

6.2

I'm driving with Christine and one-year-old Theo to visit our respective families in the Midwest. We have just pulled off the NY State Thruway to help settle Theo who is inconsolably crying. After more than an hour on the road from Rochester, he had finally slumped to sleep in his car seat when suddenly

—boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—

I had overlooked a sign that said to drop my speed down to 45mph and the massive four lane highway we were on seemed to disintegrate beneath the car's tires in waves of cracked pavement violently bouncing us along.

From the Irving exit off the Thruway it takes what seems like forever (with a screaming kid in back) to find a place to stop. We are on the brief, three-mile western concurrency of Routes 5 and 20 between Irving and Silver Creek, a dozen years and 120 miles from my trip along their seventy-mile eastern intersection, photographing with "The Working Book" workshop. I park at a kind of truck stop, help to calm our son, then go inside to find a toilet.



The interior is still, quiet, and dimly lit except for the wall of glass refrigerators lined with colorfully bottled drinks—the same as in any roadside stop. Looking for someone to ask about a bathroom, I see a young, white, blonde woman behind the checkout counter, surrounded by signs for tax-free cigarettes. It is the cigarettes—though I had seen the Seneca Hawk sign outside—that makes me cognizant I'm in Seneca Nation on the Cattaraugus Reservation. While using the toilet I further realize the section of Thruway we just bumpily traversed is Seneca territory.

Something about this crumbled road and my reaction to it stuck with me. Months later I did some basic searches and found several *New York Times* articles going back decades about the Thruway section. Most of the articles note in passing that the Seneca have been in central and western New York for more than a thousand years.

In 1992 about two hundred indigenous protestors burned tires and threw debris from an overpass to block the Thruway over attempts by NYS to collect taxes on sales of gas and cigarettes to non-indigenous people on Seneca territory. State troopers had to close a thirty-mile stretch of I-90 while police in riot gear attempted to bust up the protests. A cartoon found on a Seneca blog documented the events:



Associated Press

A protest by Seneca Indians demonstrating against state efforts to impose taxes on the sale of gasoline and cigarettes on reservations turned violent

Wednesday night when state troopers moved in to stop the throwing of burning tires off an overpass near the Cattaraugus Reservation in Erie County.

Senecas Clash With Police Over Tax Ruling

CATTARAUGUS INDIAN RESERVATION, N.Y., July 16 (AP) — A tax war between Seneca Indians and New York State grew more divisive today as Indians dropped burning tires off a highway overpass and clashed with state police.

Thirteen protesters were arrested and at least four state troopers were injured, including the force's commander in western New York.

About 200 Indians began burning tires and other debris about 7 P.M. Wednesday to protest taxes the state wants to impose on the sale of gasoline and cigarettes at reservations.

About midnight, protesters started throwing burning debris from an overpass onto the Gov. Thomas E. Dewey Thruway, which borders the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation 30 miles southwest of Buffalo.

30-Mile Stretch Closed

State troopers in riot gear cleared protesters from the overpass and put out the fire, said Maj. George Meyer.

Thirteen protesters were arrested. Troopers closed a 30-mile stretch of the Thruway around the reservation when the confrontation began. The highway reopened at 6 A.M. today.

During the protest, Maj. Bruce Roloff, commander of Troop A in western New York, was hit in the head with a two-by-four, Major Meyer said. Major Roloff was listed in fair condition at Erie County Medical Center in Buffalo.

Three other troopers and three protesters were slightly injured when protesters drove cars into the crowd, the police said.

More than 200 extra troopers were sent to the reservation from around New York state today, said Sgt. Gregory Lang. Dozens of state police cars lined the Thruway near the reservation this afternoon, and troopers stopped and questioned drivers entering the reservation.

The protests were prompted by a ruling last week by the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court al-

lowing New York to tax sales of gas and cigarettes to non-Indians on reservations.

Karl Feisen, a New York tax spokesman, said the state loses about \$50 million a year because of tax-free sales of gas and cigarettes by Indians. Retailers near reservations say Indian vendors have an unfair advantage.

Centuries-old treaties prohibit taxing sales to Indians. But Indians say those treaties also apply to sales by Indian vendors to non-Indians.

Calvin John, the Seneca Nation president, said he would organize a committee to decide how to fight the tax ruling.

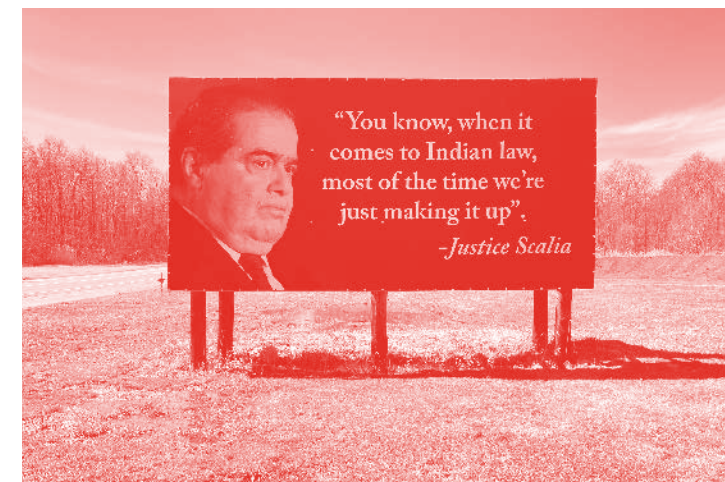
Robert Batson, deputy director of the state Indian relations office, said officials from his office also were in touch with Seneca leaders but could do little to control the violence.

"That's like the United Nations trying to control Sarajevo," Mr. Batson said.

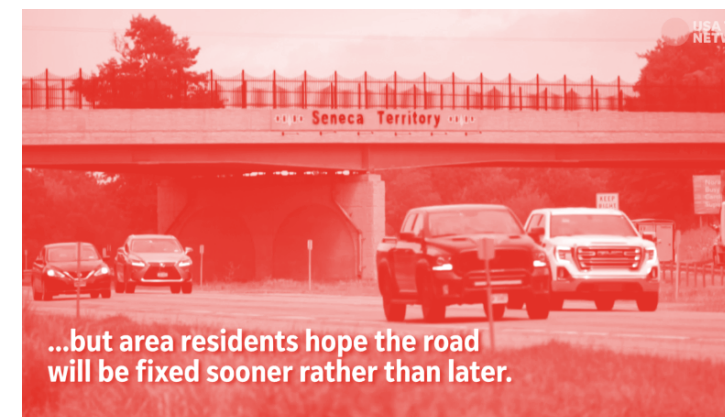


Five years later, around a thousand protestors marched on the Thruway blocking traffic in objection to the tax rules on Seneca territory. Protestors also closed Routes 5 and 20 causing State police to detour traffic miles out of the way.

In the last fifteen years, tribal leadership, arguing that they had been pressured into accepting a one-time \$75,000 payment for the Thruway to cut through its reservation sixty years prior, demanded over \$80 million: \$1 for every vehicle passing through their territory since the early 2000s. Countering, the state laid claim to hundreds of millions of dollars it says it's owed in taxes on cigarette sales and gambling earnings the tribe took in.



The overpass from which the burning debris was thrown is just a few hundred feet from the Seneca Hawk where we stopped to settle Theo. The debris landed on the damaged Thruway section where, had I slowed our car's speed to the posted limit, he may not have woken up.



...but area residents hope the road will be fixed sooner rather than later.

Reflecting on this now I'm grateful that the Thruway was left a crumbling expression of the relations between Seneca Nation and NY State.

And thankfully I have a kid, because without the experience of parenting, I'm not evolved enough or too self-involved and detached from reality to acknowledge and feel the brokenness literally reverberating through me as I try to speed over or easily bypass it.

Years after the Thruway experience, I attended a Long Table conversation between indigenous folks at the Seneca Art and Cultural Center at Ganondagan near Canandaigua.

"What are you still doing here?" one participant felt the skeptical, white, bordering world asked of them.

"It takes a lot of energy just to be outside [the indigenous community] it's easier to be secluded," the youngest imparted.

"We were invisible, but we weren't invisible because everyone looked Seneca, but we were never taught anything Seneca in school," said artist G. Peter Jemison, referring to the Thomas Indian School.

"It all goes back to the residential schools," Jemison asserted.

Again, some basic searches yielded regional reports of the brokenness between NYS and the Seneca people.

The Thomas Indian School at the Cattaraugus Reservation was founded by Christian missionaries in 1855, taking in indigenous children from throughout the state—Seneca Nation included. Early on, the founders were benevolent to the children and hired teachers who spoke and taught the Seneca language.

But twenty years later, when the NY Board of Charities took over, they forbade the Seneca language being taught or used at the school, adhering to the "kill the Indian save the child" principle established in boarding school programs across the country to culturally dominate those groups who had previously been conquered by death or violent removal. In the reporting, David George Shongo, Director of the Seneca Iroquois National Museum states:



333 E. Thomas Indian School, Iroquois, N. Y.

V. C. Armes, Publisher.

*This much is hard to see
the worst day I
7*

The traditional structures, the traditional institutions for taking care of children who might be abandoned or orphaned or whatever, broke down, because they were attacking the communities and the families who were no longer able to take care of their own. And so what do you do? You create institutions to take care of them[.]

New York has never taken responsibility for what happened, nor has the state issued an apology.

The school is one reason why the Senecas take such strong, often confrontational stances against the state and local governments when it comes to issues like casino development, gasoline taxes and tobacco taxes.



Stories of kids seized by or surrendered to NYS due to families rife with alcoholism as the result of a generation of subjugation, who were then isolated and abused for speaking Seneca or practicing their culture and further traumatized by unspeakable physical, sexual, or mental tortures, consequently restart the cycle of dependency to mollify the next generation's traumas. Again the reporting interviews a few of those in Western NY speaking to the many children whose "experience was traumatic right from the beginning."

Elliott Tallchief was only five years old when a state social worker came to take him and his six-year-old sister away from their family.

'We were small. They just dragged us into the car,' Tallchief recalled. 'We were crying and screaming too, I don't know, but I remember crying all the way. How do you get used to it, you know? The tears stop, and eventually you fit in.'

Carson Waterman turned five shortly after his admittance to the school. He says he learned some hard lessons at an early age, lessons that no child should have to learn.

'For me, after a number of years, you get used to it and you get toughened to it, and you think, well, I'm on my own, I'm the only person I can rely on.'

As I write this, Theo is six years old. Putting aside the abuse and torture, it is terrifying to think of him being left alone without a reliable person to appease his cries—crying so long that his capacity for belief in an empathetic response is exhausted. Since he was born it has been one of my biggest fears and a cause of sleeplessness.

Though I'm loath to acknowledge it, due to its appropriation by white people and its use as ammunition in culture wars, there is a connection here with the *woke* idiom that has its recent origin in Georgia Ann Muldrow's song "Master Teacher" recorded by Erykah Badu on the album *New Amerykah Part One (Fourth World War)*.

A verse of the song is:

Baby sleepy time
To put her down now
I'll be standin' round
Till the sun down
I stay woke
I stay woke
I stay woke
I stay woke



Woke is a Black mother in protective watch over her child, her creativity, and her existence. “To be woke is to be Black,” an interviewer suggested to Muldrow and after a considerable pause she replied:

Woke is definitely a Black experience. Woke is if someone put a burlap sack on your head, knocked you out, and put you in a new location and then you come to and understand where you are ain’t home and the people around you ain’t your neighbors. They’re not acting in a neighborly fashion, they’re the ones who conked you on your head. You got kidnapped here and then you got punked out of your own language, everything. That’s woke—understanding what your ancestors went through. Just being in touch with the struggle that our people have gone through here and understanding we’ve been fighting since the very day we touched down here. There was no year where the fight wasn’t going down.



Muldrow cedes to the necessity of being in empathetic contact with the centuries of violent physical and mental strife that comes from contending with dominating forces so as not to be lulled to sleep by its influence or unprepared for its violence when it does shake you awake:

Most people who are woke ain’t calling themselves woke. Most people who are woke are agonizing inside. They’re too busy being depressed to call themselves woke.

In complete contrast to the exhausting, homeless, insomniac’s existence Muldrow speaks of and its eerie correspondence to the generations of indigenous children in Western NY taken from their culturally destroyed families, Theo has just started kindergarten at Allen Creek Elementary virtually outside the front door of our current house in a Rochester suburb.



Each morning I walk with him across our street to a highway overpass, like the one over I-90 in Seneca Nation, bridging over I-490 and connecting to a field and playground behind the school. Since he was a one-year-old, we’ve been crossing the bridge together. The summer we traveled on I-90 and stopped at Cattaraugus, we had just put an offer on the house we now live in and listed for sale our first place in the City of Rochester. We signed the offer sheet while away on the trip.

We bought our current house, just outside the city limits, because we wanted more space inside and out. My automatic reaction to it being a few hundred feet from an elementary school, in a district ranked in the top 1% of nearly 11,000 schools in the Best School Districts in America, as noted on their website, was to see it as an added benefit to the property without really considering what that meant. Had we stayed in the house we sold, the Rochester City School District elementary two blocks away where Theo would have attended has an overall rating of 3 out of 10. The school's bragging point online was that it had a library.



To buy that first house in Rochester, we benefited from a grant program between the city and Rochester Institute of Technology where Christine works, with each contributing \$3,000 toward the down payment on a property within the city limits. After we had lived in the house for five years, we didn't have to pay back the subsidy. We crossed the five-year point the same week we passed through Cattaraugus. When all the white lawyers and realtors, who

themselves live outside the city limits, earned their fees, we were granted the \$6,000 plus earned an additional \$5,000 from equity in the sale. We made \$11,000 and didn't diversify the RCSD, which in this case would have meant adding a middle-class white kid to an impoverished district with demographics of 55% Black, 32% Hispanic/Latinx, 10% white, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Indigenous students.

What seems like a simple property transaction and work benefit is part of an underlying system structurally supporting those like us who pass through the city while simultaneously acquiring familial wealth through the seemingly passive process, like osmosis, without resistance to stop and reflect on its long-term effect on the whole of the community. Now that we have more fully outsourced Theo's education to a socially dominant public school in the suburbs, the potential for a distinctive and radical education, like so many initiatives of resistance and teaching that started in living rooms with individuals learning from one another through their own self-determination, seems diminishing. Whereas had we stayed, rather than fully delegating his education to be subsidized through our taxes, we could potentially have become direct participants in the neighborhood school near our previous house, offering more homegrown activities and lessons to augment the education for everyone there. I sometimes fantasize about the loss of this potential.

Now there is hardly a moment I am outside with Theo—in the three-times-larger yard of our current property, while walking him to school, making up games in the school's playground or parking lot where he learns to ride a bike and skateboard, or in winter, sledding with him down the snow-covered hillside beyond the overpass—when I don't hear the cars rushing by on the highway, the non-stop white noise of their passage wholly ever-present.

Rather than an ambient drone to aid in focus, relaxation, or sleep, the varying, unsteady flow just outside the windows calls to mind the frictionless progression of white bodies from the city, like unimpeded projectiles aimed at and reaching targets of wealth, quality schools, and safety at all costs, making the choice, accidentally or on purpose, to be strangers autonomously traveling past one another while switching lanes. Old, white neighbors say they are used to the highway noise by now. Some have replaced it in their minds with the illusion of waves breaking on a shore. Except for the "rice rockets," carped the retired policeman a few doors down, the day we moved in.

When Theo was still very young, as we walked across the overpass bridge, I would start a game of Red-Light Green-Light. “Red light” I’d shout, over the sound of cars whooshing below us, to stop him from doddering into the protective chain link fence that shelters the bridge, the security of which still worries me. Had I thought to make a serious game like this, to stop and play out the complexity of what it is to be in a state of white progression that enables the growth of wealth for individual security at the risk of the whole of our regional society and community, would I have considered doing otherwise?



What reality check is there against misconceptions of values, to remind us that we are living in a society, not a white supremacist marketplace? Because we can only check reality if we practice and make a habit of thinking outside of dominant systems as well as the individual imagination.

When a child inexorably cries there is a common acronym from addiction recovery circles that I was taught to ask myself in response: HALT—is the child Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired? Some parents may just instinctively know how to feel with their child, but I had to practice HALT to empathize with Theo’s cries and learn that they were communicative and not merely baseless vexation.

Philosopher George Yancy’s sense of white tarrying is like a form of HALT for baby white adults like me to think beyond themselves.

The call to tarry is indeed a clarion call, loud and direct; it is designed to encourage white people not to move too quickly when confronted by the muck and mire of their own whiteness. The call is diametrically opposed to efforts to escape the rabbit hole of whiteness; for it runs deep. The call demands that white people dwell with the emotional and cognitive dissonance that will be inevitably experienced as they become more and more attentive to the ways in which they are entangled in the social and psychic web of white racism.

It is the dissonance and the sense of crisis that results from the awareness of the gravity of such an entanglement that must be endured and confronted. It is not about seeing how much guilt one can sustain or endure. This sounds like a species of white self-indulgence through a mode of masochism. Rather, it is about how much of one’s opaque white racist self, and one’s social embedded reality in structures of white supremacy, can be uncovered, identified, faced and challenged. The trick is not to flee, but to have the foundations of one’s whiteness being challenged, to lose one’s sense of white self-certainty and to render unstable that familiar white sense of being-in-the-world. The process of tarrying encourages forms of courageous listening, humility, and the capacity to be touched, to be shaken by those black bodies and bodies of color that have achieved and honed degrees of epistemic complexity regarding white racism, forms of knowing that result from being raced targets of a system that privileges white bodies and polices black bodies and bodies of color in ways that render them ‘suspect’, ‘criminal’, ‘inferior’.



Elsewhere Yancy writes:

Learning from people of color, opening oneself to them, also places one in relationship to the possibility of being ambushed in new and radical ways. Whites must respectfully position themselves in relation to people of color such that whites will learn to expect to be ambushed, to be open to it.

Yancy's call to tarry translates to the HALT acronym for me to check myself with Humility, openness to Ambush, courageous Listening, and capacity for Touch. Try as I might on my own to settle internal cries to self-soothe through the discomfort of long-internalized racism for my own sake and for those whom I affect, a part of me still wants a body of color—a Black or Indigenous auntie or nanny—to settle me and tell me I'm ok, that I will be all right.

Fortunately for my development, Yancy provides no settling words of comfort. When asked the proverbial "What should white people do?" his reply: "Lay down and die. White people should die a symbolic death."

As I think now of this notion of white symbolic death, I immediately reflect upon the opening stanza of "Highway 61 Revisited" and Dylan's invocation of the Judaic story of Abraham, ordered by God to sacrificially kill his only son, Isaac. Abraham's willingness to commit the act was proof of his devotion, Isaac's execution was stayed, and Abraham is the father to generations. Whereas the sacrifice of God's only son is echoed and fully realized symbolically through Jesus' crucifixion for all the sins of all the world in the Christian gospels. Like Isaac and Jesus, the death of whiteness is a symbolic sacrifice of personal and systemic privilege for the good of humankind, just without the mythologizing, hero-making, and savior worship of these patriarchal tales. If you believe in the worthiness of love for everyone—because all people, every person is beloved by someone else—then you should willingly sacrifice the invented social dominance you share with one segment of people out of love for all humanity and its posterity. Does the circumvention of love for collective humanity come out of an instinctive protection of one's individual young? Dominant spiritual stories of human sacrifice suggest otherwise and, as Yancy suggests, couldn't whiteness do so similarly?

Yet the mindset, whether acknowledged consciously or not, for reserving such privilege that one could somehow give up seems so often to be an unwillingness to forego advantage for one's own children. While it is ridiculous to think of Theo attending a low-rated city school as me offering up his future as a sacrifice for the-good-of-the-many, when I examine the thought more closely I find what appears to be this distinctly American, zero-sum approach to existence and progression. As in the question of American schools—what *is* a *good* school? Both Christine and I are educators. We both grew up deeply working class without much outside opposition and plenty of familial support. Competition and the capitalist values that drive school testing, ratings, and success are an affront to our view of education. I learned how to be more egalitarian in the classroom through daily discussions about work with Christine. Her before-school mantra to Theo is "be kind, listen well, and get dirty," to which I add "be grateful," all values that can be practiced and learned in any environment. I'm truly terrified of a system that promotes and surely includes aspirants to its *1% of the best in America* status and would have felt that fear and loathing more judiciously had I practiced HALTing. Although the decision to move houses concerned more than schools, had we tarried together sooner perhaps I would have found the thinking implanted in my body that equates badness with Blackness and badness with poorness while also reifying whiteness as goodness, and perhaps dug up

the rooted social framework that, while imbedded as hierarchical, seems rhizomatic without any clear starting point.

The truth is, I'm still uncovering what it means to die a symbolic death of any type, including whiteness, and continue to push myself into situations where my sense of being-in-the-world is disrupted from its comfort. That, like Zeno's Arrow, is the paradox of being both in progressive motion as well as halted in the stillness of ever-subdividing moments such that no motion is ever felt, though it nonetheless occurs. It is a forward trajectory toward some distant target that seems both immutable and impossible. I don't yet know how to symbolically kill off my whiteness or other properties of self, but I envision it as an arrow shot with nothing stopping its momentum until it circles the globe to pierce its own archer's back. It requires, I imagine, the opposite of a target of deliberate awareness and is conceivable only in action itself, outside of any sense of accomplishment or achievement. It is death, after all, and credibly a form of nothingness, yet highly energetic and transformative—a kind of composting of energy transformed to new vitalities.

I don't yet know how to die or kill off this currently indivisible part of me because it remains blended with other parts that continue seeking recognition. Why else write these diaries and voluntarily share them with others? I'm writing them to comprehend myself as a white, straight, cisgender man—son and grandson of same—father to an English-speaking white boy who is coming up in a middle-class suburb as a citizen of these United States. I could simply do this work in private diaries for my personal human evolution. But a blended part of me wants you to comprehend me comprehending myself in terms of this attempted evolution. I'm willing to vulnerably divulge and share my insufficient consideration of the foregoing concerns, if I can get these arrows whizzing past you to a bullseye point that I can't help myself from aiming at, which is your recognition of me doing the introspective work of adequate identity comprehension, however minimally.

If your soul is pierced by these diaries even a little bit, making an aperture for me to be seen through, then I have accomplished some minor but critical feat that adds to my quiver of tactics to boost my ranking and enduring progress. Clearly, I will do anything, including taking such trick shots as piercing through the so-called fourth wall to quote-unquote talk directly to you so you'll see me through the hole pricked by the tip of my stunt arrow upon its extraction. It is a pretentious, total grad-schoolish maneuver made even more ironic

because I currently direct an MFA program and would call out as cynical any student distrustful of the process of discharging a part of oneself for anything other than the sole purpose of giving it away or being personally impacted by its own barb.



And yet here I find myself, blushing red, green at moving through the world without a hero's recognition, incapable of fully sacrificing being a savior of myself and others, an insecure grad student at being-in-the-world and seeing others in it.



Like when I was bright green at teaching, back in a borrowed minivan in the late July afternoon, hurtling west along the eastern concurrence of NY 5 and 20, being ambushed by the student who was out of patience for appreciating the myth of our photographing experience because she had other people to care for and survival concerns of her own.

And I can't help but also relate here a ridiculously involuted and narratively digressive story, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," by the same author as this diary's epigraph and citation of Zeno's Arrow, David Foster Wallace. Wallace wrote "Westward" while an MFA student as a takedown of postmodern metafiction, specifically the approach of the novel *Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth, who appears by a different name in Wallace's story as the writing professor of MFA student Mark Nechtr. Mark is a professional archer who has also written a story about a writer and archer named Dave (the actual story's author) whose lover, L, presumably capital-L literature, commits suicide by impalement with Dave's arrow. The arrow-as-pen and impact-as-affect metaphors abound, as do the discursive fun house mirror loops

of writer-to-character and character-to-writer and stories within stories within stories in ever diminishing ways.

For most of "Westward," Mark is in a tricked-out vehicle with his girlfriend, a fellow writer in the MFA program and former child actor in a McDonald's commercial, along with other former McDonald's actors, all heading westward to Collision, Illinois. DeHaven, a noise artist dressed as the clown Ronald McDonald, drives his own custom van with all the other artists inside until it gets stuck in a mire and he must climb on a farmer's horse to try and pull it from the mud.



The long story or novella basically culminates in an even more absurd tableau of the 1861 mural by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, namesake of the story's title. This representation of Manifest Destiny, with its white settlers bathed in the golden hour light of divine ordination to compulsorily progress from east to west and claim dominion over North America, no matter who was there for centuries prior or what the moral and human costs, covers six hundred square feet of wall space in the United States Capitol.



Like the immigrant Robert Frank's path from east to west and back again that lay claim to the States, and Wallace's parodically involuted clown car nightmare meant to settle territory beyond postmodern metafiction, as well as the raising and echoes of these in my own trip east to west, such representations may be critical while remaining expansionist hold outs of white male progression.

Yet an enduring part of me still wishes to share the aesthetic symmetry of it all, repeating these patterns in art, their recursive loops guiding me externally, like a puzzle to be solved. As if there were something poignantly resolute in the coincidental fact that Frank died the same week as the announcement that Seneca Nation and NYS came to terms for repairing the Thruway section through Catauraugus. The appeal of completion is it provides hopefulness, when hope and resolution are but a romantic's achievement of temporarily freeing himself from the muck while leaving it unchanged for others to stay stuck in its hold and somehow free themselves or not.

