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THE FIRST PREMISE OF THIS ESSAY IS THAT DAVID FOSTER Wallace, one of the most influential American authors of the past thirty years, was a tennis player who became a writer rather than a writer who merely treated tennis as a theme. At first glance this claim might seem counterintuitive, even perversely so. Wallace's literary contemporaries have often described him as a writer's writer, one who—posthumous celebrity notwithstanding—left his deepest mark on his novel-writing peers. And though critics have readily acknowledged the centrality of tennis themes to Wallace's iconic novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), they too have tended to describe his significance chiefly in literary historical terms. Indeed, the most prominent scholarly accounts of Wallace's career have characterized his work as a hinge between the postmodernism of the second half of the twentieth century and the post-postmodernism, post-irony, or "New Sincerity" of the early decades of the twenty-first.[1] According to Marshall Boswell, whose 2003 monograph *Understanding David Foster Wallace* decisively influenced the later course of Wallace studies, Wallace's signature achievement was to have diagnosed the aesthetic and philosophical limitations of postmodernism in order to "chart a new direction for literary practice" (1).[2]

Nevertheless, there are reasons to resist the idea that Wallace's lifelong interest in tennis served simply as fuel for his writerly ambitions. Having played the sport seriously throughout high school and into his early years of college (he later maintained that he had achieved the status of a "near-great junior tennis player" [*String Theory* 3]), Wallace

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repeatedly claimed that his experience as a young athlete shaped his evolving sense of self. In fact, in a 1996 essay that first appeared in *Esquire* under the title "The String Theory," he identified tennis culture as the dominant influence on his teenage years: "Most of my best friends were also tennis players, and on a regional level we were fairly successful, and we thought of ourselves as extremely good players. Tennis and our proficiency at it were tremendously important to us—a serious junior gives up a lot of his time and freedom to develop his game and it can very easily come to constitute a big part of his identity and self-worth" (72). As Wallace makes clear here and in other essays, his own "identity" was forged in the crucible of competitive tennis matches. When he reached the limit of his potential at the age of fifteen, and "kids [he'd] been beating the year before all of a sudden seemed overpowering" (13), he experienced it as a life-altering disappointment. In "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" (1991), he comments on the effects of his gradual decline in the junior ranks: "Midwest junior tennis was also my initiation into true adult sadness. . . . I began, very quietly, to resent my physical place in the great schema" (13, 15). In these lines, Wallace not only links his budding tennis career to his early development, but also hints at a deeper connection between his failures in the sport and his well-documented bouts of depression later in life. The fact that he wrote four autobiographically tinged tennis essays in the half decade surrounding the publication of *Infinite Jest*, which is set between a junior tennis academy and a halfway house, only serves to underscore how deeply Wallace connected his creative process and personal trajectory to his status as an ex-athlete.

The second premise of this essay is that Wallace's struggle to come to terms with his rise and fall as a junior tennis player manifested itself, in his literature and in his life, as an investigation into the nature of competitive individualism in the United States. In his 1992 essay "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," he makes explicit the connection between the popularity of sport in the United States and the logic of American culture:

> Here is a theory. Top athletes are compelling because they embody the comparison-based achievement we Americans revere—fast*est*, strong*est*—and because they do so in a totally unambiguous way. Questions of the best plumber or best managerial accountant are impossible even to define, whereas the

> best relief pitcher, free-throw shooter, or female tennis player is, at any given time, a matter of public statistical record (26).

These lines suggest that there is something both culturally specific and socially significant about the ways "Americans" draw meaning from competitive sports, and particularly from individual accomplishment. In fact, his focus on the unambiguous results in sporting competition implicitly correlates the US fascination with athletics with a broader societal obsession with "meritocracy," defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary* (for which Wallace served on the usage panel) as "A system in which advancement is based on individual ability or achievement." Throughout his tennis writings, Wallace characterizes sport as an activity that simultaneously tests the merit of its participants and undergirds a cultural system that elevates merit-based testing to its highest value.

While it has become a commonplace of contemporary sports scholarship that "meritocracy" is an ideological construct perpetrated by ruling elites, Wallace's work continually goes down into the trenches—or rather, onto the court and into the stands—to examine what it actually means to construct a world (and a worldview) on "comparison-based achievement." This helps to explain why Wallace goes into such painstaking detail in describing what tennis success entails: the physical and mental stamina required of elite players as well as the curious emotional distance they seem to possess toward their own accomplishments. Just as important, it illuminates why tennis was so fundamental to his mode of thought; he believed that by taking the demands of this individual sport seriously, he could clarify his sense of contemporary American cultural life. It was, for Wallace, an inquiry that was alternately depressing and consoling. At times, as for burnt-out Orin Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, tennis becomes a reminder of failure and "unhappy youth," in that "all [his] dreams seem to open briefly with some sort of competitive-tennis situation" (2006, 46). At other times, as when Wallace watches the semi-great Michael Joyce, the system seems worth its sacrifices: "the radical compression of [Joyce's] attention and self has allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art—something few of us get to be" (*String Theory* 85).

In the two decades since the publication of *Infinite Jest*, several Wallace critics have productively examined the thematic relevance of tennis to the novel.[3] More recently, following the 2016 release of Wallace's complete tennis essays in a Library of America edition, scholars

have also begun to assess Wallace's analysis of contemporary sport.[4] To date, however, no overarching interpretive framework has been developed for studying Wallace's tennis writings, a category I employ here to indicate the totality of his tennis essays plus *Infinite Jest*. In this essay, I attempt to provide such a framework, both by attending to recent calls within Wallace studies to situate his work within "a larger literary and cultural matrix" (Burn 2011, 467) and by putting Wallace's tennis writings into dialogue with current debates in sports studies about sport and meritocracy. In establishing that framework, I also draw on statements linking competition and equality by several prominent postwar American tennis players, including Arthur Ashe and Billie Jean King. Wallace himself rarely focused on the racial or gendered dimensions of meritocratic sports thinking, and recent scholarship by Lucas Thompson, Clare Hayes-Brady, and Samuel Cohen has convincingly argued that issues of race and gender are a major blind spot in his work.[5] Nevertheless, Ashe and King fundamentally shaped the tennis world Wallace encountered, and I believe there is value in situating him within a historical line that he himself did not always recognize. The final section of the essay analyzes two examples of tennis writing, Andre Agassi's acclaimed memoir *Open: An Autobiography* (2009) and Claudia Rankine's essay on Serena Williams in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), that take up Wallace's exploration of meritocratic sports thinking and intensify his critique of the culture of competition. Even though Wallace could not have foreseen the arguments about tennis presented in these works, they are a testament to the ongoing relevance of his ideas about merit in contemporary literary and sporting culture.

TENNIS AND MERIT

Wallace's assertion in "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart" that achievement in elite sports is "totally unambiguous" runs counter to the current thinking in sports studies. With this phrase, Wallace invokes the so-called level playing field, the idea that the athletic field of play (or in this case court) provides a more-or-less objective arena for establishing comparative ability—meritocratic in the literal sense. Over the past twenty years, much of the humanistic scholarship in sports studies has challenged the notion that organized athletics creates equal conditions for all participants. In *The Journal of American History*'s 2014 "state of the field" issue on sport, Amy Bass writes that understanding

"why [] people so passionately believe in the concept of a level playing field with so much evidence to the contrary" is a "basic question" of sports history (150); Susan Cahn adds that "our own scholarship proves that there are no level playing fields, in sport or elsewhere" (183).[6] Of course, an overwhelming amount of research suggests that individual merit does not determine one's economic or social status in the twenty-first century United States.[7] And significant barriers to access certainly continue to exist in modern sporting competition. Already in the 1970s, sports scholar Allen Guttmann had observed, "Theorists can comfortably assert that sports are rationally organized 'on the basis of the universalistic criterion of achievement,' but the tenet of equal access to the contest has consistently limped behind the much more completely institutionalized tenet of equal conditions of competition" (30). However, where the recent trend in the field departs from earlier scholarship is in its underlying assumption that modern sport lacks even the most basic claims to validity in its measurement of performance and/or talent. These scholars not only foreclose the possibility that relatively "equal conditions of competition" could exist; they also imply that sports reproduce inequality in exactly the same way that contemporary society does.

Wallace's writings shed light on an alternative way of thinking that was foundational to the postwar development of sports discourse, and tennis discourse more specifically. According to this line of thought, not only can competitive sports offer a "level playing field" that directly contrasts with the unlevel playing field of the United States as a whole, but they also provide, for this very reason, a model for US society itself. Two of the most influential proponents of this view were Arthur Ashe and Billie Jean King, iconic American tennis players of the second half of the twentieth century and the namesakes of the US Open's stadium court and tennis center grounds respectively. Against the backdrop of the profound changes of the post-1960s era, both Ashe and King described tennis as a microcosm of a more open, progressive society. Between the lines of the court, they insisted, the standard forms of race, gender, and class discrimination were suspended. For King, this was the major takeaway from her famed 1973 Battle of the Sexes match against Bobby Riggs. In a 1998 interview about the match significantly titled "Billie Jean King: Leveling the Playing Field," she asserted: "Sports are a visual example of what the world could be: People from all sorts of

backgrounds, working hard and winning" (qtd. in Drucker 102). And Ashe offered a variation on this argument in his posthumous memoir *Days of Grace* (1993) when speaking of race and affirmative action: "What I and others want is an equal chance, under one set of rules, as on a tennis court" (153).[8] By no means do I want to discount the growing body of work in sports studies on radicalized athletes who have questioned the politics and economics of US sports—and recent events such as the NFL and NBA protests indicate a resurgence of the very political tradition these scholars have identified. But we simply cannot comprehend the cultural history of sport in the United States without taking this line of meritocratic sports seriously.

Ashe's and King's endorsements of the meritocratic ideal of sport, formulated in the same decade that Wallace produced most of his tennis writings, capped a transformative period in tennis history. 1968 was in many ways the *annus mirabilis* of the second half of the twentieth century, a time of political upheaval from Paris to Prague as well as a signature year in modern sport, when the black-gloved fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Olympics helped usher in the transition from mainstream Civil Rights to Black Power. It also marked the birth of the so-called Open era in tennis, when all players, amateur and professional, became eligible to compete in Grand Slam tournaments for the first time. With the inclusion of players who did not have to rely on family wealth or the largesse of tennis's elite institutions—a decision, it should be noted, that was initially contested by the International Lawn Tennis Federation—the sport gained spectators and participants alike. The total sports television time dedicated to tennis rose from 2% to 13%, and the number of active tennis players in the United States grew from 5.5 million in 1960 to 20 million in 1976.[9]

In his canonical account of modern men's tennis, *Sporting Gentlemen: Men's Tennis from the Age of Honor to the Cult of the Superstar* (1995), E. Digby Baltzell claims that 1968 inaugurated a cultural shift in modern tennis, as the "upper-class" values that had long dominated the sport gave way to a democratizing spirit (12).[10] And indeed, the start of the Open era coincided with a profound change in the geography and demography of the sport. Not unlike the way the GI bill expanded access to higher education in the 1940s and 1950s, the "tennis boom" of the 1960s and 1970s created spaces for new recreational and competitive players.[11] Looking back at his junior career in Southern

California in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Pete Sampras contrasted the wealthy tradition-laden brand of tennis on the East Coast with the new "populist branch" of the sport: "a year-round outdoor game that anyone could play with limited resources," where "there were no socially intimidating overtones" and "public courts sprang up all over the place" (3–4). Though Sampras's description of California tennis undoubtedly downplays the costs of coaching and competition that all aspiring professionals needed—he later recounts the financial strain that tournament-level tennis put on his parents—it indicates the general increase in access to tennis outside of the sport's traditional bastion in the Northeast. When Wallace began his career in rural Illinois in the mid-1970s, he stepped onto a surface transformed by the tennis boom. As he wrote in "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," "In late childhood I learned how to play tennis on the blacktop courts of a small public park carved from farmland that had been nitrogenized too often to farm anymore" (*String Theory* 3). This was the altered tennis landscape of the Open era.

It was fitting—though certainly not fated—that Ashe, an amateur African American player who had grown up in segregated Richmond, became the first men's champion of the newly minted US Open in 1968. More than any other event, Ashe's victory at Forest Hills popularized the belief that the "Open" era signaled not only a change in rules at the elite level but also a change in the social constitution of the sport: more integrated, more democratic, and more accessible. In the interview portions of John McPhee's *Levels of the Game* (1969), a nonfiction account of Ashe's semifinal match against the white American professional Clark Graebner that remains one of the most important tennis books ever written, Ashe articulated a direct link between meritocratic performance and effective social change: "I define the cause as the most good for the most people in the least amount of time. . . . Nobody listens to a loser" (qtd. in McPhee 145). Recent scholarship on Ashe has emphasized the evolution of his thinking on sports and race within the shifting contours of the Black liberation movement.[12] Yet even as he took on a more active political role, becoming a leading voice in the sporting boycott of South Africa, Ashe remained committed to the belief that American institutions could become fairer by adhering to the logic of athletic competition. He also mobilized the history of Black achievement in sport as an argument for the power of meritocratic methods to

bring about social transformation. For instance, in the introduction to the first volume of his groundbreaking work of early sports scholarship, *A Hard Road to Glory: a History of the African-American Athlete* (1988), Ashe claimed that the accomplishments of postwar Black athletes offered "proof positive . . . of what the African-American can do when allowed to compete equally in a framework governed by a set of rules" (x). This comment anticipated his later description in *Days of Grace* of the tennis court as a model for US society—with "one set of rules" that ensure an "equal chance" for everyone.

At the same time that Ashe was developing his meritocratic sports argument in dialogue with the Black liberation movement, Billie Jean King honed her beliefs about tennis and merit by way of a deep (if fraught) engagement with second-wave feminism. King's 1973 victory over former men's Grand Slam winner (and noted anti-feminist) Bobby Riggs, viewed by an estimated 48 million people in the United States and 90 million worldwide, brought an unprecedented degree of visibility to the women's movement of the 1970s. Yet in her own public statements, King expressed ambivalence about many elements of the feminist platform, and frequently voiced the opinion that sports were more effective than politics in transforming social attitudes. As King put it in an interview, "Tennis helps the women's movement just by doing. We're *there*, we're visual, like blacks in sports helped their movement. If people see us out there every day, that changes people's minds, not *talking* about it" (qtd. in Ware 153). In introducing this quotation, Susan Ware is undoubtedly right to observe that "the tensions between Billie Jean King and second-wave feminism replicated the classic mind/body split, with King coming down on the action side of feminism rather than the intellectual" (153). But King's views on the "Battle of the Sexes" match—and on her career more generally—also point to the limitations of the strong social constructivist framework Ware brings to her study. While Ware largely treats the result of the match as a *fait accompli*, an inescapable phase in the progression toward gender equality, King herself has insisted that the outcome was anything but certain. King agreed to play the match only after Riggs had defeated the top-ranked women's player, Margaret Court, and King has often said that despite the seeming ease of her straight-sets victory, she recognized the real possibility that she could lose after going down a break in the first set. In her autobiographical writings, King treats the match with

Riggs as a contingent event, subject to the vicissitudes of everything from the conditions of the courts to the psychology of the two players on the day of the match. This explains why King places so much emphasis on the difference between the verbal enunciations of gender equality she associated with the women's liberation movement and the embodied demonstration of that equality she believed she had accomplished. For King, as for Wallace, sport represents the particular challenge of forcing one to embody physically the propositions that others hold intellectually.

These assumptions about sport and merit structured the tennis universe that Wallace inhabited, first as a player in the mid-1970s and then as a writer in the 1990s. Long before his generational rivalry with literary figures such as Jonathan Franzen and William Vollman, he contemplated his standing vis-à-vis his tennis contemporaries: "I am about the same age and played competitive tennis in the same junior ranks as Tracy Austin, half a country away and several plateaus below her" (*String Theory* 27). And in the 1990s, even as he was ostensibly measuring himself against the high postmodern works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, he continued to devour the sports memoirs that promised insight into what it "might feel like to hold up that #1 finger and be able to *actually* mean it" (27). As he wrote in the Austin piece, "This is a type of mass-market book—the sports-star-'with'-somebody autobiography—that I seem to have bought and read an awful lot of, with all sorts of ups and downs and ambivalence and embarrassment, usually putting these books under something more highbrow when I get to the register" (25). Although Wallace goes on to say that Austin's memoir has "maybe finally broken my jones for the genre" (25), his tennis writings reveal that he had already internalized many of its conventions.

INFINITE TESTS

Like Ashe, King, Sampras, Austin, and countless other Open-era tennis players, Wallace seemed to believe, perhaps too reductively, that the sporting arena delimits a unique cultural sphere in which talent can be measured without bias. Unlike these tennis champions, however, he acknowledged the collective psychic costs of the US obsession with athletic competitions as well as its perceived societal benefits. If King's vision of a world based on the "visual example" of sport encodes a fundamental contradiction—it is literally impossible for everyone who

works hard to "win"—Wallace's worldview was shaped by the recognition that in a tournament-based structure like tennis, almost everyone loses. Indeed, the outlook of the non-winner becomes almost axiomatic in Wallace's tennis essays, the starting point for his discussions of professionals such as Tracy Austin, Michael Joyce and, in his final tennis essay of 2006, Roger Federer. Writing of his early fascination with Austin, he states: "I remember meditating, with all the intensity a fifteen-year-old can summon, on the differences that kept this girl and me on our respective sides of the TV screen. She was a genius and I was not. How must it have felt? I had some serious questions to ask her. I wanted, very much, her side of it" (*String Theory* 27–28). While Wallace often probed the thoughts and actions of elite tennis players ("her side of it"), his writings almost exclusively approached these players from our side of it, that is, from the side of the "ungreat athletes" who live in a world made to the great athlete's measure.

In his tennis essays of the early 1990s, Wallace analyzed the social psychology of the sport; in *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, the tennis world became the center of an entire fictional universe. The main plotline of the novel revolves around Hal Incandenza, a highly ranked junior player who lives and trains at the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), a boarding school and training center owned and operated by his family. Much of the novel, which takes place in the near future but draws on the cultural environment of the late twentieth century, focuses on the physical and mental demands of Hal and his fellow elite competitors. One section begins with the following description of the academy's daily grind: "A.M. drills, shower, eat, lab, class, class, eat, prescriptive-grammar exam, lab/class, conditioning run, P.M. drills, play challenge match, play challenge match, upper-body circuits in weight room, sauna, shower, slump to locker-room floor w/ other players" (2006, 95). In the style of *Infinite Jest* as a whole—and in keeping with Wallace's arguments in the Tracy Austin essay—this list of activities exhaustively (and exhaustingly) demonstrates how the repetitive nature of athletic practice inculcates young players into what we might call the ideology of sport. Juniors acquire a specific attitude towards tennis, which leads in turn to a specific disposition toward the world, reinforced even further by a specific vocabulary: "Be a Student of the Game"; "Be coachable"; "See yourself in your opponents" (176). In "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," Wallace writes, "for top athletes

clichés present themselves not as trite but simply as true, or perhaps not even as declarative expressions with qualities like depth or triteness or falsehood or truth but as simple imperatives that are either useful or not and, if useful, to be invoked and obeyed and that's all there is to it" (*String Theory* 38). In *Infinite Jest*, he explores how these clichés mold the very contours of tennis players' minds, from their most conscious thoughts to their most veiled desires.

As *Infinite Jest* progresses, Hal becomes the reader's most trusted informant on the life of the junior player, in part because he is both inside and outside of the game. A slightly more talented version, tennis-wise, of the young Wallace depicted in the nonfiction essays, Hal has a deep understanding of how tennis habituates him to certain modes of thought and action. Yet he also sees the broader context of athletic endeavor in ways that the academy's top player, the aptly named John Wayne, simply cannot. It is therefore appropriate that Hal offers the theory of tennis in the novel that most closely resembles Wallace's arguments in his nonfiction writings. During the "Big Buddies" mentoring session with E.T.A.'s younger kids, Hal explains how the competitive structure of the tennis academy embodies a broader social logic:

> The system's got inequality as an axiom. We know where we stand entirely in relation to one another. John Wayne's over me, and I'm over Struck and Shaw, who two years back were both over me but under Troeltsch and Schacht, and now are over Troeltsch who as of today is over Freer who's substantially over Schacht. . . . We're all on each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of individual. We're each deeply alone here. It's what we have in common this aloneness (112).

In this passage, Hal articulates how the individualist ethos of tennis perversely stitches together the very fabric of community in the academy: what the players have in common is "aloneness." It also highlights Wallace's characteristic move of pursuing the logic of meritocratic sports thinking to its ultimate—and often unpleasant—conclusion. Even if one accepts that the tennis court provides a level testing ground that rarely exists in other social arenas, one must also admit that by its very nature it enacts a steep hierarchy of value. You either win or you lose,

and that result determines your spot in the rankings. Within the system, equality of the condition of play is inseparable from the radically unequal outcomes of competition. Or to slightly alter the key line in the passage, tennis has both equality and inequality as axioms. As Hal says of junior tennis later in the novel: "You can be shaped, or you can be broken. There is not much in between" (176).

One likely reason Wallace set the novel in a junior tennis academy—rather than, say, on the ATP or WTA tours—was to indicate the totality of a competitive system visible to most people only at its upper echelons. In his essay on Joyce, the "79th best tennis player on planet earth," Wallace marvels at the ruthlessness of the sorting mechanism that exists just below tennis's highest tier: "The realities of the men's tennis tour bear about as much resemblance to the lush finals you see on TV as a slaughter-house does to a well-presented cut of restaurant sirloin" (*String Theory* 43, 47). In *Infinite Jest*, he takes the reader into the most gruesome part of the abattoir, revealing the lives of those juniors who are ground down and spit out even before they make it to the tour ("the Show"). At times, the novel depicts this elimination process in mathematical terms: "They know and we know that one very top junior in twenty even gets all the way to the Show. Much less survives there long" (111). But it also discloses the psychological and emotional suffering that such a cutthroat environment breeds, as when Orin Incandenza faces his future as a good-but-not-great junior who will never make it big:

> He was at that awful age for a low-70s player where age eighteen and the terminus of a junior career are looming and either: (1) you're going to surrender your dreams of the Show and go to college and play college tennis; or (2) you're going to get your full spectrum of gram-negative and cholera and amoebic-dysentery shots and try to eke out some kind of sad diasporic existence on a Eurasian satellite pro tour and try to hop those last few competitive plateaux up to Show-Caliber as an adult; or 3) or you don't know what you're going to do; and it's often an awful time (283).

Here and elsewhere, *Infinite Jest* describes competitive tennis in a language of systemic exploitation that almost seems lifted from a naturalist

novel. Yet like Wallace's tennis writings more generally, *Infinite Jest* remains conflicted in its attitude toward the system as a whole. Anyone who reads the passage on the "automatic beauty" of John Wayne's game will recognize Wallace's attraction to the pursuit of comparative superiority (260). Anyone who reads Hal's most depressed meditations on the "crushing cumulative aspect" of the E.T.A. routine will recognize Wallace's ambivalence about the dehumanization that such a pursuit requires (896).

In his reader's guide to *Infinite Jest*, Stephen Burn (2003) maintains that "Wallace uses tennis as a focal point around which larger arguments are generated by the precision of the novel's structure . . . and by situating its mini-essays on tennis amid a spectrum of other concerns" (68). Even more so, the logic of the sport generates the iterative structure of the novel and the recurrence of its most urgent preoccupations. Indeed, phrases in the non-sports-related parts of the novel often function as implicit glosses on earlier passages about tennis. One important instance of this internal referencing occurs in the debate between American spy Hugh Steeply and Quebecois separatist Rémy Marathe on the "U.S. value system" midway through the novel. When Steeply defines the United States as "a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice" (424), he echoes not only Hal's words in his mentoring session on competition and community but also Enfield Tennis Academy head coach Gerhard Schtitt's early characterization of the US sporting ethos: "A U.S. of modern A. where the State is not a team or a code, but a sort of sloppy intersection of desires and fears, where the only public consensus a boy must surrender to is the acknowledged primacy of straight-line pursuing this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness" (83). The ideal reader recognizes that Steeply's formulation "community of sacred individuals" builds on these prior elaborations of junior tennis—and the junior tennis academy—as a miniature representation of the United States, where the collective fear of failure compels Americans to seek community through competition.

Once tennis appears as a motivating rather than ancillary concern of Wallace's work, it becomes possible to offer an alternate account of his literary trajectory in the early 1990s. As I mentioned previously, one of the most influential lines in Wallace studies has characterized him as a transitional figure between the postmodern literature of the second half of the twentieth century and the new aesthetic of the first

two decades of the twenty-first, variously described as post-postmodern (Robert McLaughlin) or post-ironic (Lee Konstantinou). Nearly all of the critics in this line locate Wallace's break with postmodernism in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993), where Wallace famously called for a generation of "anti-rebels" who "dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" (*Supposedly Fun* 81). Recently, however, Wallace scholars such as Burn, Jeffrey Severs, and Mary Holland have challenged the idea that "E Unibus Pluram" should be read as Wallace's definitive statement on postmodernism, both because he later distanced himself from several of its key positions and because the essay presents a highly telescoped reading of US literary and cultural history.[13] Although I continue to believe with the earlier critics that Wallace's diagnosis of the contradictions of postmodern irony is his most significant literary-critical achievement, I agree that the "E Unibus Pluram" essay does not fully capture his evolving relationship to postmodernism. Indeed, it was in a tennis essay from 1992, "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," that Wallace first fleshed out one of the most significant insights of "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest*: that the great challenge of contemporary American life is to learn how to inhabit one's positions authentically after the late twentieth century assault on foundationalism. In that essay, Wallace contrasts his own "divided" and "self-conscious" disposition with the mindset of great athletes like Austin, who possess the ability to "invoke for themselves a cliché as trite as 'One ball at a time' or 'Gotta concentrate here' and *mean* it and then *do* it" (*String Theory* 38). In fact, one can draw a relatively straight line from Wallace's reflections in the piece on top athletes' capacity to commit unequivocally to tennis's everyday propositions and the sections in *Infinite Jest* in which Don Gately and the other recovering addicts of Ennet House attempt to follow the "clichéd directives" of Alcoholics Anonymous in body and mind (273).[14]

To truly take sport seriously as a formative element in Wallace's career, though, requires a look beyond his written expressions of its import. It is necessary to recognize that tennis was first a daily practice for him and only later became a theme in his essays and novels. Indeed, if one accepts biographer D.T. Max's claim that Wallace based the Ennet House scenes of *Infinite Jest* on the halfway house outside Boston where he spent late 1989 and 1990 absorbing the recovery program's simplified maxims (139–40), one might reasonably infer that this stint

triggered a need for him to return to the "single-entendre principles" of his tennis-playing days. It may thus be surmised that although Wallace's inclination toward sincerity surfaced for the first time in his writing in the early 1990s, it was actually drilled into him in the thousands of hours he spent on the tennis court in his teens. It was there, in the struggle to master a sport in which "meaning" was synonymous with doing, that he first countenanced the idea that one could move beyond the cultural afflictions of self-consciousness and dividedness. It was there, as he put it in the Tracy Austin essay, that he first imagined what it would mean to "shut off the Iago-like voice of the self . . . and simply and superbly act" (*String Theory* 38).[15]

WINNING AND LOSING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As recounted by novelist Tom Perrotta, before Andre Agassi and Pulitzer-prize winning author J.R. Moehringer began their collaboration on *Open: An Autobiography* (2009), the most influential tennis memoir since Ashe's *Days of Grace*, the two men met to talk about David Foster Wallace. In Perrotta's words, Moehringer was "particularly worried about . . . 'How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart,' in which Wallace savages Ms. Austin's tell-no-secrets book and laments the sports autobiography as a failed genre." Neither the writer nor the player wanted Agassi's memoir "to suffer a similar fate." At the most basic level, Perrota's anecdote confirms the extent to which Wallace's tennis writings have infiltrated mainstream tennis discourse. In the wake of Wallace's suicide in 2008 and his growing literary stardom, his tennis writings have begun to influence the very players he once marveled at from afar. In a recent interview, Michael Joyce recalled that when he first learned that Wallace "wrote something about my life being grotesque. . . . I was like, 'why would he say that?'"; in retrospect, however, he determined that Wallace "was right. . . . This life is a tough life. Everybody sees all the great players, the money, and this and that, but it's a very tough life. . . . It's not normal" (qtd. in Riches). Wondering aloud whether he would want his own daughter to play the sport professionally, the Michael Joyce of 2017 questions the value of elite competition in ways that wouldn't have occurred to the Michael Joyce of "The String Theory" (this is Wallace's point).

Seen in this light, Agassi's *Open* can be read not only as an insightful sporting memoir, but also as an in-depth player's response to Wallace's thesis about elite athletes. On the one hand, Agassi clearly disproves

Wallace's assertion in "How Tracy Austin Stole My Heart" that great tennis players are "blind and dumb" about their "athletic genius," as well as the related claim that they can "shut off the Iago-like voice of the self." Beginning with the shocking admission that he hates tennis "with a dark and secret passion" (3), Agassi proceeds to detail his mental turmoil as a teenage prodigy who loses because of circumstances ranging from standard big match nerves to the more specific anxiety that his toupee would fall off during his first French Open final. On the other hand, *Open* internalizes many of Wallace's insights into the culture and ideology of tennis, from the emphasis on loneliness ("In tennis you're on an island" [9]) to the interrogation of sporting clichés: "Thinking, my father believes, is the source of all bad things, because thinking is the opposite of doing" (31). Each of Agassi's small acts of rebellion against tennis serves to demystify the reader's cultural assumptions about sport. As his father mercilessly imposes the law of competitive individualism—"You're a tennis player! You're going to be number one in the world!" (57)—Agassi fantasizes about how he might break that law. When then-spouse Brooke Shields proposes a "tennis analogy" to explain why appearing on *Friends* is such a big deal to her—"It's the number one show in the world. . . . This is like my U.S. Open" (218, 219)—the formulation triggers Agassi: "I wince. That phrase again" (218). In many ways, Agassi wrote the tennis memoir that Wallace always wanted to read, exploding the ideology of athletic perfectionism that Wallace had exposed in his own work.

It's difficult to know whether the parallels between *Infinite Jest* and *Open* owe more to Moehringer's literary engagement with Wallace's novel, to Agassi's effort to process the same tennis atmosphere that Wallace depicts, or to a broader narrative of crisis about the culture of competition in the United States. Over the past twenty years, and particularly since the financial crisis of 2008, a growing number of academic books and mainstream articles have taken aim at the core assumptions of the American meritocratic system, from Stephen McNamee's and Robert Miller's *The Meritocracy Myth* (2004) to Lani Guinier's *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy* (2015). Although *Open* does not overtly dismantle the discourse of meritocracy, its overall suspicion of sport as a means of mobility and empowerment reflects the current *zeitgeist*. Early in the book Agassi suggests that his father, a working-class Iranian immigrant of Armenian heritage, embraces tennis in

part because "It's the shortest route he can see to the American dream" (48). But Agassi refuses to insert this humble origin story into a triumphalist narrative arc. In Agassi's eyes, his own wildly improbable success does not validate the American Dream; rather, it catapults him into a searching inquiry of its origins. "Why, every day, somewhere on this earth," Agassi muses near the end of the book, "does someone have to lose?" (329). In Agassi's symbolic construction, the word "open" refers not to the progressive promise of competitive tennis but to the honesty needed to reveal its most destructive tendencies.

In arguing for the continuing relevance of Wallace's tennis writings in the twenty-first century, though, it is not necessary to posit a direct line of influence to contemporary work. Once Wallace's tennis writings can be recognized as emanating from a broader cultural practice of reflecting on sport and merit, rather than from a specific literary line, it becomes easier to establish connections across genres, modes, and traditions. Indeed, one of the most trenchant critiques of meritocratic sports thinking in recent years occurs in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), a meditation on ongoing anti-Black racism in the United States. The early pages of *Citizen* seem to bear little in common with Wallace's and Agassi's work. Midway through the volume, however, Rankine includes an essayistic prose poem on tennis great Serena Williams that links the racialization of the Black body in sport to the racialized logic of contemporary American society. Framing the Williams essay with Zora Neale Hurston's line "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a black background" (25), Rankine details the overt discrimination that Williams has experienced at the hands of American tennis fans as well as the invocation of racist stereotypes by fellow tennis pros such as Caroline Wozniacki.

The most incisive claim that *Citizen*'s Serena Williams essay makes, however, is that the supposedly equal rules on the tennis court have never quite been equal in Williams' case. She cites a long list of "curious calls and oversights," in particular a controversial 2004 US Open match between Williams and Jennifer Capriati in which chair umpire Mariana Alves inexplicably made five bad calls against Williams (28). "Though no one was saying anything explicitly about Serena's black body," Rankine writes, "you are not the only viewer who thought it was getting in the way of Alves's sight line" (27). The episode confirms for Rankine that tennis's system of fair play breaks down in practice,

and that Williams's frustrations and disappointments should be read as effects of that flawed system. "By Rankine's account," writes Erica Hunt in her review of the volume, "[Williams's] meltdown is not the consequence of this one bad call but of the accumulation of bad calls, bad faith, suspended rules" ("All About You"). Indeed, Rankine implies that the contradictions in the treatment of Williams at the US Open are symptomatic of a nation that touts the rule of law while systematically violating the rights of its Black citizens.

Citizen thus challenges the supposed tenet of equality of condition in tennis at the most basic level. It is worth mentioning, however, that Rankine's reading of the Alves incident is just that: a reading that emerges from a particular interpretive framework. Though Williams clearly shares Rankine's view that the historically white sport of tennis was "never meant for [her]," she has, so far as I'm aware, never indicated that this particular incident was racially motivated. In her autobiography *On the Line* (2009), Williams attributes Alves's errors to incompetence rather than bias, and concludes her account of the match by saying that "I came to look at it as an opportunity for growth" (172).[16] In fact, Rankine herself seems to acknowledge Williams's resistance to the writer's premise in a *The New York Times Magazine* interview that Rankine conducted with Williams prior to the 2015 U.S. Open. In the opening paragraphs of the interview, Rankine reports that Williams, "with a hint of impatience in her voice," says to her: "'you don't understand me. . . . I'm just about winning'" (qtd. in Rankine 39).

Of course, this brief flash of tension in an otherwise cordial interview does not mean that Rankine and Williams hold radically different views on sport, society or race, or that Rankine has in truth entirely misunderstood Williams. Elsewhere in *Citizen*, Rankine alludes to Williams's capacity to project "a kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid" (26), and it is certainly possible to view Williams's comments about the 2004 episode as a strategic attempt to portray herself as the unflappable champion many of her fans want her to be. Williams's recourse to the language of meritocracy in these instances does, however, index the ongoing disjuncture between how most high-level athletes speak of their practice and how most literary writers and humanities scholars conceptualize it. For Williams, as for many professional athletes, a commitment to racial justice, gender equality, and/or economic empowerment does not preclude a belief in

the value of merit-based competition ("I'm just about winning"). A rigorous approach to contemporary sports writing cannot exclusively focus on those authors whose ideas about athletic competition conform to scholars' own. It must also incorporate the perspectives of athletes themselves, who not only tend to accept the premise that merit can be accurately measured on the field or court, but who also see the safeguarding of "equal conditions of competition" as the very essence of sport.[17]

The contemporary works of Agassi and Rankine also confirm a general conclusion about tennis discourse anticipated by King, Ashe, and Austin—not to mention by Wallace himself. Notwithstanding the real differences in their vantage points and the specific issues they address, these figures share a fundamental concern with the relationship between merit-based competition on the court and meritocratic ideals in American society as a whole. And this brings us back to Wallace's significance as a writer. I do not wish to downplay the limitations of his views on race and gender in sport, nor do I wish to suggest that Wallace studies should simply substitute sport for literature (or literary history) as its primary object of concern. What I would claim—what I have argued throughout this essay—is that Wallace's tennis writings present compelling arguments for why the minds and bodies of athletes ought to be taken seriously, and that his literary achievement derives in significant and identifiable ways from his own status as a former tennis player. Through his ability to unite the perspective of the ex-athlete with the skills of the first-rate novelist, Wallace offers a vision of American sport and society that teaches something fundamental about each.

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NOTES

1. On Wallace and post-postmodernism, see McLaughlin; on Wallace and post-irony, see Konstantinou; on Wallace and the "New Sincerity," see Kelly. Ed. David Hering. Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press (2010).

2. The phrase quoted above is from Boswell's revised edition of 2020, but the claim that Wallace inaugurated a new literary mode is central to the argument of the first edition of the book.

3. See Bresnan and also Phipps.

4. See Wilberding and also King.

5. Thompson writes that "the critical consensus is that though Wallace was highly self-aware about his own racial identity . . . this self-awareness was not enough to prompt him to rethink the role of race in his work" (204), and Hayes-Brady affirms that "issues of diversity are one of the major weaknesses of his writing" (168). More recently, Mary Shapiro has suggested that Wallace's use of African American dialect, however misguided it may seem to a contemporary reader, marked a genuine effort to engage with white privilege and racial difference: "His limited attempt to get inside the heads of African American characters may represent a compromise between his linguistic abilities and his anxiety over cultural appropriations, but it was most certainly a conscious attempt to challenge and provoke his (imagined white) readers" (48). See also Samuel Cohen, "The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace," in *Postmodern Literature and Race*. Ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2015), 228–243.

6. Rob Ruck offers the only dissonant view in the special issue, claiming that many people "embrace sport as a level playing field while countenancing inequality and injustice in other arenas . . . because they often hold sport to a higher set of standards: they want it to be fair, democratic, and liberating. In many ways, sport has become just that" (192).

7. On the importance of structural factors such as race, class, and gender in determining economic status in the United States, see McNamee and Miller.

8. Ashe goes on to say that affirmative action is necessary "while rules are different for different people" (153).

9. See Wind 184.

10. Baltzell himself viewed this transformation with apprehension, since he equated the democratization of tennis with the increasing commodification of the sport at the highest levels.

11. Wind estimated that in 1976 around 11,000 tennis courts were built in the United States (184).

12. Thomas has argued that Ashe fits within a tradition of Black conservatism that does not deny the "continued salience of race" in US culture but that "expresses a profound belief in the ability of the American capitalist, democratic system, as constituted, to help solve problems associated with racial discrimination" (1314). Hall, on the other hand, sees Ashe as a figure that defies the "either-or approach to classifying black athletes" by treading "the thin line between conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and radicals, civil rights and Black Power, the sports establishment or the black cause" (3).

13. See Burn's 2011 review of the edited volume *Consider David Foster Wallace*, where he laments that many of the volume's contributors use the "E Unibus Pluram" essay "to explain Wallace's total body of work" even though it "belongs to a particular moment in [his] career" (466). Severs has highlighted the limitations of viewing Wallace's trajectory as one characterized by a "sincere move beyond a postmodernism shackled with irony" (5). Holland argues that Wallace's 1990 essay

on David Markson's novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* exhibits a greater receptiveness toward American postmodern metafiction than we find in "E Unibus Pluram," especially toward those strains of metafiction that deal with the "emotional implications" of their self-reflexive practice (61).

14. Of course, not all of the ideas in "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest* owe their existence to Wallace's tennis writings. As Marshall Boswell has argued, Wallace's early novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) already indicates Wallace's desire to articulate an alternative to postmodern detachment and metafiction (59–67). And as D.T. Max notes, versions of "E Unibus Pluram" date back to at least to 1990 (148–49), while the early essay "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuous Young" (1987) contains many ideas about television and passivity that would later appear in the 1993 essay (110–11). It is my contention, however, that the Tracy Austin essay marked Wallace's first full-fledged attempt to explore the possibility of grounding one's worldview on totalizing maxims, an exploration that would be significantly expanded—and given a more positive articulation—in the Gately sections of *Infinite Jest*.

15. It is for this same reason that I would differentiate Wallace's tennis writings from the tradition of postmodern sports novels such as DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972) and Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968) that Mark Bresnan has associated with *Infinite Jest* (54). These writers are certainly important literary influences on Wallace. However, I would argue that there is a fundamental difference between authors who came to their sports writings through prolonged experience as competitive athletes, and those who, like DeLillo, wrote about sports without seriously engaging in organized athletics (See, for instance, DeLillo's 1983 interview with Tom LeClair, where he states, "The games I've written about have more to do with rules and boundaries than with the free-wheeling street games I played when I was growing up" [21]). My thinking here is influenced by Pierre Bourdieu notion of the "*habitus*" as that form of "embodied history" that is "internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history" (56). Although Wallace's critics have tended to downplay his embodied history as a tennis player, the great theme of his tennis writings is precisely the mechanisms by which the sport is "internalized as a second nature."

16. In Williams's autobiography, the contrast between her reading of the "Alves" match and her interpretation of the notorious 2001 Indian Wells final is striking. Referring to the chorus of boos the crowd directed at her at the latter event, Williams writes, "I looked up and all I could see was a sea of rich people—mostly older, mostly white—standing and booing lustily, like some kind of genteel lynch mob" (70). In that instance, she leaves no doubt about the motives behind the incident: "You tell me that this mostly white crowd wasn't beating up on this nineteen-year-old black girl and her family in part because of the color of our skin. Go ahead and make that argument. I'll listen to it. But I won't buy it" (76).

17. It is instructive to note that when Colin Kaepernick, perhaps the most iconic politicized athlete of the twenty-first century, filed his 2017 collusion grievance against the NFL, his lawyer released a statement saying that "If the NFL (as

well as all professional sports leagues) is to remain a meritocracy, then principled and peaceful political protest . . . should not be punished. . . . Colin Kaepernick's goal has always been, and remains, to simply be treated fairly by the league he performed at the highest level for and return to the football playing field" (Brinson). Kaepernick's protest revealed that the NFL owners were patently willing to deviate from the principles of meritocracy in order to punish his dissent and to protect their brand. But as his lawyer's statement suggests, this does not mean that Kaepernick himself has given up on the level playing field ideal.

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