in the dime novels that preceded them in the nineteenth century. Tales of pioneering adventure and the taming of the 'Wild West' were superseded by narratives with more contemporary relevance in juvenile fiction inspired by stories from the sports field. The heroes were no longer cowboys, but the characters were essentially the same with the 'goodies' and 'baddies' represented in morality fables. As with previous incarnations the hero still swaggers, undergoes a crisis of confidence, before ultimately vanquishing his foes with charisma and guile.

The stories in these publications are deeply revealing and reflect the cultural identity of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. What is particularly noteworthy is the unexpected and hidden theme of male anxiety that can be read into the majority of these pulp fiction stories. The idea of attaining power and the fear of not reaching this ideal is always lingering beneath the surface of these seemingly simple narratives. Football's juvenile fiction from the Twenties and Thirties tapped into the hopes, fears and dreams of a nation still recovering from the economic crash and reveal a great deal about American apprehension particularly connected to its own concerns about masculinity.

There is a type of psychological self-analysis that the reader finds in this style of fiction that is reflective of the fashion for self-help and the ideas of psychological

interpretation which became increasingly popular in this era. While these stories were aimed at instilling 'the correct' virtues in the nation's youth, there is an undertone of the complex angst felt by young men who read these stories as a projection of the expectations of social conditioning. The ideal of masculinity is offered as a type of romanticised comic book heroism where protagonists overcome all odds and hurdles in ultimately successful demonstrations of extreme American valour. Two stories from the early 1930s particularly demonstrate the ideology residing in the sports pulp fiction of the period, though many others could equally be cited and analysed. In the October 1930 edition of *Boy's Life*, in 'On the Last Down' Harold M. Sherman describes the journey of "Shrimp Abbott" as he gains a place on the prep school football team despite his diminutive stature. Shrimp is at first disregarded by the rest of the team who assume he is too weak to succeed. However, Shrimp's confidence, tenacity and cunning overcome much stronger opponents to win the respect of the coach. Unselected for the first game, Shrimp begs the coach to give him a chance, only to be demoted to the reserves. Near the end of the match, Shrimp runs from the substitutes' bench and on to the field where he steals the ball and evades tackles to score a touchdown. The coach is so impressed with Shrimp's ingenuity that he grants the small player a place on the team; Shrimp has gained the admiration of the patriarchal coach. This is the story of the plucky underdog whose perseverance enables him to achieve his goal.

The serial 'The Old Fighting Spirit' from October/November/December 1931, also by Sherman, is a code defining morality story where "Big Tom" must conquer his propensity to lose his temper, and utilise his ability, size and strength for the good of the team and rise above his feud with his teammate. In the October edition there is

an interesting aside as a psychology student watching the players practice discusses the team's "inferiority complex" against their larger city rivals.⁷ The student believes that the team enters games assuming they will be beaten and his brief piece of pseudo psychoanalysis reveals a culture keen to engage with an internal search for constructs of masculine identity. Through the football narrative, masculinity can be understood via the lens of Freudian discourse where behaviour and motivation was traced to anxiety residing in the ego (Oriard, 2001, 340). The student's place in the story is testament to the culture's interest in psychology and thoughts to be derived from, often hidden, deep-rooted drives, fears and desires. In this particular story "Big Tom" must understand himself in order to overcome his failings in an act of redemptive self-awareness. Even this early football narrative drives at a process of inward seeking commitment to self-improvement very much in tune with broader social trends. By the end of the story "Big Tom" has become an integral part of the team and is praised by the coach. Interestingly, in neither of these stories is there a single female character. Unlike later football narratives when the glory of sporting success would be rewarded through the adulation of a female character, in these stories validation of masculinity is gained in an entirely closed male sphere. The players must prove themselves to obvious surrogate father-figures. The coach provides discipline and the only source of worthy corroboration that the players value. The football player has little autonomy, but the coach can impose his personal will. The team is required to carry out the coach's game-plan with very little scope for self-expression or improvisation. The players must fully give in to the coach's will by sacrificing their

⁷ The term was coined by the Freudian psychologist Alfred Adler in the 1920s (Lundin, 11-13)

bodies according to his tactical commands. It is significant that this theme of acquiescence reflects a broader trend in American society mirroring faith in the infallibility of male leadership and as a symbol of an essentially patriarchal society.

Football's popularity continued to grow throughout the late Twenties and Thirties as shown by the Frank Merriwell dime novels and serials selling 500,000 copies at its peak (Deardorff, 33). Merriwell appeared in over two hundred dime novels from the late nineteenth century to 1930 (33). The character became archetypal for all subsequent juvenile sports fiction heroes. Merriwell epitomised the wholesome boyish heroism of the football narrative in the first sixty years of its existence. Merriwell became a fictional role model representing a new masculine centre through his bravery, calmness under pressure and inscrutable moral justness. Merriwell as the football hero amalgamated the lost iconic figures of the frontiersman, the cowboy, the spiritual leader and the war hero in a paragon of masculinity. However, as I explored in the stories from *Boy's Life*, boyhood heroism often caused unease for its readers. Ryan K. Anderson identifies this disheartening aspect in chapter five of his work *Frank Merriwell and the Fiction of All-American Boyhood: The Progressive Era Creation of the Schoolboy Sports Story* (2015). The boys reading these stories could only fail to match Merriwell's courageousness and glory. The publishing houses that produced these stories were pushing an ideology that played into both their readers' dreams and angsts. Football has become America's most popular sport as the Ivy League game popularised by the privileged elite and promoted to teach leadership qualities to the nation's future decision-makers began to achieve mass appeal.

In its post-war development, coverage of football shed its association with the

Ivy League universities as the narrative of the sport's success omitted or cloaked football's origins in favour of the portrayal of the 'all American game' and its promotion of a true 'working class' fan-base. In the late nineteenth century, football grew in prominence through the popular press and the middle-class desire to emulate the privileged classes who were seen to engage with collegiate sports (Oriard, 1993, 61). For football's popularity to maintain its momentum it required a change in its class connotations. Within sixty years the upper-class game was turned into a respectable game to be read about by the middle-classes before morphing again in the second half of the twentieth century into a bastion of blue-collar masculinity (61).

As the football narrative evolved, to move away from the dime novel to fit the silver screen, it adapted subtly to integrate new elements including a romantic subplot. In 1940 Warner Brothers released a football biographical film portraying the life of a legendary Notre Dame football coach. *Knut Rockne, All American* starred Pat O'Brien as the team coach who masterminds an improbable victory over the team's college rivals. A barely known twenty-nine year old actor played the supporting role of George Gipp, the talented halfback who suffers a fatal illness, but who inspires the team from his deathbed. Visited by his coach in the hospital, Gipp whispers his memorable message to be passed to his teammates: "Tell 'em to go out there with all they've got and win just one for the Gipper". The actor who spoke these words would go on to political glory. Ronald Reagan would use his famous line again, forty years later, seeking election to the United States presidency. Reagan's role as the football star no doubt carried political sway with the American public. It is also significant that the rhetoric from the sports field transitioned so easily to his campaign speech. As Susan Jeffords comments in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*

(1994), Reagan's persona relied on a promotion of male strength: "The depiction of the indefatigable, muscular and invincible masculine body became the lynchpin of the Reagan imagery; this hardened male form became the emblem not only for the Reagan presidency but for its ideologies and economies as well" (25).

By the Fifties, American culture had dramatically altered. The United States was a country with a population growing as never before and a nation undergoing radical social change characterised by a culture of political conservatism. American values reflected a need for traditionalism and the desire of cultivating a "civilised" United States. David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) capture the mood and offer a critique of the conformist nature of mid-century America particularly in the suburban heartland of the nation. Evident in the era's popular literary depictions is a desire for protection and wholesome Christian values, exemplified in the football hero, whose clean-cut image provided the model of decent acceptability that was so unequivocally demanded. Several football films made in the 1950s reveal the zeitgeist, particularly in the need for healthy and moral heroes to stabilise a country dealing with the unsteady tremors of social change, political tension (with the onset of the Cold War), and yearning for the constancy of traditional patriarchal order. Films from this era pandered again to the audience's desires. In Jesse Hibbs' film *The All American* (1953), Nick Bonelli (Tony Curtis) is the university football star who renounces the game after the death of his parents who die in car crash when travelling to watch him play. Bonelli returns when his team needs him most, to make the winning play and simultaneously gain the love of his sweetheart, thus fulfilling the ideals of the post-war football narrative: heroism, pulling through for his coach, the team and finally gaining female

adulation. The romantic subplot reflected a new element and direction in football drama.

Football provided a redemptive symbol as men felt their virility weakened by the civilizing effect of consumerism and widespread social change. Traditional masculinity was once again threatened by a perceived weakness in male power. Football represented an antithesis to this growing sense of anxiety. The dichotomy behind football's masculinised image, between rationalised science through order and discipline juxtaposed with primitive aggression did not destabilise the sport's legitimacy as a purveyor of traditional masculinity. In fact, in the Fifties the football narrative amalgamated a type of accepted primitivism with the tenets of modernity; it therefore unified a dialectic of masculinity whilst disavowing its incompatibility (Oriard, 1993, 200). Football, like warfare, could incorporate both brute violence and logistical sophistication in its framework of masculine identity.

By the early Seventies *Boy's Life* had stopped publishing football stories altogether in favour of non-fiction articles and interviews with real-life players. The pulp football fiction genre faded away so that the football narrative morphed from the wholesome world of boy's adventure to its current position in a mass consumer market in a society enthralled by sex and violence. The Seventies saw the emergence of the football novel as a genre in its own right. Works from former players turned novelists such as Dan Jenkin's *Semi-Tough* (1972) as well as Peter Gent's *North Dallas Forty* (1973) gained popularity if little critical acclaim. These novels established the tenor of modern football fiction characterised by its bawdy and lewd tone, use of comedy and overt assertion of un-ironic male power. In this type of fiction female characters are typically mothers, girlfriends, adoring fans or strippers in the clubs the

players frequent. The football player's masculinity is given further validation by direct contrast to the character of exaggerated femininity displayed in the image of the perky cheerleader who comes out for the halftime show. Jenkins' novel in particular represents a new stage of the football narrative far removed from the innocent adventures of the Merriwell saga or the stories in *Boy's Life*. The front cover of the 1972 edition of *Semi-Tough* is a revealing case in point. The paperback edition shows a scantily clad blond woman astride a giant football as it sails towards the goal posts. The promotional shot for the film adaptation starring Burt Reynolds and Kris Kristofferson, made five years after its publication, shows several semi-naked women bent over, one hand touching the ground, in the classic 'three point stance' football snap position at the line of scrimmage. The film's protagonists stand behind them smirking in sexually provocative positions. Football not only asserts men as macho, but has a place to represent women as subservient, compliant and sexual.

The symbolic possibilities of the line of scrimmage have been a source of fascination for a number of American authors; Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway in *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), Robert Coover and Don DeLillo have all explored the tension of the T-formation starting point. Thirteen years before *Semi-Tough*, Mailer describes the moment that precedes the action as loaded with tension, erotic excitement and dark foreboding. Instead of a misogynistic opening, in *Advertisements of Myself* (1959), Mailer riffs on the homoerotic nature of the "manly" game's starting point:

The T-formation served to narrow the psychic void between backfield and the line. In the T, the quarterback crept up behind the centre, indeed he moved directly behind him, the other like copulating dogs, or let us be brave with the fact, like men in the classic pose of sodomy. The ball instead of being passed was handed back between the legs (429).

Mailer's sexualised interpretation of football's opening play is a deliberate affront to the hegemonic football narrative of aggressive heterosexuality. Football's homophobia is ingrained into its masculine self-conception and Mailer mocks the incongruity between the game's macho image and its classic starting pose. In the opening of his novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Mailer uses football again as a battleground for masculine power in the struggle between DJ and his father Rusty on the front lawn of their Texas home. Almost every football novel that I mention is set in the game's Texan homeland. Rusty challenges DJ to a head-on competition to prove his supremacy. It is what John Limon describes as an "Oedipal showdown" (173). The Vietnam War is the backdrop, but Mailer's novel obliquely attributes more weight to intrinsic violent male urges, rather than anti-communist political ideology, to American involvement in the conflict. The football game that Rusty and DJ play, or even the hunt they embark on in the second part of the novel, are shown to be ineffective prophylactics against inherent ritual violence finally manifested through war.

As the Vietnam War continued, football's popularity spread leading cultural observers to reflect more fully on the relationship between the military and the American game. The parallel between sports and the military is drawn sharply into focus as players wear helmets and body armour like soldiers on the front line. The teams compete in the physically demanding endeavour of 'making ground' into 'enemy territory' through a series of violent and high impact collisions and skirmishes. America's militaristic impulses seem overtly displayed on the field. This crossover between football and war creates public support for the military while sanitising

warfare and simultaneously lending prestige, imagery of hegemonic masculinity, and perceived integrity to football. The association is a powerful symbiotic relationship of hetero-patriarchy lending support to the corporate state and selling the game (Fisher, 203, and Jenkins, 246). In their press conferences the coaches act like generals and often speak in the rhetoric of military personnel referring to 'battles' and 'casualties' in their analysis of the game.⁸

The militarism of American political discourse permeated society at all levels. Most markedly, the technical language of football has adopted military terminologies so the nomenclature of the game has cemented the association between the two. As Pederson and Cooke note, when defensive players coordinate a group charge at the opposition's quarterback it is referred to as a 'blitz' (425). The term derives from a reference to the Luftwaffe's bombing campaign during the Second World War known as *blitzkrieg*, or 'lightning war'. In the language of football, a long, looping forward pass is known as a 'bomb' (425). Furthermore, the organisation strengthens its ties with the military through its choice of sponsorship. The NFL's "Salute to Service" project is an ongoing campaign that supports, and raises funds for military charities (Rugg 21-25). It has not been uncommon for military personnel to be paraded at football grounds and sing the pregame national anthem, nor is it infrequent for the military to recruit outside football stadiums (25).

Other 'manly pursuits' such as boxing and hunting lack football's promotion of military-style tactical strategy and the importance it placed in camaraderie. For a

⁸ The militarization of American society is openly reflected in the country's favourite sport. In June 2010 the United States' government announced it would use the NFL's "instant reply" technology in operations in Iraq (Schimmel, 345). As the United States' military searches for more sophisticated weaponry and high-tech security strategies the technology of sport and warfare become all the more confused.

layman, football can resemble a game of incomprehensible regulations and sudden bursts of disarray. The rhythm of the game seems to be continually punctuated by chaotic aggression alongside the interruptions of the numerous officials. Most short plays end with a tangled mess of flailing bodies. However, the orchestration of plays are complex feats of planning, coordination and implementation, where each player performs a specific job which is laboriously choreographed and repeatedly practiced. No other game can rival football in the importance it places on tactical understanding and compliance. Although soccer and rugby are tactically sophisticated, the structure of these games allows for much greater improvisation, which is not present to the same extent in American football. Football denies ludic choice as players are drilled in elaborate plays and taught a vast lexicon of jargon.

It is telling that football replaced baseball as the most popular national sport during a time that coincided with the Vietnam War. The reimagining of football as the sport that came to dominate the sports pages as well as television coverage emphasises the continued theme of lost American innocence as the sedate game of baseball was overtaken by the warlike sport of football.⁹ In a 1973 article “War, Sports and Aggression: An Empirical Test of Two Rival Theories”, Richard G. Stipes finds direct correlation between warfare and the popularity of attending football games. Stipes reflects on twenty societies recognising a parallel between “warlike” tendencies in a culture and sports they played that reflect and reward aggressive or violent conduct. Stipes uses a case study of the United States between 1920 and 1970 to investigate the relationship between periods of military conflict and the popularity of combative

⁹ Richard Nixon used the codename “quarterback” to orchestrate bombing missions during the Vietnam War (Murphy, 64).

(football) and non-combative (baseball) sports. Stipes concludes that his study shows an emphasis on “periods of more intense war activity accompanied by more intense sports activity and less intense war activity associated with less intense sports activity” (65).¹⁰

The United States finally ended military involvement in Vietnam on the 29th March 1973. America had suffered ignominious defeat and needed to re-evaluate its political loss in a multitude of ways. In the decade that followed, when traditional standards of masculinity became threatened by the United States’ army’s symbolic defeat, football was once again portrayed as the sport that could reaffirm the dominant position of the American male’s strength and courage. Football’s success in the early Seventies can be interpreted through the American public’s need for a sport that was iconic of national pride and could respond to a questioned state of ‘true’ masculinity. In contrast to the conflict, football emphasised the strength of American masculinity that had been questioned by such striking military failure in a country with such limited military resources. The popularity of the American football narrative helped in the process of reasserting American values and belief in the physical capabilities of its young men where the Vietnam War had weakened its position.

In the popular imagination a new narrative was formulated and perpetuated where American soldiers had not been ‘fairly’ beaten, but overcome by the hostile

¹⁰ Stipes shows the percentage of the American adult male population in its armed forces plotted against the available adult spectatorship at baseball and football games. He posits two underlying theories. Firstly, “the drive discharge model” postulates the widely held belief in the cathartic need for sports to release aggressive tension as a substitute for warfare. This concept takes a Freudian theory of innate aggression that requires a mechanism of physical release in some form or other or risk manifestations of violence in society at large. The second “cultural pattern model” aligns combative sports with wider social trends giving an explanation for the peaks in NFL attendance during and directly proceeding times of war. Stipes explains the phenomenon by stating: “Behaviour patterns and value systems relative to war and warlike sports tend to overlap each other’s presence” (65).

conditions or held back from the 'real action' by the straightjacket of political bureaucracy and the liberal pull of officialdom. In *The Remasculinization of America* (1989), Susan Jeffords argues that contemporary representations of Vietnam, particularly popular films such as the *Rambo* movies of the 1980s, emphasised the affiliation between femininity and the United States' government. This association allowed the blame for the loss in Vietnam to be attributed not to something subordinate in traditional aspects of soldier's masculinity, Rambo is depicted as the epitome of male brute strength, but to the labelling of feminine character traits that sabotaged or inhibited the perceived capabilities of the United States' armed forces (Jeffords, 154).

In the popular imagination the defeat in Vietnam was attributed in large part to the indecisiveness of the United States' government. Blame was also placed on the ineffective role of negotiations, when it was argued, greater emphasis should have rested on further military action and support. Jeffords argues that these facets were aligned to a perceived feminisation of administrative policy that directly countered the raw power and force that American soldiers were believed to inherently possess (154). Jeffords contends that the association between the concept of 'Femininity' with the Vietnam War represented all aspects of American failure and even characterised the adversary:

Although the feminine is used to chiefly account for failure and to provide explanations about the loss of the war, what becomes apparent is the feminine is used to identify the "enemy" – that against which the soldier had to struggle in order to fight and possibly win the war in Vietnam, whether the Vietnamese, a difficult landscape, or the U.S. government itself (155).

The second dramatic rise in football's popularity was a perfect means of response; it was an indirect but pervasive riposte. The image of the game could be moulded

towards reaffirming notions of American physical strength and a belief in structure and order in a time of national crisis and anxiety. The popular ideal in American culture depicts football as representing the battle 'as it should be fought': on a level playing field with strict parameters, equal teams, where the opposition can be seen, and the action can be carefully controlled by coaches/generals. Football is the embodiment of a 'clean war'. It is a type of fight that is comprehensible, measurable and open to analysis. Football is often portrayed as a regimented substitute for war in direct comparison to the traumatic experience of the chaotic skirmishes in the hostile Vietnamese jungles and the lost battles and huge casualties throughout the campaign.

Football's association with the military has been further deepened by high-profile players volunteering for conscription. After the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, Pat Tillman turned down a contract worth \$3.6 million over three years with the Arizona Cardinals to enlist in the United States army (King, 532). Tillman was deployed in Iraq and then in Afghanistan where he was killed in action in April 2004. Controversy surrounded Tillman's death as it was initially reported that he had died in a roadside ambush by Afghan militia. However, it was later revealed that his death had been the result of 'friendly fire' by a United States patrol which the government had attempted to cover-up (533). Tillman's death became a national story as no other professional footballer had died in armed conflict since Bob Kalsu was killed in Vietnam in 1970 (Anton and Nowlin, 253). Tillman was the epitome of the all American athlete: a strong, healthy, square-jawed and handsome footballer. Consequently his death symbolised the fallibility of the image of the invulnerable American sports star and the patriotic hero.

The media storm surrounding Tillman's death brought together American militarism, patriotism, and football; it was a narrative from which the NFL took full advantage: endorsing their brand and strengthening their links with the armed forces. For those outside the United States, football is often portrayed as a reflection of the most shockingly violent tendencies at the heart of American identity. The game is viewed as a peculiarly American spectacle of unsavoury nationalism and grotesque violence. In 1991 Harold Pinter wrote a poem titled "American Football (A Reflection upon the Gulf War)". In his piece, Pinter recognises the jarring nature of the football/war intersection and how this reflects the American character. The poem was rejected for publication by several newspapers including the *Guardian* and *The London Review of Books* who objected to the tone and language of Pinter's admittedly provocative work (Billington, 572). It was eventually published in Britain in January 1992 by a newspaper called *Socialist*:

Hallelullah!
 It Works
 We blew the shit out of them.
 We blew the shit right back up their own ass
 And their fucking ears.
 It works.
 We blew the shit out of them.
 They suffocated in their own shit!
 Hallelullah.
 Praise the Lord for all good things.
 We blew them into fucking shit.
 They are eating it.
 Praise the Lord for all good things.
 We blew their balls into shards of dust,
 Into shards of fucking dust.
 We did it.
 Now I want you to come over here and kiss me on the mouth.

Despite the earlier condemnation of several newspapers, Pinter's poem gained widespread notoriety. The poem satirises the joyous triumphalism that characterised

America's graphically violent, but highly anaesthetised version of events seen in its reportage of the first Gulf War. The tone of media coverage downplayed the reporting of civilian casualties and constructed alternative narratives in its portrayal of the conflict. The depiction of the war was so heavily mediated by the government that the validity of any information became circumspect and unreliable leading to Baudrillard's rhetorical claim that it was instead misrepresented through simulacra in his piece *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991).

As Michael Billington comments, Pinter's poem "reminds us of the weasel-words used to describe the war on television and of the fact that the clean, pure conflict which the majority of the American people backed at the time was one that existed only in their imagination" (572). In the poem, American violence is a source of blustering macho pride; the vulgar and obscene language gestures to American bravado and sexual connotations of violent conquest especially in the final line which sinisterly alludes to male sexual coercion. Pinter shows how bloodlust and an odd religious self-righteousness subsume any complexity of the war to great comic effect. The poem is a satire of simplistic and false jingoistic celebration of victory stripped of any political understanding or remorse. The war, like a football game of the title, is portrayed as principally a means of demonstrating the need to win and exhibit the potency of aggressive male American power. The two novels I discuss are similarly concerned with critiquing the damaging and bludgeoning effect of patriarchal authority deployed in the football narrative. In distinct ways they show the individual's attempt to establish his identity through their conflicted passion for the star player or the game itself.

Don DeLillo's *End Zone* probes the game's narrative from within. The author's cinematic gaze takes the reader through the players' punishing training schedule, their locker room rituals, and into the heat of the competition of the pivotal game. Although it was written during American involvement in Vietnam, the novel does not make a single direct reference to the conflict. DeLillo takes every evocation of the game's association with warfare, sexual conquest and American bravado and subverts each facet whilst retaining a tone of irony and humour that can be read in Pinter's later poem. DeLillo satirises the simplistic war/football metaphor; preceding the climactic game an authorial voice interjects by reminding the reader that football "is known for its assault-technology motif, and numerous commentators have been willing to risk death by analogy in their public discussions of the resemblance between football and war" (105). For DeLillo, the analogy is far too crude and football is far more intricate and rich in literary potential than merely a one-dimensional reflection of battle. As his character Alan Zapalac states: "I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don't need substitutes because we've got the real thing" (105). Of course, there is a level of irony at play as the language of crossover between nuclear oblivion and football runs right through the text. However, the novel complicates the links between football and violence, or reframes them, to explore the sport through an exploration of asceticism and philosophical searches into the nature of language.

End Zone and Exley's *A Fan's Notes* are in no way traditional football pieces; they counterbalance the brute force of the game using football's tactical complexity and stark violence rather than being restricted by its rigidity and theme of de-individualising. These texts are enthralled by a similar aesthetic sense hidden beneath the violence of the football field. The number of literary references in the two works

says much about their status beyond mainstream sports fiction. In *End Zone*, DeLillo refers to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Among others, Exley quotes from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), and *Lolita* (1955), J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934). Both novels suggest an expectation of the reader's knowledge of these works that seems at odds with the typical football fan reader. Although *End Zone* and *A Fan's Notes* portray the game very differently, there are striking points of reference aligning Exley and DeLillo and showing the scope of the football narrative in its working within and questioning of hegemonic masculinity. Both novels are concerned with the poignancy of sporting and personal failure and the way that an individual can find solace in different forms of defeat. They break with the morality tales of battling underdogs achieving honest victory in the juvenile fiction stories of the first half of the twentieth century, and the hyper masculinised and misogynistic professional game portrayed by writers such as Gent and Jenkins in the Seventies. To appreciate their nuances, it is important to recognise how *A Fan's Notes* and *End Zone* draw from the legacy of the football narrative, but offer subversive depictions of the sport's essential character.

In the introduction I made reference to the football ideology of Vince Lombardi that became a mantra for the American competitive spirit where an ethos from the football field crossed, without serious scrutiny, into public life. When the famous coach died in 1971, James Dickey penned a eulogy of sorts in *Esquire*. In "For the Death of Lombardi" Dickey protests that the glorification of success, that Lombardi preached, is its own most crushing feature:

don't you know that some of us were ruined
for life? Everybody can't win. What of almost all
of us, Vince? We lost
And our greatest loss was that we could not survive
Football (46-50).

My analysis of the following two texts shows protagonists overwhelmed by the rhetoric of football's win or die philosophy, who are instead defined by their failures and seek to find hope and meaning in building an identity out of their own losses.

Beckett to DeLillo in the *End Zone*: An Exploration of Footballing Failure

Strangely, but logically, Teresa perceives this truth as an inscription etched into her physical and psychic being, like an “indescribable” trace that remains to be translated, uttered, retranscribed ad infinitum.¹¹

Julia Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avilia*

I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.¹²

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Set in a small Texas college in the middle of the desert, *End Zone* is the story of a football player re-establishing his life after a series of failures. The novel is narrated by Gary Harkness, the student who has returned to college after inadvertently causing the death of an opponent during a game. Harkness is unable to abandon the sport he has always played and joins the portentously named Logos College at the beginning of the new season. He does so mainly as a result of his father's coercion. Reflecting on what has taken him back to the game Harkness explains: “I discovered a very simple truth. My life meant nothing without football” (22). Soon after Gary returns to college football life he identifies his own failure in his conflicted desire to immerse himself in the masculinised ethos of the sport, while he simultaneously craves simplicity and ascetic purity from the heavily militarised competitive world of the ‘gridiron’. While DeLillo often flaunts the conventions of traditional literary form, it is the orthodox

¹¹ Kristeva, 248.

¹² Beckett, 120.

tension between conformity and freedom that defines Gary's struggle throughout the novel.

End Zone is concerned with three interlocking ideas on failure that incorporate: patriarchy, language and narrative. DeLillo's use of football is essential to each facet I examine. Firstly, the novel is focused on a defining premise of football fiction: the authority of traditional patriarchal forces and the way men wield their power. Gary is bullied into a football career by his father. When he moves to Logos College the team's new coach, Emmett Creed, assumes the role of surrogate father-figure. Gary struggles to rebel against the authority of either man in his search for self-knowledge. His underlying failure is in his initial inability to divorce himself from the persistent ideology of patriarchal rule. Secondly, his father and Creed exert their power through a highly masculinised and militarised language. The text is concerned with the revelations connected to the failure of language dramatised by the deadening nomenclature of football parlance that becomes interchangeable with the specialised language of nuclear war. Gary attempts to find meaning beyond cliché and then outside words themselves. I therefore read Gary's struggle against the twin concerns of the text: phallogocentric commands and logocentric uncertainty. The name of the Texas college "Logos" explicitly signposts the logocentric inquiry of the novel. Gary's girlfriend, Myrna Corbett, represents a complex antithesis to the phallogocentrism of this dominant discourse. I will explore how she helps Gary break with the codes that have defined him. As the novel pulls open the apparatus of its own construction by undermining the implicit authority and meaning in language, DeLillo is playfully pointing to something else. Thirdly, by challenging language, DeLillo is commenting on the failure of representation in the sport fiction genre and, more crucially on the

reader's need for narrative closure. The novel ends in anti-climax. Gary, the young footballer who seemed destined for success, suddenly and with no explanation starves himself and is left being fed through a tube. In a breach of the football narrative the novel's protagonist will end the story not lifted onto his teammates' shoulders in celebratory glory, but mute and emaciated, being carried from his dormitory room. I show how failure in the text is portrayed through several mirroring journeys towards states of stasis and inaction.

My discussion of *End Zone* draws from the work of Samuel Beckett in the context of the three areas of failure I have identified.¹³ Beckett's works are an obvious inspiration for DeLillo's novel in themes and title. *End Zone*, a reference to the scoring areas of a football field, also implies the final stage of nuclear apocalypse and alludes to Beckett's 1957 play *Endgame*. A connection to the playwright is also particularly pertinent to this study as Beckett, perhaps more than any other author, represents the artist's pursuit of the aesthetics of failure.¹⁴ Beckett certainly shapes DeLillo's perspective and outlook in *End Zone*.¹⁵ Adding further to the comparison, *Endgame*, translated from its original French title, *Fin de Partie*, is a reference to the final phase of a chess game and the football field is often presented as a chess-like game of tactical strategy. Tellingly, the French expression for chess is 'jeu d'échecs' literally

¹³ Peter Boxall's "DeLillo and Media Culture" in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (2008) and his chapter "Cliché, Tautology and the Possibility of Fiction" in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2006) have provided some of the grounding for this argument. Boxall argues that DeLillo has drawn from Beckett's intention to dismantle language in an endeavour to work towards forms of inexpression and silence.

¹⁴ In DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991), the author Bill Gray claims: "Beckett is the last writer to shape how we think and see" (157), emphasising the esteem DeLillo shows for Beckett.

¹⁵ Beckett did not depict sports in his writing, although he was a rather modest sportsman; to this day, he is the only first class cricketer to win a Nobel Prize. Beckett briefly played cricket for Dublin University between 1925 and 1926. He had the rather inauspicious record of bowling for the loss of 64 runs without ever taking a wicket (Critchley, 125).

meaning 'game of failures'. Both chess and football are portrayed as analogous to warfare, while each serve as metaphorical backdrops to the narratives. Even the opening formation with the two teams facing each other in battle lines elicits the association between chess, football and warfare. Beckett's concerns prove illuminating when read in conjunction with *End Zone* in terms of their relationship to ideas of the fraught father-son bond, and the hidden and paradoxical nature of language. I finally explore the means by which Beckett and DeLillo strive towards forms of perfect stillness and silence to reveal an absence of narrative drive or resolution.

DeLillo's work presents aspects of the conventional narrative and subverts them with a range of esoteric ideas. However, the text does retain the strong father figure of leadership expected in traditional football writing. Gary's father never appears in the novel but he is nonetheless a formidable presence. The nameless father represents a distinct ethos. Harkness says of him: "It paid, in his view, to follow the simplest, most pioneer of rhythms – the eternal work cycle" (17). Gary's father lives a life of order and discipline. The phrase "pioneer rhythms" evokes an older and traditional code of behaviour rooted in sacrifice and labour, precisely the virtues he ascribes to football and which he forces his son to accept. Adhering to his father's wishes, Gary follows in his footballing legacy. Gary's own feelings on being forced into playing the sport are never truly articulated. In the backstory of the first chapters Gary's father spouts macho mottoes and compels his son into the world of football that was part of his own upbringing. We learn that Gary's footballing career has been orchestrated by his father who puts him "in a football uniform very early" (17). The pressure to be a sporting success continues through his teenage years when Gary's

father makes contact with former classmates to ensure his son goes to a college with a good footballing reputation. Although Gary recognises the authoritarian control he is under, his resistance is either misguided or indirect. In fact, his recalcitrant impulses become passive acts. Rather than rebelling or refusing to play the game he detachedly reflects: "This is the custom among men who have failed to be heroes; their sons must prove that the seed was not impoverished" (17). Gary identifies that his father's failure means that he must make amends and has to play the game to verify masculine identity. In a theme lifted from the traditional football narrative, Gary's father's desire for his son to play is rooted in his own shortcomings and desire to prove his masculinity. Gary recognises: "He had ambitions on my behalf and more or less at my expense" (17). A refusal to play is not an option and Gary must satisfy his father's aspirations despite his own reticence. Even after Gary has attempted to quit the game by unintentionally killing another player, his father still pushes his son to distant colleges to keep his own footballing dreams alive. Harkness' banishment is dictated by the will of his overbearing father who will not allow his son to stay at home and come to terms with his emotional struggles.

DeLillo's exploration of states of banishment mirrors aspects of Beckett's *Endgame*. In the play, Nagg has repeatedly shunned his son Hamm. In a harrowing scene, Nagg remembers how he would not go to Hamm's aid when he was a distressed child; he remembers: "Whom did you call when you were a tiny boy, and frightened in the dark? Your mother? No. Me. We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace" (119-120). Gary's abandonment is likewise an act of banishment where his cries for help go unheard and his obvious state of anguish is ignored. However, unlike Hamm, for Harkness the failure of nurturing paternal care is

potentially cathartic if properly rethought and actively harnessed. This marks a difference to Beckett in that DeLillo finds a more tangible form of redemptive failure arising from trauma and memories of neglect. In *End Zone*, only through separation from the patriarchal figurehead in exile can the son hope to attain the kernel of meaning he craves. The son channels the solitude of this experience, therefore for Gary: "Exile compensates the banished by offering certain opportunities [...] There were profits here, things that could be used to make me stronger" (29). He is able to use his sense of rejection, the emptiness of the desert and his own ascetic urge as an existential affirmation of selfhood and an attempt to grow spiritually. The landscape here is important. As with the staging in *Endgame*, in a room surrounded by a strange barren wasteland, the Texan desert in *End Zone* is likewise presented as desolate backdrop trapping the work's characters. Unfortunately, as much as Gary feels himself gaining in strength through exile and his ascetic activities, he is unable to totally separate himself from the clutches of paternal control. His father's words haunt Gary dramatised by a series of flashback scenes. For Gary, expelled to Logos College, the patriarch that takes the most significant role is the "avenging patriarch" (5) of the football coach. Both men enforce the strict ideology of orthodox masculinity in their imposing of discipline, respect and regimentation, which are all preached as fundamental tenets of life and the game.

In the second chapter the reader is introduced to the new football coach. At first "Big Bend" Emmett Creed seems to be little more than a caricature of the authoritarian trainer. While he does not have the caring paternal demeanour of the football coach from Forties and Fifties juvenile football fiction, he does have the stature and power associated with the tough and uncompromising teacher who is

determined to push and harry his squad into shape. All the players yearn to please him as he stands either at a distance or watches from the tower created for him to analyse every detail of the team's performance. Commanding his general-like coaches, Creed oversees everything from the symbolic panopticon tower of Foucauldian control.¹⁶

Creed's tactic is to instil fear, doubt and respect in equal measure. Much like earlier incarnations of the football coach he sees his role as a didactic as well as athletic guide. Creed demands that his players not only train rigorously, but they transpose his football doctrine of discipline and pride into their lives and studies. In his first speech to the team he implores them to "[w]rite home on a regular basis. Dress neatly. Be Courteous [...] Do not drag-ass" (10-11). By continually preaching that football is a microcosm of life Creed enforces a strong and limited definition of masculinity based on conservatism, stoicism, taking orders and supreme self-control. Creed's lectures to the team emphasise the expected behaviour of the players. He tells them: "I've never seen a good football player who didn't know the value of self-sacrifice" (189) thereby stressing the essential requisite of the footballer's loss of self in order for the team to thrive. The players follow Creed's orders with total compliance; as Harkness explains: "when coach says hit, we hit" (33). Nothing could be more straightforward in the ultimate acceptance of a totalitarian edict. Creed keeps at a distance from his players adding to his air of mystery. One of the players emphasises the role Creed adopts as something between the mythic hero

¹⁶ This image is seen in the film version of Peter Gent's *North Dallas Forty* (1979) as the coaches also utilise a tower to watch over practices with loudspeakers in hand. The field becomes a chessboard for the tactical decision-makers who oversee the game's movements and tactics, looking down on the field with its grid-like structure.

and the dictator when he claims: "Coach is a man of destiny" (54). The players yield their free will and become cogs in the mechanism of Creed's tactical conception. Creed's rule demands submission of the will and body thereby forcing the players to work like "substandard industrial robots" (33) as he yells at them from the touchline. The text establishes the tension of the football narrative as the individual must acquiesce to the coach and to the team as a militarised unit.

I have so far presented Creed's control as oppressively dictatorial, yet Gary finds pleasure in following his exacting orders. The text portrays football as an atavistic expression of a primitive and bygone masculinity. Gary's surname suggests he is "harking back" to a pure and original existence devoid of angst and intellectualism. DeLillo shows that the rituals of football act like primal ceremonies so that Gary enjoys applying the face paint of ancient war.¹⁷ Harkness explains: "I didn't know whether the lampblack was very effective but I liked the way it looked and I liked the idea of painting myself in a barbaric manner before going forth to battle in mud" (39). Gary claims: "I felt that I was better for it, reduced in complexity, a warrior" (30). The game primarily relies on extreme violent physicality. Despite the pain and loss of freedom, Gary feels the unsophisticated joy of reengaging in socially denied ancient past.

Loss of ego and primal joy are parts of Creed's philosophy that Gary takes to heart and are typical of the football narrative. Yet, Creed breaks further with the behaviour that is expected of the stereotypical coach. Creed is the new trainer brought to the college due to his reputation and to win games, but very little of his rhetoric is concerned with this aspect of the game. Through his philosophy of football,

¹⁷ Footballers traditionally wore black paint under their eyes in order to protect their vision from the sun's glare. However, the practice is now widely adopted and, with little practical value, mainly continued as part of the theatrical makeup of the sport.

Creed places greater emphasis on the game's symbolic potential than on its brute force and largely ignores the traditional imperative of the sole tenet of the game being on winning. For the team's coach, failure is the only desirable conclusion.

Creed is an ascetic fanatic. His beliefs are based on monastic discipline of cleansing and self-denial. The coach's cell-like quarters underline the principles by which he lives: no windows, a barely furnished room, and just a nail in the wall from which his whistle, the symbol of his power, hangs. Creed preaches his ethos of abstemious discipline symbolised by the picture in his room of the sixteenth century saint, Teresa of Avila; Creed informs Gary that Saint Teresa ate food out of a skull to remind herself of final things. Like his name, his philosophy stresses an ideological submission to a devoted and pure existence: "the state of being separated from whatever is left of the centre of one's own history" (29) as Harkness calls it. DeLillo characterises Creed with his literary precursors. In Chapter eleven, Creed is described as a "landlocked Ahab" (51). Later he is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The penultimate scene when Gary goes to Creed's room can be read as a reference to the journey Marlow takes to Kurtz's jungle refuge in the climactic exchange.

Creed's curious game-plan is further shown by his coaching masterstroke to recruit the talented Taft Robinson to the team by persuading the exceptional player to come to the Texas desert despite the interest of other colleges. In conversation with Harkness, Robinson recounts how Creed would "sweet-talk me - but not with prospects of glory. No, he'd tell me about the work, the pain, the sacrifice. What it might make of me. How I needed it" (226). At odds with any usual coaching techniques, Creed recruits Robinson by stressing a type of failure through a loss of ego

which can guide the dedicated follower to attain his spiritual potential. “Pain” and “sacrifice” are rewards in themselves when a player can see beyond meretricious acclaim. Creed preaches football for its meaning as a way to reach a sacred centre that will allow self-knowledge often through a journey of mental and physical self-mortification. *End Zone* is concerned with its characters’ desires for isolation and disengagement through its protagonists’ wish to free themselves through ritual, solitude and with profound acts of extreme simplification. As the novel progresses, Creed seems to abandon any concern at all with the team achieving victory on the field; he is intent only on attaining ascetic perfection via the game’s principal devotion to discipline.

End Zone exemplifies many of the concerns in keeping with the early period of DeLillo’s fiction. The work reflects themes in DeLillo’s debut *Americana* (1971) that follows David Bell’s development from New York advertising executive to avant-garde film maker and ascetic traveller as he heads out of the corporate and image-centred world of New York City and into his self-imposed spiritual exile in the Californian desert. In *Great Jones Street* (1973), the reader follows the rock star Bucky Wunderlick who has grown uneasy with the wealth and revolutionary position that his celebrity status has brought him. Shunning the crowd, Bucky’s reaction to rock stardom is similar to Bell’s relationship with corporate America in that he rejects the artifice of counterculture as only a product of consumerism and retreats away from the fans and the stage to the sanctuary of seclusion in his isolated hotel room.

Yet Creed’s development is even more paradoxical than these other protagonists. Creed exemplifies an image of orthodox masculinity, but also displays profound vulnerability. He is a lonely figure of male grief in search of truth through

total obsession, inner-torment and pain. Creed seems to revel in this cycle of self-torture. As Harkness tells Taft, Creed “seems always to be close to a horrible discovery about himself. He’s one of those men who never stops suffering” (225). Instead of stressing the coach’s infallibility and wisdom, here is a depiction of total anguish and uncertainty. Creed may adhere to the role of the coach as an authoritarian and guide to moral values, yet his spiritual quest and aura of weakness violates the male cast of the football coach’s strength and virility. Creed also tells Gary that he regrets not having a son. To constantly question existence, fail to raise a son, and continually suffer does not fit with the image of hyper-masculinity that the football narrative perpetuates. In DeLillo’s novel, patriarchal figures are given problematic ideologies that splinter Harkness’ conception of a total hegemonic order and offer a critique of one limited notion of masculinity.

DeLillo’s novel works against the dominant football narrative by emphasising failure in a variety of forms rather than a celebration of victory. At no point in the novel does Gary express any desire to win the game or to be a star in the NFL when he finishes college. There is very little talk of the squad moving on from the college game to play professionally and become rich and famous. Winning is not the only thing; rather winning can become a concealment of what is truly at stake for DeLillo’s characters - namely a way to find meaning in the games they choose to play. To find meaning the players begin to realise that they must question the very construct of authority they are bound to through a reappraisal of language.

Before his description of the pivotal game that will decide the fate of the season between Centrex and Logos College, the author makes an interesting interjection. This is the only occasion in the novel when Gary’s voice gives way to

authorial commentary: “The spectator, at this point, is certain to wonder whether he must now endure a football game in print” (105). The author is all too aware of the tedium of conventional sports writing that a reader may be forced to not enjoy but “endure” (105). DeLillo’s work stresses not only sporting failure but the failure of the sports novel itself. The author acknowledges the inescapable clichés of sports writing and the heavy burden of sporting representation. However, reading the novel as a parody of the sports genre is to miss a level of sophistication that points to football as a game of huge narrative and conceptual potential. It is in Part Two where the “elegant gibberish” (107) of football’s language tests the reader’s resolve as the novel breaks with its previous tone and moves into a level of detail that dramatises the deadening nomenclature of the sports-world and in particular football.

The first line of the description when the teams prepare for the opening scrimmage is virtually incomprehensible tactical orders of play names as a player shouts: “Blue turk right, double-slot, zero snag delay” (107). The description of the game lasts just over thirty pages. In what DeLillo thinks of as the gabble of sports rhetoric, the jargon is emblematic of football game-speak. After the pivotal game, when Robinson talks of football, the specialised language of strategy and plays is reduced to monosyllabic, onomatopoeic and inarticulate noises as he rejoices: “Boosh, boosh, boosh. Thwack, thwack” (222). The players’ nonsense words echo the desperate dialogue of Vladimir and Estragon as they endlessly wait for Godot. Such gobbledygook points to an undermining of language, but Beckett and DeLillo takes this concept one shattering step further.

With each reading, *End Zone* becomes more a novel about the failure of language. Football provides such an innovative gateway because it is “the one sport

guided by language” (106). DeLillo’s analysis of his own text reveals why the narrative is superseded by an inquiry into the ultimate fallibility of expression. DeLillo explained that while working on his second novel he “began to suspect that language was a subject as well as an instrument in [his] work” (LeClair, 2005, 5). As much as it is a tool, language is presented as deeply limiting so that failure of meaning is reflected in the failure of words to convey the sense that is intended. When lecturing on nuclear weapons, Gary’s teacher, Major Stanley, explains that language does not do justice to what is being communicated. Instead, language anaesthetises: “words don’t express [...] They’re painkillers” (80). This analogy is another illusion to *Endgame* as throughout the play Hamm demands his painkillers from Clov.

Through *End Zone*’s depiction of patriarchal authority and its role in the masculine world of football the novel explores the connection between phallogentric language and forms of coercion and oppression. The highly militarised lexicon of Creed and Gary’s father points to the pacifying and anaesthetic quality of cliché; language becomes destabilised by repetition. Harkness recognises that clichés “have a soothing effect [...] when peeled back, [they are] seen to be a denial of silence” (65). Gary represents the individual’s quest to see beyond the limits of control and language to seek this silence. Even as a child he remembers the liberty from indoctrination by breaking free of the *creed* that his father placed in his room with the motivational sign “WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH THE TOUGH GET GOING” (17). The cliché is a popular aphorism of sports culture made both powerful and redundant through insistent repeating. The language and ideology is imposed by a figure of authority and Gary’s insight is profound when he recalls the feeling that the power of these words, and by proxy his father’s control, could be diminished:

It seemed that beauty flew from the words themselves, the letters, consonants swallowing vowels, aggression and tenderness, a semi-self-recreation from line to line, word to word, letter to letter. All meaning faded. The words became pictures. It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings. A strange beauty (17).

For Gary to understand that words are not stable signifiers is exhilarating, beautiful and cataclysmic. Derrida suggests, in *Of Grammatology* (1967), that there is no stable basis for meaning through anything external to language where textual play only reinforces the absence of original truth. In this passage, there is a renouncement of both the structural limitations of language and particularly the masculinised interpretation of the interconnected constructs of authority, words and order that Harkness has been subjected to for his whole life. The words, like the wall they are pinned to or the desert that later surrounds him, represent a sense of imprisonment. To see beyond their banality and find the depth their absence conceals, particularly in cliché, elicit the first step to a reappraisal of truth-finding. For Gary, the failure of language is most evident in the masculinised jargon of both nuclear warfare, football slang and patriarchal authority. The “words that don’t express” (80) are those of masculinised officialdom and cliché that shield the real; their power is to sanitise and obscure. He explains: “I thought I’d turn my back to the world and to my father’s sign and try and achieve, indeed establish some lowly form of American sainthood” (19). Gary’s early realisation is a sudden insight where the failure of words becomes an epistemological epiphany of quasi-religious significance.

As he had discovered at a young age, Gary realises that it is language itself he is rejecting. Harkness wants to renounce the meaningless clatter of the interchangeable jargon of nuclear war and football. He believes that without language an almost forgotten and original purity of expression or even silence can herald a

cathartic reawakening “in some form of void, freed from consciousness” where “the mind remakes itself. To subtract and disjoin” (84). Through a rejection of language, there can be a restoration of an authenticity that Gary feels has been lost. Through his eschatological fantasies the world and specifically language must pass through a regenerative oblivion in a Beckettian simplification of nothingness to either be remade or disappear completely.

Beckett’s notion that language obscures the reality it is intended to depict is reflected in DeLillo’s work as it explores aesthetic silence and attempts to dismantle a means of expression that it distrusts. In a letter to his friend, Axel Kaun, written in German in July 1937, Beckett states: “Language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it” (2009, 171). *End Zone* is focused on precisely the same idea of the dismantling of language to attain a point of revelatory truth or clarity. In the novel, Gary’s teammate, Billy Mast, is taking a course in the “untellable” where the class are instructed to theorise “if any words exist beyond speech” (173). The class learn German words without their translations and the only prerequisite for the course is to not know the language. Like Gary, one of his fellow players, Anatole, continually seeks freedom from the authoritarianism of the tension of language and football. He reflects on a desire to escape and “to leave behind the old word and aromas and guilts” (180). Words are not stable and fixed signifiers, they are loaded with ideological connotations and as he believes they hold within them the context of their use and consequently “guilts”. Anatole’s name comes from the Greek word for sunrise, perhaps representing a quest for beginning and origins. Most importantly, when Taft Robinson renounces football he states: “A new way of life requires a new language” (223). Robinson explains to

Gary that he has given up football to be rid of language itself that he finds so limiting. He extemporises: “The radio is important [...] The kind of silence that follows the playing of the radio is never the same as the silence that proceeds it [...] It becomes almost a spiritual exercise. Silence, words, silence, silence, silence” (229). Robinson is drawn to a Zen-like appreciation of silent space.

Trapped in the phallogocentric world of football, Gary reaches out to the one woman in his life for salvation. Here, DeLillo again breaks away from Beckett with an alternative feminine conception. Yet I would not suggest that DeLillo presents a stable binary opposition, between male and female, in any way; his texts are more paradoxical. I would argue that DeLillo’s portrayal of women is more balanced than Beckett’s and less hostile. For Beckett in *Endgame*, the one female character, Nell, does not offer a counter or freeing other voice. In fact, she is imprisoned in an ashcan that is shut to prevent her from talking and is the only character to die. After her death she is barely mentioned again. In *Women in Samuel Beckett’s Prose and Drama* (1993), Mary Bryden recognises the consistent misogynist construction of ‘Woman’ in Beckett’s early works as “a simmering woman-hate” (76). Like Beckett’s *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot* (1953), DeLillo’s text presents an absence of women. In an early section of the novel Gary receives a letter from his parents. This letter seems of little consequence until it is placed in context of the absent female voice. The letter gives him precise details on the route he should take when coming home; Gary notices that his mother’s feelings are not mentioned at all in these instructions only that she has signed the letter that his father has clearly written and sent. DeLillo’s blackly comic description represents the voicelessness of the woman in the football narrative.

Women are missing throughout the text with one very notable exception: Myna Corbett.

The significance of Myna in *End Zone* has been widely overlooked in criticism of DeLillo's work. Although Osteen, Boxall and LeClair make reference to her relationship with Harkness, her pivotal role is generally downplayed. Initially, Gary sees Myna's femininity as a counterpoint to the authoritarian regime to which he is subjected. Myna subverts the stereotype of the sportsman's girlfriend as she is overweight, with blotchy skin and drawn to intellectual and obscure Mongolian science fiction. She is very wealthy and rebels against the responsibilities of beauty. Harkness identifies how he needs her to redefine his internal struggle:

Since my examination of life sometimes ended in oblique forms of self-mockery, and since my investigative projects often manifested themselves in parodies of hunger or grief or exile, it was refreshing to seek in this woman a perfect circle whose reality overpowered the examiner's talent for reducing in size and meaning whatever variety of experience he was currently engaged in sampling (61).

Rather than the restricting straight lines of the football field and a singular rigid way of thinking preached by his father, Myna helps Gary to reappraise his search with a holistic mode of thought symbolised by a "perfect circle" (61). At the beginning of chapter nine Gary goes into the desert and walks in circles seeking visionary truth. Harkness recognises his ascetic quests slipping into "parodies" (61), yet through Myna his hypothetical thoughts gives way to more direct experience. As much as this conception of the feminine provides a positive alternative, it is noteworthy that Myna is defined here in her role to facilitate Gary's search rather than through her own development.

Gary continues to meet Myna for picnics as their relationship develops. When the couple have sex they are in the library, meaning that the encounter is framed by an exploration of language. Gary comes into the library to see Myna surrounded by books, "all abandoned there, many left open (a breach to their solemnity)" (205). Instead of closed volumes with their gravitas shielded and unchallenged, the open books encircling Myna represents a desire to engage in language's freeing form. As foreplay they read definitions from a dictionary aloud to each other. Gary explains: "The words were ways of touching and made us want to speak with our hands" (206). The sex scene eroticises the linguistic: "Some of the words put Myna into a state of mild delirium; she thought their beauty almost excessive" (206). The words themselves contain "beauty" rather than the "Nothingness" Beckett sees behind them. In contrast to the deadening nomenclature of militarism and football connected to a heavily masculinised ethos that undermines meaning, Myna shows Gary language's freeing potential. In fact, with the excitement of their intimacy Gary starts to invent new forms of language; he "brought new noises to the room, vowel sounds predominating" (207). DeLillo has spoken about his interest in apparently nonsensical forms; in interview with Thomas LeClair he rhetorically asked: "Is there something we haven't discovered about speech? Is there more? Maybe this is why there's so much babbling in my books. Babbling can be frustrated speech, or it can be a purer form, an alternative speech" (LeClair, 2005, 8). The earlier incoherent babble of football's tactical jargon is reframed in Harkness' "new noises" (207) as the creative prattle beyond speech. DeLillo is interested in the possibility of a prelapsarian language to which many of his characters strive to return.

DeLillo returns to this idea throughout his oeuvre. In *White Noise* (1985) Jack Gladney is fascinated by his son's seven-hour crying ordeal: "He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge [...] I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility [...] It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place" (79). In *The Body Artist* (2001), Mr Tuttle's odd and nonsense speech patterns echo the idea of visionary childlike forms of language being revelatory.

Further to the notion of chattering nonsense language, the library scene also alludes to the desperate need to impose form and to turn 'mere words' into the real. For Gary, the abstract terms for military conflict are frustrating and do not lead to a progression of thought. Hidden between the library's shelves, Myna steps "away from the clothes, aware of the moment's dynamics, positing herself in the knowable word, the fleshmade sign and syllable" (207). As she undresses, Gary understands the moment not through erotic anticipation, but as a revelation that will provide a clue and a vindication of the potential of language. Earlier in the novel when Gary fantasises about a woman, he imagines a "body of perfect knowledge, the flesh made word" (52). Knowledge, sexual epiphany and language come together and it is the feminine form that facilitates the linguistic unity of sign and signifier in evocations of both destruction and creation. The *jouissance* of this moment as an explosively destructive/regenerative event has been foreshadowed by Gary's earlier sight of Myna in a t-shirt with a mushroom cloud when she looks like "an explosion over the desert" (64). Here is a central paradox in the novel where the bomb has been the

symbol of patriarchal power and the joy of oblivion, only to be rethought in light of feminine regeneration. Gary is obsessed with the language of nuclear warfare and the fantasy of the sublime death of global annihilation. It is significant that it is female figures who offer the only source of liberation for the novel's central figures by blowing apart phallogocentric constructs – the image of Saint Teresa for Creed and through his relationship with Myna for Gary.

Gary is the only player on the team who seems to have developed female friendships. When the season is drawing to a close the players seem bereft without the focal point of football to challenge them. Gary wanders the dorms to unexpectedly find Billy Mast sewing a button on to a blue dress. The players argue over who will be the first to put their face against the material. Mast tells the team: "I get first crack at that dress [...] There's a waiting line for that dress. My head goes under first" (175). In this passage the empty dress emphasises the bodiless woman; the players are sexually drawn to the female form, but only to the shape without content. The team desire the concept of femaleness without the need for the physical body. The female body is symbolised by its absence and given definition only by its opposition to the male form. It is a lack of presence. This scene is a second foreshadowing of Myna's development five chapters later.

When Myna returns to university after the Christmas break she has lost weight and Gary no longer feels sexual desire for her. At this point Myna, like Creed and Harkness, begins to live according to an ideology of attaining self-knowledge through penitent acts and denial. She too has an overbearing father from whom she seeks to escape. Gary and Myna's relationship is paralleled by their mutual need for change as they both want to discard versions of themselves and pare down from the

multiplicities and quandaries from which they seek refuge. As with the bodiless dress, Myna's weight-loss means that the female body is becoming absent. Myna explains that her weight was connected to consumer culture and by dropping her extra pounds she can understand herself better. She clarifies: "I'm ready to find out if I really exist or whether I'm something that's just been put together as a market for junk mail" (218). Myna's rebellion will be copied by Gary as he will end the novel starving himself as well. It is ultimately Myna's actions that prompt Gary's final act of both rebellion and submission as the narrative falls away to nothing. Julia Kristeva reading of Beckett's *First Love* (1946) in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980) provides a noteworthy insight into the lovers' story in *End Zone*. Kristeva writes: "What the banished man needs most from a woman is simply someone to accompany him into Death's void [...] He needs the gentle touch of [...] renunciation of the body, waste, sublimation, and - in order to be faithful to his dead father to the end - a double suicide" (15). Kristeva could be writing of Harkness who yearns for meaning in the void of apocalypse through his fantasies of nuclear holocaust and will ultimately sacrifice his body as Myna has already done through her diet. Gary and Myna's suicides are not literal but symbolic as they solemnly shed former versions of themselves in acts of self-mortification. Both their choices are compulsive attempts at self-realisation.

DeLillo's novel is marked by postmodern play that challenges the conventions of storytelling. The majority of individual characters are thinly sketched; in this way they are reminiscent of Beckett's performers who, without characterisation, act like minor players on the stage with only a few words to deliver. As soon as a plotline is introduced, the small chapter ends and it is often not referred to again. For example,

at one point the players speculate on the rumour that one of the team is homosexual. They have no proof and cannot even specify who the player might be. The chapter ends and there is no further reference to the speculation later in the text. The novel's plot does not lead to development; rather the team simply spout theories. Ideas and storylines fizzle out and are subsequently unmentioned. In fleeting passages that abruptly stop, characters often appear only once or twice in short chapters that mirror the self-contained staccato bursts of play in a football game. As with so much in DeLillo's work, this does not feel like an authorial omission, but points again to a refusal to comply with the reader's desire for completeness, wholeness or resolution. It is this aspect that links DeLillo and Beckett so strongly. As Boxall comments: "Beckett's writing labours to conjure art out of the failure of art" (2006, 37). The artist maybe destined to fail, but the process and struggle is imbued with a redemptive honour. In fact, to "[f]ail better" (101) implies that failure itself is a form of success.

With the parallels to Beckett in mind, *End Zone* intentionally 'fails' by conventional standards by leaving the reader without any traditional conclusion or final meaning. The pivotal game has finished in section two with a hundred pages still to go and the season seems to limp to resolution as the players become disillusioned and frustrated. DeLillo refuses to adhere to this time-honoured composition of mid narrative defeat paving the way for a redemptive comeback victory. Also, going against the accepted sporting narrative the team and protagonist that we have followed for the first third of the novel lose the game and do not get a chance to prove themselves in the typical act of retribution of classic sports drama. *End Zone* points to a more profound failure not only in representation but in the failure of art (Boxall, 2006, 42-43). Rather than the forward motion of the football game or the sports novel,

the text is concerned with alternative momentum towards states of profound stasis, emptiness and silence. When Gary goes to Taft's room in the penultimate chapter Robinson explains: "I believe in static forms of beauty" (228).

Failure in the novel is represented by the transition between orthodox masculinity's essential characteristics such as brute force and dynamism, towards processes of change, and ultimately inertia. The trajectory of each principal character's journey is from movement to forms of stasis. Taft Robinson, the man whose incredible speed made him the team's star player, chooses to abandon his burgeoning football career in favour of solitude, contemplation, academic study and achieving a heightened sense of self-awareness. After the defeat by Centrex, for reasons the team cannot fathom, Coach Creed takes to using a wheelchair. Finally Gary, self-starved and unable to walk, is carried from his room on the novel's final page. DeLillo's text can be read to show failure as a type of symbolic entropy as progress is curtailed and where the "end zone" marks the limits of language, change and the extent of each man's physical adjustment. DeLillo's novel imitates *Endgame* in the theme of the advance towards motionlessness. Of course, the endgame in chess is exactly such a denouement towards the entrapped motionless of the king in a final checkmate. Hamm predicts Clov's progression will be, like his own and his father's, towards immobility: "you'll come to a standstill, simply stop and stand still, the way you are now. One day you'll say, I'm tired, I'll stop" (110). In Beckett's work, failure for the narrative to progress is mirrored as the characters predict their own imminent stillness just as DeLillo's characters in *End Zone* venture towards states of inaction.

In DeLillo's three earliest novels, *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*, the protagonists attempt to withdraw to assert the autonomy that represents their

deeply rebellious individual impulses and their fundamental need for closure. Despite the minimalism of Beckett and the expansiveness of DeLillo both authors are drawn to characters' search for ascetic retreat. Boxall suggests that in DeLillo's work the ascetic compulsion becomes an impossible and therefore failing attempt to inhabit a space of pure personal reflection, insight and introverted retreat (2006, 40). In *End Zone*, this is only true initially, since Gary's desire to break from the militaristic rigidity of patriarchal control sees him make several ill-fated attempts to escape. He walks off the field in the middle of a game and then smokes marijuana before an important match. Even in these rebellious acts Gary fails to impose his personal will against the symbolic authority of patriarchy. Shortly after the team's first loss of the season Creed calls Gary to his office and makes him offensive captain, an honour that Gary reluctantly accepts. Unlike Taft, who makes an articulate choice to abandon the game, Gary is unable to fully emancipate himself of the decisions imposed upon him by these dominant male figures; that is until the final page of the book.

After Harkness has visited Taft in his room to discover the team's best player is abandoning the game, he returns to his dorm alone. With no warning and no explanation the novel abruptly ends. If it had finished a few pages earlier then the text would have a pleasing circular structure as it begins with Robinson's arrival and would conclude with his final statement. However, DeLillo has one final flourish to break such a regular composition. The final chapter of *End Zone* represents a self-conscious narrative failure. The *End Zone* of the title not only refers to the scoring area on the field, but the human desire for termination. Failure in the novel is not simply the team's loss against Centrex, the recurring symbolism of nuclear oblivion, or Gary's self-conscious fall into paralysis, but a postmodern reference to a failure in narrative

to provide satisfactory closure. In Beckett's *Endgame*, Clov longs for a redemptive cleansing order of nothingness in the gently settling dust and silence. Harkness and Creed are disciples of the same ideology; they both crave the ascetic purity of their own apocalyptic visions.

In a Beckettian trope, the reader's need for an artistic form to offer resolution and allow an understanding of the meaning of the work is continually undercut and the legitimacy of such desire is destabilised. Like *End Zone*, Beckett's *Endgame* resists any form of decoding or concerted philosophical interpretation. In a meta-theatrical exchange Hamm asks: "We're not beginning to...to...mean something?" To which Clov replies: "Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah that's a good one!" (108). The spectator's wish for the unfolding performance to fit conventional interpretation is parodied in Beckett's self-referential joke. Clov greets the mere suggestion with a type of humorous contempt. Theodor Adorno's analysis of *Endgame* proves significant here as he is fascinated by the primary absence it generates: "Understanding it can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility" (120). *End Zone* comparably portrays the opacity of art through the chimera of resolving its conundrums. As the novel's threads unravel the thin linear logic of narrative development and denouement are abandoned entirely. DeLillo breaks the expectations of narrative form, and for games like football, to be neatly concluded, settled tidily, a story ending with finale and a resolution and the game with a final whistle and printed, unnegotiable score. As Mark Osteen notes, DeLillo "[c]ritiques fiction that panders to our apocalyptic yearnings" (44) and by this he means yearnings for finality. *End Zone* satirizes the very notion or possibility of traditional endings. The cataclysmic death-wish of nuclear destruction is aligned to

the need for narrative cessation that the novel consciously refuses to benevolently facilitate.

The ending of *End Zone* is as puzzling and sudden as any of DeLillo's enigmatic conclusions. In an interview with LeClair, DeLillo suggests that Gary's act is a personal urge to retract from consumption, to simply stop being. DeLillo explains his motivation: "He is paring things down. He is struggling, trying to face something he felt had to be faced. Something nameless. I thought this was interesting. I couldn't give a name to it. He just stops eating. He refuses to eat" (2005, 8). DeLillo suggests that the impulse that leads Gary to withdraw from every aspect of his football tutelage and starve himself is almost indescribable. DeLillo's novel reflects another of Beckett's pieces, his first full length play *Eleutheria* (written in 1947 but not published until 1995), where the protagonist Victor Krap ends the work alone in his flat, turning his "emaciated back" (170) on the scene and, by implication, the watching audience. The scene in *End Zone* is foreshadowed by Gary's earlier renouncement of his father's indoctrination where he states: "I thought I'd turn my back to the world and to my father's sign" (19). It is a final and shocking gesture that, for both Krap and Gary, forsakes their place in the world where these protagonists have struggled to come to terms with their feeling of ostracism. While Adorno's discussion of Beckett's incomprehensibility is revealing, DeLillo's writing accords even greater paradox. Gary's final choice, while in one sense meaningless, points to a means of overcoming the failure of his experience.

Gary's starvation is an act of cathartic choice. His action, or inaction, is the only authentic stance. Despite the absence of an apocalyptic resolution, his choice to not eat does at least suggest a redemptive conclusiveness for its protagonist, but not

in the form of spectacular annihilation that Gary has been drawn to for much of the novel. Loss is not a point of devastation; rather there is a conclusive liberation in the act of failure itself. At the end of *End Zone*, Gary's paralysis is, in one sense, a failure to live according to the footballing code that is expected of him, but in another way it is a triumphant moment of total ascetic commitment that the novel has lead towards. This *inaction* paradoxically ennobles Harkness with self-definition beyond the football authority that had caged his life through an ideology instilled by Creed and his father. The asceticism that Harkness seeks, and has found only for moments in the Texan desert, can be realised through a rejection not of the game but of all games. The only way to free oneself is to choose to disengage entirely. To read both Beckett and DeLillo is to encounter a darkness of vision where emptiness and loss take root, but beneath their apparent bleakness, beauty and possibility spring forth from failure. As surprising as it may seem, within the darkness of failure, an uplifting sense glimmers in the aesthetic of renewal and reimagining. If football erodes freewill and marks the parameters of language, the restrictions of the game are also a journey towards paradoxical self-actualisation.

A Loser's Gain: Paternal Rejection and Hero Worship in *A Fan's Notes*

There was a time in my demented youth
When somehow I suspected the truth
About survival after death was known
To every human being: I alone
Knew nothing and a great conspiracy
Of books and people hid the truth from me ¹⁸

Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

In 1958 Fredrick Exley returned to his mother's home in Pamela Four Corners, New York and spent the next six months lying on her davenport sofa. It seems a strange catalyst for what would turn into the inspiration for his most successful work, and stranger still for a novel that centres on an all-consuming passion for such a dynamic and forceful sport as American football. However, Exley's life and writing broke with conventions in many ways. Despite his bouts of aggression, paranoia and alcoholism his writing retains a vivid tenderness and poetry rooted in his chronic sense of alienation and suffering. Much of Exley's fictional memoir, *A Fan's Notes*, was written during his stay at Harlem Valley mental hospital where he received electro-convulsive therapy and insulin shock treatment. During this traumatic time, writing allowed him an avenue for self-expression as a cathartic exercise during his bleak period of confinement. The hospital also ensured the necessary discipline and sobriety Exley needed to put pen to paper for concerted periods of time to write the bulk of his novel (Yardley, 113-114). On release from Harlem Valley, Exley went back to his family home

¹⁸ Canto Two, 167-172. Nabokov, 34.

to continue working on the manuscript and, against the expectations of those around him, completed the book that had become his escape and obsession. Despite other works that followed, Exley failed to strike the same success either artistically or commercially as he did with his first novel. Both *Pages From a Cold Island* (1975) and then thirteen years later *Last Notes From Home* (1988) develop many of the themes begun in *A Fan's Notes*. However, these three major pieces constitute the extent of Exley's output. Of these works, Exley is most likely to be remembered for his debut and his most visceral depiction of failure and fandom.

In *A Fan's Notes*, and in keeping with the game's dominant narrative, football represents a traditionally unyielding patriarchal idea of masculinity. I explore how Exley, through his self-titled protagonist, is compulsively drawn to the sport, but how its testosterone-fuelled associations with conventional standards of behaviour and lifestyle causes him only self-disgust and anguish. Exley's search for identity is defined by the conflicted sense of both adulation and hatred that consumes him in his extraordinary and frantic devotion to the New York Giants star player, Frank Gifford. This is paralleled with a fixation on his relationship with his own father who also achieved success playing football. Exley presents two mirroring role models who excel in their athletic pursuits with the narrator casting himself as the bitter but genius outsider. He is neurotic and forever forlorn on the literal and metaphorical touchline. Exley portrays himself as the fan condemned to sit and watch rather than participate. Gifford and Exley's father, Earl Exley, have all the strength, charisma and self-assurance to succeed on the football field and, by extension, in American life. They exhibit a traditional standard of masculinity that few could hope to rival. Exley

torments himself by continually judging his life against theirs, lurching from one failure to the next, as he searches to find his place in an America he conspiratorially distrusts.

As it provides such dreadful torment, it initially seems odd that Exley is attracted to football beyond his boyhood fandom or through anything but a type of compulsive self-torture. For a man determined to live a literary life, and who idolises great writers, it would seem more appropriate to rebel against the anti-intellectual ethos of the game and choose instead to live the cerebral existence of the artists he reveres. Exley appears struck by the same questions; he muses that he may have found more consolation had his passion lain elsewhere; he writes: "it occurs to me now that my enthusiasm might better have been placed with God, or Literature or Humanity" (30). However, the novel suggests three striking reasons why Exley is unable to dissociate himself from the powerful culture of football. Firstly, Exley sees how the game strikes a parallel with the endeavour of his own writing. Both fiction and sport rely on dedication and a capacity for sacrifice. Exley may not have the physical capabilities to be a football star like his contemporary Gifford, but he has the drive and tenacity to succeed as a novelist. As he watches Gifford's meteoric rise to stardom, he balances his own artistic pursuit against his imagined rival's triumph. Secondly, and by extension, Exley cannot escape the defining parameters of masculinity expressed and reinforced by the violent American game. The sport is celebrated for its capacity to teach boys to be men in a simplistic version of an accepted idea of masculinity. It is the same brand of manliness preached by Earl to his son and therefore the game is a constant reminder of his failed relationship with his deceased father due to Exley's inability to follow in his athletic footsteps. Through football, Exley attempts to work out his unresolved feelings towards Earl with his

memories always fixed on his father's exploits on the field. Thirdly, for all the complexity that Exley weaves into the game by its associations with the father/son bond, he also sees a welcome crudity in its unsophisticated form. Football provides a basic level of assurance where actions are distanced from emotions and every objective is clearly defined and ultimately orchestrated by the coach's commands. Everything on the field is quantifiable, from the yardage the players have made or lost on each play to which team has won, while outside the game such certainty is rare or impossible to find. Throughout his struggles, Exley craves the notion of unambiguous thought, hence the allure of football's straightforwardness.

At times Exley presents football as a therapeutic distraction and spectacle. Before he is first taken ill Exley gets a teaching job, and while he loathes his class of obtuse students and equally imperceptive colleagues, at weekends he finds solace in excess with "nearly heroic drinking" (1) and watching his favourite team at a nearby bar. There is an enormous enjoyment in the assurance of the game's unadulterated physical act. Exley explains:

football was an island of directness in a world of circumspection. In football a man was asked to do a difficult and brutal job, and he either did it or got out. There was nothing rhetorical or vague about it; I chose to believe that it was not unlike the jobs which all men, in some sunnier past, had been called upon to do (8).

Exley's conception of football has an atavistic and pure quality. The masculinity that the author celebrates in football is that of idealised primitivism, divorced from the cultural confusion of manliness being both celebrated and detested for its complicit relation to violence. Football's utter physical force endows it with a very particular type of authenticity that Exley cannot find in any other aspect of his life. He remarks: "It smacked of something old, something traditional, something unclouded by

legerdemain and subterfuge” (8). With his mental health wavering, football is the one constant in his life and it is viewed as a reworking of the honest ardours of imagined past labour. Football fandom offers Exley a place, particularly through its masculinised role of belonging. The game also provides solace from his feelings of isolation as a result of a lack of intimacy with his father. The protagonist fails to establish a connection with his mother, or any of the later women in his life, and is left hopelessly analysing the tragic bond he had with his father.

Exley attributes much of his intimacy issues to his relationship with his father. Johnathan Yardley’s biography, *Misfit* (1997), suggests that there is much truth in Exley’s depiction and the novel contains a great deal of accurate autobiographical detail. However, though the author shares the name of the narrator, he chooses to disassociate his testimony; Exley subtitled the work “a fictional memoir”. As a disclaimer prior to the narrative in the preface titled “A Note to the Reader” Exley writes: “I have drawn freely from the imagination and adhered only loosely to the pattern of my past life. To this extent, and for this reason, I ask to be judged as a writer of fantasy”. Exley’s request appears rather facetious; he has chosen to give his protagonist his own name yet demands the novel to be read as fiction. In a letter in advance of its publication, Exley explains that “the law firm made me change everything so it would be read as a novel” (Yardley, 134). Exley’s remark here suggests that the protagonist’s voice derives from a legal rather than aesthetic decision.

The novel begins with a series of recollections of his father who played football semi-professionally and, due to his sporting success, commanded a position of respect in the local community. Exley remembers Earl taking him for walks in the neighbourhood, on the pretext of completing a menial chore, where his father would

offer advice and understanding to the many men he met in the street. Earl is remembered as a consoler and a leader of men. Exley recounts an occasion from his childhood when, watching his father play football, Earl suffers an injury as a result of a member of the opposition team viciously stamping on his hand during a defensive play. Taken from the field to receive medical treatment, his father lets out what Exley depicts as a high-pitched, girlish scream when the medic administers iodine to the deep cut. The young Exley recalls his shock and fear at seeing his father's unmanly reaction before he realises, with the laughter of the medic in attendance and the crowd all around him, that his father is parodying "how a lesser man might react [to pain]" (32). This moment is important in two ways. Firstly, it represents the traditional masculine image of Exley's father. Earl has established himself as the tough football hero to whom Exley feels continually subordinated even in his adult life. He is unable to live outside the shadow of his father's personality. In one gesture, the footballing father, and star of the team, ascribes showing pain as feminine; he is demonstrating that 'real men' do not shriek or cry when they are hurt, and they certainly do not have emotional breakdowns as Exley will go on to have. Secondly, it separates Exley and his father from their bond by allowing one type of intimacy to be rescinded, marking what Exley recognises as "the first time the crowd had come between [them]" (32). This scene is the first occasion when Exley's relationship with his father is compromised by the realisation that, because of Earl's minor celebrity status, Exley must share his father's affections with others.

In a follow-on passage Exley remembers how his father would ensure any boys from the neighbourhood would get into the weekly game without paying. Earl's provincial authority meant "[d]oors opened before his growing legend" (34). The boys

would wait for him to arrive at the stadium then on his command run into the grounds past the ineffective ticket seller. Earl would remind them: "Don't forget: tell the man at the gate you're my sons!" (35). Exley is left mortified with embarrassment as well feeling uncherished because his father is so quick to share his parental love with this band of neglected youths. Consequently, Exley's complex sentiment towards football comprises an amalgamation of love, hate and early loss. At several points Exley's later attributes his anguish to the trauma of a series of paternal rejections.

While Earl is the epitome of athletic manhood there is also another side to his personality that the reader recognises in his deluded sense of status and grandeur. This characteristic of his father has a tragi-comedic quality. Even the scene described above is comic in the way that Earl needs to display his power to a group of impressionable boys. As well as this, Earl's swaggering demeanour on their Sunday strolls is presented as somewhat tragic by association with the town's dropouts. The young Exley is ashamed by his father's behaviour. When Earl attempts to arrange a game with a professional team by ambushing the famous coach Steve Owen in a hotel lobby, his hopeful efforts end in unaccustomed indignity for both father and son. Firstly, Earl introduces Owen to young Frederick. Owen playfully asks if his boy is "tough" (53). Even at this age, Exley knows his father will not praise him: "more than anything I wanted my father to say that I was, I was not surprised at his answer" (53). Earl tells Owen that it is too early to know if his son will be tough. Owen is taken aback at a father's lack of reassurance or praise. Earl then proposes a contest between his amateur team and Owen's professional side. Owen turns down the offer of a match finding the mere suggestion understandably ridiculous and walks away leaving father and son standing together in silent humiliation.

Rather than a portrayal of his father's failure, this scene is noted for its importance to the formation of Exley's own personality. Although he too has been wounded by the encounter, it is in this interaction that Exley identifies an initial awakening of selfhood. Exley remembers:

my father's shadow was so imposing that I had scarcely ever, until that moment, had any identity of my own. At the same time I yearned to emulate and become my father, I had longed for his destruction. Steve Owen not only gave me identity, he proved to me my father was vulnerable (56-57).

This passage is an oedipal scene where Exley fantasises about his father's failure; his previously indestructible masculine identity is seen to be not only penetrable, but extremely fallible. Only when his father is humiliated by Steve Owen can Exley begin to achieve his own individuality and see his father as something other than the alpha male image he portrays.

Exley's depiction of his father follows strongly in a tradition of literary athletes unable to find satisfaction or meaning beyond the narrow thrill of the game. For Earl, like other fictional football players such as Brick Pollitt, Biff Loman and Tom Buchanan, footballing success in youth becomes a haunting memory and a painful cross to bear for the rest of his life. Exley recognises the profound effect that the game has had on his father who never reached the elite level of professionalism. Exley refers to this theme several times, but two passages in particular evoke this sense of faded glory:

Like most athletes he lived amidst the large deeds and ephemeral glories of the past, recalling a time when it must have seemed to him he had been more Elevated [sic], and this continual and melancholy look into the past had drawn his bows into a knot, giving him a look of unmistakable hostility (41).

Earl is a deeply frustrated figure who seemed to have the world at his feet with his early success. However, he is unable to make the step to the National League and, with the birth of his son, his life becomes framed in the context of a failure he invents

and morphs into something inescapable. Exley conceives of his very existence as a symbol of his father's failure to play professionally. It is revealed that Earl chose a woman over his own dreams: "During his senior year my father had fallen in love with my mother and had determined to marry her at the expense of either education or fame" (194). Exley vows never to make the same 'mistake' as his father, thereby conceiving of domesticity and marriage as a horrific trap. This idea also colours his relationship with all future women as he regards them with suspicion and synonymous with notions of restricting his artistic potential. Exley feels the bitterness he interprets in his father's grievances, and promises himself he will not fulfil the same legacy. However, in the novel, Exley fathers twins but refuses to take any responsibility for their welfare. In this way through his paternal rejection, Exley will follow in his father's footsteps despite his earlier oath.

Later in the text Exley begins to come to terms with at least part of his feelings towards his father, coming as close to forgiveness as he is capable. Only with maturity can he learn to appreciate the significance of his father's premature sense of loss and the impact this had on his life: "Now I can understand my father, for all his melancholy aspect, was as happy as any man can be who has performed his most poetic feats before twenty" (194). As a result of his father's failure to play professionally, and subsequent suffering, Exley too has been scarred by a disproportionate way of viewing the world and attaining success. Exley bemoans that while "[o]ther men might inherit from their fathers a head for figures [...] from mine I acquired this need to have my name whispered in reverential tones" (35). Exley as a fan craves the adulation of the crowd as the only measure of self-worth; from his father he inherits a fantasy that will bring only sorrow and despair.

In a scene from later in his adolescence, Exley describes the only occasion when he and his father competed together in front of spectators. Knowing what is to come, Exley, is taken sick on the eve of a basketball game between his high school team and a team of old-timers led by Earl. Exley is determined to miss the game and give up basketball altogether, but his father persuades him to compete: “telling me that if I did this one thing, for him, he’d permit to quit the team after the game” (205). Still unwell from anxiety, Exley rises from his bed; he knows that he cannot escape comparisons with the reputation of the sportsman in his family: “At thirteen I was already having my abilities unfavourably compared with those of my father” (205). Coaxed to attend, Exley is reluctant to participate: “I sat [...] stupefied, drifting between nausea and fear” (205). He is asked to come off the bench to guard his father. Instead of encouraging his son, Earl proceeds to demean him, showing his complete physical dominance. Earl is past his prime but the competitive impulse still drives him: “Nearly thirty-nine then, sweating profusely and audibly huffing [...] to the jubilant hilarity of the crowd, my father sank three set shots, characterised for me by a deafening *swiiiiiiisssshhhh* of ball through net, in the last two minutes I covered him” (205). The sportsman in Earl has never left him, and he cannot hold back even against his vulnerable and unathletic son.

Walking back from the game, the young Exley is consumed by anger and pain. He recounts: “I had to repress an urge to weep, to sob uncontrollably, and to shout out to him my humiliation and my loathing. “Oh, Jesus, Pop! *Why? Why? Why?*” (205-206). Earl humiliates his son because he cannot relinquish his need to perform for the crowd. The image of the father-son sharing a sporting passion or bonding by throwing a football in the backyard is countered by the depiction of father-son rivalry and

Exley's utter mortification at his very public disgrace. It is one of the most harrowing pieces of the novel and this scene seems to metaphorically cut the young Exley so deeply he can never let go of this moment on the basketball court. Soon after the game his father will die, making the memory all the more painful:

Neither of us knew that night that in little over a year my father would be dead from the cancer which was doubtless even then eating way at him. But at that moment, with his ungloved hand exposed to the fierce cold and resting familiarly on my shoulder in apology for the words he could not utter, I was wishing he was dead. Among unnumbered sins, from that damning wish I seek absolution (206).

Earl died when Frederick Exley was fifteen, before he had time to come to terms with his father's flaws, and to understand how his own life would never follow in his father's sporting legacy. In searching for a reason as to why Exley becomes so besotted with Frank Gifford it seems reasonable to suggest that the football star appropriates the position of Exley's father as a complex role model of masculine identity. This hypothesis is as close to a reason that the novel will allow. So in a broader sense Exley's fascination with Gifford and football in general can be understood as a means of finding his "place in the competitive world of men" (134) without his father for guidance.

Frank Gifford, the real life professional footballer, played his entire career with the New York Giants. In 1956, Gifford guided his team to the National Football League championship with victory over the Chicago Bears.¹⁹ Exley is attracted to Gifford because he believes their lives have poignantly intersected as contemporaries when they were fellow students at the University of Southern California. From this start,

¹⁹ Gifford is a rarity, even to this day, as one of the few players who was successful in two different positions. He played most of his career at the specialised position of halfback until severe injury meant he missed an entire season. On recovery, Gifford returned to the sport and, against the assumptions of many experts, thrived in a new position as a flanker.

Exley's point of association becomes more spurious as he feels a great connection to Gifford in their shared pursuit of glory. Gifford's success represents the "realization of life's large promises" (70). While Gifford becomes the star player of the New York Giants and leads the team to unprecedented success, Exley languishes in alcoholism, depression, and a fixation on his inability to engage with the women in his life or be understood as an author.

Exley's connection with Gifford begins when they are teenagers and their paths first cross. Even at this age Gifford is already a star; he is accomplished on the football field "an All-American at USC" (61). Exley confides: "I know of no way of describing this phenomenon short of equating it with being the Pope in the Vatican" (61). Exley originally sees Gifford on campus and the scene is perceived, in Exley's imagination at least, as some kind of macho standoff. In reality, Gifford seems to barely notice this attention and in so doing imparts his first lesson to Exley. Just as Gifford is about to leave the diner they both happen to be eating in, Exley stands and provocatively blocks the footballer's path. Exley is consumed with envy for his fellow student who is the talk of the university, the football star with the beautiful girlfriend whose life seems perfect and effortlessly easy. Instead of showing any animosity Gifford is magnanimous in his response. He simply smiles courteously and steps aside. Exley explains: "With that smile [...] he impressed upon me, in the rigidity of my embarrassment, that it is unmanly to burden others with one's grief. Even though it is man's particularly unhappy aptitude to see to it that his fate is shared" (64).

There are two sides to Exley's complex obsession with Gifford: one reflective, and one destructive. Exley's idolisation of Gifford means he continually measures his life against Gifford's success. Whilst once the crowd brought a wedge between himself

and his father, it is later vicariously harnessed as a psychological tool of emotional uplift. Exley's early damage means he needs to find a way of re-evaluating what he thinks of as his own obscurity. Exley explains that his early fascination with Gifford's accomplishments and fame helped him formulate his male identity, so that "each time I heard the roar of the crowd, it roared in my ears as much for me as him" (134). The suggestion is of an emerging psychotic personality whereby another's glory can be personally channelled and truly felt. A girlfriend tries to find the root of Exley's mania. Rather than adoration she sees Exley's fandom for Gifford as sheer animosity. She asks why he despises the football star. Exley answers with incredulity; his feelings are not of loathing, he replies: "But you don't understand at all. Not at all! He may be the only fame I'll ever have!" (232).

The novel invites us to read Exley's obsession in psychoanalytical terms. While a traditional psychoanalytical approach may well pathologise fandom, the writing of psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott have proved most illuminating. Drawing from Klein, Cornel Sandvoss, in *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005), sees the fan's compulsive character traits as an essential desire for intimacy. Sandvoss writes: "the first and foremost audience for the performance of fans is the fan him- or herself. I am thus proposing a model of fandom as a form of narcissistic self-reflection not between fans and their social environment but between the fan and his or her object of fandom" (98). Exley's idolisation of Gifford fits perfectly into Sandvoss' interpretation; it is fanaticism not of identity displacement, but just such a means of self-discovery. During an early match Exley explains: "I cheered for him with such inordinate enthusiasm, my yearning became so involved with his desire to escape life's bleak anonymity" (134). Through his obscure association with Gifford, Exley sees

his life lifted from the quotidian and from the pain of his own fameless inconspicuousness.

Exley's identification with Gifford is always a shifting paradigm. An amalgamation of egos gives way and fluctuates with ferocious bouts of resentment. Exley's bitterness is expressed in his passive aggressive actions. When Gifford's dazzling rise begins Exley mutters: "Have your day, friend. In a matter of months I'll be more famous than you" (333). Football provides Exley with catharsis, yet it is also a destructive force that constantly reminds Exley of his place as an outsider symbolised by the passivity of his fandom. Exley's internal dialogue with Gifford is a feature of the text and in one passage his frustration is firmly articulated when he says: "Listen, you son of a bitch, life isn't all a goddam football game! You won't always get the girl! Life is rejection and pain and loss – all those things I so cherishingly cuddled in my self-pitying bosom" (63). Gifford is both a hero and source of his torment. At times the ease with which Gifford plays the game and realises his dream are not an inspiration but a mockery of Exley's struggles; Exley laments: "Where I could not, with syntax, give shape to my fantasies, Gifford could, with his superb timing" (134). The novel dramatises Exley's fluctuating thought patterns so that Gifford can represent both a damaging ideal to which Exley can never become and also a guide by teaching him how "in how to live with one's scars" (53).

Exley's warped fandom is based not in belonging, but in dissatisfaction and alienation. Exley only momentarily feels the bonds of fandom when he stands with a group of men watching the Giants in the chapter that makes reference to Nabokov's

Pale Fire (1962), 'Onhava Regained and Lost Again'.²⁰ Exley describes himself as "mad Kinbote" (120) the deluded academic living as a sad exile in a sleepy American college town. However, the connection Exley has with the other fans is not lasting and he understands that his place among them is tolerated only as an oddity rather than through traditional kinship. His fondness for Gifford is regarded as a source of mirth. He realises: "They were right about my churlish, extravagant partiality to Gifford; though I suspect they never understood it, it amused them, and they liked me for that" (133). Yet, this is the only scene in the entire novel of any type of fan camaraderie; Exley cannot share his affection for Gifford with anyone else in his life. The obsession of his fandom ostracises him from others meaning Exley is isolated in his art, relationships and passion. At each turn of the story and in every failed relationship or disgrace the spectre-like presence of Frank Gifford haunts him: "it seemed that every time I picked up a magazine [...] I was confronted with his picture" (231). Gifford is the star and his life has been built on success as the image of the masculine ideal. Exley's pain is rooted in his inability to see his life beyond the lens of Gifford's fame and grace.

As a physical manifestation of his frustration, at the end of the novel, Exley provokes an altercation with two strangers who innocently walk past him in the street. It seems as if he is psychologically drawn to have his diminished sense of self-worth reflected by physical pain. Exley may also be looking to emulate the public injury that his father received earlier in the book by experiencing violence and pain as somehow a means to forge masculine identity. Exley's racial and homophobic abuse of two men who bump into him incites a sudden confrontation. Before the ensuing fight, Exley

²⁰ Onhava is the capital of the fictional kingdom of Zembla in Nabokov's novel.

mistakenly assumes that his adversaries understand that his vituperation has not been through bigotry or malice; it has rather been redirected from profound self-hatred: “loathing [...] rose up from deep disappointment within myself-from my own defeats and degradations and humiliations” (354). As a reason for this displacement then the narrator’s excuse seems tenuous, but in the context of his mental health, whilst not condonable, it is at least comprehensible. Exley puts up little fight and is soundly trounced. Bloody and beaten, it is at this moment that Exley finally pinpoints the reason for his years of suffering. He explains: “I fought because I understood and could not bear to understand, that it was my destiny – unlike that of my father, whose fate it was to hear the roar of the crowd – to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan” (357). What drives Exley’s struggle is the awful dread that he is forever destined to be a spectator and not a participant as his father and Gifford had been. Instead, Exley is fixated on what he perceives to be his certain future to be an onlooker, not only on the field, but in life itself. Exley’s view of sport is from the outside, as a spectator forever looking in, never able to feel the thrill of athletic grace or bask in the glory of the crowd’s devotion. Gifford has all the attributes Exley imagines his father wished for him. Exley craves Gifford’s success and, although not in sport, with the publication of the novel he has attained a comparable success. While he sees himself as a failure because his success will not be on the field, it is precisely his position and frustration as a fan and onlooker that has allowed him the perspective necessary to write.

For all its focus on suffering and defeat, three aspects of the novel overturn Exley’s conception of failure revealing hidden redemptive elements in the text. A central premise of the novel is how Exley must come to terms with his own definition

and judgement of himself as an outcast in American society. Due to his idiosyncrasies, he is never going to fit in with the norms of mainstream America; Exley realises that he will always feel alienated, but he must “get used to being an outsider” (19). The football narrative imposes a strict ideology: just as it insists on a specific notion of masculinity, so too does it castigate any implication of sexual failing. Essential to the representation of football as a bastion of blue-collar masculinity is the institutional insistence on an expression of heterosexual virility that the sport perpetuates.

Exley does have a series of relationships, although each is destroyed by his neuroticism. The most significant romance he describes is with a beautiful young blond woman. When Exley moves to Chicago he is introduced to Bunny Sue Allorgee; her name is a thinly veiled allegory for America. Exley is infatuated with her. He sees her as his muse; he grandiosely claims she was “Wordsworth’s Lucy, Tristan’s Iseult, Poe’s Annabel Lee. But, oh, she was so very American” (149). When Exley is unable to consummate his relationship with Bunny Sue, he feels his impotence as a reflection of a greater failure in his manhood itself. Bunny Sue is the quintessential ‘all-American girl’, she is the “Homecoming queen” (149), the “girl next door” (149), the Midwestern beauty, the embodiment of American youth, “the odor she cast as wholesome as homemade bread” (149), and the epitome of male sexual fantasy. Exley has been indoctrinated by the dream-myth, interwoven with the football narrative that codifies real men and heroes as “unimpeachably virile” (163). In his mind, impotence renders his failure with the stigma of emasculation leaving him feeling further alienated and “removed [...] from the world of men” (163).

What proves so troubling for conceptions of American masculinity is that the football narrative, and the ideology it pervades, serves to undermine as much as it

provides assurance. The code of exaggerated masculinity is an impossible ideal that leaves men, as in Exley's case, feeling ostracized from red-blooded virility and the standards of behaviour that have been indoctrinated. However, eventually Exley is able to resolve his feeling towards his impotence because he improbably reinterprets his incapacity as a form of displacement and strange salvation. Bunny Sue stands for America and Exley interprets that his "inability to couple had not been with her but with some aspect of America with which I could not have lived successfully [...] had I mingled with her womb I would never have had the strength to walk away" (221). Exley feels at odds with America itself and, in this passage, feels vindicated by not consummating the relationship. Yet behind this excuse there is tremendously problematic belief, which reveals a much darker side of the novel. As much as *A Fan's Notes* runs counter to the traditional football narrative, the portrayal of women in the text is all too familiar in sports genre pieces.

Unlike DeLillo's portrayal of the complex relationship between Gary and Myna, throughout Exley's writing there are deep misogynist tendencies and even an unpalatable contempt for women that leaves readers of his fiction feeling, at best, uneasy. The tone is established from the beginning. In a shocking passage Exley describes reading glossy magazines filled with pictures of beautiful women; he says: "I would imagine raping them and at the moment of orgasm, slashing their throats or bashing in their lovely faces with a spiked club. Imagining these things, I felt neither guilt nor horror but a kind of gleeful detachment" (15). The novel's misogynist sections are shamefully in keeping with much of football's association with gender oppression and extreme sexual violence. Exley's transfer of his hatred for America onto women or vice versa is a defensive strategy; he fabricates an excuse that a physical

relationship with Bunny Sue would have meant his submission to the American values he opposes when of course the two are linked only in his mind. The association between America and Bunny Sue is therefore a latent construct of Exley's neuroses. As with Susan Jeffords' argument that the reimagining of defeat in Vietnam was aligned to the feminine, so too does the perceived connection between Bunny Sue and traditionalist America sit awkwardly. The convenient association shows a phallogentric construct of power where a male sense of inadequacy can be reinterpreted and attributed to women. In the novel, the portraits of women are never fully formed or balanced; women are described as nothing more than "rewards [...] for those obedient men who accepted society's standards of success" (16) values that for Exley are "not only wrongheaded but grotesque" (16). Choosing to rebel against the compliance of "obedient men", Exley foresees a future without women in his life. While this aspect of the text proves troubling, what does remain significant is the focus on indecisiveness, non-consummation, and *inaction* that can offer Exley a redemptive escape from American conservatism. By disengaging Exley rejects the imposed and limiting values represented by his friends' "neat-trimmed lawns and white clapboard houses" (9). Exley recognises himself as an outsider but acknowledges his place and finds a modicum of solace through a denial of mainstream America and the behaviour that society demands.

Exley finds a more acceptable and credible sense of healing redemption in a second form. When Exley destroys the manuscript he had been working on for several years, he explains "I burned it because on every page I had discovered I loathed the America I knew" (335). It is a revelatory moment. The America that Exley loathes is the one infatuated with fame and in particular its sports stars. Exley recognises that

he is also part of this culture. Although he recognises the toxicity at the heart of the American Dream, this knowledge does not free him from its corruption. Exley imagines just such a life for himself and recognises “nothing grossly unusual in the fantasy: it was a projected compendium of all that was most truly vulgar in America: I was rich, famous, and powerful” (80). The American Dream is “vulgar”. The game itself is the perfect embodiment of Exley’s America; it has the capacity to both captivate and horrify. Exley’s solution is to refuse to comply with societal pressures, particularly in America; he chooses to take to his mother’s davenport: “In a land where movement is virtue, where the echo of heels clicking rapidly on pavement is inordinately blest” (185). Exley’s reaction is against a country he struggles to comprehend; he is divided by his unresolved desire to both belong and be apart. The one authentic stance he can adopt is to lie down and disengage.

Exley is repulsed by America but wants nothing more than for the country to take him to heart and celebrate his self-proclaimed genius. He reflects that his failure derived from “the inability of a man to impose his dreams, his ego, upon the city, and for many long months had been experiencing a rage induced by New York’s stony refusal to esteem [him]” (70). He is infatuated by women, but resents them taking him away from his true calling. As C. Barry Chabot argues, he is emotionally sensitive but constantly forces himself into “[i]mmunizing detachment” (96) for the sake of his wellbeing and artistry. The reason for adopting this state is perfectly illustrated when Exley is first taken to the hospital and the reader is given one of the few indications of why he has chosen to live at a distance. Exley takes pity on a fellow patient, a young black man, who is convinced that he has the devil living inside him and his only cure will be for one of the doctors to cut him open with a scalpel and remove his imagined

internal tormentor. In a rare scene of compassion, Exley feels pity for the man and is the only one in the asylum who will listen to his fellow inmate's (Exley prefers this term to patient) anguish. They stand together at the window of the hospital looking out onto the autumnal colours of the outside world and Exley places an arm around his shoulder. However, the black man is abused and derided by the attendants for his belief and this only serves to strengthen Exley's assertion of emotional detachment. His self-defence mechanism is to choose to withdraw from all relationships. Exley refers to this practice as his "Law of Institutional Survival" (76). Left to reflect on the black man's pain, Exley learns his lesson and concludes: "The main thing was to avoid...attachment, to avoid setting myself up for experiencing another's defeat" (79). Exley believes that to guard one's sanity, one must withdraw from the potential heartbreak of relationships and human reciprocity. Therefore, for the protagonist, failure to engage is a vital act of self-protection. Exley recognises that this resistance method is essential to his conception of being an artist. At the end of the novel he is committed to following his calling. In his mind, to be a writer is to remove oneself from humanity: "The malaise of writing – and it is of no consequence whether the writer is talented or otherwise – is that after a time a man writing arrives at a point outside human relationships, becomes, as it were, a human" (359). This means that for Exley being an outsider is not only preferable, but essential to an artist's vocation.

The third aspect of redemption is symbolised by the text itself. Its publication can be read as a type of victory for all Exley's failure and suffering. *A Fan's Notes* is a work defined by failure, but the novel Exley writes is ultimately a great accomplishment born of true distress and loss. Exley's work deals with addiction, confinement in mental asylums and the failure of his relationships with women and

his family, but all becomes the material and source for the writer searching for a voice. At moments, Exley realises that his journey has been essential to his art. He discovers that “literature is born out of the longing [he] was seeking to repress” (37). As James Dickey writes, as it appears on the back-cover of the Random House edition of the paperback from 1998: “This is the horrible and hilarious account of a long failure, but a failure which turns into a success: the success that this book is”. Exley’s ambition to become a distinguished author in the tradition of the authors he reveres like Hawthorne and Fitzgerald may not have been quite realised, yet its publication and the plaudits it has gained reads as verification of a writer’s self-discovery and the redeeming potential of an artist’s work. The masculinised narrative of fulfilled sporting glory, as seen in Gifford’s career, is juxtaposed with the obscurity of fandom. While Frank Gifford’s story is of first success then the heartbreak of his head injury before the denouement of his victorious return to the team, Exley’s story in tandem, is one of depression and failure. The reader is also aware that they hold before their eyes the finished novel itself. How far Exley and his self-titled protagonist intertwine is a matter of conjecture, yet the reader does know that the work will be completed and published, and all the protagonist’s suffering has not been in vain. Exley’s failures are sources of inspiration; his instability and depression have eventually provided him the necessary materials with which to write. He discovers that “literature is born out of the very longing I was so seeking to repress” (37).

Beauty and Stasis: Football Conclusion

End Zone and *A Fan's Notes* share as many differences as points of intersection. Where DeLillo's novel is rather cool, ironic, and theoretical, Exley's story is personal and raw. Where DeLillo depicts the game from the inside through gruelling training sessions and the players' in-game experiences, Exley is forever the outsider looking in from stands, in a drunken haze from the barroom, or lying on his mother's davenport sofa. However, two ideas aligning these texts are worthy of a final thought. Both take remarkable interest in a reassessment of the brutality of the game and also accentuate how ideas of stasis can undermine the drive of the football narrative's imagery and create catharsis for its protagonists.

Traditional football stories celebrate the game's blood and thunder dynamics drawing pride from its own violence as a throwback to what is commonly portrayed as man's vital primitivism. In both novels while there is an element of archaic reconnection at play, there is also an alternative vision to bloodlust and the guilty thrill of gladiatorial aggression. Exley and DeLillo juxtapose notions of aesthetic beauty against their depiction of football's total bellicosity. At the end of *A Fan's Notes* the reader witnesses just such an instance of violence and artistic reframing. Exley describes the infamous moment when Chuck Bednarik almost ends Frank Gifford's career with a brutal tackle in a game between the New York Giants and the Philadelphia Eagles in November 1960. Bednarik's tackle inflicted horrific injuries that left Gifford unconscious as he was carried from the field, then hospitalised with a deep brain concussion, which kept him out of action for eighteen months. A famous black

and white photograph of Bednarik celebrating his tackle and standing over a twisted and seemingly lifeless Gifford has become an iconic image in football folklore. As Exley watches the action unfold he describes the scene as if in slow motion. As much as Exley roots for Gifford, there is a part of him longing for the footballer's destruction. Just as Exley has been given identity, years earlier, by his father's humiliation at the hands of Steve Owen, he yearns to see Gifford hurt. Exley witnesses his hero poleaxed by an opponent, but depicts the tackle as a strangely graceful memory: "Gifford never saw him, and Bednarik did his job well [...] bringing him to the soft green turf with a sickening thud. In a way it was beautiful to behold. For what seemed an eternity Gifford and the ball had seemed to float weightlessly, above the field" (347-348). Exley's description evokes a strange tenderness in violence as time stands still and Gifford's crumpled body collides with the ground. The informed reader knows that Gifford will suffer life threatening injuries from the tackle, but the moment of impact has an odd grace lent by Exley's prose.

In *End Zone* a similar idea is portrayed as football's image, with its core violence, turns from chaos and ugliness to an astonishing ephemeral elegance. For Creed, violence and pain reminds us of, not only our primal purer selves, but paradoxically to a calmness of thought. After the team's first defeat Creed tells Harkness: "People stress the violence. That's the smallest part of it. Football is brutal only from a distance. In the middle of it there's a calm, a tranquillity" (190). The "tranquillity" of the game is created by its acceptance of theoretical order. There is harmony from within through the orchestration of the players' movements, strategic cooperation and sophistication that Creed sees as peaceful despite the apparent disorder when viewed from afar. On the field of play the end zone is the scoring area

but it is also the one area inside the game where contact is restricted thus it is both a goal and a refuge. In accordance with Creed's conception, while watching football on television, Harkness notes how "[i]n slow motion the game's violence became almost tender, a series of lovely and sensual assaults" (92). DeLillo's text reveals an alternative image to football's viciousness; outside the vortex of the game's chaos there resides an order invisible to the unprivileged and uninitiated. There is a symmetry and harmony in the "interlocking" (190) systems of play and a sense of unity in the physical act of head-on competition.

The image of the game in slow motion will develop in DeLillo's text, like the theory of entropy, to reach a final state of total stillness. Complete calmness is an apotheosis, to use one of the words Harkness teaches himself earlier in the narrative. In *End Zone* each significant character moves towards Beckettian immobility. What ultimately unites these two novels is the way that the protagonists choose inertia and therefore disengagement. Faced with what they come to perceive to be insurmountable odds they both choose stasis, on his mother's davenport for Exley, and in paralysis through an unarticulated hunger strike for Harkness. Football is the game that demands movement of opposing forces and military-style conviction in following orders through positive and linear action. The whole game is premised on competing bodies tussling, straining and colliding. Reacting against this theme, Exley and Harkness make very conscious resolutions to oppose an accepted ideology of football. As Exley writes, in a country that is so enamoured with affirmative movement in the unquestionable pursuit of happiness, his choice to disengage and renounce the capitalist clamour he feels surrounding him is recounted and celebrated as a "grand, defiant, and edifying gesture" (185). In taking to his sofa Exley imagines himself

rebellious from the terrible mundanity of his view of conformity. It is significant that the chapter in which Exley retreats to his mother's sofa is titled "Journey on a Davenport" as Exley retrospectively views this period as a meaningful passage rather than an end point. As they feel the corruption of the system they have been coerced into entering: militaristic college football for Harkness and the pervasive indoctrination of mainstream American values for Exley, each man aims to destroy his own potential for a success they distrust. Harkness sabotages his football career by separating from his teammates, smoking marijuana before a game, then starving his body. Similarly, Exley loses his job, burns his manuscript, and takes to the davenport. These characters choose the only form of personal affirmation they feel is open to them. The most poignant way to express their free will is to fail and relinquish their life's work and what is closest to them.

Strangely, the choice of surrender these protagonists make also conforms to one of the fundamental demands of the patriarchal football narrative. Both Exley and Harkness, pushed to their limits by their destructive thoughts, choose forms of self-sacrifice. The virtue of sacrifice leads all the way back to the early pulp football narratives of the nineteenth century where characters were prepared to give their body and soul for victory. Yet in the cases of Exley and Harkness both versions of surrender are not made for the good of the team as Earl or initially Coach Creed might demand, but in a desperate attempt to find personal salvation. These texts describe anti-heroes shunning the world around them, less as personal failures, and more as an acceptance of the failures of the systems they inhabit and loathe. Therefore their withdrawal is a passive form of realisation. In what society may deem failure in institutionalised isolation, Exley in a mental asylum and Harkness in the infirmary, is in

fact failure transformed through a reimagining of will. In these texts quiescence as failure is an act of breaking free from the ideology that has imprisoned these protagonists in their previous lives.

Basketball: A Cultural and Narrative History

You learn hoop. Then you fall in love. Learn the game and play the game a certain way and what you feel about it can turn to more than you ever dreamed²¹

John Edgar Wideman, *Hoop Roots*

In 1887 Dr Luther H. Gullick was appointed onto the International Committee staff of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). As part of his role he was tasked with developing the organisation's physical education programme. Gullick was among a growing number of Americans who saw merit in promoting the ethical purpose of sport believing that educators were responsible for nourishing their students' physical as well as spiritual wellbeing (Myerscough, 140). Gullick was an exponent of the "Muscular Christianity" movement of the mid-nineteenth century which came into vogue across American institutions. The YMCA became popular with young male college graduates who wanted a space to continue playing the sports they had enjoyed at university. In 1891 a young graduate, James Naismith, took up a post at the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts. Naismith, a Canadian, shared Gullick's ideology of sport's capacity for promoting exercise and instilling rigorous moral values. Naismith, who had earned his degree from McGill University specialising in divinity (Myerscough, 140), was drawn to education through promoting the links between sport and ethical beliefs. His ethos fitted with the YMCA's desire for a platform for athletic and gentlemanly growth.

²¹ Wideman, 17.

When the football season finished in the winter, and as baseball did not start until spring, young men were left with a period without a sport to play in order to maintain their fitness and hone their athletic skills. Calisthenics and aerobics were both practiced in the off-season, but were generally unpopular with the men at the YMCA as they were considered too repetitive and arduous. Gullick bestowed the task of developing a new game upon Naismith, demanding a sport that could be played indoors under artificial lights, and that would engage the athletes without the risk of serious injury (Myerscough 140). Naismith was determined to create a sport that could be played with space restrictions and fulfil the directive of inventing a pastime that would utilise speed and skill over strength and power.

Having decided on his basic principles, Naismith asked the college janitor to provide two baskets that could be used to create separate goals. The janitor was only able to find a couple of discarded peach crates which were roughly the same size and dimensions as Naismith's request. Naismith instructed that the peach crates should be hung perpendicularly from each end of the gym. The crates were nailed ten feet above the floor, which is the regulation height still used to this day in all professional competition (142). Further details of Naismith's first game are rather vague, but it is believed to have occurred in mid-December 1891. The first players were an unsuspecting YMCA class who arrived for their normal activities. Naismith pinned a list of the game's rules in the gymnasium and the students were able to study these as they came in to train (141). The students who first competed in the new sport were unsure of the game's potential but enjoyed the novel activity enough to ask for it to be played again. From this point basketball's popularity grew as students from the YMCA in Springfield continued to play, then left and took-up posts all around the

country and encouraged others to play the game. By 1893 basketball was spreading across the United States (145). The same year Mel B. Rideout took the game to France by taking a post in the Paris YMCA (150). However, it was in America that public passion for the sport took hold, transforming basketball from a training game in the offseason to an accepted and popular sport in its own right.

The YMCA began to organise competitions and in 1896 the first Championship of America was played in New York cementing the sport's popularity.²² The game that had begun as an experiment in the gym of a Springfield YMCA club had become a fully-fledged sport with mass popular appeal. Basketball's initial popularity can be attributed to its originality and versatility. The game's strength is undoubtedly enhanced by its informality and lack of rigidity. The rules are simple and the gameplay is incredibly intuitive and fast. Whereas American football was derived from rugby, and baseball took elements of cricket and rounders, basketball seemed an entirely original game.

However, despite the widely known story of its inception, involving Naismith's peach crates, there is speculation about other sources of basketball's beginnings. Sports historians such as Peter Donahue and Brian Wingate have conjectured on an alternative origin to basketball, with far earlier roots, derived from Mesoamerican ballgames in ancient indigenous culture. Indian communities had played throwing and hoop games for hundreds of years before the invention of what became basketball. North American tribes played a game of hoop-and-pole where participants would hurl long poles towards a hoop with a rawhide netting attached to the rim which closely

²² The National Basket Ball League which was initially comprised of six teams from the Northwest area: Camden, Trenton, Millville, Pennsylvania Bicycle Club, Hancock Athletic Club and Germantown Club (Myerscough, 138).

resembled the design of the basketball net (Donahue, 46). In some variations the hoop was rolled along the ground as two groups of men took aim and launched their poles at the moving target (46). The Lakota believed that the spider web net attached to the hoop was invented by the ancient spider people and then taught to them (46). Although it was played among many tribes and differed considerably, the hoop was often approximately the size of a standard basket based on the peach baskets used by Naismith. Some tribes even played games on wooden floors roughly the length of a basketball court today. Pok-Ta-Pok is another game that has noteworthy similarities to basketball; the ancient activity is a game of ritual associations comprised of five players on each team with the aim of propelling a ball through a high stone hoop. This native game was traditionally played by tribes in the Southwest and is generally associated with Mayan culture. Historians have traced its origins back as early as 3,000 B.C. (Wingate, 10).

Whether games such as Pok-Ta-Pok or hoop-and-pole truly influenced the development of basketball in the United States is uncertain. It is unknown whether Naismith would have had any knowledge of these pre-existing Native games. Yet, what is undoubtedly true is the athletic and competitive aspects that Native Americans took from ancient and traditional games and imposed on an appreciation of Naismith's sport. Baseball and football hold deeply negative associations as the games that Native American children were forced to play in the boarding school assimilation process of the late nineteenth century (Ahrenhoerster, 28). The Indian children at these schools were made to cut their braids, prevented from following their religious beliefs, and forced to play American games to integrate them into

mainstream white culture. Basketball lacks this specific connotation and helps explain why it has become hugely popular on Native American reservations.

As enthusiasm for basketball spread in the early twentieth century, it gained great popularity amongst a range of ethnic minority groups. People could come together to play the game and its originality meant it was not a reminder of the old world, but was perceived as an embodiment of the new. Teams of the early twentieth century reflected the recent immigration to the United States with names such as the Italians, the Visitation (Irish) and the Busy Izzies (Jewish) (Grundy, 138). Basketball was used as a means of expressing ethnic identity and forging community ties as well as an immediate act of integration into a new homeland. Basketball was the sport most apt in terms of this agenda mainly due to its immediacy and its urban association.

In its early years basketball was known as a Jewish game because of the number of prominent Jewish players. In Jewish communities in inner cities, basketball became a vital way of establishing American identity whilst also maintaining a separation of culture and religious beliefs (Grundy, 138). A number of NBA (National Basketball Association) teams came into existence as a result of amateur teams from community centres and Jewish neighbourhoods where the game was widely enjoyed. The first player to score a basket in the NBA was Jewish. In a match between the New York Knickerbockers and the Toronto Huskies in November 1946 Ossie Schectman gained the opening points for his team.²³ The Jewish media encouraged communities to adopt basketball to promote their newfound 'Americanness' and endorse

²³ This was the first game of the Basketball Association of America (BAA). Schectman along with his Jewish teammates Sonny Hertzberg, Stan Stutz, Hank Rosenstein, Ralph Kaplowitz, Jake Weber, and Leo "Ace" Gottlieb were early Jewish stars of the first basketball league of America (Vyorsy). However, Schectman's name has been all but forgotten in American sporting culture.

integration, but also as a way to break the stereotypical image of Jews being unathletic or uncoordinated. While the game helped to forge feelings of inclusion in the Jewish community it was also used to spread racist attitudes. The sports essayist Paul Gallico, editor of *New York Daily News*, wrote in the mid-1930s that basketball "appeals to the Hebrew with his Oriental background [because] the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind and flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smartalecness" (Russell, 167). Unfortunately, such overt anti-Semitism and racial bigotry was far from an isolated opinion.

As much as basketball helped to strengthen ethnic identity, it was also used to instil prejudice against vulnerable minority groups. The early Native American teams found a great deal of success on the basketball courts. However, the popular image of proud silent warriors who lacked discipline perpetuated a negative stereotype that reinforced the bigotries of the majority white audience. The Native American teams became caricatures of the exoticised image of the defeated warrior nation still wearing battle headdress, but no longer a danger to civilised society (Yep, 979). Chinese teams such as the Hong Wah Kues suffered similar intolerance as they were presented as comic and inferior because of a perceived lack of strength and dexterity (980). To add to the stereotypes the team was ordered by their manager to only speak Cantonese on court and wear silk pyjamas (981). For mainstream America the existence of such teams provided neat corroboration of America as a melting pot of a heterogeneous society, but presented an unthreatening version of foreign identity.

A tradition of racial segregation, the game's adaptability, and its take-up by minority groups helps explain why, in literary representations, basketball has been continually depicted as an outsider sport. American writers have used the game to

articulate an ostracised existence for characters either pushed outside typical society or unwilling to reside in such a limiting space both physically and psychologically. The basketball narrative continually portrays ideas of ethnic marginalisation, exclusion and alienation. However, within the game's depiction there is also an emphasis on breaking barriers to find means of escape; this sense is represented by the speed and movement of the game as a symbol of improvisation, and transcendent possibility. It is in this space where the contemporary and experimental writers I consider, principally John Edgar Wideman and Sherman Alexie, use basketball as a means to elevate the spirit through a desire for play and find freedom through self-expression.

Basketball in fiction is by far the least represented game of the three major American sports. While baseball has a nationalistic mythology that has inspired countless American authors, and football has a legacy of school and college tradition, basketball does not have the same imagery or folklore for artists to draw upon. Basketball has traditionally been a more difficult sport to fit into the genre of sports fiction because its play does not readily translate to a pleasing linear narrative structure. Basketball defies the tenets of traditional literary conventions in that the game is a dynamic and relentless flow back and forth, up and down the court. The game lacks climaxes or the steady build ups analogous with conventional plots or character developments as has been argued is the case in other sports genre fiction. Basketball's youth, pace and focus on movement has generally dissuaded writers from depicting the game and choosing the more literary established sports such as baseball or boxing. Although John Updike's 1960 novel *Rabbit, Run* forged new ground in its use of basketball in fiction, other works have not followed in its path in any great numbers. Updike's series of novels depicts the story of Harry Angstrom (known also

as Rabbit). In the first novel, Updike depicts his suburban alienation, angst (hence his surname), and frustration in middle-America. Subsequent American authors have not built on Updike's sporting framework: basketball novels are conspicuous by their absence in the canon of American sports writing. It may well be due to its outsider status that has limited the number of literary works. It is likely that black writers have shied away from the unavoidable stereotyping of the game described as 'the black national pastime'.²⁴ Mainstream white writers, with the exception of Updike, have also failed to see the game's symbolic potential of the game's dynamics. However, basketball's meteoric rise in popularity since the Seventies has meant that younger writers, often from ethnic minority groups, have begun to explore the potential of basketball literature that has led to several innovative works. As contemporary writers attempt to reimagine the basketball genre they follow in a literary tradition begun by Updike. The focus in this chapter is on a racial division within basketball, and therefore references to Updike's works will be sparing, although it seems necessary to start with Harry Angstrom's beginnings, life and death on the basketball court.

There has been a great deal of literary criticism on Updike's Rabbit novels and much study of his use of sport and basketball in particular. Messenger's chapter 'The Pursuit of Upward Space' in *Sport and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction* (1990) and Jack B. Moore's section 'Sports, Basketball, and Fortunate Failure in the Rabbit Tetralogy' in *Rabbit Tales: Poetry and Politics in Updike's Rabbit Novels* (2000) are particularly noteworthy in exploring the significance of play and

²⁴ It is noteworthy that there is an absence of black American writers receiving critical attention, and fewer still who have used basketball in any significant way in their writing. Works by black writers such as Al Young's *Ask Me Now* (1980) and Barry Beckham's fictional biography of legendary player Earl "The Goat" Manigault in *Double Dunk* (2000) do reiterate the themes of the basketball narrative yet few have the ambition, scope and originality of works by Wideman.

disillusionment in the series of novels. Updike's oeuvre also fits well into this study as his prose captures a sense of deep loss; his characters have a great propensity for failure. This is never more eloquently articulated than in Harry's tragic search for belonging. At the beginning of the series, in a compulsive moment, Harry flees his home and finds himself in a provincial diner; he wonders: "Is it just these people I'm outside, or is it all America?" (20).

Updike chose basketball as the sport at the centre of Rabbit's narrative for a very particular set of reasons. Angstrom could have been a failed sportsman in any discipline from baseball to track and field, yet Updike selected basketball for his most iconic protagonist.²⁵ Basketball fiction was uncharted literary territory in the Sixties and so Updike was able to write about the sport without the influence of prior works. Most importantly for Updike, the sport allows Rabbit to rejoice in specific aspects of the game that are vital to an understanding of his character that can be summarised as touch, grace and individuality. These specific facets are less obvious in other sports; although basketball is a team game the individual is given abundant opportunity to perform in their own right. As Updike was well aware, the basketball court is a stage with its wooden floors below the tiered stands of spectators. Basketball is also so suitable for Harry because of its association with being an outsider sport. He is constantly searching for a place where he can feel true to himself, and the tetralogy is anchored in Rabbit's ostracised sense of loss and his permanent quest to both belong and to be free of commitments. For Rabbit, basketball is one avenue of

²⁵ Updike was known to have been a baseball fan; he also wrote of his passion for golf. Harry of course does play golf, most notably in *Rabbit, Run* against Eccles, and in *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) where the game becomes a status symbol among the retired elite of Florida. Basketball certainly does not have the WASPish connotations of golf.

freedom yet it also a freedom that exists only in an idealised memory. Rabbit was a high school basketball star but the rest of his life does not match the thrill of his early success. The liberty he seeks is never reachable and is consequently destructive to his potential for happiness. Rabbit must come to terms with his frustration; he laments: "I once did something right. I played first-rate basketball. I really did. And after you're first-rate at something, no matter what it is, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate" (64). Only in the youth of his basketball playing career does he find contentment and self-worth. The novels are full of references to the dimpled texture of the ball against Rabbit's skilled fingertips and the pursuit of a comparable connection to the tactile or tangible in every aspect of his life outside the sports arena and his memories. The grace that Harry felt on the court is absent in all other parts of his life, but fundamentally in relationships, his religion and his identity.

Basketball features in each of the subsequent Rabbit novels. In *Rabbit Redux* (1971), against the backdrop of the moon landing, Updike depicts the racial tension of the 1960s when Harry's wife leaves him and he eventually takes in his lover, Jill, and a radical black man named Skeeter. Skeeter preaches an apocalyptic and revolutionary vision of instability in a divided America. On one occasion Rabbit returns from work to find Skeeter playing basketball with his young son Nelson. Rabbit joins in with the game and Skeeter instantly mocks his old-fashioned style of flat-footedly throwing the ball; he laughs:

Where did you learn that funky old style of shooting a basketball? You were tryin' to be comical, right?' [...] You gotta jump and shoot, jump and shoot, right? He demonstrates [...] Rabbit tries, but finds his body heavy, the effort of lifting jarring. The ball flies badly. Says Skeeter, 'You got a white man's lead gut' (337).

This scene represent the passing of power and the ascendancy of a particularly black style of play epitomised by the transition from an outmoded standing shot, of Harry's boyhood era, to the much more athletic jump shot, adopted by black players, that was to become so integral to the game in the second half of the twentieth century. Wideman will devote an entire chapter of *Hoop Roots* (2001) to an imagined conference on the subject of the invention of the jump shot. As Updike alludes to, black players took over from their white counterparts and began to dominate every aspect of the professional game. Harry represents the old-school and Skeeter the new. Rabbit is a relic of another time, he no longer has the physique to be graceful, his technique is outdated, and he is unable to find the lightness of touch he once had on the court, hence Skeeter's scorn. Themes in the novels converge so the importance of the gravity-defying jump shot mirrors the space rocket that will fly beyond the Earth's atmosphere into orbit. Rabbit too looks upwards towards the overhead ball or toward the church steeple after he has committed adultery in bed with Ruth in *Rabbit, Run*.

As well as the theme of "upward space" that Messenger identifies, Updike is drawn to the symbolism of the net at either end of the playing arena. The net is the goal but it is also a trap. For Harry the net has great symbolic importance. In his youth it represents potential and glory. By the time he is married it seems only to stand for oppressive duty and Rabbit's sense of being ensnared as he flees from his old life and the restrictiveness of family obligations. As Updike found, the language of basketball is extremely evocative and malleable to the prose of marginalisation. Whilst it has been suggested that basketball does not immediately lend itself to fiction, I explore how authors with a postmodern aesthetic, such as Alexie and Wideman, use prose and structure to contradict this limiting notion. As with all American sports there is a

vast and erudite lexicon to describe every aspect of play, nuance and tactical strategy on the basketball court. Yet in analysing the language used by coaches, players and commentators it is revealing to note the extent of imagery of restriction, unshackling and breaking free. Language such as the 'exclusion zones' in which players may not encroach during free throws, or the misdemeanour of 'travelling' where a player runs more than two steps without bouncing the ball which is an immediate penalty, brings to mind ideas of constraint, movement and escape. Even the linguistic serendipity between the words court and caught seems fittingly apt in the multiple meanings standing for a venue, catching the ball and being trapped. Wideman takes this idea one step further playing with the word's double meaning in describing the wooing and play of a pair of lovers: "I courted her" (106). Even specific areas of the court have a language that relates to freedom. 'The key' is the name given to the area on the basketball court underneath the basket and between the end line and foul line. When a player steps over the white lines beyond the confines of the court they go 'out of bounds'. The term 'benchwarmer' is American sporting slang, particularly used in basketball, referring to a player who perennially sits amongst the substitutes without being called into the action. This is the language that lends itself to basketball writing at the margins of the mainstream.

Due to the sport's insistence on invention and play, experimental authors have found that basketball, far from being limiting, is analogous to the act of writing. Lawrence Shainberg draws the parallels in an emotive article in the *New Yorker* from 1989. The author's subject shares much with the analogy in Wideman's memoir. Shainberg writes of how his passion for the game influenced his later career choice:

During college, a few years later, I find another solitary practice. It's called writing. At first it leads to diaries and journals which are not a little like shooting alone. Sound and rhythm, precision, description, explanation, analysis—when I get the words right, I tap into sensations not so different from those I felt when I connected to the rim. A sentence or even a word completes a circle. Sometimes, by taking up my pen, I can make time disappear or find my way to sentences that seem, like an instinct-shot in the heat of a game, independent of my brain. It isn't long however before the diary seems incomplete [...] Of course—again like shooting alone—getting it right in your diary is pure and somehow complete, but as Wittgenstein says, language is a game, and some games, like basketball and the one I'm playing at this moment, have to be played with others. It's true that writing is always solitary, but one needs a reader as a ballplayer needs a teammate or an opponent. If you aren't, right now, retrieving the ball for me or playing defence against me or getting the ball to me when I'm open under the basket, you are somehow, by understanding, appreciating, criticizing, rejecting or even just reading these words, completing the circle with me.

There is a spirituality that Shainberg, Alexie and Wideman all recognise in the game. The image of the circle is a key feature in contemporary basketball fiction that reoccurs in the works of each. The ball, the hoop, and the act of completion are all circular. Playing the game and writing both rely on self-awareness and focus; the goal in each is a sense of perfection that is attained in fleeting moments of oneness. Although shooting hoop and writing are solitary acts they are given life by interplay: between the ballplayer and his/her opponent and the author's reader. Shainberg's novel *One on One* (1970) is centred on seeking self-awareness. The work depicts a six foot nine Jewish basketball player called Elwood Baskin as he competes in his first game for New York University. Elwood's height and skill make him the most exciting new player in the country, but the text is centred on his mental state. The novel is concerned with alienation, fragmented consciousness and psychosis as Elwood's internalised version of events becomes clouded by his psychiatrist's attempts to control him and the neuroticism of his parents' desires. Rather than being free,

Elwood must battle these internalised competing voices that vie for attention as he readies himself for the game that will define his basketball career.

In one passage Elwood rebels against the prescriptive control of those around him giving orders. He muses: “If things happened on the court the way coaches diagram them, every game would come to a standstill: a perfect offence and a perfect defence add up to a state of paralysis” (155). A theoretical framework of sports, as a particularly American trait, threatens to transform the freedom of a game into a rigid conceptualised model. This line could easily be taken from DeLillo’s *End Zone* in its concern for an autocratic vision of organised sport with a paradoxical zenith in a faultlessness of stasis. Ellwood’s critique derives from his vision of the game as an escape valve to release and expression rather than conformity or indoctrination.

Shainberg’s depiction of the game’s essential eloquence will be explored in Wideman’s writing which takes inspiration from the act of creation and the search for authorial truth. Yet in his depiction of the college game Shainberg is atypical of experimental basketball writing which has tended to focus on the truly informal offshoot of the sport. Wideman and Alexie share with Updike an emphasis on the street game rather than the NBA as the ‘authentic’ version of basketball. These writers celebrate a distinct sporting subculture of pick-up basketball that asserts itself as proudly independent from the glitz and wealth of the professional televised game. Informal versions of games such as football and baseball are played, but they are too reliant on form, space, equipment and structure to be adaptable to the confines of the streets. Of the three sports discussed, only basketball fiction is so concerned with the unofficial branch of the game. As Wideman celebrates, in contrast to professional basketball, “playground hoop advocates apostasy, independence” (174). Playing

solely for personal satisfaction separates the street game from the elite sport. On Indian reservation courts and in the back alleys of ghetto neighbourhoods of major cities basketball thrives and is played by marginalised underclasses. Street basketball is essentially a poor sport and takes pride in this very fact. Writers such as Alexie and Wideman are able to articulate a love for the sport rather than an artificial tool for narrative as has been the case with much generic sports writing. In the right hands, basketball's narrative incorporates a sense of rebellion unlike that of the other American sports. Footballers submit to the strict patriarchal doctrine of the coach who preaches total obedience and the necessity of self-sacrifice. Baseball players and fans are immersed in nostalgia, longing and the living tradition of a sport where time stands still through the languid nature of the on-field action. In contrast, basketball's fluency represents modernity.

The primary reason for the lack of basketball fiction is its association with ethnic minority groups who are also underrepresented in the literary establishment. Alexie and Wideman are two of very proportionally few black or Native American authors in literary readership. Both have won the Pen/Faulkner Award, Wideman in 1991 and Alexie in 2010. One aspect that links them so strongly is the way both authors use basketball to articulate their own and their characters' desire for escape. Basketball's popularity among minority groups has propelled it to become an urban sport of speed, dynamism and the affirmation of a journey of self-identity and credibility. The game's perceived 'coolness' and integrity has enabled it to maintain its marketability. Consequently, basketball has been used by the advertising industry to such profitable success. In many ways the basketball narrative has followed a unique trajectory in its promotion that has been facilitated by corporate America in a

symbiotic relationship of branding and the game. Basketball has become the most image-centred sport in the American imagination. Yet writers have not failed to see the irony of the wealth of companies like Nike's promotion of the game through images of ghetto poverty and versions of street culture. Black culture has become synonymous with basketball currency.

In the early twentieth century black players began to make the game their own. Team such as the Chicago Crusaders, the Cleveland Pennzoils and particularly the New York Renaissance and, most famously of all, the Harlem Globetrotters gained success in both integrated and segregated competitions (Grundy et al, 146). The Globetrotters stole the public imagination as they travelled the country and then the world with their brand of skilful and flamboyant hoop. While some point to the Globetrotters success, the extent of criticism and hostility they received should not be overlooked. The Globetrotters were seen to represent the emerging 'blackness' of the sport that was read by the white establishment as at odd with the ideals of the game. It was particularly the improvisational and 'flashy tricks' of the Globetrotters that represented a style of play incompatible with the perceived tenets of traditional hard work and team spirit ascribed to white teams and to basketball's origins more generally. As black players became more successful and black culture adopted basketball as an assertion of freedom, black basketball was used against the African American community by its stereotyping of blackness as undisciplined and associated with clowning foolishness. (Grundy et al, 146 and Yep, 979.)

The NBA came into existence in 1946 but did not allow black players for another four years (Lacey and Kent, 120). From this point onwards, African American players established themselves in NBA teams across the country. Despite the racism

at the core of professional sports of this era, black basketball thrived. By the 1960s a great number of black players moved to historically white, professional and college teams (Grundy et al, 145). The game was reshaped with a style of play emphasising incredible athleticism and dynamic use of the ball as aspects of the street game became incorporated into the court version; black players became by far and away the dominant force in the sport. In 1966 there was a defining moment in basketball history with further implications for American race relations. An all-African American team representing Texas Western University beat an all-white team from the University of Kentucky (Grundy et al, 145).²⁶ As the Civil Rights movement gained momentum, basketball framed the struggle in a sporting context. Basketball's meteoric rise and television coverage gave the game a unique position in the narrative of black resistance and became the sport that most clearly pushed the social and political landscape of the United States for African Americans. Today black players make up three quarters of the league.²⁷ African American players have, both symbolically and with their athleticism, taken the game to new heights.

Black players' success in playing and promoting the sport has provided a powerful source of the cultural iconization of a particular idea of blackness. Not only portrayed as a black sport, street basketball is particularly associated with inner-city America and its growth has been marked by a trend of the pathologising of the black urban experience. Since the 1950s, street basketball in the popular imagination has

²⁶ Basketball was not alone in providing a stage for issues surrounding black civil rights. Jackie Robinson had become the first black professional baseball player in the 1940s and before him Jesse Owens had won gold in the 1936 100m Olympics final in Berlin.

²⁷ In the 2017 Racial and Gender Report Card the National Basketball Association concluded that 74.4% of NBA players identified themselves as African-American or black (The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport).

been negatively linked to unemployment, irresponsibility, poverty, crime, abuse, and violence. The street game has been associated with ghetto areas in Watts in Los Angeles and the Bronx in New York. However, these facets of its 'street' identity have also provided much of its lucrative appeal. Companies such as Nike, Reebok and Converse have been quick to cash in on its marketable 'edge' and its association with cultural credibility in advertising campaigns using basketball stars to endorse their products. These corporations have capitalised on mainstream America's dichotomy of terror and captivation in its voyeuristic gaze towards urban communities and in particular the black experience (Andrews and Silk, 1634). The success of basketball has been augmented by the paradox of the streets being associated with all manner of social problems, while also becoming the locus of authenticity and the transformation and manipulation of mainstream consumer desires.

While the "ghettocentrism" (Andrew and Silk, 1639) of basketball has driven the sport's popularity, closely aligning it to the glamour of black music such as rap and hip hop, it has created considerable unease in its simplistic representation of an outsider culture. The basketball narrative routinely depicts the ghetto as a secret space of erotic fantasy, excitement and as a perceived antidote to the quotidian of countryside or suburban life. As in rap music, violence and even poverty are glamorised and black players are continually characterised by their rise from the street game to the rewards of the NBA, but still able to stay true to their roots. Here the myth of the American Dream is played out: the media's control of basketball fetishizes the black body, romanticising street culture, and creates a hugely profitable consumer product predominantly for a vast white audience that have no experience of these ghetto communities. The basketball narrative propels the neoliberal fantasy of self-

determinism and drive to overcome humble beginnings and succeed, while disregarding institutionalised racism and lack of social opportunity. The truth is that only a fraction of black players who compete on the streets in 'pickup games' will ever go on to play at a professional level. Far from empowering black people, basketball has been used to maintain the status quo. As Wideman has argued in *Hoop Roots*, the commodification of basketball can be seen to depoliticise the black urban experience by turning the ghetto into only an aesthetic realm denigrating the potential for black resistance and social change (41-42).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the NBA was in turmoil due to habitual drug use until the sport underwent an incredibly successful marketing campaign that saw the image and popularity of basketball turned around. In 1980, seventeen of the league's twenty three teams were not making profit and consequently risking the NBA's viability as an enterprise. During this period, conservative estimates suggested that over half the players were taking recreational drugs. In the ten years after David Stern's appointment as NBA Commissioner the league's annual revenue increased by one thousand, six hundred percent surpassing three billion dollars by 1993 (Maharaj, 101-102). Stern and the NBA were able to transform the image problem of professional basketball by remoulding the public perception of its black players from irresponsible and deviant figures of urban crime to positive embodiments of street culture. Basketball's association with a particular cultural change helped propel the sport to the cutting edge of American sports consciousness. The insidious interests of the advertising industry have used the game's appeal as well as basketball stars themselves to sell products from junk food to sportswear.

Basketball's explosive rise in popularity can, in part, be attributed to the public playing out of its racial tensions. This was most evident in the rivalry between Larry Bird and Magic Johnson; the media orchestrated opposition between the two players began in 1979 and positioned the stoic, old-school values of Bird's Boston Celtics against the more flamboyant Johnson who played on the West coast for the Los Angeles Lakers. The footwear giants Converse released a range of shoes called the 'Bird shoe' and the 'Magic shoe' so customers could make a decision to buy and therefore side with one or the other. John Wideman suggests that the Bird versus Johnson rivalry was in fact due to a reciprocal drive for sporting excellence where the competition pushed both men to a level of excellence they would not have attained if it had not been for the other (168). However, this interpretation does not play into the mainstream narrative of binary opposition. As Wideman cynically suggests: "such treatment doesn't sell sneakers or cars or beer" (168). In the popular imagination, Bird was presented as the 'Great White Hope' and as such "a bedrock symbol of mainstream values" (168). Against this version of the ballplayer was Johnson's image of black rebellious non-conformity. Wideman claims the underlying assertion of racial stereotypes kept alive essential tenets of popular American entertainment even going as far as preserving the efficacy of "blackface minstrelsy" (168).

The basketball narrative employed the sporting rivalry between black and white to sell sporting commodities as well as itself as a product through a simple dichotomy of competing forces that perfectly reinforced stereotypes of racial divisions. Professional basketball peddles itself as the sport of the American Dream, but according to Wideman it perpetuates the power imbalance that means racial equality is a tantalising but thinly veiled fantasy. Even the success of black players

cannot hide how basketball “has been exploited to illustrate a sorry tale again and again” (168-169). The tale Wideman refers to is black cultural oppression by a dominant majority, so even as black players came to lead the sport, they did not overturn prejudice but played into a more malevolent metanarrative. Wideman suggests that the white media retains supreme control so “[t]he entertainment industry consolidates its power, its Prospero-like grip, by charming away this anxious dreamscape and substituting another - predictable, measured, named, disposable” (177).

After the rivalry between Bird and Johnson, Michael Jordan became the new icon of basketball. By the mid-Eighties Michael Jordan was as much known for his global brand and image as he was for his jump shot. Wideman points to Jordan’s appeal as emblematic of white culture’s voyeuristic captivation with all things African American. Wideman writes: “Then, thanks to Nike and others, you began to see MJ everywhere [...] Ad after ad cashed in on the paradox of white fascination with blackness: the obdurate otherness, invisibility, and mandated inaccessibility of blackness versus its transparency, seductiveness, and omnipresence” (40-41). Wideman directs attention to the paradox of Jordan’s commercial success as blackness is both hidden and everywhere. Jordan starred in a series of Nike commercials beginning in 1984 and lasting over a decade. Jordan became a global celebrity, and through his carefully constructed media image was positioned as an avatar of a particular type of masculine grace and integrity (Goldman and Papson, 50). The notion of transcendent possibility and the silhouette emblem of Jordan in flight, legs astride and ready to dunk the ball, became an instantly recognisable signifier of Jordan and the Nike brand.

Three advertising campaigns prove particularly illuminating in explaining the position of basketball as an American sports narrative that influences culture so profoundly. The footwear giants Nike have monopolised the branding of basketball since the late Eighties. The adverts chosen here are indicative of the media representation of basketball portraying the social and cultural connotations of the game, and in so doing, revealing much broader themes. The marketing campaigns selected for analysis do not point to ethnic diversity; rather, they all stress an essentialised blackness. In these television commercials there is no reference to teamwork, instead the entire focus is on individual ability and achievement. If these marketing campaigns are to be believed, basketball appears to be an individual sport, not a complex team game.

One of Jordan's most iconic and successful commercials was Nike's "Failure" advertising campaign. Jordan is shown arriving at the basketball stadium and his voiceover begins: "I've missed more than nine thousand shots in my career. I've lost almost three hundred games. Twenty six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life and that is why I succeed". What makes this advertising campaign distinct is that Jordan, celebrated for his unrivalled success, stresses that his failure has defined his career and has been the factor that has driven him towards his incredible attainments. In several commercials Jordan claims that failure is a requisite for success. Similarly the "Maybe it's my fault" campaign highlighted the dedication of the professional athlete and the importance of drawing from one's setbacks to become stronger. In these advertisements Jordan does not believe the hype surrounding his ability, and he is able to challenge himself and how he is viewed through introverted self-reflection.

Jordan questions the factors that have facilitated his success and sees a deeply inward looking analysis centred on defeat. It is interesting that Nike managed to balance Jordan's image of extraordinary athletic ability with a sense of humility. Jordan confides:

Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I led you to believe it was easy, when it wasn't. Maybe I made you think my highlights started at the free throw line, and not in the gym. Maybe I made you think that every shot I took was a game winner: that my game was built on flash, and not fire. Maybe it's my fault that you didn't see that failure gave me strength, that my pain was my motivation. Maybe I led you to believe that basketball was a God given gift, and not something I worked for every single day of my life. (Nike, 2008)

In both advertisements Jordan uses the word "failure". Jordan's message in the full range of his Nike commercials repeats the same themes. Throughout his association with Nike, Jordan expounds the value of hard work and the strength of dedication ultimately finding inspiration in his disappointments. Yet, there is something more profound about failure that Jordan seems to embrace. His words suggests nobility in the act of failing itself, although he will come back stronger from each setback, his defeats define him, they give his achievements meaning not his accolades.

In Sherman Alexie's story 'Saint Junior' in the collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) the protagonist, Roman Fury, is obsessed with the moment Jordan announces his comeback to basketball, giving it mythical status. Jordan successfully returned to the court after a short and unsuccessful spell playing minor league baseball. Jordan cited various reasons for the surprising career change. Jordan's gruelling basketball schedule in the 1990s certainly played its part as well as the burden of being the game's most renowned player. However, it was also significant that Jordan made this choice after his father was murdered in 1993. Jordan suggested that his father's wish had been for his son to play Major League baseball. Jordan

returned to basketball with the iconic two word press conference statement: "I'm back". In Alexie's story, Roman watches reruns of the event as he lies on the sofa with the snow falling outside and he clutches a basketball "like a lover" (157). Jordan's words become a refrain in the story like the chant in a ceremonial ritual. Alexie also refers to a forgotten detail of Jordan's father's murder case in that one of the assailants had been a Lumbee Indian. Roman reflects: "But then again it was Indian scouts who helped white people kill Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and every other Indian warrior in the world" (158). In Roman's imagination Jordan is placed alongside historical Indian figures who fought the colonial powers.

In a sense, Jordan never fitted with the 'bad ass' hustler character of the black basketball player that the media has perpetuated to such success. Jordan represented a very different more acceptable version of the sports star. Jordan, unlike Mohammed Ali or Olympic sprinter Jesse Owens, never became a vocal advocate of black American identity or political rights. In the Nineties a more sanitised and wholesome icon like Jordan was a marketing dream, but as the decade drew to a close a more 'cool' and 'streetwise' personality was required to sell footwear products to a burgeoning new, more cynical target market. In contrast to Jordan's clean-cut all-American persona, Allan Iverson represents a different, more dangerous, aspect of the basketball star determined to maintain his 'street' credibility but equally driven to gain success. In the Reebok "A7 commercial" Iverson does, to a partial extent, represent a continuation of Jordan's message. Iverson is shown taking and missing the game-winning shot as the buzzer sounds for the end of the match. There is a swift cut to Iverson's alarm clock at five the next morning when he rises to take to the dawn streets in a punishing training regime where he bounces a ball as he sprints through

the deserted city. A sleepy child comes to the window to see Iverson rush past. Iverson the role model replaces the rebel image he had created. The message is clear – a setback or a failure will simply inspire Iverson to work harder and push his body further to come back next time as a stronger performer. However, in another commercial, Iverson sits in the locker room as text appears on his body denoting his various injuries from a dislocated shoulder to a fractured hand. Iverson rises and walks towards the court. The viewer is told that Iverson is “a warrior” playing through the pain and going into battle night after night. As he strides towards the court Iverson proclaims “it’s time to go to work”. The “Answer V” commercial sees Iverson in a studio with rapper Jadakiss highlighting the link between basketball and rap music and consequently Iverson’s street credibility. Reebok used Iverson’s dangerous reputation to endow their brand with the required ‘cool’ demanded by their demographic.

Iverson’s success and depiction has generated widespread discussions in the American media. Wideman has spoken of the press’ failure to portray Iverson as anything less than a one-dimensional stereotype of total black bravado and attitude. In an interview with Eric Neel for *ESPN* in 2001, Wideman explains that commentators have misrepresented Iverson:

They fail to understand [...] race in general - that there is no either/or in this life, that we're a complicated people. You're not either an undisciplined playground player or a disciplined professional. There's a whole lot of middle ground. That's the ground of creativity and identity. That's where the action is. That's where Iverson is and that's where the media fails to go.

Wideman suggests it is the failure of the media to choose to represent anything that is multifaceted or complex that has created an inadequate depiction of the black sports star. Essentially, Wideman reveals the fallacy that the perpetuated narratives must be binary and set down as either black or white, a hoodlum or a saint.

In 2005 Carmelo Anthony of the Denver Nuggets starred in a Nike commercial entitled "B More". In the advertisement a hooded Anthony wanders the shadowy and dangerous streets of downtown Baltimore where he grew up. The commercial begins with the sound of police sirens, a baby crying and the electric hum of a flickering faulty street light. Over these noises of inner city degradation the roar of a basketball crowd is filtered into the soundtrack. The viewer is presented with a dystopic vision of the streets as a police helicopter hovers ominously overhead casting its spotlight onto Anthony's silhouette as he walks confidently along the road. A gang of black men sit on the steps of a rundown tenement building with boarded up windows. Anthony turns to see a game of street basketball with children playing in a poorly lit side alley. We see figures from the community smiling proudly towards Anthony, yet the viewer is left in little doubt that Anthony's success has been driven by both his desire to succeed and the fact that he has remained true to his humble roots. At the close of the commercial the light of the helicopter creates a white haze turning into the lights of the professional arena and Anthony is transported to the steps of the locker room as he prepares to run onto court. Anthony's black hoodie is replaced with a brilliant white uniform and he is transported from the black ghetto world of poverty to the commercialised white world of hero worship and celebrity success.

In the "Elevate Your Game" advertising campaign for a different side of Anthony is promoted. Anthony is shown training on court conscientiously repeating drills with tennis balls with his coach. Next he is shown leaving a stadium and signing autographs for multiracial children and then taking an active role in designing the "Carmelo Anthony Youth Development Centre". In an image not seen elsewhere in the basketball narrative this campaign promotes social responsibility as Anthony is

seen to be using his wealth and position to give back to the community where he began. In these adverts the basketball narrative glamorises the celebrity status of its sporting stars, but at the same time exploits a humanist discourse of motivation and empowerment. The promotion of basketball invites the viewer to participate in the game. As in the tagline for Gatorade "Be like Mike", referring to Jordan, the audience is told they too can play. They too can wear the shoes, drink the same products and join in with the sport.

The adverts discussed all have African American protagonists. In fact it would be hard to find any brand associated with basketball that does not. Yet Nike have not only promoted their products with imagers of blackness, but recently they have been drawn into alternative markets. In September 2007, Nike released a new range of footwear which they promoted as the "Air Native N7". Nike's new shoes were directly marketed towards the indigenous community, but more relevantly were conceived as a means to show the company's commitment to ethical issues and minority inclusiveness particularly on Native American reservations. In a press release from 2007, Nike claimed the footwear was designed to honour traditional Native American philosophy that values compassion and awareness of the natural environment (Miner, 100). Nike tapped into a Native American spiritual tradition of sustainability and respect for the natural world, using the metaphor of a footprint marking one's impact on the planet. Nike's marketing campaign was to promote their new shoe as specially crafted with the Native American instep and foot width in mind due to a perceived biologically distinct podiatric requirements (100). The rather spurious argument suggested that Native Americans are genetically disposed to a much wider foot shape making the N7 a more comfortable fit.

Nike promoted their new footwear as ethically sound and as a showcase of their commitment to minority groups. However, the product was not well received in Native communities. Firstly, the implication of scientifically based ethnic measurements evokes worrying similarities with the discredited craniological pseudoscience of the nineteenth century (101). In addition, Nike's campaign is made all the more jarring by its global labour practices, which have been attacked for exploiting indigenous peoples in third world sweatshops particularly in Mexico and Nicaragua. When Sherman Alexie was asked about Nike's new sneakers he responded with abhorrence, remembering: "the first thing I did is laughed until I cried, because it was hilarious. The day it was announced, I thought: 'Are they going to have dream catchers on them? Are they going to be beaded? Will they have native bumper stickers on them that say, Custer had it coming?'" (Schwarz, 129). Alexie, like many observers, felt Nike's campaign was based on capitalising on a mainstream understanding of Native culture in a continued act of imperialistic exploitation. Nike's marketing strategy was to tap into a lifestyle and penetrate diverse markets, whilst simultaneously promoting themselves as ethically conscientious. The trainers were only available in tribal clinics and reservation businesses. The shoes themselves were never likely to generate a huge profit, but Nike is also concerned with its brand-image. Its marketing campaign was presumably intended to bolster its publicity of social responsibility. The imagery of the N7 trainer proves worrying in its stereotyping of Native culture, they may not, as Alexie suggested, have a dreamcatcher on the sides, but they are adorned with arrows and wild horses along the side representing stereotypical iconography.

In Alexie's poem "Victory", published in *Prairie Schooner* in 2015, the narrator remembers when he was twelve he stole a pair of Nike trainers. Playing basketball wearing his new shoes, he is inhibited by his conscience, suddenly his balance is gone and the ball flies badly; feeling consumed by "guilt" (6) as well as "paranoia and rue" (7) the narrator is incapable of enjoying the game, but not yet willing to confess, he discards the trainers: "I threw those cursed Nikes / Into the river and hoped that was good / Enough for God (9-11). However, playing the rest of the season in "supermarket tennis shoes" (12) he suffers from blisters and twisted ankles as if as punishment for his misdemeanour. Eventually the narrator confesses to his father who calls him "Little / Basketball Jesus" (20-21) and bandages the wounds of his son's "Poverty Basketball Stigmata" (24). Alexie's title refers to the brand name Nike, who in Greek mythology was the goddess of victory. The ill-gotten shoes are a symbol of corruption and shame. Seeking victory through theft, the narrator's sense of morality sabotages his ability to perform. Nike's trainers lead the narrator away from his innocent joy of the game implying the corporate world's co-opting of basketball and, for Alexie, the mainstream association of an ideology placing triumph above all else. In Alexie's depictions of basketball an alternative narrative is perpetuated where themes of forgiveness and healing take precedence over attainment.

“Indians Lose Again”: Basketball in the Works of Sherman Alexie

Late summer night on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Ten
Indians are playing basketball on a court barely illuminated by
the streetlight above them [...]
They will play until the ball
bounces of the court and disappears in the shadows

This may be all you
need to know about Native American Literature. ²⁸

Sherman Alexie, “The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me”

Sherman Alexie’s poetry, novels and short stories are characterised by his use of basketball as a means of expressing ideas about alienation, escape and freedom. Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, weaves Native American tradition into the basketball narrative finding a unique position for the game in his work. This chapter analyses a cross section of Alexie’s writing. Alexie does not have one definitive ‘basketball work’; rather the game has appeared, almost compulsively, throughout his literary output. Alexie’s texts explore the tension of Native American culture in a modern American society which is often portrayed as incompatible with indigenous experience and Indian heritage. For Alexie, basketball reflects poise and athletic grace, but also offers a complex dichotomy between several essential ideas in his fiction: resistance against assimilation, tradition’s discordancy with ideas of progress, anger versus passivity, as well as a capacity to define and undermine notions of identity.

²⁸ Alexie, 1-3, 6-10

One of Alexie's greatest strengths as a writer is to subvert and ridicule stereotypes. A specific idea of Native American failure is deeply entrenched in the American imagination and Alexie points to the negative power of typecast cultural representations. However, Alexie's portrayal of failure refuses to be limited by rage or a self-pitying tone. The author highlights means of overcoming oppression and feelings of inferiority often with humour or through re-evaluation.²⁹ Alexie stresses that Native Americans, and artists in particular, must reassert an alternative account. While his characters' basketball defeats perpetuate one common narrative, defeat itself can be incorporated into something other so the game can function to alter a singular version of Indian identity. I explore how Alexie dramatises the schism between Indian culture and mainstream white American values through scenes of basketball contest. Yet Alexie refuses to let mere enactment of past conflict through sport fully define Native American rebellion. Alexie is concerned with a non-Western interpretation of the essential ideals of the game so popular on reservations. Alexie must negotiate an alternate epistemology by recognising the history of colonisation and the continued impact of assigning a failed status on reservation inhabitants, whilst also acknowledging the futility of nostalgic pining or one-off acts of vengeance. Basketball history in Alexie's work, by contrast, integrates the tension of indigenous culture where postmodern narratives represent hope and reappraisal. I draw from the work of Gerald Vizenor in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1999) and his theories of "survivance" to show how indigenous stories cross postmodern tropes especially in Alexie's basketball depictions. Vizenor argues that

²⁹ See also Paul McDonald's chapter 'The Postmodern Little Man' in *Laughing at the Darkness: Postmodernism and Optimism in American Humour* (2010) where the author points to a theme of resistance through irony in Alexie's writing.

Native American fiction shares with postmodernism a scepticism toward metanarratives that can be expressed through subversions of dominant forms. To reach this conclusion I will first show how Alexie demonstrates the more visceral element of basketball's role in counter-narratives.

In Alexie's young adult novel *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), the central character Junior responds to the grief of losing his peoples' ancestral land: "We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING [...] We only know how to lose and be lost" (173). Native Americans have not only had their sacred lands taken, but are being lost as an indigenous community as their culture is steadily diminished. Furthermore, Junior is referring to a cultural bias that hides Native American history and tradition so that it is obscured from view. The popular version of history recognises that America was discovered as uncharted wilderness in 1492, despite the fact that Native Americans had been living on the continent for thousands of years.

In Alexie's story 'Indian Education' from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) another protagonist called Junior writes of the eleventh-grade game when he misses several free throw shots that would have won his school the state title. The team are nicknamed the "Indians" and Junior feels a sense of irony and burden that he is the only Native American member. Feeling dejected, the next day Junior reads the paper which perpetuates the narrative of Native American defeat: "This morning I pick up the sports pages and read the headline: INDIANS LOSE AGAIN. Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me very much" (179). Alexie evokes the sadness of a group of people who are continually portrayed as victims. The established account is to depict the Indian as either noble savages tamed by Manifest Destiny, or much more tragic failures. Both versions see the Native American

overwhelmed by the continued advances of American 'progress'. Native Americans first lost to the American colonisers, then their identity was eroded, and sporting defeat is simply a continuation of the dominant narrative and cycle of failure. In this story, through nothing more than a high school basketball game, loss is imposed on Native American culture and any show of resistance is ignored and any corroboration of defeat is magnified.

A recurring theme in Alexie's fiction is the basketball court as a modern-day battlefield where Native Americans can relive their past struggle against the white colonizers. Playing basketball can offer its players the cathartic sense of settling old scores and the opportunity for symbolic reprisal. In the poem "Why We Play Basketball" from *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996) Alexie expresses the urgent desire to participate in the sport:

It is just a game
we are told by those
who cannot play it
unless it is play.
For us, it is war
often desperate
and without reason" (80-86).

For Native Americans the game "is war" (85). Basketball acts out a type of rebellion that is limited or absent in any other form of social or political sphere. Playing basketball is a source of release, an expenditure of energy and anger because Alexie shows there is nowhere else for young Native American men, in particular, to direct such frustration. However, the tone of the poem is not defeatist; rather it eulogises native identity and pride as a seemingly last bastion of a fading culture. For a minority group that has been so abused, basketball is offered as an ultimately necessary act of defiance and expression. The war is over and may have been lost, but basketball gives

Native Americans a space for physical authenticity. The spirit of play and the emotion spawned from rejection drives the players on court and, in keeping with his basketball philosophy, can satisfy a deep need for narrative, community and shared experience.

In the title story of the collection 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven' an Indian character strays harmlessly into a suburban white neighbourhood of Seattle. He is stopped by a police officer who orders him to leave, telling him: "You're making people nervous. You don't fit the profile of the neighbourhood" (183). The narrator obeys but is left to reflect: "I wanted to tell him that I didn't really fit the profile of the country but I knew it would just get me in trouble" (183). Alexie's protagonists brings to mind Harry Angstrom's similar remark about feeling outside America, though of course the element of racial segregation, in Native American fiction, magnifies this intensity. Although tragic, Alexie's characters react to their condition with black humour as a necessary form of resistance. His protagonists occupy the liminal space between the reservation and contemporary urban America. The character in this story is physically and metaphorically lost; he is wandering between the two worlds. Native Americans are continually excluded and, as with Alexie himself, who grew up on a reservation but moved to the city, feel like outsiders in both locations. Earlier in the story the narrator evokes this sense of dispossession: "When we look in the mirror, see the history of our tribe in our eyes, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears, we understand completely. Believe me, everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough" (178). When the white majority project this sense of ostracism and failure on Native American communities then it is all the more understandable that reprisal is so desperately sought in whichever venue is available.

In a number of his works Alexie's introduces climactic moments where an Indian protagonist must compete with a white rival on the basketball court. These games become highly charged and symbolic battles for the Indians characters who take part. On the court they feel the game enacting a four hundred year struggle with colonial oppression. However, the result the Indian characters initially desire is never achieved. In the short story 'Lawyer's League' in *Ten Little Indians* (2003), the Native American character Richard is invited to join a team of lawyers who play basketball once a week. As soon as he starts to play Richard falls into a rivalry with the best player on the opposition team, the aggressive white racist Big Bill. When Richard takes the ball around Big Bill and scores a slam-dunk, which is the most aggressive and powerful move on the court, his rival is irate. Big Bill claims that dunking is against the "house rules" (64) because he fears being usurped not only by an outsider, but by an Indian. Richard has the potential to displace Big Bill who reacts with incredulity and anger; Richard reflects: "In this Wednesday-night wolf pack, he'd probably been the alpha-male hoopster for a decade. I threatened to demote him into the beta position" (64). As soon as they begin to play, the game turns from a sporting contest into a power struggle and into a racial battleground.

At the end of the story in 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven' the narrator recalls a game with "a white kid" (189), the son of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) chief, who is the best player on the reservation court. The narrator feels it is his duty to reclaim the position of supremacy; he remembers: "I was an Indian when it counted, and this BIA kid needed to be beaten by an Indian, any Indian" (189). In 'The First Annual All-Indian Horseshoe Pitch and Barbecue' Simon rhetorically asks: "Do you think it's any coincidence that basketball was invented just one year after the

Ghost Dancers fell at Wounded Knee?" (147). Simon suggests that basketball follows in the legacy of Indian revolt and the vital power of any means of continued insurgency. For Alexie, basketball, however inadequately it represents the struggle, is often the only viable arena for his characters to demonstrate their urge for resistance.

In Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* (1995) Thomas Builds-The-Fire recounts a story of his own basketball folklore to two sisters he meets, Chess and Checkers. Thomas tells them how his father, Samuel, once the reservation's star ballplayer, and his father's friend Lester Falls Apart arrange a basketball game with the local Tribal Police who have threatened to throw them off the reservation if they lose. Although the Police are also Indians, they have aligned themselves with white authority making the game symbolic of a much broader racial conflict. In Thomas' version of events, the members of the Tribal Police are portrayed as traitors to their heritage like the Indians who first collaborated with United States' forces against their own tribes. The police are led by Officer Wilson, a white man who makes claim to Indian ancestry but is known for his cruelty on the reservation. Thomas explains that Wilson "claimed a little bit of Indian blood and had used it to get the job, but seemed to forget that whenever he handcuffed another Indian" (102). Thomas and Lester are outnumbered six to two, but manage to hold their own at the beginning of the contest even taking the lead. During the game, Samuel and Wilson swap racist insults. As Samuel takes charge of the game, each time he scores a basket he dedicates the points to victims of Native American genocide. He cries: "That was for Wounded Knee I and II." (117). Vizenor writes how Wounded Knee has become known as the 'last great battle of the Indian Wars'. However, such a description imposes a legitimacy on an event that amounted to the indiscriminate massacre of women and children. The official version of events

exonerated the government from culpability at the same time as praising the military and blaming the Sioux. The hegemonic account is “an insistence of manifest manners and the literature of dominance” (Vizenor, 50). The depiction of the game in *Reservation Blues* bears similarities to DeLillo’s football match in *End Zone*. The game extends for almost thirty pages of detailed description. Similarly to DeLillo’s football game between Logos and Centrex, Alexie mocks and appropriates the language of sports coverage. A traumatic depiction of genocide is overwritten by a Western discourse just as Native American history has been sanitised by a dominant narrative turning cultural atrocities into entertainment such as the Western genre. The mock “sportcasters” introduce the participants: “We’re here to witness the execution of Spokane Indian warrior Junior Polatkin for murder. Eighteen murders, to be exact. Quite a total for such a young man” (144).

Although Thomas initially keeps his listeners and the reader informed of the running score, his story ends without disclosing which team won. At the chapter’s close, Chess asks Thomas to reveal if his father managed to overcome the Tribal Police team and remain on the reservation. Thomas’ reply is rhetorical and the final words of chapter four: “‘Who do you think?’ Thomas asked. ‘Who do you think won that game?’” (129). Thomas refuses to provide a definitive answer but the implication of the story is that Native Americans cannot win a fight that is so heavily weighted against them from the start. The reader too is invited to draw their own conclusions about the context in which Native American failure is defined.

In the film *Smoke Signals* (1998), based on a selection of the stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Arnold retells a story about a game that he played with his son against a team of Jesuit priests. In the story, Arnold claims that

his son managed to score the winning basket. However, it is later revealed that the game defining shot was missed. By not allowing Victor his moment of glory, Alexie resists a simplistic counter-narrative of revisionist retribution where the score can be settled for past atrocities through a symbolic victory. This is the defining feature of all Alexie's scenes that depict Indians versus whites on the court. In Alexie's writing the important point is always missed, the game is habitually lost and his characters are invariably left to reflect on the implications of failure. In the games referred to above, where Native American characters take on white adversaries, the end result is always the same: Indian defeat. The insinuation in *Reservation Blues* is that the Tribal Police finally beat Thomas and Lester. The son of the BIA chief is too good for the narrator in 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven'. Even though Richard gets the better of Big Bill in 'Lawyer League', the points he scores do not count and he regrets his violent outburst when he strikes Big Bill and suffers long-term damage to his hand. In *Smoke Signals*, Victor has the opportunity to win the game but fails. Where Alexie could easily depict the basketball courts as a venue for Native American victories and the place where old scores are finally settled with the white power, he chooses instead the same negative outcomes. However, there is an underlying force at play that shifts the centrality of ideas about defeat into personal understanding. For Alexie, as soon as basketball is removed from what he sees as its core values – joy, inventiveness, grace and democracy and, instead framed by animosity and racial tension - it fails to provide his characters with empowering or uplifting feelings.³⁰ In the poem "Why We

³⁰ Basketball is popular on Indian reservations for the same reason it is in urban ghettos, because it is essentially cheap to play. As one of Alexie's characters remarks in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*: "all you need is something resembling a ball and something resembling a goal or a hoop and you can play. You can play with one person or a hundred people" (156). Basketball is truly democratic in this sense and Alexie celebrates the joyfulness in its open form.

Play Basketball” Alexie explains: “We play basketball / because we want to / separate love from / hate” (96 – 99). The implication in these stories is that basketball must be enjoyed for the sense of freedom it offers rather than as a harmful and unproductive allegory for vengeful battle.

It should be stressed that Alexie does not present a binary opposition between ‘good’ Native American characters and ‘bad’ white ones. In ‘What You Pawn I Will Redeem’ from *Ten Little Indians* the kindest character in the story is the white cop who saves the homeless, alcoholic Jackson and gives him money even though he know Jackson will only spend it to get drunk. Opposition between mainstream American culture and Native American tradition through basketball reaches new forms of understanding. In Alexie’s view, basketball should not be valued in terms of a win-loss ratio or played only to vanquish or humiliate an opponent. The score is ultimately unimportant. Alexie encourages an alternative interpretation of the game. As in *Reservation Blues*, the lack of a conclusive score is a crucial aspect of the author’s use of basketball to reflect Native American ideology. When characters reminisce about basketball heroes from past reservation games, they recall not the number of points gained or official accolades and titles won, but the grace and beauty of the player’s ability, and the stories they inspired. Alexie has commented on how basketball is comparable to poetry, music or dance; watching the athleticism and elegance of professional players he explains:

The grace is just as amazing as ballet dancing. The choreography, once you begin to understand it, is just as intricate and complex, but the difference is it’s almost always improvisational. So when you are watching a basketball game you are watching a form of jazz music. You are watching a form of physical art expressed through physical movement and it is dance. The refusal for any artistic loving person not to appreciate the dance involved in the

basketball game is a kind of prejudice they would not allow themselves in other venues (Alexie, 2010).

In his writing, the style of the player's movements and the stories proliferated by his/her feats matter more than the individual game's outcome. This view is much more in keeping with Native American tradition than the focus solely on attainment in mainstream American sports coverage. Where Western culture has a tendency to value only the final score, Alexie brings attention to how Native Americans are drawn to the significance of the story. This is also the crux of the ideological limitation that has held back so many young Indian ballplayers. In the story 'The Only Traffic Light on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore' (henceforth 'The Only Traffic Light') from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Adrian and the narrator nostalgically talk about "the famous case of Silas Sirius, who made one move and scored one basket in his entire basketball career" (47). The friends reminisce: "People still talk about it" (47). The final score is not remembered, but a single moment limited to a solitary basket has captured the imagination of the entire community and has been incorporated into the oral tradition of communal folklore.

The scene discussed highlights one of the main reasons why, despite its popularity on reservations and skill of many young players, exceptionally few Indians go on to play at either college or professional level. Alexie recognises that Native American tend to play basketball for the sake of the community or their family rather than to be judged by the standards of the scouts whom most black or white players aim to impress. The community will often support the high school team but will be far less inclined to root for a player who moves beyond the reservation. In the tradition of Indian basketball, and as Alexie's stories express, pride seems to count for more

than glory and therefore even failure is ascribed with more worth than success. For all the achievements of the many high school teams from reservations who have won local tournaments and state championships, there has remained a glass ceiling to the attainment that a Native American ballplayer can achieve. Whilst not disregarding racial prejudice and lack of opportunities, Alexie acknowledges the cultural differences in promoting achievement that complicate the simplicity of facilitating escape from the reservation. A young black player from the inner city may be encouraged to seek a better life as well as his/her fame and fortune. For Native Americans, community and cultural ties are not so easily broken. In *Pickup Artists: Street Basketball in America* (1998), a coordinator of minority student services at Lewis and Clark State in Lewiston is interviewed about the Native American experience of elite level basketball. He explains why the game is unable to offer escape: "Family is probably what draws a lot of people back to the reservation [...] When you leave the reservation, you don't have the support that you had when you were eighteen, and you get drawn back. It happens no matter how good you are at basketball" (73-74). Alexie's stories capture the difficulty of young ballplayers establishing sports careers due to cultural ties. The author's fiction concentrates on the game as it is played on the reservations far away from the bright lights of purpose built stadiums and the rock concert glamour of professional NBA matches. Alexie's passion for the game rests in its more humble origins and the derelict and rundown places where it is enjoyed on the reservation. His ballplayers look to the artistry of the game to reconnect with their past, not to facilitate an imagined future.

In the story 'Jesus Christ's Half-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation', from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the narrator has

injured his leg in a game but returns years later to play with the reservation children finding a redemptive link to his past. He explains: "It's been a long time since I played but the old feelings and moves are there in my heart and fingers" (127). It is significant that it is through participation with children that he rediscovers his enthusiasm through the innocent enjoyment he initially experienced. The narrator in the short story from the same collection 'Indian Education' speaks of the modest joy of the game: "it felt good, that ball in my hands, all those possibilities and angles. It was mathematics, geometry. It was beautiful." (175). Holding the ball, ready for the next pass, the narrator feels the options of potential choice, a privilege he fails to see in any other aspect of his life.

From the later collection *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Roman Gabriel Fury is one of the very few former professional players Alexie depicts in his work. In the story 'Saint Junior' he has stopped playing professionally never having reached his true potential. Retired from the sport, Roman is out of shape, he "rarely played the game anymore, preferring to shoot baskets by himself, he still loved the game and all of its details" (156). At the end of the story, Roman shoots baskets with his wife, "but age and weight and happiness had left him with slow hands and slower feet" (187). Yet again in this story the closing scene on the basketball court is one of redemptive validation as the game brings the lovers closer together. Whether as a reminder of youth's promise and skill, a solitary activity, or by connecting with childhood, basketball in these stories offers solace from the tough world of reservation life. Versions of failure are multi-faceted in their complexity towards showing characters' growing self-awareness and how the reader will comprehend their development. Playing basketball often offers Alexie's characters deep therapeutic, spiritual and

healing qualities. Characters who have once been talented like Roman, or suffer through injury, alcoholism or poverty, manage to reengage with the game and find consolation in returning to a past time and physical activity that they have once loved. As much as Alexie sees the joyous sense in basketball, there is an equal element of sadness for these characters. In 'The Only Traffic Light' the narrator laments the loss of his own basketball skills. He forlornly concludes: "when it disappears, for whatever reason, that ballplayer is never the same person, on or off the court" (46). When Alexie's players can no longer play at the level they once did, they must take solace in the stories the game creates. In this way, the game offers a connection to a traditional Indian oratory tradition.

'The Only Traffic Light' begins with Adrian and the unnamed narrator sitting on a porch playing a game of Russian roulette. The narrator holds a pistol barrel to his temple as Adrian encourages him to pull the trigger. When Adrian finally does 'shoot', the gun now held between his lips, is unloaded. The story points to several interconnected ideas of escape through self-destruction, storytelling tradition, through playing basketball. Firstly, the most destructive form of escape is expressed through self-medication, alcohol abuse, or even in the act of suicide where the story begins. The title of the story is an ironic reference to a symbol of freedom and stasis. The light that "doesn't flash red anymore" suggests nothing ever changes and the community is locked in a time-warp bereft of a future. This idea is echoed by the car stuck in reverse in *Smoke Signals*. Yet, with this title, Alexie also suggests that if the light no longer flashes red, then there is no restriction on Native Americans leaving the reservation and seeking a better life elsewhere. However, flight is not so simple and Victor and the narrator seem just as trapped as most of the characters in these

stories. In 'Somebody Kept Saying Powwow', from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Junior describes life off the reservation as "like a bad dream you never wake up from" (207). For all the desire to escape, the outside world is portrayed as a bleak and hostile environment from which characters usually return in disillusionment.

The friends in 'The Only Traffic Light' appear destined to remain caught by a cycle of alcoholism, poverty and lack of opportunities that tie characters to the reservation. Even though the red light does not work, hidden factors imprison the community restricting any form of potential growth. The reservation may be a sanctuary, but it is equally a prison where characters like Adrian seem destined to remain. The implication of the broken traffic signal is that the two Indians will continue to sit on the porch drinking diet Pepsi, instead of beer, and never leave their unhappy paralysis. However, refuge is sought in the act of narrative. Alexie refers to traditional native storytelling as a tool to empower a retained cultural identity. The folklore and communal stories of the basketball court allow native traditions to be remembered. The narrator claims: "in the outside world, a person can be a hero one second and a nobody the next [...] but a reservation hero is remembered. A reservation hero is a hero forever. In fact, their status grows over the years as the stories are told and retold" (48). The oral tradition is seen as a way of preserving culture, even if the story encompasses failure. As a story becomes folklore, and then even mythic, it creates bonds of shared ownership that's exchange value relies on its oratory nature. In the way that Native Americans may have once passed down stories of heroic feats, in Alexie's works, basketball provides sources of contemporary narrative. Vizenor suggests that Western culture has overwritten indigenous storytelling creating a

profound sense of loss: “The sudden closure of the oral in favour of the scriptural are unheard, and the eternal sorrow of lost sounds haunts the remains of tribal stories in translation” (69). If an indigenous story is transcribed or translated, an important aspect of its cultural value and meaning is suddenly removed.

Not only does ‘The Only Traffic Light’ refer to storytelling, it highlights the mythmaking legacy of craving and creating heroes. The friends speak about local players they remember such as the legend of Aristotle Polatkin, Silius, and Julius Windmaker who is the next in a long line of potentially legendary players. The narrator observes how a player’s legacy is augmented over time by the narratives that their skill inspires. When the young Julius succumbs to alcohol and his ability on the court wanes, the community are quick to find another player on whom to pin their hopes. A young girl called Lucy is burdened with taking on the mantle of the next ‘rez-ball’ hero even though she is only in the sixth grade and has played only a few games. Alexie is ambiguous in his suggestion that Adrian’s and the narrator’s need to find a new hero empowers a narrative of re-perpetuating survival. By contrast, the constant labelling of each young player as the next new hero is suggestive of tragic acts of desperation and doomed faith. There is the implication that the legacy of replacing one young basketball hero with another is a never ending cycle of cumulative hope and failure. The key message is that even without any evidence the narrator retains his faith in these young players and this storytelling tradition, and so promise is more powerful than their eventual and inevitable falls from grace. The players’ successes and eventual failures is essential to the elliptical power of the storytelling tradition and not ultimate glory that truly perpetuates the essence of native community and survival. For the two Indians sitting on the porch the story of the game and how that

narrative is continued to be told is as important as the players or even the game itself. In this work, the stories of basketball that the community share and love to retell are shown to be ceremonies of healing.

Alexie's texts refer to a particular aspect of Native American cultural heritage. Throughout Native American history games have served a unique purpose by providing ceremonial occasions. Sporting competition was often organised to prevent famines or war. During these ceremonies shamans presided over the contests (Oxendine, 8). The Huron or Wyandot people were known to have played a version of lacrosse to encourage the desired weather for harvest (Oxendine, 8). In Alexie's imagination, basketball offers a twentieth century replica of the ceremonies and traditions that have been all but lost to contemporary reservation life. In 'The First All-Indian Horseshoe Pitch and Barbeque' one character asserts: "basketball should be our new religion" (147). Then he extemporises: "A ball bouncing on hardwood sounds like a drum" (147). Alexie's work is marked by his characters seeking to reconnect with their spiritual pasts. This need is usually presented with humour, but there is always a sense of characters who feel bereft in modern America craving the spirituality of their ancestry. In 'A Drug Called Tradition', Victor encourages his friends to take hallucinogenic substances with him. He says: "We're going out to Benjamin Lake to do this new drug I got. It'll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?" (14). Alexie's characters have learned and been informed as much about their identity by pop culture as by their own upbringings and traditions. In *Reservation Blues* one character observes that Indians have become distanced from their faith, he says: "all they know about religion they saw in *Dances with Wolves*" (145). The tragedy here is that Kevin Costner's Hollywood film contorts the myths of Indian identity so it presents itself in

a positive light only to adhere to the oppressive tenets of stereotypical representation. In *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (1998) Louis Owens decries how the film “is, from beginning to end, [an] exquisite re-enactment of the whole colonial enterprise in America, and it is the most insidious vehicle yet for this familiar message because it comes beautifully disguised as its opposite: a revisionist, politically correct western” (114).

Popular consumer culture has diluted Native American tradition. In many of Alexie’s stories his characters crave a type of spirituality that seems unattainable in the harsh reality of the reservation. This is why basketball is so important. Alexie sees the sport in a spiritual as much as a political light; the game fulfils a yearning for self-expression and the potential for transcendence through ritual and physical action. Basketball seems like the last avenue open for this vital expression. In the poem “Mistranslation of a Traditional Spokane Indian Song” (1996) Alexie depicts a recurring image in his basketball writing of the court under snow:

on the midnight basketball court
of a reservation town
where the dark ghosts of Indian children
leave no trace of their passing
as they run from hoop to hoop
way ya hi yo
way ya hi yo (6-12).

Traditional Native American song and the game are aligned. It is unclear what exactly has been mistranslated, but the implied failure of expression to interpret gives way to a new image of basketball bounding forth from the rhythm of ceremonial song.

Alexie constantly alludes to the bittersweet in this revelation. Basketball is used to stand for a connection to Indian traditions, but it is also a reminder of lost cultural origins. In ‘Jesus Christ’s Half Brother is Alive and Well on a Spokane Indian

Reservation' the narrator plays basketball as a way to reconnect with an idyllic native tradition. He describes himself and his teammates as "warriors roaring against the air and the nets and the clock that didn't work and our memories and our dreams and the twentieth century horses we called our legs" (118). Alexie captures the ambiguity of loss and the scope for visionary reimagining through this powerful image of sporting epiphany. The narrator uses the game as ceremonial catharsis after his life has been shattered by an injury to his knee, the drain of alcoholism and his role as surrogate father to the baby he rescues from a house fire. Numbed by James' inability to walk or speak, he goes onto the court and explains: "I play and play until the sweat of my body makes it rain everywhere on the reservation [...] I hold James in one arm and my basketball with the other arm and I hold everything else inside my whole body" (115-16).

The narrator's sweat turning into precipitation to drench the reservation is more than a metaphor. Fantastical events occur throughout Alexie's writing as characters' storytelling energy incorporates dream-like possibilities and the fantastical into the everyday. Alexie uses magical realism provocatively as he swiftly transitions between scenes of poverty and despair on the reservation to incredibly wondrous and transcendent moments often through basketball. In 'Saint Junior', when Junior and his wife play on their own the final image of the story is of the ball catching fire as it sails through the air, against the backboard and through the hoop (188). In 'The Only Traffic Light' the narrator speaks of the momentous occasion when the young hero Silas "took a step and flew the length of the court, did a full spin in midair [sic], and then dunked that fucking ball. And I don't mean it looked like he flew, or it was so beautiful it was almost like he flew. I mean he flew, period" (47).

In the film *Smoke Signals*, during a flashback prior to his death, Arnold stands on the moonlit desert court outside his trailer. He holds a basketball as if about to shoot and speaks toward the sky or perhaps the hoop above him. His monologue begins: "Everything in the world can fit inside this ball [...] It's about magic, man. It's about faith. It's about holding the ball in one hand, and in the other hand, you're holding the hearts of everyone who's ever loved you" (*Smoke Signals*). Where Alexie's stories strike hardest is in this juxtaposition between the gritty realism of reservation life with scenes of release. Characters failing to recover from alcoholism or depicted as working up the courage to commit suicide are set against mythic storytelling traditions encapsulated by basketball. Fantasy and upward movement are felt as the most powerful counterforces to the deadening weight of ostracism and suffering.

In 'The Only Traffic Light' the narrator refers to the new reservation star as "the latest in a long line of reservation basketball heroes, going all the way back to Aristotle Polatkin, who was shooting jump shots exactly one year before James Naismith supposedly invented basketball" (45). This idea is used again in the story 'Jesus Christ's Half-Brother...'; the narrator says: "I see these Indian kids and I know that basketball was invented by an Indian long before that Naismith guy ever thought about it" (127). Alexie's writing is full of such challenges to the dominant version of American history attempting, often with humour, to undercut a single faultless account of events. Vizenor believes: "The foundational theories of social sciences have denied natural reason, tribal memories, and the coherence of heard stories" (67). Through the establishment of dominant metanarratives, indigenous culture has been stifled and the challenge Alexie recognises is to offer a subversive re-workings.

In his poem “Defending Walt Whitman” from his collection *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996) Alexie connects America’s poetic legacy with his own place and his ethnicity via basketball:

Walt Whitman dreams
of the first jumpshot he will take, the ball arcing clumsily
from his fingers, striking the rim so hard that it sparks.
Walt Whitman shakes because he believes in God.
[...] Half of the Indian boys wear t-shirts damp with sweat
and the other half are bareback, skin slick and shiny.
There is no place like this. Walt Whitman smiles.
Walt Whitman shakes. This game belongs to him. (49-52, 62-65)

The intentionally humorous juxtaposition of a long bearded-Whitman out of place on the basketball court with nimble young Indian boys creates a surreal and striking image. There is a homoerotic tension in Whitman’s observation of the athletic and topless boys. Nancy J. Peterson recognises how “[e]rotics, aesthetics, and spirituality come together in this charged encounter” (137). Whitman dreams of a moment of sporting transcendence likened to religious epiphany. As Alexie is well aware, Whitman died just three months before Naismith invented basketball. Alexie’s wry poem alludes to an alternative form of exclusion through basketball metaphor. The theme of the poem is also a reference to a type of artistic segregation felt by modern American poets, heightened if the poet is from a minority group as in Alexie’s case. Whitman as the forefather of American verse casts an imposing shadow over all those who use the poetic form especially outside the establishment. In this context, Whitman’s legacy can be artistically debilitating rather than inspiring. Basketball becomes a metaphor for the craft of poetic expression, the game is poetry, and so full is Whitman’s legacy that it “belongs to him” (65).

However, placed in the reservation setting it is Whitman who is eager to belong, exchanging places with the traditional Native American outsider. There is an ambiguous sense in Alexie's poem sparked by the open nature of the title. One reading would be to suggest that Alexie is "Defending" Whitman's poetic legacy and his importance to American verse. Although "Defending" Whitman could also be interpreted in the language of basketball in which a player blocks another. Alexie creates an image of protecting Indian culture from an imperialistic and judgemental gaze symbolized by Whitman's voyeuristic spectatorship of the Indian boys. Of course, the image of Whitman is partly intended to be humorous, but there is also a cutting aspect to Alexie's poem. The author uses basketball to propose heretical narratives to undermine a hegemonic discourse in a creative and postcolonial act of empowerment. The game becomes a metaphor for historiographic opposition in the way that grand narratives are imposed on the indigenous population to counter what Vizenor calls "the cruelties of parcolonial historicism" (75). The folklore and oratory tradition of Alexie's basketball stories facilitates a recalcitrance that begins an artistically relevant counterweight to an unchallenged essentially white homogenous version of history.

In *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, Gerald Vizenor argues: "*Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry*" (vii, emphasis in original). The term "survivance" is a portmanteau of survival and resistance. Vizenor has chosen an amalgamation of words to generate an active rather than passive terminology to oppose simulations of Indian identity. Vizenor demands an anti-colonialist process whereby the indigenous population can challenge and move away from reactionary responses toward self-awareness and readdress their own narratives. In the basketball battles between whites and Indians, Alexie

presents a familiar story of Native American failure, but this is never the overriding message. Alexie's own "survival stories" reframe the basketball narrative to inspire an alternative interpretation of the significance of the account, and the importance of the creativeness of both ballplayer and storyteller.

Although not referencing Alexie explicitly, Vizenor's description of Native American literature expresses precisely the postmodern strategies of Alexie's narrative concerns. Vizenor writes: "The ironies and humor in the postmodern are heard in tribal narratives; the natural reason of tribal creation has never been without a postmodern turn or counterpoise, a common mode that enlivened the performance and memories of those who heard the best of their own experiences in stories" (68). In the same way that Vizenor finds the expression of freedom in Native writing, Alexie is drawing from a legacy of a storytelling tradition and finding points of intersection with Postmodernism. Critics such as Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack recognise how Alexie shows that identity is inspired by the game so that "race represented within a postmodern landscape-is embedded in his stories that depict the tribal use of basketball to get at the 'truth'" (81). Alexie's writing upturns narratives with irony and humour to undercut an ideology of victimhood and reach a clearer understanding of contemporary Native American experience. However, the "truth" that Davis and Womack theorise is rarely discovered, Alexie finds greater potential by alluding to a mosaic of shifting certainties.

Alexie's works promote a revision of history, fragmentary narratives, breaking down of stereotypes, ethnic heterogeneity, playful ironies, and the blurring of genres. He achieves a fluid effect in his storytelling through an elasticity of form. A story is not fixed, it is malleable because it relies on the teller: it has an organic quality. Although

Alexie's stories are in the form of texts, he brings to life the oral tradition where characters tell stories that are living and breathing entities. Whether Alexie is telling the story of basketball game between Tribal Police and reservation outcasts, friends recounting stories of heroics on the court, or a husband and wife shooting baskets in the dark, he refuses to be limited by conventional boundaries preferring the porous qualities of stories as ever-expanding narrative possibilities. The defeats that these players experience are irrelevant to the meaning they discover in the game. The author's style of fiction is a defence in itself adhering to a tribal aesthetic. Alexie's artistic drive is reflected in his representation of the sport. Alexie is not restricted to one form; he writes novels, poetry, short stories, film and even stand-up comedy. Just as he values openness and creativeness of street basketball, so too does he work in multiple mediums.

“Keeping Them Outsiders”: John Edgar Wideman’s Homage to the Game of Resistance of Playground Basketball in *Hoop Roots*

Black basketball began as a communal and spiritual mode of resistance to white supremacy, street basketball now functions as a refuge for black youth in urban exile.³¹

**Onaje X. O. Woodbine, *Black Gods of the Asphalt:
Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball***

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.³²

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

In *Hoop Roots*, John Edgar Wideman shows how black street basketball is indicative of the forced failure of African Americans in United States society. Wideman argues that the portrayal of playground hoop in the mass media has become emblematic of an idea of blackness ascribed with negative associations incorporating images of the ghetto, gun crime and drug-use. Wideman’s intent is to overturn these associations, so whilst he emphasises how playground basketball still represents marginalisation, it is also a means of asserting independence and empowering black cultural identity. In this way, a reimagining of hoop can subvert its damaging image and reclaim its status as a symbol of African Americans’ belonging rather than merely as a tool to sell footwear or perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Just as proactively, Wideman shows how playground hoop is comparable to other forms of self-expression and resistance

³¹ Woodbine, 18.

³² Du Bois, 3.

such as traditional African dance, as well as the blues, jazz, and writing. In *Hoop Roots* the game represents the struggle to fight and counter prejudice through vital discourse and cultural practices. Wideman draws attention to a distinction between basketball and hoop, and I will explore his depiction of the differences between the official game and its popular offshoot. As well as these notions of re-evaluation and opposition, Wideman recognises an intensely spiritual connection to the world through the underlying forces and rhythms of the game that has inspired him as a writer. His own creative fiction mirrors playground hoop to resist the implications of stereotypes of failure. The text becomes a reflection on hoop's relation to writing itself by incorporating the playfulness of invention and the personal discoveries of the artist.

Hoop Roots resists simple definition. The writing style shifts as chapters move between autobiography, commentary, history, and fiction. Yet, for all its hybrid elements, a cohesive thread is the text as a poetic journal dedicated to Wideman's love of the game. Wideman leads the reader on a journey through his memories and reflections on basketball encompassing a range of narrative and discursive devices that forcibly break with the conventions of the memoir genre. Wideman begins in orthodox fashion by describing how he first played the game, watching others compete as a child before being given the opportunity to shoot the ball himself. Wideman explains that if his work were to be a more orthodox piece then he would express the precise sensations of that first shot or depict the reactions of the men who let him try for himself. However, he confides that he is unable to recall any of the salient details or feelings he experienced and therein lies the failure and subsequent joy of his creative endeavour. Wideman finds joy in this hazy meeting ground: "The

story enlarging, fact, fiction, and something in between, till I become who I am today, the story growing truer and less true as I make it up and it makes me up” (34-35). He and his work are defined by the interrelationships of reality and creation, the elusiveness of memory, and the fabrication of events and identity.

At this early stage, the work breaks into disparate and self-referential sections in which Wideman offers commentary on his own work and uses hoop as a metaphor to explore the writing process itself, and the goals and limitations of his project to convey the importance of the game. The chapter titled ‘Who Invented the Jump Shot (A Fable)’ depicts a literary conference on the subject. In another section, Wideman tells a fictional account of the Harlem Globetrotters in 1927 as they travel to a game in the bigoted heartland of Illinois. By the end of the story the only black man in the town has been lynched and Wideman points to a legacy of persecution and institutional racism. Throughout the text, Wideman continually asks what role basketball plays in ‘the race problem’? Hoop and racial identity are tightly bound and Wideman aims to show the empowering capacity of his beloved game. The text also represents a personal family story through Wideman’s memory and love for his grandmother. The author writes of the occasion at the end of her life when he left her deathbed to slip from the house and out to the street court where the local boys congregated to play basketball: “Running to the court seemed one way out of the room. One way to prevent her from slipping away from me. With such confusion, such ambivalence rooted inside me, no wonder it continues to haunt my feelings, my understanding of love” (111). Wideman’s guilt at abandoning his grandmother forever merged with his passion for the game and the sense of escape he felt running from his home.

As a boy Wideman was interested in playing the game rather than watching it and this love for the street version has kept him immersed and captivated by its creativity and patterns ever since. Wideman's text is primarily concerned with playground hoop rather than the professional game. It is in the informal offshoot of basketball, with its vibrant subculture, and language, where Wideman finds what he thinks of as authenticity. Whereas the professional game has allowed a "corporate network" to control "the game's production, access, distribution and image" (178), Wideman claims that the unofficial branch fosters inclusivity, participation and freedom through "amalgamation, crosscultural fertilization, bricolage, hybridity, collage" it essentially "builds towards self-sufficiency" (174). Street hoop has an amorphous quality, without limits, it grows because it refuses to be limited by boundaries or co-opted by the profiteering of the establishment.

Hoop Roots uses basketball to address the issue of race in the United States. Wideman portrays basketball as an emblem of the nation's disparities meaning that street "hoop is a witness to the bankruptcy of America's promise of democratic equality" (173). Basketball is a symbol of the injustice of the American system where wealth and power are maintained by a predominantly white elite and disadvantage correlates with the experience of minority groups. Wideman is critical of "government institutions and practices that empower the rich at the expense of the poor, protect the interests of the haves by disenfranchising, marginalizing, the have-nots" (199). Wideman demonstrates that the African American experience is defined by discrimination and imbalance.

Wideman's use of basketball in this context is double-edged; while the game is portrayed as a "witness" (173) to social inequity, it can also be incorporated in a

creative act of rebelliousness and alternative positive representations of black identity. The author rejects the persistent notion of the categorising of failure onto the black community. Wideman uses basketball to deny the dangerous habit of pathologising black culture; his tone is defiant yet elegant. The street game can be used as a celebration of cultural opposition and an exultant form of validation. Hoop promotes the challenging of conventions. The game should be used:

To resist being ripped off and redirected, to escape being kidnapped and whitewashed by the mainstream, playground hoop like all cultural practices at the margins engages in a constant struggle to reinvent itself, pump out new vibrations, new media and messages of yea-saying, saying loudly, clearly, Yes. We're here. Still here, and we're human, we're beautiful (189, emphasis in original)

The choice of the term “whitewashed” in this passage directly alludes to racial prejudice and the dominance of white culture to distort, repress and conceal black identity. This section also shows how playground hoop is a form of freedom and, importantly for Wideman, enables resistance through “escape”. Street hoop is an alternative marginal practice; Wideman believes for it to retain its power that it has a necessary imperative to continually and dynamically reaffirm its vitality, message and the importance of its independence. If playground hoop were to remain in one form then it would lose part of its power: reinvention is the key. I will later explore how this is also true of Wideman’s writing that morphs and shifts within one work and even within the space of several paragraphs. Therefore, like the game itself that rewards energy and motion, basketball and writing must frequently change and develop to keep relevant and maintain resistance.

Within the representation of urban American ghettos the derelict concrete playground against the backdrop of graffiti, and police sirens wailing, is a recurring

image. The commercials referred to earlier, particularly the “B More” campaign featuring Carmelo Anthony in downtown Baltimore, perpetuates just such an image. Thus basketball and black urban poverty are often aligned in media representations of the ghetto and then, as has been the case with Nike and Reebok, exploited and commodified. Wideman draws a parallel between a legacy of slavery and the advertising industry’s unscrupulous profit-seeking: “Just as centuries ago the commerce in black bodies fostered a new worldwide economic order, the commerce in images of blackness during the last decade has accelerated globalization of the marketplace” (42). Yet Wideman, whilst acknowledging this association within the professional game, depicts hoop in opposition by illustrating its truly uplifting qualities. He desires to reclaim these harmful images and transform their denigrating message or even intent into something empowering. Wideman writes: “If urban blight is indeed a moveable famine, playground ball the city’s moveable feast. Thesis and antithesis. Blight a sign of material decay, ball a sign of spiritual health rising from the rubble” (50). The urban game organically and defiantly rises from the concrete streets where it is played like a green shoot through a small crack in the bitumen.

In *Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball* (2016)

Onaje X. O. Woodbine, through interviews and observations, produces a moving portrait of the experiences of urban ballplayers very much in keeping with Wideman’s writing on the topic. Woodbine explains that his work “interprets the game of basketball as a ‘lived religion’, in which the central problems and structures of inner-city life are displayed, renegotiated, and reimagined on the court” (9). Wideman’s aim is to similarly articulate an impassioned exploration of the consequences of demonising blackness and how such ideas can be rethought and challenged often

through the use of the game. Basketball's cultural image remains one of ostracism and the desire for inclusion, particularly for ethnic minorities, and scapegoated black males. Basketball mirrors racial prejudice, but the informal game "is partially a response to the mainstream's long, determined habit of stipulating blackness as inferiority, as a category for discarding people, letting people crash and burn, keeping them outsiders" (173). The focus on classifying certain groups as "outsiders" is a central concern. Street hoop is a retort to a hegemonic insistence on black subjugation. Wideman compels the black minority to "fight the power" (175) taking from the game the positives he believes it to possess.

While Wideman is often idealistic, he offers pragmatic ideological strategies as an alternative method of fighting back. The popularity of playground hoop means it can infiltrate the mainstream and undermine it from within. Basketball has a capacity to disrupt and challenge, so like "any attractive folk cultural production, playground hoop is subversive because it crosses borders between the margin and mainstream, and these crossings can destabilize, erode borders, eventually even abolish the distinction between mainstream and margin" (175). The mainstream exists as one extreme and the margin of ghettoised Homewood, an area of Wideman's hometown of Pittsburgh and setting for the majority of his work, as a 'failed' environment is the other. Wideman suggests playground hoop can facilitate the eradication of such binary distinctions. Hoop can have a dual, even paradoxical, role. While the game articulates the black male's experience of inhabiting an outsider space that is segregated from the mainstream, it suggests another possibility. Instead of directly rebelling against the injustice of exclusion, Wideman proposes that black culture must find scope for redefinition, not beyond, but from within such a marginalised

environment. The street court can be appropriated as a marker of racial pride and undermine a dominant discourse that gives traction to an ideology that deems inferior any culture which incorporates difference.

Playground hoop is a celebration of freedom. The openness Wideman recognises in the game is drawn sharply into focus as opposed to the corporatised and stylised world of the NBA. Wideman writes about the early days of professional basketball when black players were not permitted to compete in league games. In the Thirties team owners would be desperate for all-black teams such as the Harlem Globetrotters and New York Renaissance to play exhibition games to entice spectators to poorly attended competitive games (179). These showcase games, with highly skilled African American players, often proved more popular than the main event itself at the end of the evening. For Wideman, the professional game will always be clouded by its history of segregation whereas the street game is forever associated with liberation removed from big business and a legacy of discrimination. This means that “one way playground hoop distinguishes itself from other varieties of basketball is by carrying forward the emphasis on democratic, inclusive, grass-roots participation, on play for its own sake. On Pleasure. Play without pay” (179). While the NBA focuses on attendance, on advertising revenue, on its promotion of its players as icons, Wideman labels this a “cartoon version of basketball ultimately destructive for players and the game” (182). Wideman believes that the true spirit of basketball is associated with the unencumbered honesty of the street game where participants’ play is for the sake of the game, the sheer thrill, and the feel of the ball, rather than money or glory. It is in this version of the game, with its fundamental black urban background, where Wideman has found his obsession. However, while the street game manages to retain

this authenticity it must continually defend itself from attempts from the mainstream to encroach on its space by attempting to hijack its appeal. In so doing the establishment is presented as commandeering hoop's urban image to market the game and dilute its aesthetic and political currency.

In the chapter 'Who Invented the Jump Shot (A Fable)' Wideman attends a fictional academic conference to discuss the origins and legacy of a move that revolutionised the game.³³ Rather than ending the title of this section as a question, the absence of punctuation makes the chapter heading a statement rather than a considered inquiry. Instead of a free discussion between informed experts, the agenda of the study is another form of cultural appropriation by the dominant culture, where white academics will symbolically seize and take ownership of a decidedly African American invention. Wideman quips: "By the end of two hours they'll own the jump shot, unimpeachable experts on its birth, development, and death. Rewriting history, planting their flag on a chunk of territory because nobody's around to holler *stop thief*" (137, emphasis in original). Wideman condemns scholarly attempts to take ownership through the arrogance of assumed entitlement.

In much of the text the focus is on the act of reclaiming and reappraisal; one of the most damaging aspects of racism is its pervasive harm to youth culture thereby enacting a cycle of discrimination. Wideman explains: "The idea of race and the practice of racism in our country works against African American kids forming and sustaining belief in themselves. Wanting more doesn't teach you there are ways to

³³ In the Thirties players began to use the jump shot and over the next two decades the style of shooting became by far the superior technique. Shawn Fury's book *Rise and Fire: The Origins, Evolution of the Jump Shot* (2016) is the most detailed exploration of the fundamental change to players' styles of scoring.

get there...You need the plausibility, the possibility of imagining a different life for yourself" (6). In *Hoop Roots* Wideman claims playing hoop offers one of the few venues for alternative self-conception. In a later chapter, Wideman attempts to "blink away" the image he has seen on television of a group of white cops "punching, kicking, stomping some invisible, allegedly black somebody" (166). To escape the vulgarity of this endlessly repeated scenario he demands a "counterreality" (164). In contrast to the demonising of black culture, the playground game allows "African-American men [to] act out a symbolic version of who they are, who they want to be" (164). When young black men are able to step outside the confines of their lives and onto the court, the playground becomes a space for ontological inquiry and a setting for redefining identity.

In the chapter 'Naming the Playground' Wideman explores accounts of basketball tragedy. Wideman ponders a new name for the basketball courts behind Homewood school; the area is named Westinghouse Park after a white industrialist. Wideman imagines christening it instead with the names of legendary players who started from its precise and humble beginnings; they are legends of the street game who risk becoming forgotten. Wideman remembers Maurice Stokes, a role model in the community, who grew up in Homewood and went on to fulfil his early promise by playing professionally. Stokes made his name with the Cincinnati Royals where he gained acclaim. However, Stokes' skill and ability meant he was often picked out by the opposition for rough tactics in attempts to slow him down or throw him off his game. Stokes found himself repeatedly fouled and consequently suffered a series of troubling injuries exacerbated by his gruelling playing schedule. On 12 March 1958, Stokes was mid-air with the ball when an overzealous opponent crashed into him

knocking him to the ground and causing Stokes to hit his head. Although he was able to get up and leave the court, the impact of the clash had severe ramifications. Three days later Stokes developed post-traumatic encephalitis and was rushed to hospital where he fell into a coma for six days and, although he regained consciousness, he lay bedridden and was unable to speak until he died twelve years later. There is a tone of blame and anger in Wideman's description of these events. Wideman underlines how Stokes was particularly singled out by mediocre Caucasian players envious of his prodigious talent. According to Wideman, the fouls committed on him were made by the "most pedestrian white players" (202). Unable to compete with their rival legitimately, they chose to slow him down by fair means or, more regularly, foul. The night that Stokes was injured is described as "one of those nights people get lynched" (203). There can be little doubt that Wideman attributes Stokes' eventual death to a culture of racism in the United States. Wideman extends his vitriol further than the players who committed the deeds, and to the basketball establishment. The professional league would not take responsibility for Stokes' injuries, although they absolved themselves from liability by organising an annual game to support his family. Further than this, the league would not help with any of Stokes' family's medical costs.

Wideman goes on to suggest another former player whose name, he feels, should commemorate the court. Eldon Lawson showed considerable early promise and was tipped to play professionally. Yet he was unable to shed the effects of his past in Homewood as he continued to commit petty thefts and was eventually jailed, later developing diabetes and losing a leg to the affliction. Both stories and names are concerned with the black basketball narrative of failure, where young men from the ghetto use the game as a means of escape but both have tragic endings with the "cruel

denouement of each man's life" showing "how both men were crippled but salvaged a part of themselves" (208). This is an important part of the redemptive aspect of failure in basketball writing. Wideman is keen to point to each man's dignity in spite of these horrendous events. Wideman places failure, not as any weakness of character or even attributed to a turn of fate, but squarely as a consequence of the corrupt system and imbalanced social structures that collude and discriminate against black men through "society's racist attitudes" (209). Wideman stresses how these two men have been associated with failure and loss, but through the act of naming and thereby commemorating them, he hopes to redefine their one-dimensional narratives and take cultural ownership of their tragedies. Wideman comments: "When we repeat the name we're bearing witness to an indelible, inevitable parable residing in the public domain" (195). Instead of forgetting the trauma these men suffered, Wideman contends that their memories should be kept alive. Following the legacy of former slaves revoking their slave names, the act of renaming has a powerful symbolic quality. In the very deliberate promotion of memorialising Stokes and Lawson, Wideman suggests that emboldening can fracture institutionalised divisions: "Unlike the names given to us to silence our voices, the names we give ourselves will open the possibility of conversations across so-called racial lines by dynamiting the lines" (200). Wideman's explosive verb calls for positive action in representation, rejecting a stigmatised version of blackness. *Hoop Roots* defiantly works to repel the representations of black culture solely in terms of failure. Wideman's intent is to remember and celebrate these men from Homewood for their achievements, and draw attention to the injustices of their falls by immortalising their names. This process follows an important legacy; Wideman explains: "we've been renaming,

rebaptizing, giving birth to ourselves and alternative realities since we were kidnapped to these shores five hundred years ago, kidnapped and dispossessed of our ancient lands and languages" (200).

Wideman's choice of the term "rebaptizing" is particularly significant because of its religious connotations. In keeping with this theme and language, redemption is a key aspect of his work because it integrates racial prejudice with the possibility of rising from discrimination in forms of positive self-determination through religious symbolism. *Hoop Roots* is explicit in stressing a legacy of persecution in America for a black population "transplanted brutally" (240) from their homelands through the establishment of slavery, its legacy and the continued stratification of society in the United States. However, much as African Americans have suffered injustice, Wideman does not lose hope throughout his later works epitomised by *Hoop Roots*. In the ashes of burnt-out buildings in his earlier *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) the promise of redemption seems mercilessly lost. By contrast, *Hoop Roots* points to the dynamic upward momentum of figures on the playground court and the possibility of change.

In *Hoop Roots* redemption is heavily evoked through the religious imagery that Wideman uses to describe playground basketball connecting various aspects of the game with symbolism of Christian worship. In a number of chapters Wideman focuses on the tempo of hoop and how it reflects spiritual musicality: "The game, again like gospel music, propagates rhythm" (57). Gospel music has its roots in a black oral tradition. Hymns sung by gospel groups were traditionally accompanied by clapping and stamping for percussion. Like hoop, gospel music supplies "rhythm", but it is also a collaborative activity fostering community. At another point in the text Wideman draws the analogy between the baskets and the crucifix as an emblems of redemption.

He writes: “those hoop-crowned poles at either end of the court, like the Christian cross, identify and honour the intersection of what humans can and can’t comprehend” (47). The structure of the playing area brings to mind ideas of religious understanding and those ideas at the limits of knowledge aroused by the game. By continually aligning the game with Christian theology Wideman eulogises hoop and evokes its redemptive qualities of uplift over persecution.

In the same passage Wideman muses on the most significant part of the game: the act of scoring a basket. Yet the score itself is given very little consequence; the author stresses rather the motion of the player’s action and the importance of flight. This mid-air state is imagined by Wideman as a transcendent moment loaded with religious significance: “the player who climbs air up, up toward the rim is entering for a charmed instant another mysterious dimension, his spirit as well as his body rising like a ball arcing toward the hoop, like the souls of believers” (47). Wideman celebrates the jump a player makes towards the hoop as a culmination of skill and play leading to spiritual epiphany. He plays with imagery of ascension and the audacious slam dunk as a journey towards a revelatory experience.

For Wideman, and also for Alexie, a key idea in their basketball writing is the importance of flight. They both find scope in the basketball metaphor of minority groups held to the ground by racial prejudice and social injustice discovering means of springing upwards. Wideman is interested in the double meanings of words connected to the game.³⁴ In the language of hoop, flight is particularly evocative due to its multiple meanings. On first thought, it refers to the incredible leaps the players

³⁴ At various points in the text he plays with how the words “court” and “rebound” can be interpreted in different ways, referring to both basketball and to relationships.

make during games. Wideman finds great possibility in these moments that constitute grace, athleticism and freedom. He explains: “You rise off the ground with the ball gripped in both hands, up into the air where you can’t stay long [...] Occupy yourself while you float, weightless, working out what you need to do next” (58). The split-second in the air is a moment of transcendence and loaded with potential. A page later Wideman eulogises further: “you fly over the defenders or around them or blow through them [...] You’re still soaring as you strut in reverse, bouncing high off the balls of your feet” (59). Wideman equates flight with freedom, and throughout the work, links a type of cultural resistance through sources of escape. Flight conjures up images of independence but it is conversely a problematic idea. There is a paradoxical sense that flight, taking from its other meaning, is essentially fleeing from threat and seeking refuge rather than standing to fight. Understood in this context, flight as an act of defiance is a rather jarring concept that needs to be disentangled. *Hoop Roots* must therefore balance notions connected to escape and desiring refuge with an assertion of the game’s role in reflecting and establishing forms of resistance and empowerment.

To understand how Wideman positions the dialectic complications he finds in hoop I draw from an earlier and hugely influential work of sports literature: *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) by the Marxist intellectual C.L.R. James. James explores how cricket can reflect and even inform ideas of national identity; he writes: “In the West Indies the cricket ethic has shaped not only the cricketers but social life as a whole” (54). James’ social-historical appraisal of cricket in the Caribbean is framed as a memoir of his Trinidadian youth, just as *Hoop Roots* makes use of early autobiographical details. James paved the way for the use of sport as a lens to regard political circumstances as

a cultural critique. Wideman's intent is to show the potential of basketball as a cultural study just as James had done for cricket nearly forty years earlier; Wideman has even said that he wrote *Hoop Roots* with a copy of James' work on his desk (Ignatiev, 11).

Beyond a Boundary is centred on how cricket represented the divisions in class and race of West Indian society. James' passion for the game was unabated, but he recognised its power in propagating the harmful legacy of colonial rule. Through cricket in the West Indies a code of behaviour was taught meaning that British hegemony was sustained and surreptitiously reinforced. James concludes that he was only able to comprehend the extent of the malign authority in retrospect: "I understood the limitations on spirit, vision and self-respect which was imposed on us by the fact that our masters, our curriculum, our code of morals, *everything* began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading, and our business was to admire" (39). However, where cricket could so pervasively impose influence on social norms, James suggests the opposite effect was the catalyst for his political awakening:

I haven't the slightest doubt that the clash of race, caste and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket. I am equally certain that in those years social and political passions, denied normal outlets, expressed themselves so fiercely in cricket (and other games) precisely because they were games. Here began my personal cavalry. (66)

James identifies the power of sport and questions how a game so steeped in imperialist constructs of identity and order can then be harnessed in a reactionary and counter endeavour. He is concerned with the need to reconcile competing notions of complicity and resistance in cricket: in turning a British colonial practice into a subversive one capable of instigating ideological change. In a similar fashion, Wideman must strike a balance between the dichotomy of two key concepts he

recognises in hoop: the game's facilitation of escape and the importance of opposition. Wideman is able to achieve this partly because street hoop, beginning as an offshoot of the formal version of basketball, has forged a rebellious identity in its own right. Hoop has broken the confines of its officially sanctioned forbearer, as an amorphous practice of an amalgamation between game and culture. Yet this fact alone does not do justice to the complexity of Wideman's argument where the juxtaposition between ideas serves to underline the co-dependence of contradictory points.

Wideman, as with James, argues for the simultaneity of seemingly divergent forces. James proposes that on the field of play it is possible to encounter forms of identity beyond the restrictions, or boundaries, of race and class; James writes: "The British tradition soaked deep into me was that when you entered the sporting arena you left behind you the sordid compromises of everyday existence" (66). The cricket crease is imagined as a sanctuary. Likewise, Wideman shows how hoop allows a vital arena for self-definition denied to black culture elsewhere. In *Hoop Roots* Wideman claims that the playground game allows a refuge from societal pressures and even the burden of American inequality in a space where "African-American men act out a symbolic version of who they are, who they want to be" (164). How this transformative process can be realised is reliant on assertions of independence. James contends that cricket must be re-appropriated to become a means of anti-colonial resistance. In the first chapter James writes of a player who was able show just how such an endeavour could be achieved through a style of play and a specific batting elegance:

My second landmark was not a person but a stroke, and the maker of it was Arthur Jones. He was a brownish Negro, a medium-sized man, who walked with quick steps and active shoulders. He had a pair of restless, aggressive eyes, talked quickly and even stammered a little. He wore a white cloth hat when batting, and he used to cut. How he used to cut! I have watched county cricket for weeks on end and seen whole Test matches without seeing one cut such as Jones used to make, and for years whenever I saw one I murmured to myself, 'Arthur Jones! (5)

“Cutting” is a particular type of shot that James admires. The batsman strikes down from a high backlift making sharp contact with the bowler’s delivery wide of off stump to send the ball veering away from the fielders and out behind him. What is so significant about the choice of stroke is that its whole purpose is to display its difficulty to execute and the dexterity and skill of the batsman. Jones’ use of the shot is then interpreted by James as a veiled act of insurrection; it comes from an aesthetic wish rather than from a purely practical technique and therefore Jones’ shot becomes a stylistic choice of liberatory desires. Similarly, Wideman suggests that hoop, as played in African American communities, has a parallel purpose of imposing cultural identity. Just as with cutting in cricket for James, the jump shot or indeed hoop itself, in terms of its improvisational qualities and the lack of importance it places on the final score, are assertions of autonomy.

James makes an articulate argument for the aesthetic beauty of cricket; the game: "is first and foremost a dramatic spectacle. It belongs with the theatre, ballet, opera and the dance" (196). James emphasises how cricket’s aesthetic qualities also serve a reformatory purpose. Wideman, no doubt inspired by this writing, makes just such claim for street basketball:

Art is someone speaking, making a case for survival. The art in our styles of playing hoop as eloquent as our styles of playing music. Art is what we experience, how we feel about being alive. Art’s medium for expressing what’s

crucial and worthy of being preserved, passed on. What works, what doesn't. A culture's art shouts and whispers secrets the culture couldn't exist without, unveils its reasons for being (230).

Wideman makes a strong case for hoop as an art-form and few would dismiss the power of art such as fiction or music to influence culture and elicit social reform. The author demonstrates how hoop is as worthy of similar regard. Wideman argues that the game's greatest asset is to be found in its freeing potential: "The game is pure because it's a product of the players' will and imagination" (48) just as is the case for a work of creative fiction.

Wideman emphasises that hoop is an equal art form to black music and writing because it is fixed in the same need for communication and self-definition. The power of street basketball is to facilitate independence and expression. Wideman asserts that hoop is connected to the act of creation and comparable to the elegance and righteousness of a tradition of black music. Street basketball is a rebellious offshoot of the game just as jazz music was partly a rejection of the prescribed standards of mainstream music. Wideman develops a three-way metaphor between writing, music and hoop, so that his depiction of the game is jazz-like in both language and structure. Wideman's prose is a fragmented style that is intent on the vibrancy of rhythms. Jazz, basketball and writing become interchangeable art-forms with their focus on the importance and primacy of 'the beat'. An underlying principle of jazz music is to develop and play with existing melodies, structures and motifs. The jazz musician works beyond the standard piece of music adhering to the familiar; then through improvisation, subverts the form by breaking with convention in terms of facets such as intonation, rhythm and melody. *Hoop Roots* is a blurring of forms, fusing fiction, autobiography and political essay. Throughout the text the authorial voice weaves

between first, second and third person narration. The transitions come with no warning, creating a loose and shifting tone. This instability and polyvocal nature of the memoir draws the reader in as if the author is communicating directly. On the contents page Wideman prefaces the chapter headings: "Different pieces coming from different places – read them in sequence or improvise". The reader is invited to adlib in their reading experience mirroring the free style of jazz music and street hoop where players are challenged to use their creativity as the tenets and rules provide only an initial guide. Wideman finds similarity between jazz music's syncopated timing, the poetic meter of a sentence, and the hypnotic rhythm of the bouncing ball. For Wideman each pulse is like a heartbeat: "The game, again like gospel music, propagates rhythm, a flow and go, a back beat" (57). Even the name "*Harlem...if you put your ear close to the word you'd hear faint echoes of syncopated jazz*" (145).

The jazz composition is emphasised further in Wideman's prose which relies on rhythm, assonance and experimentation. There are passages when Wideman's style breaks from any form of narrative progression into staccato bursts as he riffs on the basketball theme: "Great Time your chance to be. To get down. Out. To do it right. Right on time" (57). The creativity of jazz fuses with play so that the game reflects the characteristics of the music. In the later chapter 'Learning to Play', the writing is more elegant, but still with an emphasis on cadence and tempo. Wideman writes: "The sun perpetually shining on hoop. The thump-thumping of the ball drumming the asphalt always on time, in time, dancing moons, planets, and stars whose orbits, whose glide and shuffle and bump, figure the rhythm of the court" (107-108). Here the poetic lyricism evokes the jazz trumpet soloist playing against the constant steady beat of

the bouncing ball rhythm section. The imagery is of hoop as a constantly sacred space with the reference to the moon and stars implying sensations of ascension.

Wideman likens writing, basketball and jazz in the ways they ultimately offer freedom. Basketball shares essential elements with jazz as Wideman recognises in the music's spontaneous and ephemeral qualities. Wideman writes:

Maybe the primary reason the game exists and persists is because it reliably supplies *breaks*, moments a player dreams of seizing and making his or her own when he or she thinks *music* or thinks *basketball*. Moments when weight, the everyday dominoes collapsing one after the other of linear time, is shed. When the player's free to play (50, emphasis in original)

There are such obvious affinities between jazz and basketball that become even greater as one delves into their characters and forms. Primarily they both value improvisation as a key standard, yet within their creativity they rely on cooperation, in basketball from the team and in jazz from the other musicians playing together. Ballplayers and jazz musicians must respond to one another relying on interplay, reciprocal *movements*; this is a term used in both sport and music. The musician and the ballplayer must develop a level of understanding only established through concerted practice and playing together. Above all, both emphasise rhythm; a basketball player will often bounce the ball, steadying himself, gaining 'the beat' and focus before foul shots to re-establish feel and tempo after a break in play.

For Wideman, jazz, basketball and writing are also fundamentally connected because of the emphasis they place on a ludic sense of openness. Basketball is the one sport where play is so essentially valued. Whereas within other games the rules provide a rigid structure and strict predetermined boundaries, street basketball attributes far less importance to restriction. Instead, the informal version of the game, what Wideman would call the true game, is "about creating pleasure, working the

body to please the body, about free spaces, freedom that can be attained by play, by a game not without rules but with flexible rules, spontaneous, improvised according to circumstances” (167). Those who play the game enter a space governed by principles that are democratically malleable and that spur elegance and creativity. The court is “not a jail cell but a mutually agreed upon set of restraints, an imaginary labyrinth testing how ingeniously, elegantly players can actually work their way out” (167). Wideman’s imagery of the game is as a puzzle allowing players’ creativity to find solutions to the game’s traps. Wideman could just as easily be referring to the act of writing with the flexible rules of structure, language and form giving postmodern writers a starting point to forge experimental works.

Wideman’s work starts and ends with a reflection on the similarities between his two great passions: writing and basketball. Both have mystery despite their seeming simplicity. They are both capable of articulating endless conundrums that play against each other when considered in unison. Wideman writes: “Hoop and writing intrigue me because no matter how many answers I articulate, how gaudy my stat sheet appears, hoop and writing keep asking the same questions” (13). Wideman’s twin passions boundlessly mystify him because of their shared enigmatic qualities. Yet it is the street game that appears to better satisfy the author’s aesthetic need. Where writing develops a fragmented identity of many competing parts, hoop offer a sense of oneness or harmony. Wideman suggests that in writing “[t]here are many selves, many sets of rules jostling for position. None offers the clarifying, cleansing unity of playing hoop” (9). The most significant ideological difference between playing basketball and writing is the centred self of the ballplayer compared to the multifaceted self of the author caught in constant struggle between

contradictions and doubts; this fraught identity is juxtaposed against the instinctive hoop player who seemingly feels none of these quandaries or concerns, but is still afforded the space to be legitimately creative. Whereas authorship can inspire confusion as the writer struggles with competing versions of himself; Wideman portrays street basketball as an intuitive and pure game with a vital healing capacity.

Sports, and Wideman's conception of street basketball in particular, allow players to enter a mindful state that psychologists, such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, refer to as 'flow'. In *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996) Csikszentmihalyi defines this phenomena as an "automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness" (110). This is precisely the type of heightened awareness that Wideman's eulogy to hoop explores. In this mind-set, sportsmen or, even amateur hoop players in pickup games, feel totally engaged in the action; they are completely lost in the moment. For the duration of the game or, perhaps only for a split second, they feel a zen-like connection of total concentration, unaware of time or anything beyond the game's boundaries. In *Black Gods of the Asphalt*, Woodbine identifies the distinctive transcendent potential the game allows. The author quotes an amateur player he meets called Tyshawn:

Man, it's just like you forget what's going on, pretty much, everything else on the outside world. For that however much time that you're on the court, I mean that's the only thing you're focusing on. You don't know the time of day, everything else is pretty much you're just blacked-out between those four lines. That rectangle is your whole new space for that certain time being (11).

Wideman too is in awe of exactly the sensation this player vividly describes. He contends that at the centre of a game the feeling of immersion and flow prohibits the ballplayer from overthinking; hoop "doesn't allow a player to indulge this conscious splitting-off and self-reflection" (9). These are just the pitfalls of creative writing that

the self-aware author battles each time he/she puts pen to paper. Authorship is restricted and constrained by rules and therefore stripped of sport's spontaneity. Writing is frustrating for what it does not allow as Wideman desires the passing "excitement of process, of invention, of play [...] Seeking more means of self-discovery" (13) he find in his cherished game.

In several passages Wideman states his feeling of failure at the capacity of his writing to do justice to his subject matter. Even the first line of the text admits to the inadequacies of his ambition: "No Book. Only a wish I can make something like a book about a game" (3). By the close Wideman confesses to his own disappointment to truly demonstrate the relationship between racial identity, athleticism and creativity. He acknowledges: "I've only just begun in this book: to demonstrate how sport is art and, like any other African-American art form, expresses and preserves, if you teach yourself how to look" (185). An admission of incompleteness does not devalue the work's intent as, for Wideman, it is a necessary step that facilitates the creative process.

With each sentence Wideman is feeling his way towards an elusive conclusion. He is testing what his own writing can achieve, and what will be forever out of reach. There is a certain amount of 'writing into the darkness', letting thoughts come naturally. In an interview, Wideman explains his preparation: "I do plan, scheme, write outlines, work stuff out, but a lot of what I do is intuitive" (Baker, 267). *Hoop Roots* has just such an impression; it is a search for personal insight and self-knowledge. The text is often mysterious in its workings, revealing and self-questioning at once. Wideman confides that the writing act is a process towards understanding not a demonstration of a resounding solution: "And I'm still writing. That's what these

words in the guise of a letter are about. About finding out what I need to know so I'm able to take my next step" (219). The lack of definitive answers is not a failure but an acknowledgment of the complexity Wideman's work unearths and conveys. In one section, Wideman seems to offer a justification for his unconventional style of weaving personal stories and the game that he has loved since childhood. Wideman explains: "*One reason I'm telling all this old stuff, the hard stuff and silly kid stuff too, is because it ain't over yet*" (102). Through the creative act of writing Wideman "must dig and sift, lift and comb. Not to censor or reveal things I've wished away. Not to confess or beg forgiveness. To see. To name. To enter the room, then begin to find my way safely out" (103). The author travels deep into his memories as in a journey of discovery into his past. Several passages interpret his own work as if the author is discovering a truth only when he articulates what basketball has meant to him. He writes: "Has it taken me this long to figure out...the subject of this hoop book is pleasure, the freeing, outlaw pleasure of play in society, a world that's on your case" (179).

Hoop Roots suggests that revelations are close at hand, then undermines them with an authorial sleight of hand. In this way Wideman evokes the street basketball player, the hustler or trickster, showing you the ball then just as you feel you can clasp it, with a deft movement, he glides away and the opportunity is gone. This is not to say that the work continually mocks its reader. In fact Wideman's writing has a sense of honest confidentiality as he writes of his childhood and his loves. Yet Wideman's text refuses to function as a traditional memoir. It lacks linear narrative; the work's fragmented narration and postmodern structure are essential to its agenda. The book's playfulness and blurring of forms distorts the tenets of the autobiographical

sports genre in its metafictional artistic quality. Wideman's own voice and commentary interjects with the stories and memories he depicts. A vignette often gives way to self-reflection on the processes of artistic expression. Instead of depicting an earlier lynching, Wideman makes a considered sidestep: "I'm asking you to imagine [...] I refuse to regale you with gory, unedifying details" (158). By simply depicting such an atrocity Wideman suggests he would be adhering to the narrative of crime and indignation. Instead, Wideman's work is concerned with challenging both himself and his reader; he implies a passive relationship between the two is type of artistic failure. In contrast, the distance between the writer and his audience is not a closed space; Wideman explains: "For me audience is a collaborator [...] their imaginations and my imagination form some kind of middle ground with the, or the prose, as a kind of facilitator" (Baker, 265).

At times Wideman's text adheres to this collaborative model, but at others the relationship he demands is far more confrontational. In a Du Boisian concept, Wideman suggests that self-reflection for the African American is always mediated by a dominant culture; Wideman's use of the mirror is a recurring theme in this and other of his texts. The double mirror in *Hoop Roots* evokes the notion of seeing oneself forever through the eyes of another. The text's experimentation with form comments on the paradigm that allows him to watch the reader watching him. Wideman provocatively asks: "Did I ask you to tell your stories so I could watch?" (124). It is as if one mirror was placed facing another. Wideman emphasises his vulnerability, then his power so while he states that he wants to be the literary equivalent of Michael Jordan, he also asks for sympathy. The work becomes not only a portrait of a man, but an act of self-discovery where the author represents one facet of himself and

speculates on, first the reader's response, and then the validity of the creator's intent via its interpretation. Wideman asks us, albeit self-consciously, to "[p]ity the poor writer" (11).

Wideman addresses several passages to "you", while the book is dedicated to the French journalist "Catherine". With his ode to Catherine or even to his grandmother, Wideman is trying to reveal a masculine game to the women he cherishes. At other times it appears the intended *you* is not "Catherine" at all, but addressed to a long lost lover. Towards the close of the work Wideman shifts and the reader is left to wonder if the intended listener has been his beloved grandmother all along. The final chapter takes "the guise of a letter" (219) addressed to his grandmother. As Berben-Masi comments, the book's immediacy is balanced against the mystery of its imagined listener: "The author shares his universe directly with us, now as if they were his thoughts, now filtered through the device of a primary reader we must intuit" (32).

Wideman's choice of language creates this fluctuating tone and unstable authorial position. Earlier, I suggested that Wideman believes hoop exceeds the qualities of fiction. For Wideman, fiction can only hope to match hoop in the complexity and subtlety of language with its potential to metamorphose in its illusive powers and capabilities. Wideman recognises:

the unpredictability of language, its stubborn self-referentiality, its mysterious capacity to mutate, assert a will of its own no matter how hard you struggle to enslave it, bend coerce it to express your bidding, language, with its shadowy, imminent resources and magical emergent properties, sometimes approximates a hoop game's freedom (12).

Only the intricacies and inexplicable nature of language can be an adequate metaphor for the vast freedom of hoop. Words have limitless potential that Wideman likens to

cosmic gateways: “Words open black holes. Portals where living and dead traffic, where worlds intersect, dissolve, clash” (106). It is the author’s freedom to invent and the ballplayer’s freedom to play that liberate each one and gives rise to transcendent possibilities of hoop and fiction.

Wideman’s writing draws on a legacy of articulate black resistance as a dissenting voice to the white hegemonic status quo. *Hoop Roots* reads as a text by a maturing artist able to reflect back on his literary output. The work represents a progression of thought and should be understood in the context of the author’s oeuvre. Wideman’s earlier writing explored more explicit ideas of radicalism such as his depiction of the black liberation group MOVE in *Philadelphia Fire*. As dramatised in the work, members of MOVE lived communally and adopted the surname ‘Africa’ in reference to their heritage. During the Seventies and Eighties, members of the group were at the forefront of violent conflict with the authorities. In 1985 a police helicopter dropped a bomb on a property MOVE occupied resulting in a fire that engulfed the local community leading to the deaths of many people including women and children. *Philadelphia Fire* is an apocalyptic vision of a decaying and bleak America at the precipice of nationwide race war. Wideman’s tone in his later work is more measured; outbursts of rage are more controlled. In *Hoop Roots*, instead of espousing violent political opposition and unmitigated anger, Wideman champions shifts in social identity. As Kathryn Hume argues, his recent writing advocates “positive modes of action” (21) without being drawn to ideas of instant recompense or the development of improbable utopias. Hoop does not provide a model for a beautiful egalitarian society, but rouses notions of community and becomes a symbol of hope and belonging. Wideman is not a deluded optimist; he simply recognises the

devastation of living in a cycle of ostracism and hate. Violence only goes so far; he explains: “we’ve tried that before, in the sixties, and found fire’s often satisfying but no solution” (199). As such, Wideman is keen to emphasise the small-scale, but vital modes of fostering community. In interview with Lisa Baker, Wideman explains: “I am really interested in democracy, in the radical sense – and the kinds of communal storytelling that occur on the basketball court, in the barber shop, and in my aunt’s kitchen are amazing examples of democracy” (271). The court is a communal space linked to an oratory tradition where “storytelling” is the most powerful tool to reaffirm identity beyond stigmas of failure.

Failed Spaces and Non-Linear Time: Basketball Conclusion

Wideman and Alexie create distinctive depictions of the street game with a focus on players seeking forms of refuge and flight; this desire is what Wideman labels the game's "escape from loneliness and fear" (240) and Alexie describes as "that feeling of immortality that drives a ballplayer" (*LR*, 46). However, this notion of yearning for liberty or breaking free does not mean abandoning the site where they play, but a reimagining of place and identity. Both writers use basketball as a dualistic symbol of the dichotomy between marginalisation and freedom. Whereas Wideman celebrates this paradoxical relationship and uses it to evoke an inspiring sense of black identity and self-discovery through rebellion and renaming, in Alexie's writing the conflict is interpreted differently. Alexie's characters are more inclined to integrate their losses into personal and healing forms that openly or indirectly evoke cultural heritage. Wideman works to maintain the racial and social aspect of anti-establishment street hoop while Alexie's stories depoliticise the game, even after confrontational altercations, and instead, take inspiration from the acts of grace and transcendence the ballplayer can achieve.

I conclude with two original and final points of commonality between these two writers in their treatment of the game they cherish. Firstly, the space in which they both depict basketball contests are located in environments beyond the mainstream. The basketball courts they portray are situated in outsider settings. These authors' basketball stories takes place in what are commonly depicted as 'failed spaces': the playground courts on the reservation and in the ghetto. Wideman's courts

are in the poor and rundown communities of Homewood. The neighbourhood he describes have “the look of postwar bombed-out desolation” (35). Wideman takes the reader back to his formative childhood landscape: “Busted sidewalks, broken window [...] deserted shells next to occupied dwellings, vacant lots like the toothless gaps in a rotting mouth” (35). The imagery of these scenes evoke lives on the edge of American society in various stages of decay. The court itself is enclosed by broken metal wiring and the setting of games is situated against the backdrop of derelict buildings by which drug deals take place and a social underclass reside. The caged courts, inches from the sidewalks, are “[n]ot unlike the prisons, jails, detention centers, detox centers, asylums, hallway houses, ghetto blocks of public housing plunked down in the midst of cities” (164).

Alexie’s courts are equally dilapidated on the reservation. Rather than a proud homeland of sovereignty and identity, the reservation is a space of limbo and poverty where characters live in a state of unrest. In ‘Family Portrait’ from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* the reservation houses have such thin walls that sounds from the television become distorted and confused with real-life speech so that “‘I love you’ sounded like ‘Inertia’. ‘Please’ sounded like ‘sacrifice’” (191). Alexie consistently gives reservation existence this hazy, discordant yet oppressive quality where communication is fragmented and alcoholism and desperation are parts of daily life. In his fiction, characters desire to leave, but anywhere outside the reservation is hostile and lacks native spirituality. However, for both writers there remains an unexpected sense of pride in these ostracised ‘failed’ settings as soon as the game is played. In their works the assertion is implied that a ‘failed’ space is also an authentic arena. It is invariably during reservation or street games where players

have their most momentous and life-defining epiphanies leaping upwards towards the hoop. Street basketball in these dangerous and strange excluded zones is the embodiment of legitimacy, both a place to escape and from which to take pride.

While I feel this idea of authenticity is valid in Wideman's and Alexie's work, it should be acknowledged that this label has not be applied loosely, or without further context. There is a risk in negatively classifying certain locales such as is the case in minority settings. When an environment assigned to an ethnic minority is given corroboration as an authentic space because of its consigned association with disadvantage and failure, there runs the risk of perpetuating a discourse of further ghettoization and segregation. My reading of redemptive failure runs counter to this idea by refusing to define failure solely as disparaging, but instead regenerative. These spaces reflect more the tilted scales of American society than an indictment of the individual residents. The reservation and street courts represent the lived experiences of the people the authors depict and gives dignity to their endeavours to find respite particularly in spiritual practices, art forms, and in street hoop itself.³⁵

In much the same way that Wideman and Alexie redefine the space where the game is enjoyed, a larger agenda is being enacted in the form of their similar revisionist exercise to counter traditional accounts of history and time. Both point to how the game represents a non-linear tradition of understanding experience. A much more positive, if radical, form of reclaiming is shown in these authors' exploration of temporality. Firstly, Alexie and Wideman both demand a reappraisal of the dominant white account of history. For example, in Alexie's story 'What Ever Happened to Frank

³⁵ Shelly Eversley's *The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth Century African American Literature* (2004) engages with this issue dealing in depth with African American pathology in the Black Arts Movement through the concept of authenticity.

Snake Church' in *Ten Little Indians*, Frank's mother tells him, "whenever any teacher tells you that Columbus discovered America, I want you to run up to him or her, jump on his or her back, and scream, 'I discovered you!'" (219). This comic anecdote brings to mind Wideman's fictional academic conference in which the white establishment claims the jump shot as its own because there are no dissenting voices to dispute their assertions. Both authors identify the need for resistance to the pervasive trend of cultural appropriation. In many cases basketball is used as the focus of this heretical process. In another story Alexie playfully suggest that basketball was invented by Native American tribes long before James Naismith conceived of the game. My introduction to the history of basketball suggests there may be more truth to this counter-history than Alexie may be aware. The implication in the story is that the game is so integral to community identity it seems inconceivable it has not always been played. Alexie's interpretation of basketball stresses a depiction incorporating the mystical possibilities of the game unrestricted by a traditional rationalist viewpoint so through storytelling the ball may turn into flames as it arcs towards the basket, or a player will fly the length of the court to slam-dunk the ball.

Each writer evokes alternative ideas to linear time through basketball. Wideman writes of "Great Time" where the present, past and future are not distinct absolutes but converge in a holistic sense of reimagining. Wideman defines his concept in more detail later in the work: "Great Time is the ancestral time [...] It's like an ocean. So you pass through it, you are not going in one direction, you are floating" (267). "Great Time" is a link to pre-modern experience; it exists beyond a time-based conception; it is enveloping and never-ending. This version of time is freeing because

it refuses to prioritise the linear. The reason that this idea retains such an importance place in black culture is because it allows ownership over experience to be reclaimed:

It's very logical in African American culture, in which people have very little control over things like progress and economic, material accumulation, that a concept like Great Time would be crucially important, because it provides a mirror, a place where you can see where you are and what you are doing in your own terms (268).

On the basketball court "Great Time" is felt in tandem with the freedom of the game:

"Playing ball, you submit for a time to certain narrow arbitrary rules, certain circumscribed choices. But once in, there's no script, no narrative line you must follow" (12). This vision also explains why playground hoop, without the time restrictions of the formal game, retains such relevance to black culture. "Great Time" is also reflected in the way Wideman believes hoop can allow African Americans to look at themselves, without outside judgement, and redefine their identity beyond the image of the stigmatised Other. Wideman speaks of white corporate America's domination and the exploitation of basketball to perpetuate a harmful discourse that undermines black identity. One version of the story is continually retold repressing one culture and reinforcing the ascendancy of those in power.

Similarly, Alexie counters the prescriptive notion of Western time, instead valuing a traditional Native American viewpoint which has much crossover with Wideman's paradigm. In a number of stories in *The Longer Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* Alexie uses the wristwatch as a symbol of an established version of Western thought on experience. In the story 'A Drug Called Tradition' Alexie writes: "And don't wear a watch. Hell Indians never need to wear a watch [...] See it is always now. That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it wrapped up in the now" (22). Much like sections in Wideman's work, the basketball game is the clearest venue to channel

this sense of ancestral culture and the circularity of time as opposed to orthodox sequentiality. Alexie is concerned with an oratory native tradition where the past lives and is as relevant as the present or future because the stories being told incorporates all three. This is continually depicted by the storytelling practices that feature generations of ballplayers. For both authors, linear temporality is a convenient hegemonic notion to consign the past to the pages of history textbooks thereby rescinding the guilt of colonization, slavery and genocide. Wideman's and Alexie's basketball works seek a postcolonial and revisionary form of narratology to break with a confining failure to assess experience beyond standardised Western thought.

Although Wideman and Alexie are both pointing to a cultural past, their inversion of time encompasses a decidedly postmodern aesthetic. The freedom of hoop reflects the disintegration of 'rules' of genre, structure and language that postmodern writing unifies. In *Philadelphia Fire*, Wideman describes a pickup game and transitions into second person point of view: "Pushing past the point of breaking but you don't break...Doing your thing and nothing can touch you...You forget everything you know and play. The wall you can't move, that stops you and makes you cry when you beat your head against it, is suddenly full of holes." (30-31). Restrictions are broken and what was once a barrier is found to offer alternative points of view. The game represents a sense of liberation as a description of hoop once more becomes a metaphor for the creative outlet of writing.

Baseball: A Cultural and Narrative History

Sing to me, Muse, of that endlessly cunning man
 who was blown off course to the ends of the earth, in the years
 after he plundered Troy. He passed through the cities
 of many people and learned how they thought, and he suffered
 many bitter hardships upon the high seas
 as he tried to save his own life and bring his companions
 back to their home. But however bravely he struggled,
 he could not rescue them, fools that they were – their own
 recklessness brought disaster upon them all ³⁶

Homer, *The Odyssey*.

But of all team sport, baseball, with its graceful intermittences of action, its immense and tranquil field sparsely settled with poised men in white, its dispassionate mathematics, seems to me best suited to accommodate, and be ornamented by, a loner. It is an essentially lonely game. ³⁷

John Updike, *Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu*.

Baseball caught the American imagination in part due to the imposing of a mythology surrounding its creation. According to its legend the rules and gameplay of baseball were conceived by Abner Doubleday in 1839. Doubleday's actual role in the creation of baseball is a matter of some dispute. What is well documented is that Doubleday was a Union officer who fought during the American Civil War and gained notoriety for his minor role in the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 (Barthel, 169). Baseball's inception legend contends that Doubleday invented the sport and organised the first game in a cow pasture in Cooperstown, New York. However, historians have cast

³⁶ The *Odyssey* is a quest, but fundamentally concerned with the hero's homeward journey (1-9).

³⁷ Updike pays loving tribute to Ted Williams on his final game for the Boston Red Sox, published in *The New Yorker*, 22 Oct. 1960.

considerable doubt on the validity of the story as the true roots of baseball's beginnings. Between 1830 and 1850 Americans played a range of bat and ball games (Tygiel, 2000, 5). Different cities and regions enjoyed versions of these activities, but there was no uniformity to their rules or make-up. In Philadelphia and New England teams played 'townball' which was a bat and ball game involving fifteen players on each team (5). Sometime in the 1840s bat and ball games were unified when the term 'baseball' came into popular parlance. In 1903 Henry Chadwick was one of many who questioned the game's origins and produced an article claiming that baseball derived from the British game of rounders which, he alleged, had simply been adapted to create America's national sport (Rader, 93). The National League were so concerned with these accusations that at the beginning of the century they organised a committee headed by Abraham Mills who was entrusted with the task of tracing baseball's American foundations (93).

Shortly after its establishment the Commission was approached by a mining engineer named Abner Graves who claimed to have witnessed Doubleday's first game. On the basis of Graves' sketchily remembered childhood account the group concluded that Doubleday was indeed the inventor of baseball (Vecsey, 43-44). According to his recollections Graves, who would have been five and Doubleday twenty at the time, witnessed the first game in a muddy field between a group of soldiers. Graves provided no additional evidence other than his memory of the event and the Commission supplied no further proof of baseball's creation thereby establishing the myth, but failing to add historical weight to its validity. Although it was not widely publicised, Graves ended his life in 1924 in an asylum for the criminally insane after he shot his wife during a dispute over the sale of their home (44). Historical detail is

conspicuous by its absence in the official story of baseball's inception. Undermining the Doubleday account further is the fact that he made no reference whatsoever to baseball in his diary entries of his youth (Vecsey, 43). The unsubstantiated story of baseball's birth took another turn when, in 1935, a relative of Graves found a shabby ball in a farmhouse in Fly Creek, just outside Cooperstown. It was claimed that the ball was the original one used in 1839. Albert Spalding, who had been involved with the Mills Commission, took ownership of the ball, using it as further proof of the Doubleday creation story and in 1939 the Major League commemorated what it asserted was the centenary of baseball's first game (Rader, 94). The lost ball took pride of place in the lavish Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown that became a shrine to baseball as America's national pastime and the legend of Doubleday's creation.

Baseball seems woven into the very fabric of American consciousness and continually eulogised as a romantic reminder of the purest values of the nation's youth. The French theorist Jacques Barzun, in *God's Country and Mine: A Declaration of Love Spiced with a Few Harsh Words* (1954), famously claims: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game and do it by watching first some high-school or small-town teams" (159). This often quoted statement emphasises the particularly self-mythologising insistence of its own legend that has always been a key facet in baseball's particular form of self-aggrandising promotion. Barzun's reflection stresses the rural image of baseball which is connected to notions of American innocence and conjures a sense of the sport's wholesome mythology. The rhetoric of baseball, heavily mediated by the Major League, presents the game as a sport of tradition, interlaced with memory. Baseball

retains an almost sacred place in the American psyche, where the nostalgic imagery of an empty high school baseball diamond in early spring mist, or even of a father and son simply throwing a baseball back and forth in a twilight yard have become iconic of small-town American values.

Baseball is depicted as a symbol of both national and local pride as well as a metaphor for the evoked purity of the country and its auspicious beginnings. Central to the mythology of the sport is its retained image as a pastoral pastime with its popularity spreading before the Civil War and during widespread industrialisation, which has always given the game a contrast to urban growth (Tygiel, 2000, 6). The fertile green of the outfield extending as far as the boundary wall is thought of as a symbol of nature and virtue as a point of contrast to the expanding city landscapes where it was played. As Leo Marx theorises in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), the American imagination has long been drawn to a rural conception as a counterpoint to urban development and technological advancement. Fundamentally, baseball is symbolic of the poetic fantasy of bucolic American tradition.

As well as its countryside association, throughout its history baseball has been linked with a means of escape, becoming a refuge from whatever crisis the country was suffering. So important was baseball to national feeling that in 1942 President Roosevelt sent a letter to the Commissioner of the Major League to encourage continued competition during World War Two. What came to be known as the “Green Light Letter” allowed baseball to continue despite the worsening conflict and greater American involvement in Europe and the Pacific (Briley, 229). Even with the loss of star players such as Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams to military service, baseball games

were played throughout the war years. Roosevelt felt the sport unified the nation both galvanising the country in a time of crisis and providing a sense of normality and distraction while the battle was fought (Briley, 229).

In the late nineteenth century, even before the Baseball Museum's creation, the game had become a sport with which the American public could easily identify and foster nationalistic sentiment. Baseball was able to both harness and strengthen American values associated with democracy, competitiveness and fair play which the sport was said to inherently express (Bairner, 97). As with the later evolution of basketball, the baseball narrative has maintained an assertion that the game brought the country together as immigrants adopted the sport in the city quarters where they settled.

Writers and historians of social history have suggested various reasons why baseball became so instantly cherished as a symbol of American nationhood. Michael Oriard argues the case for baseball's delicate balance between individualism and cooperation aligning it with the ideals of American democracy (1993, 35). Westbrook insinuates that its mythic symbolism has created a folk heritage in the United States in the absence of an extended history. In *The Summer Game* (1972), Roger Angell suggests that the sport's association with the seasons is a vital part of its deep charm connecting it to America's agricultural past. The league competition begins in the spring and is played throughout the summer drawing to a close in the fall, but carrying with it the promise of rebirth and a cycle of optimism. Angell reflects on the start of the baseball season: "The view from my city window still yields only frozen tundras of trash, but now spring is guaranteed and one of my favourite urban flowers, the

baseball box score, will burgeon and flourish through the warm, languid, information-packed weeks and months just ahead” (3).

As the title of Angell’s work references, baseball is popularly known as ‘the summer game’. The course of the season is played through the sun-drenched months before the autumn chill sets in. After the winter gloom, baseball resumes, played in towns and cities across the country. However, for all its evocation of light, baseball retains an essential darkness. It is the game’s strange melancholy character, the loneliness that Updike recognises in the tranquil setting, that bestows the poignancy of baseball’s poetic charm and has inspired a plethora of American literary works. One of the most eloquent chroniclers of baseball’s aesthetic, A. Bartlett Giamatti, in his lyrical essay “The Green Fields of the Mind” (1989) claims in reverence: “It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart” (7). Baseball’s capacity for heartbreak is precisely its most alluring appeal. The sport’s slow rhythms and gradual narrative played out over a timeless space inspire a type of inward reflection. Baseball is one of the only team sports played without any time restrictions. Writers who depict the game cannot help but be drawn to its lazy sadness, bittersweet sentiment and themes of aching nostalgia. Accordingly, the unifying bond between the best baseball writing is its focus on disillusionment, tragedy, and ultimately failure.

In no other game is the threat of failure so omnipresent or given such weight. Admittedly, this is partly true of all sports, each has victors and losers, but few attribute such resonance to defeat as America’s national game. The baseball narrative reflects this essential quality and leads always towards a search for redemption. Its central characters are either haunted by defeat, trying to regain an aspect of their youth or, like Roy Hobbs in Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* (1952), appear

inextricably condemned to their despondent destiny. Despite his successful comeback, Hobbs is doomed: “this was the shame in his life, that his fate, somehow, had always been the same (on a train going nowhere)—defeat in sight of his goal” (135). In this short passage we see too the lyricism that baseball literature arouses in its recurring portrayal of disillusionment and loss.

Standing at home plate, when the batter swings at the pitcher’s fastball he will fail far more often than he will succeed.³⁸ What is more, there is a sense that this failure or impending tragedy in a baseball game hovers over the participants like the sword of Damocles. Roger Angell makes this point in his essay “The Interior Stadium”:

It all looks easy, slow, and, above all, safe. Yet we know better, for what is certain in baseball is that someone, perhaps several people, will fail. They will be searched out, caught in the open, and defeated, and there will be no confusion about it or sharing of the blame (295).

In baseball literature, the wide-open expanse of the field is an amphitheatre of tragedy before an expectant crowd. These references to classical mythology (Damocles, tragedies and the amphitheatre) are not coincidental; to write about baseball is to evoke mythology.

In 1845 in Hoboken, New Jersey, the first game of organised baseball is said to have taken place between two New York teams. While the truth of Abner Doubleday inventing the sport has been widely disproved, this first game holds historical legitimacy. Baseball historians have documented the inaugural game between the Knickerbockers and the New York Baseball Club as the official birth of the national sport (Thorn, 17). In a portentous moment of chance, the game was played on an area

³⁸ In professional baseball, a player with a batting average of .300 or above over a season is considered to be at a consistent level of excellence. However, this means they are hitting just over one in every four balls pitched.

called the Elysian Fields, and so it seems that baseball, mythology and literature converged from the very inception of the organised game. In classical Greek mythology the Elysian Fields are the realm of immortals where heroes chosen by the gods live and play as they delight in unbridled games and a life of peace. As the first ball was pitched and the first bat was swung in New Jersey in the fledgling sport, the mythic associations in baseball were cast and the game would be continually associated with paradise-like sanctuary.

Deanne Westbrook has written convincingly on the intersection between myth and baseball drawing widely from critical myth theory and placing this in context of canonical baseball literature of the twentieth century. While her argument on myth is valid, it fails to give a clear reason behind why this convergence has become almost a prerequisite to any baseball narrative. To explain the rationale for the abundance of references to mythology in baseball I would suggest that the mythic is embedded in baseball for several reasons. The most obvious explanation is that such symbolism was rooted in the inaugural game. The Elysian Fields of its origins shaped decidedly mythic foundations that captured American writers' imaginations. Secondly, the first great baseball novel is generally regarded to be Malamud's *The Natural* which draws from the mythology of the story of the fisher king and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Prior to Malamud's work, baseball was seen only as a subject of juvenile fiction with, as Timothy Morris points out, very little literary merit attributed to its depictions (153). In *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction*, Morris makes the case for this juvenile fiction playing an important part in the development of the sport's literary tradition. Subsequent writers have continued in Malamud's literary footsteps seeing the same analogies between the national pastime and archetypal

mythic narratives. Most powerfully, baseball's own myth of creation, with the story of Doubleday in the cow pasture, aligns it to these other stories meaning that baseball has relied on a mythic heritage to promote itself and entrench the game as a uniquely American invention. For a game that has been so dependent on the culturally infiltrating effect of folklore, to renounce the mythic would risk diminishing its potency.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem "Baseball Canto" (1974) is a prime example of the mythopoeic in baseball writing. Although the poem is playful and radical in one sense, making references to the game's promotion of the civil rights struggles, it still insists on mythic and classical similes. As the batter strikes the ball:

he clouts the first one into the sun
and takes off,
like a footrunner from Thebes.
The ball is lost in the sun
and maidens wail after him. (28-32)

In Greek legend during the Peloponnesian War the besieged city of Thebes sent a runner requesting help to their allies in Athens. In Ferlinghetti's poem the wailing maidens further exaggerate the tone of epic heroism of the baseball batter making the run towards home plate.

Baseball has become the most literary game for American writers. It boasts many times over the number of works of football, basketball or even boxing novels or poetry. Walt Whitman, great chronicler of American democracy and ideals, eulogises on the sport that he believed could affirm national character: "I see great things in baseball," he writes: "It's our game - the American game. It will take our people out-of-doors, fill them with oxygen, gives them a larger physical stoicism. Tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set, repair these losses, and be a blessing to us"

(McGimpsey, 8). Whitman's grandiose allegiance to baseball is two-fold: an 'original' game that can transpose ideas of national identity and an authentic therapy for the sedentary malaise of a young post-industrial nation with early damage and losses to be healed. Mark Twain would echo Whitman's sentiments in celebrating the game. He claims: "Baseball is the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century" (Zoss and Bowman, 67).

These quotations from two of the great canonical American writers are ubiquitous, to be found in almost any book on the subject of American sport. They align baseball to the literary sphere and the game as a symbol of America. However, their rather brash optimism does reveal a sense of unease beneath their confident veneer. It is strange that a game with such a languorous flow corresponds to ideas of dynamic momentum to which Twain compares it. When Twain and Whitman made these remarks baseball may have had obvious parallels with progressive ideas in keeping with a rapidly developing society that was "raging, tearing" and "booming" towards American hegemony. Yet, read now, baseball is a game frozen in the past where the rules, rhythms and even the uniforms of the players have remained unaltered since the nineteenth century. An expression of "drive and push and rush", as Twain claimed, has failed to move beyond its early roots as the game's residing narrative has steadfastly held onto its pastoral legacy. It is this nostalgia and sentimentality that has created a branch of fiction unlike other sports writing so entrenched is it within ideals of bucolic wonder and earnest gazing into a dream of America's golden-hued past.

In contrast to other sports genre writing, there is a clear canonical collection of baseball literature that has been commemorated for its literary scope. Notable sports literature critics such as Messenger, Westbrook and Morris unanimously refer to a collection of works as the definitive list of literary baseball novels: Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, Mark Harris' *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1956), Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968), Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973), W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982), and Eric Rolfe's *The Celebrant* (1983). I would add to this list Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), which has only been omitted from these critics' attention due to its more recent publication date. DeLillo's *Underworld* is less a conventional baseball novel, the on-field action gets very little coverage, it is more a novel with a baseball spinning outwards at its centre. However, I argue that the mythology and symbolism of the sport does have a vital role in an understanding of the text's complexity and does both follow and consciously subvert baseball fiction's literary tradition. I focus on DeLillo's novel and compare it to Coover's similarly unconventional baseball piece. I consider these two works to be the most ambitious and richly nuanced works of the genre combining ideas of failure with creativity and fabrication. Coover's novel finds much scope in the myth and romance of the sport as well as the nature of its gameplay as a metaphor for the inventiveness of writing.

However, prior to all these twentieth century works came a poem now enshrined in American folklore. It may seem surprising that the most renowned baseball poem, and one of the most famous and cherished works of American literature is a story of fallibility, hubris and ultimately failure. Yet, I will explore how such themes of loss and defeat are carried throughout postmodern writing on

baseball. Ernest Lawrence Thayer wrote “Casey at the Bat” in 1888. The poem depicts a baseball game in which Casey, the larger than life heroic figure, chooses to pass up the first two pitches he receives not even swinging his bat. Building the dramatic tension of the day, Casey arrogantly assumes he is destined to strike the winning homerun on the last ball only for his overconfidence to cost his team the game. I quote here from the last two stanzas of the poem:

The sneer is gone from Casey’s lip, his teeth clenched in hate,
 He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate;
 And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
 And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey’s blow.
 Oh somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright,
 The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light;
 And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children
 shout,
 But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out (46-54)

The story told in the poem is not about the star player winning the game at the death, but about the local team being defeated through the arrogance and clay feet of its hero. I will go on to explore the legacy of baseball poetry particularly in works that portray the game’s vindictive quality and the centrality of failure and loneliness, as well as the painful anxieties of childhood in association with the game. Beginning with Thayer’s classic work, American writers have been drawn to baseball’s concern with its own failure.

As with “Casey at the Bat”, the point of view in baseball poetry is predominantly from the stands regarding the game at a distance and finding meaning in a panoramic overview of the action and the audience. The American modernist poet William Carlos Williams penned “At the Ball Game” in 1923. In his poem the crowd are enthralled not by the skill of the ballplayers, but “by a spirit of uselessness” (3). Williams’s phrase is a contrast to a Whitmanian euphoric “snap, go, fling” description

of baseball's essential values particularly as a link to the progressive and dynamic ideals of American identity. Williams regards the game's association with mass consumption as a type of opiate for the masses by dulling their senses in their unbroken following of merely a game. The crowd are transfixed by a spectacle that, for Williams, distracts them from the possibility of poetic understanding or meaningful reflection. They are:

cheering, the crowd is laughing
in detail
permanently, seriously
without thought (26-29).

Williams does not pay any attention or recognise the tranquillity of the game or the grace of the team working in perfect cooperation. Instead, the intricacies of the sport are purely a recording of "detail" (9). Williams deems that America's obsession with baseball is emblematic of society's non-intellectual impulses. His poem suggests that a pastime such as watching baseball is a way of distancing oneself from the realities of life to the detriment of an intellectually engaged mind.

It should be noted that Williams' poem came before baseball's literary scope had fully taken hold in the American national consciousness. Although in the nineteenth century Whitman and Twain praised the progressiveness of the sport as a symbol of American culture, they did not directly write about the game in their work. Baseball only began to find its feet, in terms of literary expression, in the mid twentieth century. Williams' criticism of the game through its failure to engage its audience intellectually would be challenged as its abiding symbolism took root. Renowned writers such as Robert Frost and Marianne Moore began to draw the parallels between the sport and the endeavours of the poetic and creative mind.

“Poets are like baseball pitchers” said Frost. “Both have their moments. The intervals are the tough things” (Light, 736). While in “Baseball and Writing”, published in *The New Yorker* in 1961, Moore writes:

Fanaticism? No. Writing is exciting
and baseball is like writing.
You can never tell with either
How it will go
Or what you will do (1-4).

Thanks to the acclaim for such significant literary figures, baseball poetry became more prevalent and indebted to the game’s lyrical identity.

One of the sport’s most endearing features is its unchanging nature. Baseball has altered very little in its one hundred and seventy five year history. It is a game of gentle rhythms, waiting and reflection. Watching a game it is not difficult to be lulled into baseball’s meditative state as the pitcher stands with the ball pressed to his glove waiting for the batter to come to base. Even its moniker of national pastime implies a sentimental return to bygone era of “time past”. Baseball is a game of introspection and so often depicted in connection to images of lost childhood. It seems remarkably apt that despite its unreliability, the myth of its origins is derived from Abner Graves’ boyhood memory.

The language of sports can be remarkably revealing when exploring the depth of symbolism in American games and with which sports fiction must either integrate or artistically bend its material. I have written about the military terminologies used in the tactical vocabulary of football and the allegory of escape and freedom in the language of basketball. I come now to an aspect of baseball’s character that has proved most alluring in the implication of the term ‘homerun’. Giamatti recognises that if “baseball is a narrative, an epic of exile and return, a vast, communal poem

about separation, loss and the hope for reunion - if baseball is a romance epic [...] It is the romance epic of homecoming America sings to itself" (1998, 104). Baseball fiction continually incorporates these facets of separation and homecoming with classical imagery. For American writers, the game's narrative is a lullaby sung to oneself to soothe and reengage childhood memories as well as romantic notions of the past.

In each game batters attempt to strike the ball then, if successful, embark on a cyclical journey back towards home plate thereby returning to where they first started. The batter's passage is full of peril as, during their own or at any subsequent play, they could be tagged out or if their teams fails to advance them, or they will run out of opportunities to reach their goal. As Giamatti reflects, the English word 'home' is virtually impossible to translate into any other language so richly is it associated with idealised memory, as well as themes of belonging and longing, security and freedom (91-92). Home is where one grows up and it is the place of childhood. Home is where one learns the lessons of life, so a homerun is a desperate (hence run) attempt to trace one's roots to a source of protective primacy. If, as I suggested at the beginning of the thesis, all stories are derived from a series of basic archetypes, then the baseball narrative is most indebted to the quest epic where protagonists take an Odyssean journey through a route to return to their Ithaca/homeland. However, in this archetypal story the voyager returns but must re-evaluate the home they find. In many cases the hero returns from his journey but is unrecognisable or unwelcome. For example, Odysseus disguises himself as a wandering beggar when he reaches Ithaca. In the baseball narrative the protagonist's return home can be comparably difficult. The baseball hero, in the narrative tradition, arrives to find the home he left is not the same as the one to which he returns. In the baseball narrative home should

be connected to a point of restoration of lost things. Yet, in the act of the journey the psyche of the voyager has been irreconcilably altered meaning the concept of home, to which he clung, does not adhere to the actuality he rediscovers. Home is only found in a memory as a place of origins and cannot be realised beyond abstraction making the physical act of leaving and returning a symbolic reference alone. When the protagonist in baseball fiction has left or even outgrown their home, they will be unable to rediscover its protection. Therefore, home is a place of separation; while coming back is about failed reunion and only a partial act of re-joining.

In a rather obscure novel, and therefore one I have not included within the canonical list of baseball fiction, Douglas Wallop has written a work that fits perfectly with the mythic mid-century baseball narrative. In *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* (1954), Wallop demonstrates the archetypal narrative arc of the sport's plot. Joe Boyd is a Faustian protagonist; he is a middle-aged salesman who follows his hapless favourite team, the fictional Washington Senators, through a series of disastrous and losing seasons. Unexpectedly, he is offered a proposition by a mysterious man named Applegate (his name is suggestive of the apple offered to Eve). Boyd is given the opportunity to become a baseball star and, agreeing to the deal with Applegate, becomes transformed into 21-year-old Joe Hardy. Like Odysseus, when Boyd returns home he is unrecognised. In an Oedipal subplot the young player is taken in by Boyd's wife meaning he becomes both son and husband (Westbrook, 70). Hardy lives in his former home and sees it through fresh eyes. Boyd fulfil his fantasy and is the star of the team leading his beloved Senators to glory. At the novel's conclusion, Joe is able to return to his own body having gained appreciation for his wife and an understanding of his previous life. Boyd follows in the mythic legacy of the story of

Odysseus. In coming home he is repudiating his opportunity for eternal youth and instead accepting life, longing and death. In keeping with Odysseus, Boyd has gone through a journey of self-discovery and maturity.

In Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, Dr Archibald "Moonlight" Graham must make a similar choice. In this baseball fantasy novel that inspired the film *Field of Dreams* (1989), Ray Kinsella is the protagonist who is commanded by an otherworldly voice in his cornfield to build a ballpark. To the bemusement of the local community and his wife's brother, Kinsella obeys the mystical words and constructs the baseball field. Ghosts of baseball players appear on the field and play, but are only visible to Kinsella and his family. The baseball field is depicted as both a "walled garden of eternal youth" (Westbrook, 102) and a borderland of potential resurrection. The temporal and spatial dimensions of the field allow acts of fantastical transition. When 'Moonlight' Graham steps on to the grass of the mystical field he is returned to his youthful self. During a later game Kinsella's daughter falls from the bleachers injuring herself and Graham must decide whether to step off the field to help the young girl. Graham knows that if he leaves the game and strides over the white lines, marking the boundary of the field, he will not be able to return to the game or to his younger self. Graham, like Boyd, makes the moral choice and forsakes the possibility of eternal youth to save Kinsella's daughter and return to his old life.

As observed earlier, there is no precise synonym for home. However, in the context of the two novels I have described, it could be feasibly be exchanged with the word 'childhood'. As with the strong desire to return to an idealised vision of home, baseball writers depict a yearning to recapture their romanticised youths as with Boyd and Graham. However, beyond these fantastical narratives the desire to return to

youth is never more than a dream. The tension of this symbolism lies in the fact that both a conception of home and youth are impossible to regain because both fade with time and are ultimately irretrievable. Baseball is one of the only games where a player's job is to return to where they started. In other sports, teams are required to seize enemy territory or reach the opposition's goal. Yet baseball demands a cyclical movement and completion of a circle in which beginnings and ends are unified.

As each cycle is completed with homeruns scored, or as players strike out, a team's progress is meticulously recorded. The complexity of baseball's statistics and the scope for games to be represented in numbers initially allowed games to be reported in newspapers at the very time when the printing press and mass media gained momentum and the reporting of games could be distributed on a national level. The statistical joy of games represented in numbers has retained a large part of the game's appeal emphasised by the popularity of sabermetrics, which is the complex statistical analysis of baseball data, and the recent trend of fantasy leagues played by fans. Looking later at Coover's novel, I explore how his protagonist is fixated by his version of order in a self-enclosed baseball world. The use of a table-top baseball game is part of an American literary fascination with a fantasy offshoot of the national pastime. It is likely that Coover was aware that Jack Kerouac created a solitary baseball game as a teenager that he continued to play into adulthood and there is even evidence that he was playing the game a year or two before his death in 1969 (Hayes, xviii). Similarly, to Coover's protagonist, Kerouac made fictitious teams and players complete with biographies and painstakingly recorded details of each game (Hayes, xviii). As a teenager, Kerouac even wrote homemade newsletters about his baseball fantasy world. As with Coover's protagonist, Henry Waugh, Kerouac kept his

game a secret particularly from the Beat writers with whom he would go on to associate, no doubt fearful they would find his hobby childish or strange. Growing up in Lowell, when Kerouac was a child he played an earlier version of the game striking a marble with a nail and recording where it landed. Kerouac's invention preceded a series of commercially available baseball board games such as APBA and Strat-O-Matic. Before Paul Auster was a celebrated novelist he invented a card game that he attempted to market called "Action Baseball" (Brown, 170).

The games developed by Auster, Kerouac, as well as the make-believe one in Coover's novel, point to baseball's connection to childlike invention and a deep desire to return to the joy and creativity of play. Even in novels where baseball is not the central concern, the symbolism of the sport's innocence is a powerful tool. In J.D. Salinger's classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Holden Caulfield's most treasured item is his deceased younger brother Allie's baseball glove. Allie writes poems on the glove so he will not get bored whilst fielding. For Holden, the glove becomes a symbol of his lost brother and also the majesty of youth as well as a counterpoint to the adult world of corruption and what he labels "phoniness". The imagery of the catcher's mitt returns in Holden's dream that he confides to his younger sister, Phoebe, of being the catcher in the rye where he must protect crowds of playing children from falling off the precipice of their innocence.

Whilst home and childhood seem like the comforting realms of family and safety, their connotations stretch further than this perfect image. Home is both the place of origin and a final mystical destination. Home and childhood are evocative of sanctuary and protection, yet to remain locked to either can establish a sense of confinement. If an adult fails to grow beyond the allure of home or childhood they are

infantilised and their maturity risks becoming stunted. To live within the baseball narrative is to refuse the fundamental obligations and commitments of adulthood which, however daunting, must be met. What the spectator feels, and the sense that athletes themselves experience, is a type of prolonged innocence in the simple enjoyment of the game. In analysing many sports stars' autobiographies, in *Sporting Lives* (2008), James Pipkin recognises a commonality in the theme of the athlete portrayed as an eternal child. The athlete's commitment to the game is to keep alive the essential qualities of a child at play (23). For the athlete, the play and nostalgic reverie associated with childhood, that fans crave so much, is never lost as the athlete continues to live out their childhood fantasies through their professional lives. The sports star exists outside normal obligations meaning that America's fascination with sportsmen resides in a recognition that the athlete is a Peter Pan figure. It is therefore appropriate that the nation's most iconic sports star was nicknamed "Babe" and has retained a special place in American collective memory and folklore.

In his musings on baseball, Paul Auster highlights how the fantasy of playing the game is never diminished even when the ambition to play baseball professionally is fulfilled. In *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Auster reflects:

To play the game as a child is simultaneously to imagine playing it as an adult, and the power of this fantasy is present in even the most casual pick-up game [...] for those who grow up to be professionals, there is an awareness that they are living out their childhood dreams – in effect, being paid to remain children (124).

In Auster's theory, childhood is stalled; it is preserved and in effect, a shadow of pure innocence remains in the sport and all those who play and watch it. However, while juvenile play allows the athlete to express themselves, its contrary inhibiting effects can be just as powerful. There is a paradox at the centre of the child/athlete

intersection as the artificial sanctuary of sports leads to a process of infantilism for the athlete (Pipkin, 33). If the 'sportsworld' is a nostalgic connection to youth, it is also a symbolic detention that impedes development and the potential for emotional growth. The walls of the baseball field serve as a metaphor for the edenic purity of the sport's arena, both containing the sportsman and fans in safety, and shielding a dangerous world beyond the lush grass and fantasy of ritual and performance (Westbrook, 77-78). However, there are also two inhabiting factors connected to this idea. Firstly, the walls that protect can also prove restrictive. Secondly, there is an implied sense of transience: just as childhood cannot exist forever, nor can this nostalgic connection to youth be permanent.

Loss is an essential element to this type of nostalgia, as a celebration of the past is just as much an acceptance of something that has disappeared. As a eulogy to his great friend Ring Lardner, F. Scott Fitzgerald writes:

During those years, when most men of promise achieve an adult education, if only in the school of war, Ring moved in the company of a few dozen illiterates playing a boy's game. A boy's game, with no more possibilities in it than a boy could master, a game bounded by walls which kept out novelty or danger, change or adventure [...] However deeply Ring might cut into it, his cake had the diameter of Frank Chance's diamond (2006, 134).

Frank Chance was a first baseman for the famous Chicago Cubs team of 1906 to 1910 and later played for the New York Yankees. Fitzgerald may have chosen Chance as a popular player of the era or perhaps the name itself has suggestive symbolism implying the taking of risk. Fitzgerald's eulogy presents the baseball field as a sanctuary of impeded and limited scale aligning it negatively with the fantasies of childhood and a worldview that failed to extend beyond the outfield wall that marks the perimeter of the game. There is more than an implication that his friend has

wasted himself in his devotion to *merely* a sport that boys should play and then grow beyond and leave behind. Yet Lardner never fell out of love with the game and therefore, in Fitzgerald's eyes, he failed to flourish creatively and to extend his literary career beyond his beloved juvenile baseball fables. In Fitzgerald's disparaging words, Lardner's association with baseball allowed him to extricate himself from "danger" or "adventure" instead of seeking, what Fitzgerald would have believed to be, stories of greater depth or darker truths such as his own. Lardner chose instead a cathartic and unchanging fantasy world of twilit fields and sun-soaked afternoons, where boys could play and, at least in these stories, live forever beyond suffering or change. Here is the childish allure of the baseball diamond: it has never changed and adulation towards its nostalgic heritage is felt in reverence to a perfect illusion of hypnotic play and childhood fantasy.

Baseball poetry has taken up this focus on the sport as a childhood game while incorporating the essential metaphor of loneliness and the small commonplace agonies of youth. When the focus of baseball poetry shifts perspective from that of the onlooker to the amateur participant, and the child in particular, there is a suggestion that baseball's nostalgic image of childhood joy is corrupt. Denis Johnson and John Updike move away from a work such as Williams' "At the Ball Game" towards an introspective but no less threatening depiction of failure in their poetry. In these works, there is a transition from the jeering stands and on to the field itself with poems that thrust the apprehensive participant into a bright and unforgiving spotlight of the game. Updike's poem put the reader in the position of anxious ballplayer, standing in the outfield, terrified of making the mistake that will cost their team the game. In these works the link between baseball and childhood is not one of nostalgic

contemplation, as depicted in much mainstream baseball poetry, but a recollection of fear, doubt and above all failing. I come to two poems that take inspiration from a feeling of mortifying dread.

In his poem "Baseball" (2009), Updike reflects on the childhood fear of failure first felt in little league games with parents watching on and an exaggerated sense of importance given to each public detail. The poem begins with an observation from the side-lines as for those who watch, the game appears slow, idyllic, and even simple. Yet Updike's poem points to the failure at the heart of America's favourite sport. In the first stanza, the reader is alerted to a sense of foreboding with the image of the distant ball like an ominous "dark star" (10) as it hangs in the sky above the outfield. As the young fielder stands waiting to catch the ball, the attention of the watching crowd is focused on whether the boy will make the catch or drop the ball when the "spotlight swivels your way" (26). An interesting aspect of the poem is the references to being petrified with the protagonist "scared" (22) of losing as much as being struck by the ball. If in the American imagination the game is interwoven with small town values, in Updike's poem the residing emotion is regret and fear. Updike stresses how baseball is unlike the other American sports; football and basketball, we are told, have aspects that can be practiced and honed, but baseball has an ephemeral mystery where only a select few "are chosen" (17) to have the attributes to succeed in a sport which appears deceptively "easy" (2). Updike conjures up the memory of a childhood game where the mothers watch from the stands. The poem is in the second person. The moment of tension is designed to be felt by the reader as "you" (3) feel the weight of expectancy and the sudden pressure as the ball falls "your way" (26).

The final stanza of Updike's work twists the image of baseball; under the surface of the game's pastoral memories of summer afternoons in childhood there resides a much darker realisation. The game invented in America and synonymous with democratic freedom is in fact emblematic of the startling "chance / of failure" (36-37). Sports give the artifice or promise of glory, but very few who play these games will succeed. Updike, as with Angel, emphasises the game's inevitable cruelty. The remarkable line "sly jazz" (36) of baseball implies that it is within the easy nature of the game where a sombre side of its character is concealed. Baseball stands in for the American Dream where the fallacy of abundant opportunity and the justness of capitalist ideals are exposed. What Updike refers to as "everybody's right" (37) is not to fulfil any conceivable ambition in their life, but to be free to fail. The saccharine allure of the national pastime deceptively obscures the minor tragedies the game elicits in the childhood memory of a dropped catch, a misguided run for base, or a strike out.

Denis Johnson's "A Poem about Baseball" (1995) echoes many of Updike's themes. Johnson, chronicler of the slacker, deadbeat and outcast and poet of the alienated rarely reflected on sport though this poem is particularly pertinent to an exploration of sporting failure. The narrator is remembering the fear induced during games of his youth that haunts him in adulthood:

for years the scenes bustled
through him as dreamed he was
Alive. Then he felt real, and slammed
awake in the wet sheets. (1-4)

The narrator rouses from a nightmare in a cold sweat imagining a time when he is a fielder and the ball hangs high in the air giving him, a seeming eternity, to wait with

the dread of missing the decisive catch. Similarly to Updike's "dark star" (10), the ball is described as a "dot against / the sky" (8-9) and the glove he uses seems oversized and awkward implying that this scene is from his remembered boyhood distorted by a lurid sense of inevitable defeat. There is a dizzying quality to the poem as the reader feels the protagonist nauseously tracking the ball across the sky: "should I move / forward, or back, or will the ball / come right to me?" (22-24). The tension and fear for a fielder running to catch the ball is that they will lose their bearings and crash into the wall as they run whilst gazing skyward.

As in much of Johnson's writing there is a hallucinatory quality as he imagines that his "hands melt into the walls" (20). At three points in the poem Johnson described "edge/s" (6, 9, 27) vanishing or melting implying that the foundations of a stable reality are being twisted or grotesquely altered. Johnson writes:

*the wall has no
surface, no edge, the wall,
fades into the air and the air is
my hand, and I am the wall.* (26-29, emphasis in original)

The baseball field with its perfect and pleasing geometry, regulations and boundaries are eroded so that the tangible becomes unsteady in a nightmarish vision. As with Updike's "Baseball", the poem depicts a moment when the narrator is watched and knows he will fail: "I know I will / miss, because I always miss when it / takes so long" (24-26). In the first lines there is an implication that this scene has haunted him; he is jolted into consciousness in, what seems to be, a hospital bed: "slammed / awake in the wet sheets screaming" (3-4). The narrator is powerless because the ball will remain in the air for so long that even if he does catch it the batter will have already completed his homerun. The last stanza concludes with a bleakly humorous idea that

if he does make the catch he will then have to go into bat, where he may “strike out” (42) and therefore the risk and constant fear of failure is inescapable, however he performs.

Updike and Johnson find the simple American game to hide a treacherous aspect of its character capable of inflicting childhood trauma that is suffered long into adulthood. It is through this lens of failure where protagonists of baseball fiction are unable to move on, instead clinging to a moment of loss, where the novels I will discuss share a unity of thought. *Underworld* and *The Universal Baseball Association* are also the most ambitious baseball novels to date, both finding great scope in the game to express their wider metafictional and postmodern concerns. Both authors write in the tradition of baseball narrative in the loosest possible sense as Coover and DeLillo are keen to subvert the strands of baseball symbolism. The actual game is portrayed at a distance whether as a memory or as a complete invention. Each novel concerns protagonists who are obsessed with an individual instance of failure. However, my reading of these texts will ultimately point the redemptive sense facilitated by the baseball aesthetic.

Creation and Liberating Failure in Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*

The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world – not a part of it.³⁹

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Baseball novels had not shown an experimental side until Robert Coover published a profoundly inventive work in 1968. *The Universal Baseball Association Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (henceforth *The UBA*) depicts middle-aged accountant, Henry Waugh, who immerses himself in a game he has devised based on a fantasy baseball league. Waugh oversees the game with a complex set of rules and through action that is determined by rolling dice that correspond to the events in the game. Henry plays his creation alone recording every detail of the gameplay meticulously in “the Book” and inventing elaborate backstories and personalities for his roster of make-believe players. His total absorption in the game is so consuming that Henry finds it difficult to work, coming in late and daydreaming, then sleeping, in the office; as the plot progresses his grasp of reality and of the lives of his creations begins to blur. The novel moves between Henry’s flat and then into the narratives of the ballplayers to whom Waugh’s joy and despair is inextricably bound. When Henry’s young star player, Damon Rutherford, pitches, what is known as ‘a perfect game’, Henry feels euphorically uplifted. However, shortly after his triumph, a fateful roll of the dice

³⁹ Wittgenstein, 5.641

“kills” Damon when he is struck on the head by the pitcher’s fastball. Henry is distraught and enters a period of depression as he questions his compulsive need to play his game while the parallel created world of the fictional baseball players reveals a teeming and tangible consciousness beyond and breaking free of their creator.

I will first show how Henry is depicted as a failed figure in keeping with contemporary American sports fiction’s protagonists. Henry’s growing obsession with his game disconnects him from society, thereby inhibiting his emotional growth, conforming to the alternative vision of the baseball narrative where its characters are either by choice or unwillingly infantilised. At the beginning of chapter six Henry thinks of himself in “disgust” as “an old man paying with a child’s toy” (183). However, Henry has become so immersed in his make-believe world that he cannot give-up the game. As Waugh becomes engrossed in the Association the few personal relationships he has developed begin to crumble. Henry is the godlike creator of the Association and its development beyond his control parallels the act of creation and the ensuing theoretical collapse of power that the novel explores. I argue that the first facet of his failure leads to the second metafictional aspect of the text’s redemptive failure. From this point the players try to distinguish the reality of their own world from within the ritual they have been created to perform. This, in turn, leads to an exploration of authorial influence and the redeeming failure of what I label ‘authocentric loss’.

In his oeuvre, Coover’s intention is rarely verisimilitude; his short stories are usually inspired by fables and mythology and draw attention to their own artificiality, for example, the playful stories ‘The Magic Poker’ or ‘The Babysitter’ in his collection *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969). The separation between ‘the real’ and fiction is not a binary relationship; nothing is so simple in Coover’s fictional worlds. By way of

explanation Coover clarifies: “The world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker’s function is to furnish better fictions with which we can reform our notion of things” (Everson, 11). Coover’s ambition is to reposition art to challenge and test those engaged with its forms. *The UBA* plays with the boundaries between the imagination and reality; while the reader identifies with Henry and feels for him, to a certain extent, understanding his need to create a game to remove him from the boredom of his life and work, a more central aspect of the work is an exploration of the nature of art and the role of an author. Therefore, this analysis begins with Henry’s psychology and his anguish, but moves to a reading of Waugh as an extension of his own characters, and his relationship to Robert Coover himself as the Wittgensteinian “metaphysical subject”. Henry’s creation of “the Book” as a documentation of the season parallels the writer’s own creative exercise. Henry becomes encumbered by the pressure of creativity that begins to turn in on itself just as Coover shows with the mechanisms of fiction and the self-referential aspects of his work that *plays* with the reader. As Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso argues: “Like Henry’s characters, trapped within the game somebody has created, so are we the readers as we enter Coover’s novel” (106). Here is the challenge of the text, but also its most arresting element.

Uniquely, Coover has written a classic baseball novel that does not feature the real game at all. Once a fan of the actual sport, Henry no longer goes to baseball games. Baseball’s symbolism and “semantic freight” as well as its “sacred implications” (Westbrook, 99) are enough to evoke the game, and Coover uses the play of America’s most iconic sport as a metaphor for writing and the extensiveness of the imagination. Henry has no interest in the actual sport as he prefers the abstract mathematical order and detail of his fictional version:

the real game bored him – but rather the records, the statistics, the peculiar balances between individual and team, offense and defense, strategy and luck, accident and pater, power and intelligence. And no other activity in the world had so precise and comprehensive a history, so specific an ethic, and at the same time, strange as it seemed, so much ultimate mystery (53-54).

It is significant that Waugh is drawn to the balance of “power and intelligence” in baseball, foreshadowing the conceptual breakdown that will come later when his own influence wanes and the consciousness of his players emerges from within the game. Henry remembers that the formation of his Association came about after he had fallen asleep while watching a live game. The real action failed to capture his imagination, but the statistical and analytical interpretation opened an avenue for his own creation. In starting his Association he remembers: “Suddenly what was dead life, what was wearisome become stirring, beautiful, unbelievably real” (177). Paradoxically, the statistical detail creates a vision that is more “real” than the live action. In keeping with the baseball aesthetic, Henry’s fascination is steeped in the past and deepened by nostalgia. He explains “the real action was over a century ago. It’s a bore now” (176). The league he creates is an homage to a bygone era of baseball’s early charm. Waugh gives his teams names that are suggestive of the game’s innocent American legacy such as “Pastime Club”, “Pioneers”, and the “Beaneaters” (188). So caught up in the myth and symbolism of baseball, Henry believes in its sacred importance. He tells his friend and work colleague Lou Engel: “I even had the funny idea that ball stadiums and not European churches were the real American holy places” (177). However, as much as Waugh validates his preoccupation, he can never avoid the notion that he is in fact forever seeking, through compulsive fantasy, avenues of escape.

Waugh’s commitment to his Association is solipsistic; it is both innocent and misanthropic in its failure to engage with those around him or to develop meaningful

relationships. Henry seems repressed, unable to form the normal bonds of social interaction. In an intermittent moment of clarity, he even acknowledges this to himself: "Some people would look on his game, Henry realized, as a kind of running away" (151). However, the language here places an emphasis on how others would view his hobby and not his own value judgement. Instead of moving forward into respectable adult life, Henry retreats ever further into the world of his imagined baseball stadium so that instead of spending an occasional evening playing his private game, the course of the season obsesses his thoughts and consumes all his free time.

There is a tragic sense in Henry's devotion to his game into which he throws his entire creative passion. Henry has never been able to conform to the traditional life that he occasionally fantasises. When he is asked by Lou why he never married he lies that it had never appealed to him. The truth is later revealed that he desperately desires just such a life. In this respect, there is much in common with Fredrick Exley's alter ego in *A Fan's Notes* which was written in the same year. Both are depictions of lonely men whose peculiar sporting fixation renders them outsiders in society both in terms of how they are treated, but more importantly their own self-conceptions. Ultimately, an invented baseball game for Henry and watching football for Exley, offer them sporadic happiness and casts them in roles of ostracised and failed figures. Henry has no family and lives with the absence of a "beautiful wife and tender and loving children" who may have provided "great comfort, great pleasure" (171). Instead, there is no explanation for his situation other than "Henry had chosen the loner's life, the general pain, because...because...he couldn't help himself" (171). Like Exley, Henry is unable to imagine himself in any other predicament than as an outcast

living through his self-centred suffering. The Association is a sanctuary of sorts, but one that continually reasserts his isolation.

Like Exley's attempts to enjoy the game with others, Henry's endeavours to share his creation invariably fail. He first shows his Association to Hettie, a B-girl from his local bar. When they talk in Jake's tavern it seems that Waugh and Hettie have formed a bond that may waylay his loneliness, but an impulsive moment to share his creation turns quickly to shame. Hettie simply mocks Waugh when he explains the lists of names lying on his dining table correspond to his game and he is left mortified. Her scorn is hurtful: "Her laughter tore clean through him" (187). When Henry tries to explain to her that he has simply been playing a fantasy baseball game she is cutting; she suggests they could have an orgy with all his fantasy players. She jokes: "Henry, you're a complete nut!" (187).

When Hettie leaves after this argument all Henry can do is return to his fantasy world. He retreats from his emotions and buries them beneath a juvenile hobby he now completes as if by rote: "mechanically, he cleared the breakfast away, reordered all the papers, and began, once more, to play the game" (188). In these depictions the game functions as a counterweight to the ugliness and chaos of the world outside of Henry's imagination. Coover's vivid prose continually aligns the real world with images of sordidness and grime while the inner Association is the play world of, at least initially, clarity and pureness. The sun always shines in his make-believe games. The Association exists in perfect stasis as Waugh gets to make the rules and write the stories of his players' lives. Henry imagines how people would be surprised to learn he is almost sixty, but he has a secret: "his Association [...] kept him young" (14). However, in keeping with a central idea of baseball's aesthetic, Waugh's obsession

with his game does not just keep him young, it infantilises him. His table-top world is initially portrayed as innocent in line with baseball's symbolism of the Elysian fields of its inception. In contrast, outside the Association several pivotal passages in the novel take place in Henry's apartment and take on a strange and grotesque realism. Moments of human contact are degraded by gritty depictions so Henry focuses on Hettie's "odor" and "bovine yawn" (184) rather than her companionship or charm. As she leaves his room, a harsh light illuminates their relationship: "He only stared. Ugly and old. She was. They were" (187). Henry is drawn to the perfect world of his creation to escape the reality he conceives of as degraded and unattractive.⁴⁰

After Hettie, in a final attempt to share his game-world, Henry allows his friend, Lou, to play his invention. Henry has trepidations but also sees Lou as his last hope: "He was afraid, but he was glad, too. Lou could save it. Or him from the game" (183). Even at this point Henry realises that *he* may need to be saved from the game. However, Lou is unable to grasp the rules or immerse himself in the match, much to Henry's frustration. In fact, Lou's involvement deadens the game for Henry: "He sat, took up the dice. He tried to get his mind into the game, but Lou's bulky presence seemed to blank him out, and all he saw was paper" (197). Instead of the make-believe stadium, noise of the crowd, sunlight and players, Henry sees the uninspired reality of lists and rules and his own suddenly ludicrous place in his contrived enterprise. As soon as Henry shares his inventions it appears to him as foolish and absurd.

The discrepancy between the dirtiness of the real world and the pureness of the Association is highlighted with Lou's arrival. When Lou comes to the door Henry is

⁴⁰ Once again in sports fiction women are ostracized. Westerbook argues that all women are removed from baseball fiction in a male effort to protect the sacrosanctity of the masculine baseball environment as an edenic symbol connected to Eve's original sin (115).

repulsed by the pizza he brings on which the “[o]ils and juices oozed and bubbled” (190). The pizza and beer Lou offer for them to share risk being spilt on the records thereby physically and symbolically sully Henry’s labour of love. These descriptions, emphasising acts of tarnishing or corrupting, threaten the immaculate purity of Henry’s table-top world where the creator has fabricated a universe of impeccable order and uniformity where all eventualities are plotted and recorded. Despite Henry’s efforts, the game can only be enjoyed alone. His small attempts to reach out to Hettie and Lou in efforts to feel less isolated are ultimately depicted as failures. The three main characters in the novel all search for activities to battle their loneliness. Lou eats and goes to the cinema alone, Hettie’s sanctuary is in sex and going to church, Henry’s baseball game is the most creative endeavour, but to his disappointment, he finds it cannot be shared with those around him.

If human contact cannot save Henry then a revision of the game’s place can allow him solace. To see Henry as solely a figure of lonely failure is to miss a level of complexity in Coover’s novel that distinguishes its postmodern depth and the essential component of playfulness in his creation. Coover’s use of baseball in his metafictional exercise is unique in itself. Coover does not show an encyclopaedic knowledge of the game as DeLillo does of football in *End Zone* for example. Nor does he exhibit the love for the sport that Wideman or Alexie demonstrate for street basketball. Rather, Coover finds that baseball has a pre-existing wealth of distinctive American mythology, narrative and folklore that is perfect for an author to draw upon and then turn an ironic hand. Waugh is drawn to baseball; we learn he has earlier invented a horseracing game he played at work and considers playing chess, but it is the national pastime that captures his imagination so fully. Waugh is enticed by the

“perfect balance between offense and defense [...] the beauty of the record system” which leads him “to baseball as his final great project” (27).

In *The UBA*, baseball functions as a game to parallel the ‘game’ of writing that Coover himself undertakes. One of the most important aspects of metafiction is its essential playfulness as can be read in the works of authors such as John Barth, William Gass, Jorge Luis Borges or Vladimir Nabokov. Humour often arises from this aesthetic as the only sane response to an absurdist understanding of experience. Coover’s novel uses baseball’s play spirit as a tool to subvert standards of literary convention meaning his writing focuses on upturning set notions for deliberate effect. In all of his works the reader feels as if the rug could be pulled from beneath his/her feet at any moment and the narrative will collapse or completely fall in on itself. Coover continually alerts us to the fictitious nature of his stories or suddenly flips perspectives so one version of events, all of a sudden, gives way to another.

The beginning of *The UBA* is in keeping with Coover’s style of playful fiction. The reader is introduced to Henry apparently watching a live baseball game. Nothing in the first several pages allows the reader to infer that the whole game is taking place, not on the lush green grass of a baseball diamond, but entirely in Henry’s imagination. The embellishing details give the impression that Henry is sitting in an actual ballpark: “He saw beers bought and drunk, hot dogs eaten, timeless gestures passed” (11). Henry is lost in the action as any fan might be at an exciting game and at a pivotal moment. The illusion is then partly broken when Henry suddenly leaves the game to buy a snack at his local deli. The reader is told that it is almost eleven o’clock at night but we are also informed that the afternoon sun has been shining on the game in which Henry has been immersed. There is a disparity in the narrative that the reader

struggles to resolve at this early stage. The reader may surmise that the game is televised and Waugh is watching a rerun from his apartment, but then Henry re-joins the stands with the excited Pioneers fans around him. It is not until page five that Henry is depicted throwing dice on his kitchen table and then not until twenty pages later that the link between the dice and the game is clarified. The opening of *The UBA* is illustrative of Coover's metafictional playful writing where he appears to present a stable version of reality only for it to be suddenly undermined. This technique leaves readers to continually reposition their understanding of events, character or the nature of the created reality in which they have invested.

At times, the reader is directly alerted to the incongruities between versions of 'fact and fiction'. Central to the novel's depiction of play is the interrelationship between the text's inner diegesis (the lives and fortunes of the players both on the field and off) and the outer diegesis (Henry's 'real' world concerns). Henry confuses the bar that he frequents with the one the players visit. Henry goes to a bar called Pete's but calls the barman Jake, the name of the bar the players visit in the imaginary world (178). At times in the novel Henry thinks he sees players from his Association in his daily life. Coover blurs the boundaries between these two realms exploring the authority of creation, both Henry's and his own. However, initially the power to disturb the narrative vision that Henry created strikes a blow to his heart. Henry throws an unlikely combination of dice that, according to his rules, means that the pitcher is struck by the ball and killed. Henry is aghast that it is none other than his favourite player, fresh from unprecedented triumph, who is hit. The players have taken on such life that Henry mourns Damon's death as if he was a real person. He goes into a period of grieving and even buys a wreath as a memorial to his 'lost son'.

When Damon's inert body is taken from the field by the players Henry breaks down in sorrow: "The Proprietor of the Universal Baseball Association, brought down, brought utterly to grief, buried his face in the heap of papers on the kitchen table and cried for a long bad time" (85). The reader must be reminded that, at this stage, Henry is heartbroken by a figment of his own imagination. So distanced from reality has Henry become that only the death of one of his players can truly elicit an emotional response.

There is a similar sense of darkly comic play in Coover's depiction of Henry as the author of "the Book". Just as a writer risks becoming so engrossed with the characters he has drawn he may feel guilt at the vindictiveness of the fate he bestows on them, so too does Henry show concern for his players and an element of self-reproach. Of course, Coover's own notion of the author's guilt is a decidedly ironic gesture. His characters are simply words on a page, their actions and motives all completely invented. For Henry, the distinction between reality and creation is far less clear. With his Association losing its way Henry wrestles with the idea of breaking his own guidelines, not following the dice as a reprisal for the loss he feels. The progress of the text is concerned with the nature of Henry's control and how he chooses to impart his creative drive. At first, Henry has power over the game but he also chooses to allow an element of luck within a set of strict predetermined parameters. The use of dice adds essential chance to his endeavour, but the world of the players is still essentially at the mercy of Henry's will. He imparts names onto the players, chooses their positions and even decides on how they die when they have grown old and have retired from the league. Importantly their deaths can only occur when they have left the league unless the dice indicate otherwise. It is the unlikely combination of dice

that kills his star player that sends his conception of his Association off kilter and leads to his emotional breakdown.

Jock Casey is the pitcher who delivers the fatal beanball that kills Damon Rutherford.⁴¹ Henry plays through possible solutions to his problem of moving on without his star player and punishing the orchestrator of the Association's collapse: "Supposing he just shipped Casey to the minors and to the hell with the rules? He could do that. If he wanted to. Could explain it in the Book" (169). However, this is not a feasible option for the proprietor. Henry finds it difficult to rupture the code he has created and is unable to relegate Casey from the Association and resolve the dilemma. As the author of the game Henry should have the power to do whatever he chooses, but he has become so caught up in his own game world that he is reluctant to violate his own rules.

The solution must be more decisive so that Henry attempts to regain control and impose his will on his baseball world. His choice to intervene finally destroys his hold on his league. Henry feels less empowered by his creation as he senses the players escape his intellectual governance. After much deliberation, Henry finally breaches the rules of the game at the end of chapter six when he decides to interfere with the previous order of his invention. Enraged by the course of "history", propelled by the randomness and seeming malevolence of the dice, he chooses to sacrifice Jock Casey. Henry orchestrates events and then, overcome with his power, reticently places the dice, instead of rolling them, so that Casey is in turn killed by the batter's strike.

⁴¹ A 'beanball' is a colloquialism referring to a ball thrown at an opposing player with the intent to cause harm or injury.

As soon as he has acted he is physically and emotionally overcome: “A sudden spasm convulsed him with the impact of a smashing line drive and he sprayed a red-and-gold rainbow arc of half-curdled pizza over his Association” (214). Coover uses the metaphorical language of baseball to great effect. In baseball, a “line drive” is a powerful shot struck close to the ground but a “line” is also a passage of text aligning the abstract and the physical both causing this paroxysmic effect. As Henry is sick on his records the world of the Association is at risk of being washed away with apocalyptic force and destroyed by its creator’s splurge of vomit. The reader has already been alerted to the theological symbolism of the text when Henry ponders “if Adam and Eve could get pizza?” (190). The roll of the dice that symbolise the death of Casey is three sixes reflecting the number of the beast. Like the biblical flood, the creator’s destructive impulse threatens the world he had fabricated. Coover’s imagery here is far from accidental. Any critical reading of Coover’s text must make reference to its biblical allegory.⁴² The novel spans seven consecutive days enacting the seven days of creation. In this context it is significant that Waugh’s initials, JHWH, are a reference to the Old Testament God Yahweh (Westbrook, 225). Waugh is the novel’s God, but he is a flawed deity, vengeful and confused by the lives he has brought into being. He is a God struggling to relinquish the accountability of his power.

After Damon’s death and Henry’s subsequent inability to restore order, he recognises that the players are beginning to escape his control and he feels that it is within his capability to halt their imagined acts of insurrection: “He tried to reach them [...] tried to find out what was the matter, but it was strangely as though they were

⁴² Expanding on this religious connotation critics have explored Coover’s experimental novel from a variety of perspectives including ideas of political fantasies of meritocracy (Tim Morris), metahistory (Christian Messenger) and myth (Deeanne Westbrook).

running from him, afraid of his plan, seeing it for what it was: the stupid mania of a sentimental old fool" (188). Henry has created a world that requires his initial control, but he has then become distrustful of his own place; Waugh senses that the players yearn to break from the power of his authority. These moments of self-realisation will paradoxically signal the players' eventual sovereignty from the rule of their creator marking the symbolic tyranny of his omnipotence.

Henry's creation grants him power that is too much for him to bear alone. What had begun as an innocent hobby and a harmless game is transformed into the awful oppression of responsibility and the burden of godlike power. At the close of the novel, Waugh is finally able to disentangle himself from his once beloved Association. The contradiction that Coover creates is that only when Henry loses authority over his baseball world can equilibrium truly be re-established in his life and can the players find liberation; it is only when Waugh removes himself completely that the game-world can be set free from its neurotic creator. Waugh's loss of control after Damon's death and then his choice of abandonment ultimately bring him freedom. Henry's failure is therefore redemptive because it allows him to escape the great burden and imagined accountability of his role as a fallible deity. Henry's sense of failure and ineffectiveness is inverted because the great weight of duty can be lifted. Henry considers his feelings of hopelessness: "Impotent? Not really. But sometimes total power was worse" (168). Henry's failure to maintain control of his Association means the league shifts from the "individualism and egocentrism" (229) of his unequivocal rule, to an association of self-conscious independence where the players are no longer malleable identities or sacrificial pawns, but concerned with their own existential angst and "the very nature of man and society" (229). The further

implication of the novel is that when the maker of the game is removed, the players can still exist without their creator and then assert their own true identities.

The death of Jock Casey, whose initials align him to Jesus Christ, is a sacrifice by God/Henry imagined as a way of restoring order, but then becomes a means to liberate mankind/the players from their unconscious subservience. The players are then free and, as a consequence, Henry feels released from the oppression and guilt of his own intellectual control. The players' freedom turns inward so they become aware of their own fictional nature and even of the absurdity of the rituals they been created to perform. One of the players, McCamish, says about their lack of origins: "We have no mothers [...] the ripening of their wombs is nothing more than a ceremonious parable. We are mere ideas, hatched whole and hapless, here to enact old rituals of resistance and rot" (242). The players have reached a level of self-awareness to understand they are mere creations and their sole purpose of being has become to reprise a meaningless and tainted myth. The choice of the word "rot" (242) suggests that the dichotomy between the purity of the inner world opposed to the sordidness of the outer world, I earlier explored, is now less distinct. At first the players feel lost, but their subsequent discussions lead to a revelatory clarity. One of the players stares upwards to the "Ineffable Name" of the sun and reads "100 Watt" (244). The true 'sun' of the Association is the bulb that hangs above Henry's table and the characters stare beyond the boundaries of their limited world. Henry's ballplayers begin to see their sense of independence as redemptive. Casey, the great antihero, had imagined "rising above [...] all conceptualizations, including scorekeepers, umpires, God in any dress, in the heat of total mystic immersion" (252). Casey become a quasi-religious icon for the players. Those who choose to believe in an interpretation

of events stressing his centrality become "Caseyites". His followers adhere to a notion of freedom beyond a God where their freewill can be expressed and celebrated and the established order of the Associations and its central myth is fundamentally questioned.

The freedom discovered through Henry's failure to maintain influence is reflected inwardly and outwardly. As the players escape the determination of their creator so too does Henry find liberation from his deadening job and the dreary life he had endured. Although Henry is eventually fired from the accountancy firm he realises that he can easily move on instantly finding another position. Finally his Association has freed him from both his unfulfilling work and the stranglehold of playing and recording the game. In the last scene in which Henry appears he is described wandering around the moonlit streets looking for somewhere to get a drink. The final portrait of Henry, at the end of chapter seven, is of a changed man who has experienced catharsis as if a wound has been healed. Walking into a new bar Henry is delighted to see old players from the Association as if greeted by old friends: "Henry smiled back, though inside it was damn near a belly laugh" (229). Baseball "is the great American game!" (230) and its ultimately healing capacity has been realised.

This is the last occasion that Henry appears in the work. Rather than a pleasing ninth chapter to wrap up the loose ends, to mirror the nine innings of a baseball game, the reader is left with only eight chapters and he/she must make sense of a rather strange and cryptic ending now fully immersed in the world of the ritual. In the final chapter Henry Waugh has vanished from the text. Suddenly, and without warning, the reader has lost the protagonist they have followed for the previous two hundred pages and whose imagination created the baseball world and all of its players. The

final chapter depicts an annual event where descendants of former ballplayers take part in a mysterious re-enactment of the deaths of its two former players Damon Rutherford and Jock Casey. In the self-enclosed time of the Association one hundred seasons have passed since the original league Waugh played on his table-top. As with most myths the 'truth' of the events have been rewritten so the deaths of both players take place in the same ritual as if they occurred on the same day. "The Parable of the Duel", as it is known, has taken mythic dimensions where the Association's best rookies take on the personas of their ancestors to enact the story in a commemoration of the players' deaths and the very existence of the Association. The ceremony has a disturbing sense as the enactment will actually lead to the deaths of the players taking the leading roles. The religious overtones are quite clear: the game is played at the end of each season on "Damon's Day" like Doomsday, and fulfils the dual role of judgement and initiation. 'The Parable of the Duel' has become an essential myth but, in keeping with other myths, its meaning has been clouded with its repetition and interpretation so that its significance and symbolism has become subjective. The players adopt different philosophies based on the same origins; the Caseyites and Damonites follow disparate dogmas, so while Damon has come to represent traditional values, Casey, the original villain, has followers drawn to progressive ideologies.

Henry's Association has turned from an enclosed game into a self-perpetuating myth-generating process. Instead of drawing from an existing mythology as with other baseball literature such as Malamud's use of Arthurian legend or the chthonic symbolism I explore in DeLillo's *Underworld*, Coover allows Henry's Association to

create its own mythological origins, albeit indebted to the Book of Creation.⁴³ In the final chapter, Paul Trench must play the role of Royce Ingram, the man whose strike of the ball is the fateful act of revenge that kills Casey. Trench is deeply troubled by his participation in the ritual. He recognises the frustration in how “the continuing strength of this story through time is evidence that it is somehow essentially true” (223). Myth imposes “truth” by reiteration and the playing out of ritual. The enactment has taken on the weight of a religious experience where the original meaning has been lost. However, whilst being limiting, the myth of the duel is a central ideological reference point whereby characters can begin to derive their own fragile but self-questioning autonomy. The players, once only names on Henry’s paper records, have grown to exhibit aspects of self-conscious awareness. The tentative and unassured questions of the players in earlier chapters become formulated ones at the novel’s finale. The players begin to refuse that the event should be blindly accepted as “sacred” (251). From this starting point they can redefine their place in the spectacle of ceremony or even deny it completely. When the players are able to break the mythopoeic space they inhabit then they are able to realise a new autonomy.

As with DeLillo’s *End Zone*, Coover’s novel deliberately ends abruptly. However, unlike the anticlimactic but powerful close of *End Zone* where Gary Harkness chooses to lock his dorm and starve himself, the loss of Henry creates an alternative narrative drive. The change in point of view of at the ending of the novel is a radical artistic shift and marks one of the most subversive aspects of Coover’s work, where

⁴³ In *The UBA* this submerged but invasive aspect of stories is described as “all the mythic residue hidden away in daily life” (234). Coover has explained that some myths can “outlive their usefulness. They disturb life in unnecessary ways, and so it becomes necessary to break them up and perhaps change their force” (Evenson, 13). When myth’s efficaciousness become clear, then it is necessary that they challenged and rewritten.

the internal world of the Association comes to the forefront, and the 'real world' of Henry's quotidian fades away to disappear in the background. Where there was a previous frame of reference between the creator and the game, now no such stability remains. By removing the authorial figure of power in the form of Henry, the man who kept "the Book" and dictated the course of events, Coover highlights how a creator's disappearance can be regenerative. Coover's fiction continually breaks down the pre-modernist tenets of the mimetic form so a work of fiction can find freedom by its playfulness thereby revealing its own workings and fictitious nature.⁴⁴ Coover's liberation of Henry also allows him to suggest how fiction itself can be rethought. It is interesting that Coover's novel coincided with a movement in literary theory to challenge previous assumptions about the place of the author.

In *What is an Author?* (1969) Michel Foucault, in a response to Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* (1968), suggests that the disappearance of the author, far from some theoretical end point, facilitates a fresh beginning and an open reading of a text:

It is obviously insufficient to repeat empty slogans: the author has disappeared; God and man dies a common death. Rather, we should re-examine the empty space left by the author's disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions realised by this disappearance (121).

This notion is echoed in Casey's previously mentioned "rising above...God in any dress" philosophy. The quotation by Foucault articulates the post-structuralist demand of destabilising the previous Author-God control by emphasising the inherent schisms in a text when an omnipotent creator is thrown into question. Foucault asks the reader to "attentively observe", recognising the concealed mystery when

⁴⁴ As in DeLillo's *End Zone* with the authorial interjection before the big game, a seemingly straight first or third person narrative is ruptured by the interruption of the artist behind the novel.

authorial power is rendered void and the reader is attuned to questioning traditional notions of literary intent as prescribed solely by the writer of a text. The “gaps” within a text are not hidden but thrown into focus by what they reveal and the multiplicity of interpretations they allow. Foucault suggests that this process is ultimately invigorating and Coover would certainly agree with this claim. In this way Coover’s disappeared author, in the shape of Henry’s final absence, renews the text in several ways. Firstly, Henry’s non-existence allows the formation of a new narrative world where the inner diegesis expands to consume its own outer boundaries and the motion of the characters’ philosophies and fears become central. Secondly, the last chapter opens forth with the characters’ discovery of self-consciousness and the ensuing implications that his creations have taken on a life of their own. The novel has jumped fully from a central character driven piece into a more abstract theoretical framework. Foucault’s description of the death of the author is enthused by the potential of “fluid functions” to replace the concrete and unyielding certainty of pre-modernist critical readings. Coover’s technique shows how through loss the Association becomes a metaphor for the polysemic nature of a text beyond some all-knowing author.

In *The Joyful Wisdom* (1882) Nietzsche writes that when the old God is found dead: “our hearts overflow with gratitude [...] At last the horizon seems open once more [...] our sea, again lies open before us” (276). The death of God and the author offers a limitless vista of possibility where previously there had been none. Henry is both Author and God and his absence represents the death of both. In the novel, God’s absence preoccupies the players. Their creator has abandoned them to their own revelations. Some of the players adopt this atheistic stance and are therefore left with

these conundrums in the void of their ritual where they question their purpose without a deity. In this way, the act of freeing a text from its own author then echoes the liberation of disavowing meaning from a missing God. The players are left to philosophise on the nature of being and the dread/elation of finding a multiplicity of meaning when old certainties are disproven.

Henry's failure to engage with 'reality' distances him from his life most notably impacting on his work, and shattering the fragile relationships he had forged with Hettie and Lou. However, Coover's fiction draws attention to the fact that both inner and outer diegeses are equally fabricated as constructs of the author's mind. Where one traditional reading of Henry's development might chart his obsession with his table-top game as his progression towards severe delusion or even insanity, another interpretation is far richer and nuanced. It is far more in keeping with Coover's literary and artistic sense to view Henry's aesthetic choice to remove himself from his creation as the only possible path to set both his players and himself free. It is this aspect where breaking from the game, unbecoming the God figure, and failing to maintain control grant Henry his escape and create the novel's most thought-provoking component at its finale.

Henry has needed his own failure through the journey of the game and the death of his star player to reach an understanding of a need for play, as well as the necessity of flux and change. He has "discovered that perfection wasn't a thing, a closed moment, but *process*, yes, and the process was transformation" (224). The perfection he had sought in the game is only possible through acts of development and change. This realisation is mediated by the character of Barney Bancroft who Waugh has created to take over the obligations of record keeping. At this point, Henry

has relinquished his hold on the Association, thereby extricating himself as the author from the text entirely, and leaving a figment of his imagination to continue the process of recording.

As Sean Burke argues in summarising the argument of Roland Barthes: “To impose an author on a text is to impose an archaic monism on a brave new pluralistic world; it is to seal over the ceaseless play of difference that the death of God has opened in its wake” (23). Burke’s use of the term “ceaseless play” proves particularly apt because this is precisely what Coover is articulating in choosing America’s national game to show the freedom of Johan Huizinga’s ‘play spirit’. Play and playfulness correspond to Coover’s own writing. The greatest loss in the novel is the authocentric position Henry relinquishes that functions as a symbol of a metafictional aesthetic. Loss and the indeterminacy that follows is, in fact, presented as the most liberating renouncement that the artist can embrace. The players likewise realise this on the final page of the novel. Instead of enacting a preordained ritual that takes the shape of a “trial” (255), the game itself is all that matters, and the game is joyful and “beautiful” (255). With the loss of Henry and the ritual of the killing ceremony taking precedence over the league, it would appear that the game of baseball has also evaporated by the novel’s final chapter. However, the game, like its association with the green shoots of spring, returns to restore a sense of peace and harmony at the novel’s end. The close of Coover’s novel has a redemptive sense and it is in the game itself that this is found. Just as Paul Trench readies himself for the final ritual, and an act that he knows will bring about his own death, a sense of hope uplifts him: “And the black clouds break up, and the dew springs again to the green grass, and the stands hang on, and his heart leaps alive to give it one last try” (354). Playing the game

restores his faith. All that matters is the game with the ball “hard and white and alive in the sun” (355).

Nostalgia, Americanness and Myth: Don DeLillo's Portrayal of Baseball in *Underworld*

Nostalgia does not strike one as an altogether satisfactory word for such fascination [...] with a past beyond all but aesthetic retrieval ⁴⁵

Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

In this section I explore how DeLillo adheres to the baseball narrative and also how he subverts and works against the confines of this mythopoeic space. I demonstrate how DeLillo writes in the tradition of the baseball genre and then upsets this simplistic mode of expression in what seems a postmodern turn, only to return to a reworked and idealistic supposition. This process can rarely be interpreted as simply a literary technique or a provocative act as if blowing up a balloon only to burst it. Even as the baseball narrative is usurped it is impossible to completely erase every residue of the evocations of innocence and wonder in DeLillo's revealing depictions. The primary text in focus will be his novel *Underworld* (1997) but I also draw from the novel that preceded it, *Mao II* (1991). Baseball is a lesser theme in this work, but its use and connotations have direct parallels revealing the sport's dual role in DeLillo's literary imagination.

Underworld famously opens at a baseball game in the Polo Grounds in New York City. DeLillo depicts the celebrated 1951 Pennant game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers that coincides with the day the Soviet Union

⁴⁵ Jameson, 19.

successfully detonate an atomic bomb. In an article for *The New York Times* titled “The Power of History” DeLillo explained that his imagination was initially sparked by rereading the front page of a newspaper reporting on both stories, but giving the baseball game far greater coverage. DeLillo writes: “The home run that won the game – soon to be known, vaingloriously, as ‘The Shot Heard ‘Round the World’ – had found its vast and awful counterpoint. A Russian mushroom cloud” (63). In DeLillo’s work, the cinematic opening jump-cuts between various characters in attendance (including celebrities like Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason and J. Edgar Hoover) who will eventually witness Bobby Thomson, of the Giants, strike the homerun that will become known by its legendary epithet. This phrase initially referred to American troops listening to the game while stationed in Korea, but in *Underworld* the reverberations of that ‘shot’ echo through the lives of all those desperate to own the lost ball. The actual ball has never been accounted for, and out of this historical absence, DeLillo draws his fictional world interweaving a plethora of different stories. The piece, originally published as *Pafko at the Wall* (1992), was slightly revised to become the novel’s prologue titled “The Triumph of Death”. The novel then expands into a complex series of connected narratives over the next fifty years, exploring American culture through the Cold War period, as the ball changes hands to finally land in the possession of the novel’s protagonist Nick Shay. The ball becomes a treasured relic, an item to be fought for, traded, bought or stolen. In its grail-like position, the mythological is transposed on baseball and DeLillo begins in accordance with one of the game’s abiding archetypes.

DeLillo’s portrayal of the sport strikes a tension between adhering to an accepted depiction of the game whilst also undermining and challenging it. Baseball oscillates between two extremes thereby constituting a complex relationship in

DeLillo's prose. Aspects of the baseball narrative that conform to the accepted classic narrative are presented in the text; often within a few sentences or in context of the same passage, they are debunked and thrown into doubt before resurfacing as conflicted ideas incorporating faith, deceit, tragedy but also hope. To use the most overarching example, the progression of the ball itself at the novel's centre conforms to the suggested paradigm. The object that Nick comes to own is never authenticated so its legitimacy relies on its owner's capacity for blind belief. Nick deceives himself into thinking that the ball will offer him catharsis primarily through a therapeutic resolution with his own unreliable story of his absent father's abandonment of the family. Nick acknowledges that his connection to the ball is concerned with "the mystery of loss" (97) which has defined the tragedies of his youth. However, an understanding of the ball's strange route into his possession, through the imagined stories of its owners, offers some sort of equilibrium and solace. This leads towards the eventual epiphany of the closing chapters with Nick's realisation that "[e]verything is connected in the end" (826), hence the novel's symbolism of hope and harmony reiterated in the final word of the novel: "Peace" (827).

I will posit three fundamental characteristics of the baseball narrative and explore how each theme is undermined by DeLillo who exposes each concept through an emphasis on failure. My argument covers essential elements of the baseball narrative through an exploration of firstly memory and nostalgia, secondly what I label 'wholesome' American values, and thirdly aspects of the mythic.

It would be hard to write about baseball without making reference to its incorporation of nostalgia. The sport is an homage to a rose-tinted and romanticised image of a glorious American past. The old stories and games hold greater poignancy

because they are able to retain a hazy purity of a bygone era. Nick argues that the 1951 game has such a special place in the collective memory because it occurred before disproportionate media coverage and television replay saturation could diminish the power of an event. He explains:

The Thomson homer continues to live because it happened decades ago when things were not replayed and worn out and run down and used up before midnight of the first day. The scratchier an old film or an old audiotape, the clearer the action in a way. Because it's not in competition for our attention with a thousand other pieces of action. Because it's something preserved and unique. (98)

Nick contends that a moment can be conserved with such a lasting legacy because it exists outside its excessively repeated representations and it therefore remains uncorrupted in a pure and abiding memory. In the opening hundred pages of the novel, DeLillo juxtaposes the 1951 game with another game from the 1990s between the Giants and Dodgers. Tellingly, just like Shay, both teams have moved west from New York to relocate in California.⁴⁶

Nick attends the ballgame with Brian Glassic, a colleague in waste management, who is having an affair with Shay's wife. They sit explaining the intricacies of the game to an English woman eager to soak up a taste of American culture.⁴⁷ In contrast to the depiction of the famous Thomson-Branca game, the action is continually mediated and withdrawn from the real. Nick and Brian sit in the press box "glassed in" so that they only hear "muffled sounds from the crowd" (91). In this passage, the spectators "remained at an eerie distance, soul-moaning like some lost

⁴⁶ The Giants moved to San Francisco in 1958 and the Dodgers went to Los Angeles later the same year. Both teams faced commercial pressure and wanted to spread baseball to the west coast. Walter O'Malley was vilified when he moved the Dodgers to LA.

⁴⁷ Similarly, in *Hoop Roots* John Wideman introduces a French woman to act as the foreign outsider to whom the game must be clarified and explained.

battalion” (91). The crowd’s noises evoke a ghostly past rather than a captivating present. The 1951 game seems to hold an authenticity in comparison to the sterility of the modern version characterised by this view of the stilted and silent game. As Baudrillard’s states in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981): “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (12); the effect here is to distance the onlooker from an experience because of the highly mediated present where nostalgia has more power and takes precedence.

However, DeLillo’s writing is also a critique of cultural myopia through American wistfulness for the Fifties. At points in *Underworld* there is an ironic tone towards a tendency to see the Fifties as a golden age, when in fact cultural change was spawning some of the ‘evils’ of late capitalist society. Nick and Matt discuss how the Fifties created a culture of brainwashed conformity: “The placid nineteen-fifties. Everybody dressed and spoke the same way. It was kitchens and cars and TV sets” (410). Indeed, as Duvall has also noted, the author’s depiction of baseball intimates authoritarian and crypto-fascist ideologies (30). The final lines of the baseball opening in *Mao II*, “the future belongs to crowds” (16), stress the dangerous idea of a collective force drowning individual choice and freedom. DeLillo’s distrust of baseball, in its capacity to turn its crowd into thoughtless fascistic masses, echoes Williams Carlos Williams’ poem “At the Ball Game” (1923) where the crowd “is alive, venomous” (16). In *Underworld*, the crowd similarly facilitates a more melancholy and unstable response in the power of their collective longing; as they flock to the venue “they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations” (11). These early lines of the novel set the tone of baseball’s incorporation of

oppositional forces, most poignantly between reverie and despair, as well as longing and fulfilment.

Yet, characters such as Brian and Nick cannot help but feel a pull towards the old game through the nostalgia of their childhood memories. Brian visits the memorabilia collection of baseball fanatic Marvin Lundy. Lundy has made it his life's work to track down the 1951 ball and record its lineage from the moment it left Thomson's bat. Marvin recognises the tension between the forward momentum of the ball's progress, and his own need to work sifting backwards to find its origins. He reflects: "Strange how he was compiling a record of the object's recent forward motion while simultaneously tracking it backwards to the distant past" (318). The reader too is invited to perform a similar process of mapping the linearity of the novel. The novel is told backwards in chronology. Longing for the past is reflected in the novel itself as the narrative momentum forces backwards in time, creating distance from a future of limited scope (Shaub, 73). In a Kierkegaardian sense, life must be lived forward but can only be understood in reverse. Yet Lundy is missing a vital piece of evidence to construct the ball's journey beyond the game. He explains to Brian: "I have the complete sequence back to him. The line of ownership [...] I don't have the last link that I can connect backwards from the Wainwright ball to the ball making contact with Bobby Thomson's bat" (181). The reader already knows the missing link that Lundy will never find, which has been portrayed in the opening section with the African American boy who first retrieves the ball. Lundy's desperate need for order drives his obsession with this particular game. Unlike his host, Brian is able to step back and see where Lundy's fixation is derived and what has drawn him and other men to Marvin's collection:

That's why he was here, to surrender himself to longing, to listen to his host recite the anecdotal texts, all the passed-down stories of bonehead plays and swirling brawls, the pitching duels that carried into twilight, stories that Marvin had been collecting for half a century—the deep eros of memory that separates baseball from other sports (171).

Baseball has a cultural heritage unlike other sports. No other sport places such weight on its own history. The game has an oratory quality of preserving folk culture. Brian is willingly enticed into this therapeutically nostalgic world: “He leaned over the display cases that held cigarette cards, ticket stubs, the signed contracts of famous players, nineteenth century baseball boardgames, bubblegum wrappers that carried the pinkish likeness of men from Brian's youth, their names a kind of poetry floating down the decades” (168).

While Brian's fascination with baseball's past seems harmless, through Lundy's and Nick's passion DeLillo suggests that this type of haunting nostalgia is also dangerous. Lundy's interpretation of the act of collecting memorabilia is in accordance with Nick's justification for buying the ball. Lundy claims that people accumulate objects as reminders of previous eras to overcome fear:

People who save these bats and balls and preserve the old stories through the spoken word and know the nicknames of a thousand players, we're here in our basements with tremendous history on our walls. And I'll tell you something, you'll see I'm right. There's men in the coming years they'll pay fortunes for these objects. They'll pay unbelievable. Because this is desperation speaking (182).

In conventional baseball narratives these types of fables, remembrances and dialogue with the past are to be celebrated and cherished. In DeLillo's work, this memory is described as a type of “desperation” (182). Men are willing to pay vast sums because of the desolation implicit in baseball nostalgia and the longing they feel to reconnect with an unreachable sense of belonging. As with Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, an inability to

live in the present and an overwhelming adoration for the past is ultimately limiting, stunting and damaging. In *Underworld*, the reader is confronted with the troubling concept of a “[p]ornography of nostalgia” (320). Nostalgia is depicted as distasteful; it is both compelling and corrupt.⁴⁸ The implication in DeLillo’s phrasing is that just as pornography is clandestine and shameful, likewise baseball memorabilia is shut away like a perverse secret. This line is an evocation of Nick’s “mystery of loss” (97) and one of the key notions that *Underworld*’s baseball conveys: the true failure of baseball is in its inevitable and crushing inability to retain its romantic and innocent center. DeLillo makes reference to the schism between the wholesome image of baseball and the pornographic idea of a game degraded by the fans’ desire to commemorate every minutia and element of its history. In *America* (1986), Baudrillard comments on the nation’s strange urge to create a history for itself by attempting to eternalise anything that can form a cultural heritage. Baudrillard believes that: “since [...] [Americans] were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalize everything by reconstitution [...] To them, everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoration. Everything can have a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum” (41). Modern sports culture embodies Baudrillard’s theory of “embalming”. There are dozens of sports museums across America devoted to baseball bats, gloves and assorted memorabilia to which tourists flock.⁴⁹ Lundy’s desperate need to accumulate baseball memorabilia to create an American historiography is a Baudrillardian endeavour of deluded simulacrum-building and preservation.

⁴⁸ Lundy’s baseball museum brings to mind the collectors of Nazi memorabilia in DeLillo’s early work *Running Dog* (1978) where characters search for an alleged collection of Hitler’s lost sex tapes.

⁴⁹ Richard Ford’s *Independence Day* (1995) focuses on a father and son’s road trip to baseball and basketball halls of fame.

In contrast to Lundy, Nick does not lock the ball away in a secret museum or put it in a glass case solely to be admired. The ball is his own personal link to a memory and conception of failure, yet Nick can never rationalise the reason as to why he had to own the ball. He explains that it is “an expensive and beautiful object that I keep half hidden, maybe because I tend to forget why I bought it” (809). The magnetism of the ball is partly due to its physicality and its texture as he lifts it into his palm he explains: “I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf” (809). The ball’s smudges and sun bleached discolouration connect it to the past as Nick examines how it has been “bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change” (809). Its tactile nature and signs of wear are a tangible association with history and American identity. In this passage, Nick finds the ball on a shelf placed beside books, a position which makes it comparable to other sources of knowledge, history and narrative. It is “wedged between a slanted book and a straight-up book” (809). Significantly, as Fitzpatrick has noted (159), the ball is next to one book arranged “straight-up”, implying a documented objective version of events and a slanted one suggestive of an off-kilter alternative to the prescriptive order. The story of the ball in the novel traverses these two version of history – the official and “slanted” or the social and personal variations. Equally, DeLillo does not let baseball’s symbolism rest at one distinct angle.

Key to this ambiguity are the motives for Nick’s eventual purchase of the ball. It is noteworthy that Shay outlays thousands of dollars on the item. Earlier in the novel, Nick explains that he “didn’t buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it”. He concludes: “It’s not about Thomson hitting the homer. It’s about Branca making the pitch. It’s all about losing” (97). On a psychological level, Nick’s ownership

of the ball is a means of displacement. The ball is only important as a facilitator of its role to the possessor. As such, the ball is a symbol of Nick's desire for an accepted narrative of origins and it is a substitute for the answer to the reason why his father abandoned his family when he left the house to buy some Lucky Strikes only to never be seen again. Nick's father's disappearance is then interpreted as an act of betrayal for the abandoned and innocent son. The ball stands for this absence and a failure to construct meaning from our lives.

Nick remembers hearing the game on the radio as a boy; its climatic moment is marked as a personal tragedy. Several pages before disclosing the reason for his purchase he explains: "I died inside when they lost. And it was important that I die alone. Other people interfered. I had to listen alone" (93). The defeat is a meeting of public and private failure that Nick must hear and experience alone because the impact is so personal and profoundly shaping in its effect on his sense of self. His team are beaten. Yet, more poignantly, the ball aligns him to Branca in a self-fulfilling prophecy understood in retrospect. In the way that Branca's life will be forever remembered by that single moment of defeat, lasting long in the American collective memory, Nick too will be defined by the memory of a teenage trauma: the gun he misfired aged seventeen, killing a local pool hustler. His ownership of the ball is a "shameful secret" because the reason he bought it was to "commemorate failure. To have that moment in my hand when Branca turned to watch the ball go into the stands – from him to me" (97). For Shay, failure can be commemorated just as profoundly as victory. There is a sense too that although a private loss, the game also represents the grander failure of baseball's promise. Baseball continually represents America's desire for perpetual cultural innocence despite the nation's history to the contrary.

Decent and honest American principles permeate the baseball narrative at every turn. To read the baseball narrative is to be told how devotion to home, family and the community carry most currency. The preface of *Underworld* concentrates on an African American boy named Cotter Martin. Cotter will eventually leave the ground with the winning baseball. Despite being poor and belonging to an excluded ethnic minority, Cotter retains faith in the allure of American exceptionalism and American ideals to reward the just and hardworking. He "believes in baseball and to believe in baseball is to believe in America" (266). America is like a religious beacon and baseball is synonymous with its guiding light.

Like *Underworld*, *Mao II* begins in a ballpark. The central plot depicts a renowned but reclusive writer named Bill Gray.⁵⁰ The moribund Bill Gray works ceaselessly on an unfinished novel he chooses not to conclude fearing that publication and the consequential mass consumption of his work will only deaden its effect and breach an idea of the artwork. After a brief flirtation with his assistant's girlfriend, Karen, Gray is drawn out of his self-imposed exile when a young Swiss poet is taken hostage in Beirut. Bill is persuaded to travel to London, and then to Lebanon, to raise awareness of the captured man's plight. The journey will prove both futile and fatal as Bill is hit by a car whilst attempting to catch a ferry in Cyprus. As in *Underworld*, several plots interlink, beginning with a scene that sees Karen amongst a crowd in an eerie and bizarre ritual in a baseball stadium.

⁵⁰ DeLillo pays homage to American novelists who have been self-consciously withdrawn from the public eye in their anonymity such as J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon.

The novel's prologue, also a short piece in its own right,⁵¹ begins with a depiction of a fictitious mass wedding in New York's Yankee stadium. The Church of Unification ceremony sees 13,000 people married to their previously unseen partners by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. In the novel's opening, Karen, who waits to be wed, is sought by her bewildered parents who sit in the bleachers searching for their daughter as she walks with a vast crowd across the ballpark's outfield. Karen meets her new husband on the field during the ceremony and all she can think to tell him is that the stadium in which they are standing is where the Yankees play baseball. Not speaking English, he looks at her without understanding. Karen tries to make him comprehend:

'Baseball,' she says, using the word to sum up a hundred happy abstractions, themes that flare to life in the crowd shout and diamond symmetry, in the details of a dusty slide. The word has resonance if you're American, a sense of shared heart and untranslatable lore. But she only means to suggest the democratic clamor, a history of sweat and play on sun-dazed afternoons, an openness of form that makes the game a kind of welcome-to-my-country. (8-9)

Baseball in one word can signify an entire cultural history and sense of kinship, but furthermore, in the popular imagination, it is analogous with American democratic freedom and inclusiveness. Fellow baseball enthusiast and writer Paul Auster expounds on this idea: "We also have to keep in mind that baseball has rapidly turned into an immigrant sport, a democratic sport which facilitated integration. My grandfather loved baseball, and playing it he became American!" (De Contanze 1995). Here is the contrived notion that baseball is the sport that forged communities out of the melting pot of American difference and gave people a common point of reference

⁵¹ The first chapter was also published as a short piece in *Granta* magazine in 1990 with the title "At Yankee Stadium".

and therefore an identity. At times, DeLillo points towards the conventional and traditional narrative of the game signifying cultural emblems of nationhood and deeply felt pride in phrases such as “shared heart” and “untranslatable lore”. The message of DeLillo’s passage could be taken from any dime baseball novel from the nineteenth century or indeed any clichéd baseball movie serving to preserve the efficacy of the American Dream and present baseball, like apple pie or a little white picket fence, as a homely symbol of Americanness. In this section of *Mao II*, the author seemingly feeds into the folklore and mythology of the national pastime as the sport of the people capable of garnering pride.

However, there is a much darker subtext in this passage. The word “baseball” is spoken not by a father taking his son to his first ballgame or a coach inspiring his valiant yet losing team, but by a woman publicly abandoning her family in front of their startled gaze. In this depiction, the assimilation process is a renunciation of American ideals to a dangerous cultist religious order. Karen chooses to renounce that American “democratic clamor” in a mass of brainwashed devotion. What baseball means to Karen and other Americans is being relinquished in her choice to wed. The tension of DeLillo’s prose is in the seeming joyfulness of “sun-dazed afternoons” at the ballpark in contrast to a cult-like worship of an all-powerful dictator and a submission to the edict of this choice.

Yet to believe in America, and by implication the American Dream, is to believe in an illusion. Jackie Robinson was the first professional black player in 1947 and played for the losing Dodgers team in the 1951 Pennant game. However, black players were still ostracised by the sporting establishment. The fallacy of racial unity in the 1950s was veiled by baseball’s charade of democracy and the pretence of inclusion.

In *Underworld*, when Cotter illegally gets into the stadium, by jumping the turnstile, he strikes up an unlikely friendship with a middle-aged white man named Bill. The usual class and racial barriers appear to melt away in the jovial interaction between the pair only made possible in the inclusive and egalitarian community of the ballpark. The two even share a packet of peanuts as they enjoy the action on the field. However, the illusion of their rapport is shattered when the ball is hit into the crowd who surge and clamour for the game-winning memento. The ball, now a commodified object of desire, interrupts the previous good-natured relationship of the fans, and of Bill and Cotter in particular. Cotter manages to grab the ball, but Bill will not relinquish the possibility of owning the item. The baseball stadium's idealistic image as a sanctuary of goodwill and democratic feeling is instantly undone as Bill pursues Cotter in a desperate attempt to possess the ball. Bill follows Cotter out of the stadium as their light-hearted banter takes a sinister hue: "Bill looks at Cotter and grins narrowly. It is a wolfish sort of look with no mercy in it" (53). The ball's power distorts commonality, even friendship, into maliciousness. The boy manages to escape his accoster, but the atmosphere of celebration has turned sour and becomes ominous. Although Cotter manages to evade Bill, he will soon have the ball taken from him.

Cotter's belief in the justness of baseball and American principles will finally be truly undone when his father, Manx, steals the precious ball only to sell it for a fraction of its worth, just over thirty dollars. This is the first time the ball is sold and represents a transition as the object moves from a precious emblem of the game and American sentiment into a conduit for trade, greed and desire. First, his surrogate father at the game, then a member of his family try to take the ball Cotter retrieved fairly. At first, when Cotter admits to his father that he skipped school to watch the

game, but managed to retrieve the ball, they discuss selling the memento. However, Cotter is reluctant and eventually thinks he has argued his father down. However, when Cotter is sleeping, Manx creeps back into his son's bedroom and briefly wrestles with the morality of his act: "He stands in the dark room. He is arguing out the thought should he do it or not. Then he does it. He takes the baseball" (150). Manx's treachery is an affront to the familiar nurturing patriarchy of the saccharine baseball narrative. As Manx walks to the stadium in search of a buyer of the newly acquired prize, he witnesses people still celebrating after the game and significantly he "sees fathers and sons standing around the fires to warm themselves" (366). However, Manx has forsaken the warmth of bonding with his son over the game because he has seen the cold and lucrative potential of the special ball. Soon after he has sold Thomson's homer, Manx feels "the familiar stab of betrayal" (654) because he has stolen something treasured by his child with the implication that this is not the first time he has been disloyal to his family. Deanne Westbrook argues that "[t]hemes surrounding the crucial relationship with the father, the son's quest for atonement, blessing, and the psychic rewards that ensue, are endlessly repeated in baseball's mythology" (246). *Underworld* depicts the taut relationships between fathers and sons through Cotter and Manx, then Nick and his father Jimmy. In both stories the sons are betrayed by their fathers, and suffer psychological trauma, yet Nick and Cotter seem intent on reimagining the redemptive attraction of baseball.

In *Ground Rules* (1996) Deanne Westbrook successfully shows how baseball cultivates a "mythic" as a running strand through its literature. Malamud's reworking of the story of the Fisher King in *The Natural* and Coover's use of the Old Testament in *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968) are cases in point. DeLillo's

text does little to dispel this association finding great scope in the freedom of mythic intertextuality. Indeed the title of the novel is itself a reference to mythology and acts as a gateway to a multifaceted reading of the text which draws from a plethora of sources. The underworld motif infiltrates almost every thematic reference in the novel from Nick's occupation of burying waste products, to the sections in the New York subway system, the murky world of organised crime, to submerged memories and the power of the subconscious. Just as archaeologists search beneath the ground for remnants of the past in an attempt to piece together an acceptable order, so too does the characters' search for the ball attempt to unearth personal truths. In an interview, DeLillo explained the reason for his title: "I wanted to give a sense of underground history" (Ulin, 1997).

When talking about his occupation Nick feeds into the mythological language of the novel. He explains: "We built pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from the word Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld" (106). Contemporary society attempts to submerge its toxic by-products symbolic of its wastefulness and disregard. Vast landfill sites become a modern underworld where the toxicity of industrial waste like plutonium threatens to resurface like Hades appearing from the depths. Nick too is burying his past and the only link he retains is the ball to which he attributes mythical status. On one level, the novel takes the form of an epic quest as in the classic mythic narrative. As with Jason's search for the golden fleece, or the Arthurian legend to find Excalibur or the holy grail, the baseball become the sacred object of desire.

In one scene, Nick is unable to sleep and muses on the ball. He clutches it at four in the morning feeling a tangible connection to the past and to something steeped in folklore and mythology. Failure itself can be commemorated. Nick's attachment to the ball anchors his life. The emotions evoked run deeper than regret. Tracking down the ball allows the fans to uncover a secret and by so doing to trace something to its origins in the grander sweep of *Underworld's* allusions to an incomprehensible universe. Nick's wife Marian catches him entranced and staring at the ball. He says:

I was standing at the bookshelves with the ball in my hand and the thought of it was like Hamlet gazing on Yorick's skull, or maybe Aristotle, even better she said, contemplating the bust of Homer. That was nice, we thought. Rembrandt's Homer and Thompson's homer. We smiled at that (132).

The reference to Hamlet implies a morbid fascination with the passing of time, and death. Mortality is a central theme of the novel with its apocalyptic vision underpinned by its twin references to Bruegel's painting *The Triumph of Death* (1562) and the looming image of imagined cleaning purity of the atomic bomb. The ball too is a reference point to a fixation with history and the necessary desire for clarity by following an object to its ultimate source and therefore its truth. Each fan wants to know the precise lineage of the ball's journey, how it was passed on through the decades, and how they came to own a piece of American sporting history. In Rembrandt's masterpiece, Aristotle gazes at the bust of Homer implying a quest for answers in the murky shadows of history and a yearning for narrative certainty in the epic scale of the poet's work. There is a revelatory quality in the act of contemplation through a grasp of a dimly perceivable historical truth. The "long arching journey of the baseball" (318) similarly offers an opportunity for transcendence in the ultimate

knowledge, which the novel continually alludes to, in a vast network of interconnected meaning that an understanding of the ball's trajectory mysteriously seems capable of revealing.

It is also significant that Shay moves west from New York to Phoenix as the city shares its name with the mythical bird that can rise from the flames. Nick aims to begin a new life, from the fires of his dark past, where he can be reborn and where his guilt for his earlier crime can be rescinded. To reach catharsis Nick must find peace not only with his delinquent past, but with the loss of his parents. The ball stands in for "the mystery of loss" (97) as a totem of this and other acts of searching for redemption. When his mother dies, Nick remembers his emotions: "I felt suffused with her truth, spread through as if with water, color or light. I thought she'd entered the deepest place I could provide" (804). The imagery of subterranean surrender and acceptance marks the theme of tragedy moving towards hope as I highlighted earlier. This passage is another allusion to catabasis with the underworld as the place of the dead where answers are to be found for the willing hero.

Nick's relationship with his mother points to an oedipal subtext emphasised further by the retribution he takes in shooting his surrogate father figure, George Manza. George is the local pool hustler who takes Nick under his wing at one point, telling him to stay in school. George hands Nick a loaded gun and, as he sits facing Shay, provocatively asks him to pull the trigger. An involuntary impulse leads the seventeen year old Nick to oblige. Manza's murder can be read as a subconscious act Nick commits against vanished paternal security to cope with failure. Critics such as David Cowart have emphasised the oedipal forces at play; Cowart suggests that Nick "struggles with Furies that take the form of filial guilt, sexual remorse, and forces

that make him live at a distance" (199). Living "at a distance" prevents Nick from moving forward towards emotional maturity until much later in his life. The oedipal references are in keeping with the baseball narrative's theme of infantilising men, thereby inhibiting their potential for growth.

Not only does *Underworld* draw from mythic narratives, the novel highlights how its characters construct personal myths as a means of ordering and defining their sense of self. Nick fabricates a myth about his father in an attempt to understand his abandonment. He invents an elaborate story that his father, Jimmy, was "wasted" (106) by the mob in a revenge shooting. For years, his brother Matt tries to persuade him that the story is a fantasy, but Nick is unable to let go of the contrived explanation for his father's disappearance. In the epilogue, Nick wrestles with the manner and implications of his father's abandonment. He says: "The earth opened up and he stepped inside [...] I think he went under. I don't think he wanted a fresh start or a new life or even an escape [...] The failure it brought down on us does not diminish" (808-9). As Graley Herren argues, the language used by Nick in the description of his father's leaving implies an association with mythology (456). In Nick's imagination it is as if Jimmy is being drawn into the underworld. The weight of failure carries onto the son who was abandoned by an imagined and strongly felt patriarchal order. The "failure it brought down on us" cannot be lifted because of the damage and emotional impact of the event that has been given no context or meaning. Nick will carry the failure of his father's abandonment for the rest of his life. His feelings towards his disappeared father are echoed by his response to his mother's passing in the symbolism of going under into cavernous retreat. Ultimate acceptance of these two events will only be reached in the novel's epilogue.

While I have highlighted the mythic in *Underworld*, this reading alone fails to do justice to the work. A novel with a mythic title, a plot centred on a lost baseball and an abandoned male protagonist with longstanding father issues has all the hallmarks of the classic baseball narrative. However, *Underworld* counters many mythic foundations, so while I have pointed to the ubiquitous nature of mythology in the novel, these references are not symptomatic of a writer caught in the confines of universal and mythic narratives. Instead, *Underworld* shows an author with a postmodern aesthetic, who both conforms and destabilises to very deliberate effect. While, in one sense, Nick fits the mould of the Odyssean hero on personal journey of self-discovery, on a closer reading he is atypical. While the classic baseball protagonist follows Odysseus' cyclical homeward search to his Ithaca, Shay tries to escape the Bronx of his past. While Odysseus leaves his son to begin his epic journey, Shay is abandoned by his own father.

The mythic narrative tends towards formulaic stories with archetypal characters and repeated narrative arcs. In contrast, *Underworld* is structurally complex and innovative because the unfolding of the story is non-linear and fragmented. The novel presents a world of vast complexity and interconnectedness where stories and characters intersect and weave. Mythical readings can oversimplify the text. Herren suggests that Nick's imagining of Jimmy's descent into the underworld is like Hades capturing Persephone. However, such direct comparisons appear contrived as Jimmy does not return as Persephone does, nor is his journey forced; rather, it is a conscious choice. DeLillo's anti-mythic sensibility is most pronounced when he exposes the troubling nature of myth; he recognises stories constructed and maintained to uphold ideals and claims about experience and the

legitimacy of certain narratives. Baseball is so fitting for this endeavour due to its own mythopoeic past in regards to the fabled story of its inception and the dubious Spalding ball used to corroborate this fallacy. DeLillo's thinking shares much with Roland Barthes who claimed that myth turns history into nature by endorsing an accepted order and rationalisation of the status quo. Barthes writes that myth "organises a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth. A world wide open wallowing in the evident. It establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (143). *Underworld* presents a world of enormous depth and ambiguity, a world that exists beneath the surface with anything but "blissful clarity". DeLillo does not value a traditional or accepted version of history, but the anecdotal and personal stories of a social and cultural historiography unified by the quest for the treasured ball and the failure of its sacralisation. Philip Loeffler suggests that this is achieved "through a particular type of storytelling and respective plot elements that reflect processes of individual commemoration rather than historical grand narratives" (96). *Underworld* depicts Cold War America, but significant historical events are a mere backdrop: for example, the Cuban missile crisis is indirectly portrayed through the paranoid stand-up routine of Lenny Bruce. Gorbachev's relationship with the West is presented through an anecdotal story about baseball and the shape of the birthmark on his head, and the Soviet's first atom bomb explosion is set against the opening baseball game. Fictional and real life characters merge as does the historical and the invented. Instead of collective memory feeding into a grand narrative, characters are determined to retain divergent and personal accounts. When Nick speaks about hearing the 1951 game, he explains that he had to listen alone.

DeLillo shares with Barthes a criticism of myth because it fundamentally disconnects history from language so that chosen signs are codified as unbreachable and therefore possess absolute meaning. The breadth and ambition of *Underworld* works to dispel the authority of an objective history. The failure of myth that DeLillo highlights is a lack of potential for interpretation. The novel suggests that history resides outside a unique epistemological framework and is conceivable in a convergent space of pining individual narratives and memories.

DeLillo's fiction falls between an homage to baseball and an ironic inversion of its ethos. Baseball nostalgia, to use a phrase from *White Noise* (1984), constitutes both "American magic and dread" (19). As Ladino writes of *Underworld*: "The back and forth between induced and frustrated – or sincere and ironic – nostalgia prevents us from being passive spectators" (7). The reader must continually reposition their understanding as they are guided between seemingly extreme positions in unison. While appreciation for baseball may be sincere, as a synecdoche for America it is partly ironic.

The baseball novels with most artistic depth invariably focus on failure with protagonists forced to face the implications of their own ruin. Yet DeLillo's portrayal of baseball, whilst ultimately in keeping with this aesthetic, is distinct. Whilst works such as Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) transpose mythology and epic qualities onto baseball, they do little to subvert or complicate these analogies. Other classic baseball works such as Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973) are harsh parodies of the ludicrous nature of America's national pastime. In fact, Roth's depiction bears little fondness for the sport in its slightly mocking humour. DeLillo will not follow either lead. The mythology of his baseball narrative expands exponentially

to encompass Cold War paranoia, a culture of waste, and the complexity of private histories in America. Most significantly, there is never a suggestion of ironic scorn towards the idea of baseball incorporating a genuinely American sacred. Although, as I have argued, DeLillo subverts the image of homely values, mythology, and memory his prose retains the elegiac lyricism of the baseball diamond's romantic heart. In *Mao*

// Bill explains what is behind the ambition for his writing:

When I was a kid I used to announce ballgames to myself. I sat in a room and made up the games and described the play-by-play out loud [...] There hasn't been a day since those days when I've felt nearly so good [...] And I've been trying to write towards that kind of innocence ever since [...] it's the lost game of self, without doubt or fear (45-46).

The innocence of those early imaginings is the source and inspiration for creativity that Gray is desperate to regain. The imaginative catalyst that Bill craves is rooted in his boyhood imagination, like the mythology of baseball's inception itself according to the legend, rooted in Abner Graves's childhood memory. Gray speaks of the joyous feeling he recalls in the absence of "doubt or fear". The author/protagonist's sentiment towards writing and innocence does not contain a hint of irony. DeLillo, through Gray, celebrates a need for fiction to resist the pastiche elements of postmodernism. In *Underworld*, Nick's explanation that his need for the ball is "all about losing" (97) captures the essence of the mood of eternal memories with the lingering fear of something always being inextricably lost. At each pivotal moment, the reader follows the trajectory of the narrative arc from faith through deceit and tragedy, before finally reaching hope. The pastoral and pure landscape of the baseball narrative is always in decline. It is forever disappearing as the nostalgic or despairing fan yearns for its poetic and vital recompense.

Reinventing the Past: Baseball Conclusion

Written almost thirty years apart, *The UBA* and *Underworld* are linked by their experimental styles and their focus on the mythology integral to the baseball narrative. Baseball functions in distinct ways in these texts, but both employ the sport's aesthetics to explore complex ideas about history, identity and failure. Their differences illustrate the breadth of postmodern sports fiction and the diverse characteristics its texts can take. Where *Underworld* is expansive, *The UBA* is focused on detail. *Underworld* is fragmented, jumping back and forth between forty years of Cold War history. Coover's work is chronological, spanning only seven days, before the final metaphysical chapter in the Association's distant future. Yet, for all their obvious differences, both novels hinge on pivotal individual pitches as moments of world-shattering failure.

The fateful 'beanball' that kills Damon Rutherford and the failing pitch of Ralph Branca are defining events for each protagonist who are removed from the action through their positions as onlookers. Neither one is a fan or spectator in the traditional sense. The young Nick Shay listens on his radio in solitude, broken-hearted by defeat, while Henry Waugh has crafted the whole scenario that he plays out alone in his apartment. In both cases these incidents are internalised and compulsively analysed, turning deeply private moments of play into focal points for over-intellectualisation, guilt, obsession and angst. This is sport's and therefore sports fiction's compelling appeal: in an instant change can occur and completely reset the course of a game. Both pitches act as catalysts for a drastic shift in perspective. While fiction may rely on instances of sudden transition, these two events are marked for their continued

association with failure becoming points of unhealthy fixation. For Shay, Thomson's heroics, one afternoon in 1951, pale into insignificance when measured against Branca's defeat. For Henry, Damon's previous great feats are completely overshadowed by his premature death.

Traditional sports narratives may show moments of individual failure, but they would be followed by redemptive depictions of heroes channelling one loss or setback to become stronger and enabling them to claim victory by the close. In Coover's and DeLillo's novels the form of redemption is far less linear or simple. Failing in itself is not avenged or overcome, but incorporated into personal understanding. Nick's life is defined by the occasion he witnessed his beloved team's most iconic defeat. In *The UBA*, Henry has lost the imagined son he has never had and, with his death, must re-evaluate the extent of his own failures.

Waugh stares at the merciless dice while Shay focuses on the treasured ball as a memento of defeat. On one level, Nick's possession of the ball is a physical embodiment of lost youth; it is his connection to a precise time in his own past in which the fabric of his consciousness was irreconcilably altered. Henry does not know where to turn when his baseball game lurches in an unexpected direction. He first looks to the mechanisms of his design. He muses: "if he didn't know better, he'd suspect the dice of malevolence, rather than mere mindlessness" (163). In his imagination, the dice change from a tool for randomness to something with wilful malice acting against him. Shay's ball and Waugh's dice are instruments of each game but, rather than inanimate objects, they are each divested with the power to facilitate, what Shay refers to as "the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss" (97).

As a boy, Shay is obsessed with the number thirteen that he finds forever linked to Branca's failure. He cannot stop finding connections to the pitcher's shirt number:

All day thirteen was coming out of the woodwork. He had to get a pencil to list them all.

Branca wears thirteen.

Branca won thirteen games this year [...]

The month and day of yesterday's game. Ten three. Add the digits, you get thirteen [...] Take the name Branca – this is where he started going crazy. Take the name Branca and assign a number to each letter based on its position in the alphabet [...] The *B* is two. The *r* is eighteen. And so on and so on. You end up with thirty-nine. What is thirty-nine? It is the number which, when you divide it by the day of the month of the game, gives you thirteen (678-9).

Shay must irrationally search for reasons and patterns in an event that has deeply scarred him; he will go on to pay thousands of dollars to possess the ball, claiming it is the only thing he absolutely must own. DeLillo is playing into several ideas. Firstly, the novel explores ideas of sentiment, nostalgia and longing. In Nick's case, records are a method of retrieving historical accuracy. American sports rely on a remarkable wealth of figures and statistics. Once the game is over, analysis goes even further with arithmetical specificity.⁵² In *Underworld* the appeal for fans such as Nick, Brian and Marvin is to be consumed by the detail of historical contests and the documentary obsessiveness to record a game with precise statistical scrutiny. This level of detail leads to the minutia of remembering something seeming inconsequential like a misplaced throw in a forgotten game many decades ago. In *Underworld*, Marvin's wife, Eleanor, pleads with him to forget his absurd quest for Thomson's homer

⁵² Sabermetrics has become a fashionable means of analysing baseball records and data. In Michael Lewis' *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* (2003) the author explores how the Oakland Athletic's general manager, Billy Beane, sought to assemble a team by disregarding the traditional wisdom of baseball coaches in favour of rigorous statistical analysis to create a successful squad at a fraction of the price of other teams. In 2011 a film of the book was released popularising the theory and terminology.

recognising that the ball is symbolic of something other than a baseball souvenir: “You can’t precisely locate the past, Marvin. Give it up. Retire it. For your own good” (322). However, these men cannot relinquish their obsessions so easily and the past shines brightly like the green light across Gatsby’s bay.

In *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) Paul Auster’s alter-ego A. comments on how baseball’s aesthetics documents the game with exacting precision: “There is a record of every game played, a statistic for every hit, error, and base on balls. One can measure performances against each other, compare players and teams, speak of the dead as if they were still alive” (124). Statistical detail lends order when the world beyond seems only chaotic particularly to characters like Waugh and Shay. It is from this confusion of universal chaos that Nick seeks liberation when he finds the number thirteen everywhere he looks. Auster too, touches on a recurring motif of baseball fiction with the dead returning to the land of the living. In classic baseball fiction such as *Shoeless Joe*, ghosts of former players emerge from the cornfields onto the baseball diamond. In *The Natural*, Roy Hobbs, although not killed, returns to the game after being shot early in his career. The novels in question are likewise drawn to spectral qualities. In the final pages of *The UBA* Damon reappears on the field to whisper to the actors in the “Parable of the Duel”. Likewise, *Underworld* evokes the mythology of a realm of the dead against a baseball backdrop.

If the dead live then the past is never forgotten. For both Waugh and Shay, the modern real-life game is less vivid in comparison to the glory of its past. The live game Nick watches in LA is a muted affair in comparison to the famous 1951 game that obsesses him. Characters in *Underworld* are preoccupied with nostalgic mementos of a bygone era collecting artifacts of baseball Americana. For all their subversions of the

baseball narrative, the connection to the game as a reminder of loss is at the heart of canonical baseball fiction and celebrated by both Coover and DeLillo. The game is inseparable from a well of American nostalgia and the failure to rejoin an imagined innocent centre. Yet as much as this desire for reunion is needed, both novels are suggestive of the dangers of living too fully in the past. Baseball's romanticised heritage obscures an even-handed assessment of its own story. After all, in the early twentieth century, thought of as the game's glory years, the colour line had not been broken and corruption in the sport was rife. Wistfulness clouds a view of history. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Frederic Jameson sees nostalgia as a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (135). As such, rather than a balanced appraisal of history, the past is a "glossy mirage" (135) of a cultural accepted version of events. The writers discussed recognise this reductive tendency, but in similar ways suggest a means of overturning a sentimentalised form of history-seeking.

Where I have highlighted a feature of the baseball narrative in its obsession with the past and an inability to move on, these works of fiction point to a redemptive sense of invention where a precise mood or special moment can be evoked with the roll of the dice or by running a finger along the texture of an old baseball's seam. *The UBA* and *Underworld* are remarkably drawn to the creative potential of baseball where the ghosts of the old game points to its fantasy future. Where poets such as Moore and Frost first saw an analogous relationship between the game and the act of creative writing, these works show how baseball can inspire the imagination. Baseball fiction draws from a spirit of play and invention. Henry has created an elaborate

baseball game that can elicit the noise of the fans, its folklore and even the players' lives outside the ballpark.

DeLillo also marvels at the creative spark of the national game. Nick does not witness the game he commemorates; he listened on the radio constructing the action in his mind. Shay distrusts the scratchy images of Thomson's homer preferring to preserve the memory of the event he experienced alone. Like Bill Gray's imagined baseball games as the inspiration for his later writing, so a sense of imaginative creation rests in the sport's nature. In the Prologue to *Underworld*, Russ Hodges is the broadcaster at the 1951 game who provides commentary on the action. In one section he is amazed at how the scope of the game can be imbued by its recording: "somebody hands you a piece of paper filled with letters and numbers and you have to make a ball game out of it [...] and it's remarkable [...] how much summer and dust the mind can manage to order up from a single Latin letter lying flat" (25).⁵³ Henry weeps with grief at a ballgame made of just such simple Latin letters. The "summer and dust" he invents become inseparable from the novel's reality. The game is given a second, perhaps greater life, by its recording and creation. For both authors, although writing in the tradition of the game's melancholy aesthetic, the most uplifting aspect of baseball is drawing from a failure to recapture its past, towards the possibility of creativity when the game can be generative to the inextricable power of the boundless imagination.

⁵³ Early radio broadcasts of baseball games relied on commentators not actually present in the stadiums, but receiving details of the game from a telegraph wire from which they would construct play-by-play descriptions of the action as if witnessing it live (Tygiel, 2000, 68).

Conclusion

I no longer have the stamina to endure the frustration. Writing is frustration — it's daily frustration, not to mention humiliation. It's just like baseball: you fail two-thirds of the time. ⁵⁴

Phillip Roth

Perhaps it was true that through defeat men were made, and victors actually lost, with every triumph, the vital strength that found exercise only in recovering strength. Perhaps the spirit grew greater in achieving the understanding that was first confused and then exquisitely clear after having lost⁵⁵

James Salter, *The Hunters*

On the 7th June 2017 a small museum opened in Helsingborg, Sweden. The museum contains over seventy products most of which have been forgotten or, until now, intentionally blotted from memory. Each is noteworthy for its immediate, and long term, lack of success. It is called The Museum of Failure.⁵⁶ On display curator, Samuel West, has collected innovations and inventions from around the world where some of the biggest global companies have developed products memorable for being marketing and commercial fiascos. The Museum of Failure has received widespread attention due to its unusual exhibits. In the collection visitors can see examples of the shockingly unpopular Harley-Davidson cologne (improbably marketed as the 'biker perfume'), Bic For Her (a line of pens just for women), and an optical head-mounted display designed to be worn like glasses called Google Glass which was removed from

⁵⁴ Taken from McGrath's article in *The New Yorker* "Goodbye Frustration: Pen Put Aside, Roth Talks."

⁵⁵ Salter, 72.

⁵⁶ The museum's website promotes other failure-themed events it hosts including a music night consisting of a live concert of famous failed music and a tasting evening of failed beers from regional microbreweries.

production due to safety and privacy concerns (Haynes). With the opening of the museum it seems that a reappraisal of failure is far from an area of distant academic attention, but meaningful to contemporary culture.

Yet, the version of failure that this museum presents is essentially in accord with its popular interpretation. What must be remembered is that these marketing blunders have in no way crippled these global companies. Their miscalculations are framed as costly, but humorous missteps. In most cases, the corporations have written off the investment and continued to flourish. Furthermore, in business the failure narrative of entrepreneurial success, where an individual makes good after a series of setbacks due to their unbreakable ambition and perseverance, has been perpetuated. In fact, the business world often misinterprets Beckett's most famous words about failing better as a mantra for business tenacity and capitalist determination. It seems that every prominent entrepreneur has a clichéd story of adversity before gaining recognition and wealth. 'Failing better' has been co-opted by the corporate establishment to mean coming back stronger, precisely because of the adversaries encountered. However, I would suggest that Beckett's phrase has a different meaning. For an artist, failure is a reward in itself. In many ways it is all there is. Beckett is referring to failing with grace, failing as a noble act; it is not a business executive's definition of rising to the top.

At the start of this thesis I explored how sports enact archetypal narratives. The real life examples of athletes Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods, Oscar Pistorius or OJ Simpson show sportsmen at an elite level who, through failings of character, suffered spectacular falls from grace in the full glare of the public spotlight. Their foibles are exposed and their wealth and fame counts for nothing when their successes unravel.

These failures are, portrayed in the popular imagination, akin to Greek myths or Shakespearian tragedies. In this respect, failure in sports stories are not only common, but perversely craved because they fit so wonderfully with classical drama. The narratives have descending character arcs with heroes undone by poetic weakness to fall from their pedestals. These are sportsman who cheat, are caught cheating in their private life, or are even tried for murder.

However, this paradigm does not fit so neatly in the most ambitious sports fiction in contemporary American writing. In all the works I have covered, the protagonists have not been professional athletes, but fans, obsessives and amateurs. True American sportsmen appear: footballer Frank Gifford in *A Fan's Notes*, baseball players Bobby Thomson and Andy Pafko in *Underworld*, basketballer Michael Jordan in Wideman's *Hoop Roots* and Alexie's short stories, but they have only minor roles acting as contrasts to the characters' inadequacies and suffering. The protagonists who watch these athletes have their failures drawn in more complex forms by brushstrokes that are aware of the narrative of the sportsman's fall, but take inspiration from differing notions of defeat. Each portrayal is vividly written and original in outlook. These works are not stories about the athlete's traditional failure on the field of play, but pieces about the breakdown of narrative forms, depictions of amateur frustration and marginalisation, or pieces that interrogate how failure is an integral component in personal understanding; in some cases these works combine all three of these elements. When Exley laments that he will never have Gifford's perfect timing it becomes apparent that he does not truly crave the footballer's sheer poise, but the acceptance as a child from his father that he never received. One type of failure enlarges so as to hide a more central other. In *Underworld*, Nick Shay

cherishes the “mystery of loss” (97) he commemorates in Branca’s baseball. It is not the pivotal Giants-Dodgers game that fascinates him, but how failure can be incorporated into his very being and how he can live with its haunting implications. The ball as a symbol shows how one precise and distant moment can act as a centrifugal force around which one can judge one’s own life. In each of these works failure in sports is a catalyst for reimagining.

Sport provides a definitive goal. However, the characters and authors discussed have not reached a victorious endpoint where nothing more can be achieved or the story is completely resolved. In these works failure points to a creative openness of form; its nature means that inconsistencies posit greater scope. Jean-Paul Sartre writes: “In one sense, there is success in failure for the me refuses, it remains open, it has not been ‘caught,’ it does not allow itself to become frozen” (121). The static aspect of orthodox success that Sartre pinpoints is deemed restrictive and far less inspiring than its opposite form. Failure or breakdown can be the most liberating state and unleash an alternative capacity to process affirmative reappraisal and disrupt the narrative of success and assumptions about progress. Failure is a route towards the denial of the ascendant logics of power and control. If it is disentangled from its habitual usage, failure becomes a critique that prompts deviations from rhetoric and institutions of authority by exposing how, as Halberstam suggests, “alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent” (88).

In the works studied, I have explored how each failure differs; in fact no two are alike. Wideman’s is the most political, Exley’s the most personal, while Coover’s takes the greatest interest in the philosophical. Failure inspired by sporting narratives

spans genres, styles and ethnicities. Failure is not only liberating for sports fiction's protagonists, it offers artists the opportunity and form to grapple with some of the most profound questions that we can face. This choice of wrestling analogy was deliberate; sport permeates language just as failure permeates American literature. In each case I have analysed authors whose concerns hinge on the act of writing itself and the problems and opportunities it creates. Jones highlights how in the nineteenth century failure in American writing "comes to seem less of personal struggle than something woven into the fabric of literary creation, a precondition of artistic expression" (159). The writers I have studied take this idea one step further incorporating and even celebrating textual inconsistencies, battles with narrative techniques, and problems of authorial authority. They find only potential in breakdown and freedom in the fissures of literary convention. Each has expressed reservations about the labelling of their works as 'postmodern', yet their self-referential qualities and distrust of metanarratives are significant features. All five novelists draw attention to the conundrums of language to convey stories and characters. Wideman implores his readers to pity the writer as he strives to make sense of his material. He articulates that writing is a continual process of failure to ever achieve the same freedom as the street ballplayer experiences on the court. Coover draws attention to the need to divorce the text from its creator. An imagined baseball league is the perfect vehicle for him to express the melancholic nature of loss. Alexie must find a way to integrate tradition as he values the oratory over the written. Exley has produced an entire novel about the torture of self-expression and the excruciating ordeal of living as an artist. While in *End Zone*, DeLillo shows the elation

of feeling when meaning is stripped from words. Language is never simply a means of expression, but a concept that must be interrogated and broken down.

The writers I have highlighted recognise the paradoxes in failing connected to the implication that failure is in fact a journey. With maturity failure is rethought and so it becomes important in its own right. In a *Guardian* article from 2013 on how authors respond to failure, Julian Barnes eloquently suggests the distinction between misfortune and glory grows more complex with time and necessary reflection:

When I was growing up, failure presented itself as something clear and public: you failed an exam, you failed to clear the high-jump bar. And in the grown-up world, it was the same: marriages failed, your football team failed to gain promotion from what was then the Third Division (South). Later, I realised that failure could also be private and hidden: there was emotional, moral, sexual failure; the failure to understand another person, to make friends, to say what you meant. But even in these new areas, the binary system applied: win or lose, pass or fail. It took me a long time to understand the nuances of success and failure, to see how they are often intertwined. (Barnes, 2013)

Once more, success and failure are not oppositional forces but interwoven to offer an alternative state of mind; to understand failure is not to accept defeat in order to be hardened, but to confront an essential aspect of human experience. It is in this regard that writing on sports has proved so efficacious and where American fiction has found forms to inspire a distinct sporting aesthetic. The masculinised sporting depiction of Hemingway or Mailer has given way to narratives from the side-lines: of ostracised figures sceptical of traditional heroism. These are works where the drama of sport is fused into writers' exertions to achieve artistic expression and meaning. For American authors, sports continue to hold a special place. As Philip Roth lay down his pen to retire from writing his final literary simile could not help but refer to both failure and baseball.

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