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itself has been rewired as a kind of cultural wood, lumberscent mana down through the generations, westward the wagons, and perhaps that way the little Lebowski on the way won't ever have to endure being called little Dude.

Notes

1. On skeumorphs, see Hayles, 13–17.
2. In real life, the house is a well-known gem of mid-century modern, the Sheats house, designed by architect John Lautner in 1963. See “The Twentieth Century: 100 Years of Design,” *Architectural Digest*, April 1999, 266–67.
3. Special thanks to my colleague Susan Jarosi for first bringing this allusion to light.
4. My thinking here owes something to Ward Shelley’s “Timeline Paintings,” www.pierogizoo.com/flatfile/shelleywdrawingso6.html.

By the time I delivered the ideas in this chapter, in September 2006, in a dowdy wood-paneled “conference room” in a bowling alley in Louisville, Kentucky, during the annual Lebowski Fest held in the city and at those lanes, everything had been said. Mine was the final paper, and during the previous two days the film had been turned upside down and shaken, and then carefully situated with regard to fluctuations in the L.A. real estate market, the subgenre of bowling noir, the Brunswick color palette, nihilism and fluids, Paul de Man and Rip Van Winkle. Everything had been said, some things multiple times, and everyone was happy. Most people were happy. It became apparent to many of us that the film did not suffer from this critical vulturism, that the conversation could go on, potentially forever, without it being a problem that we were repeating ourselves and offering quite obviously contradictory views on many important aspects of the movie. The chatter did not exhaust the film, did not debase it or use it up, but it did not really exalt it either. The ability of the film to sustain such conversation was not due to its being a “classic,” timeless or otherwise. It seemed, rather, that the film was not so much full of a complexity that needed endless “unpacking”—this despite the fact that *The Big Lebowski*, like all the Coen brothers’ movies, lavishes loving, even obsessive, attention on all its details—than it was offering itself as genially *underdetermined*, available for any and all projections, investments, analyses, even mimics.

The level of mimicry during the meetings was quite high—at moments, alarming. When one of the presenters donned a hat and began to deliver his paper in the voice of “The Stranger,” I was seized with anxiety. But I shouldn’t have been—it was a virtuoso performance, one of several, and even those of us who did not rise to such performative excellence were more and more immersed in an environment of mimicry as the meeting went on. Like Bartleby’s office mates, who unconsciously respond to his infuriatingly underdetermined personality by imitating the sole unique aspect of his self-presentation—the word *prefer*—we all started to invoke the preferred nomenclature, we all entered each other’s worlds of pain, and the general happy-go-lucky Walteresque profanity seems now, in hindsight, to have done a great job of tying the fucking room together. The film produced verbal and gestural mimicry, it elicited interpretive saturation, because of its ultimate underdetermination, its refusal to calcify into any one genre, any special place in an oeuvre, any commanding ideological employment. The film was less an object to take apart than a matrix for a strangely limitless refabrication, or reproduction. It morphed ceaselessly under the pressure of our gestures and our words and still remained, inviting all comers, disallowing no mutation, however strange. The film seemed strangely *generous*—something for which I was grateful as I began to deliver my superfluous final words. It forgave us all our trespasses.

In this essential underdetermination, *The Big Lebowski* takes on the aspect or identity of its central character, Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski, played by Jeff Bridges. I say “central character” with some hesitation, because I don’t want to say “hero.” It took me some time to realize it, but the title of the film does not refer to the character played by Bridges. Why this did not occur to me sooner is an unhappy reflection on my critical acumen, since the plot’s entire motivating structure is the Dude’s *refusal* to be known as “Mr. Lebowski.”: “I’m not Mr. Lebowski,” the Dude

explains to the wheelchair Korean vet and tycoon with whom he has been confused. “You’re Mr. Lebowski, man. I’m the *Dude*.” Of course, when you have a title like *The Big Lebowski*, and not one but two characters named Lebowski, one of whom is clearly the main character, it’s perhaps excusable to think that the title names the hero. But whatever Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski is, he’s not any normal kind of hero, so I really should have known better than to think *he* was “The Big Lebowski.”

I don’t think the aggressive tycoon is the Big Lebowski either. *Mr. Lebowski*, sure, the Dude tells us that. And given their obviously disparate positions on the status hierarchy, one might conclude that the Dude is, logically speaking, the little Lebowski next to the bellowing, self-aggrandizing gasbag played by David Huddleston. But as we learn late in the film, there is already a “little Lebowski” on the way, the result presumably of the Dude’s amorous night with Maude Lebowski, and her yogic cradling of his seed. So, if the Dude can’t really be said to occupy the place of the little Lebowski, there’s no reason to extend that exalted title to the Dude’s millionaire namesake—*Mr. Lebowski*, fine, but not the Big Lebowski.

My first conclusion, then, in my effort to understand the meaning of the film’s underdetermination is that the title is a feint. It sets us up for the expectation of eponymous heroism. Now, generally speaking, the relation between names and heroes is complex and profound:

The hero fights and conquers. Where does this virility come from? From himself. But where does he himself come from? This is the beginning of the hero’s difficulties. He has a name that is proper to him, one he has often even appropriated—a surname [*surnom*], just as we speak of a superego [*surmoi*]. He has a name, he is a name. (Blanchot 369)

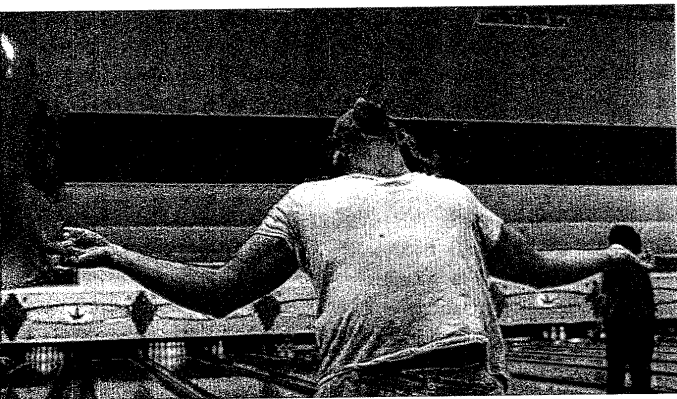
Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski has a name, and this is indeed the beginning of his difficulties. But he does not “appropriate” this surname, as

one equips oneself with, accepts the burden of, a superego. He rejects that name and appropriates for himself the name "The Dude," an act we might rather call the creation of a subego. The Dude's essence, we might say, lies in his refusal to be Lebowskied. Where the title leads us to expect a hero, then, we find what I can only call a *condition*, a being-Lebowski. Looked at in this way, the title begins to seem like a weird homage, in a film with so many more overt homages, to Raymond Chandler and, specifically, *The Big Sleep*. Chandler's title, *The Big Sleep*, doesn't name a hero, either; it names the limit-condition with which the fiction and the film are obsessed—namely death. Chandler's plot is driven by everyone trying to avoid "the big sleep." The Dude also tries to avoid suffering the Big Lebowski: like the big sleep, to have the big Lebowski visited upon you, is not, perhaps, an experience from which one returns. The Dude comes perilously close to such a fate, but his refusal of the nomination constitutes his escape, or rather, his ability to *abide*.

The Dude refuses to be Lebowskied, then: this refusal, the assumption of a subego, constitutes a way of abiding that fundamentally revises the hero's role. "The hero fights and conquers," says Blanchot. "Where does this virility come from? From himself." Such words can't help seeming comical in the context of *The Big Lebowski*. The film as a whole asks us to see this negotiation between names and heroism as an extremely violent and comical affair. But the Coen brothers do not see "comical" and "serious" as mutually exclusive values: they are quite serious about the comicality of the stories they tell. This applies to the vexed question of the Dude's "virility." In the admittedly small-scale research I did on academic and crypto-academic treatments of the Coen brothers, and this movie in particular, I discovered that a number of people think this film is about patriarchy, or even that it constitutes an extremely clever critique of various kinds of violent male posturing, from Walter's

harping on Nam and constant invitation to enter his private "world of pain" to the patriarchalism seemingly implied by the whole Lebowski surname farrago. But whatever the film has to say about men and virility and patriarchy, however much the film exposes and deflates the virile pretensions underwriting pronouncements that "This aggression will not stand, man," it does so, I would suggest, from the side of the body, rather than the side of the name, idea, or value of manliness. The Dude is an exuberantly embodied character. One charming detail from William Preston Robertson's book on the making of the film is provided by costume designer Mary Zophres, who tells us that Jeff Bridges was so taken with the Munsingwear tights-whities he was issued that he took a pair home to help him method-act his way to the Dude's level of grunge. In the scene in the bowling alley where the Dude performs some spaced-out stretching movements, canting over to one side, staring up at the ceiling, his Munsingwear peeps over the top of his stretch pants. It's a sweet moment, almost intimate. In general, Bridges plays the Dude as built for comfort, and Zophres understood this requirement of the character. In her account of costuming the movie, she offers fascinating information on how she fatigued the Dude's sweatshirts and shorts so that they could achieve the level of shapelessness that was deemed desirable. Whatever else the Dude's clothes may say about his economic situation, counter-cultural bona fides, or attitude toward personal hygiene, his baggy, bunched clothes also keep before the mind's eye all that flesh that is being allowed to take up space unconstrained. In this way, too,

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21.1. A desirable level of shapelessness: The Dude in Munsingwear.

the Dude's embodied presence is all the more powerful for seeming underdetermined, for having resisted the shaping, fixing, and molding imposed on it by what seamstresses would call clothes "with structure."

The Dude's middle-aged burliness, as played by Bridges and costumed by Zophres, has a comic quality, certainly. But the deflating power of embodied virility is, if anything, more marked in the screenplay. In the absurd second meeting with the millionaire Lebowski, the discussion turns to "what makes a man." The Dude genially listens to the fatuous musings of his namesake: "Is that what makes a man?" he is asked, rhetorically, to which the Dude answers: "That and a pair of testicles." The funniest riff on this theme comes in the scene with pornographer Jackie Treehorn, a scene which encrypts a reference to *North by Northwest*. The Dude, of course, shares with Roger O. Thornhill the discomfort of being mistaken for someone else. In Hitchcock's film,

Thornhill, desperate to get disentangled from his mess, jumps up at one point to get an address by rubbing the pad on which Eva Marie Saint had just written. The Dude performs the same clever maneuver at Treehorn's bachelor pad, which is itself so reminiscent, in its 1950s stylings, of James Mason's mountain retreat at the end of *North by Northwest*. Treehorn, a James Mason gone seriously to seed, has just scribbled on a pad while taking a call. When he leaves for a moment, the Dude leaps up and does the pencil-rubbing maneuver. But where Thornhill gleaned a clue, all the Dude gets is a traced version of Treehorn's pornographic graffito of a cock and balls. Slavoj Žižek has convincingly written of Roger Thornhill's struggles against the "symbolic mandate" imposed by the Big Other in Hitchcock's film. But when you substitute a Dude for a Roger Thornhill, a Jackie Treehorn for a Van Dam, a Big Lebowski for a Big Other, the mysteries of misrecognition collapse into cartoons (see Žižek 104).

The Dude refers to himself in the third person, which is weirder than it might seem. "Leave a message for the Dude," instructs the answering machine. What kind of person refers to himself in the third person? Let me leave aside "The Jesus": as the man in the purple jumpsuit sensibly advises, it is best "not to fuck with The Jesus." But there are others who refer to themselves this way. Bob Dole used to do so. So did Elmo from *Sesame Street*. Perhaps if we average these two characters, we get a sense of who the Dude may be—half political subject-function, half cartoon embodiment of the pronomial promiscuity of toddlerdom. I have just looked, albeit briefly, at the way the Dude's mode of virile embodiment seems to participate in both the elasticity and the comic violence of the cartoon character. But what about his Bob Dole side? The Stranger tells us in the beginning of the film that the Dude is the man for his time and place, that he "fits right in there." This description, like the title itself, functions as a lure, drawing commentators of all kinds to

spell out what makes for the Dude's exemplarity. But as I learned in Louisville, the Dude's ability to be plausibly exemplary of many mutually contradictory things is perhaps what is most unusual about him. If he "fits right in there," in other words, it's not because he is shaped right—like the perfect puzzle piece—but because he bends and stretches like Silly Putty. He is ideologically and socially interstitial. The Dude is like a socio-symbolic stem cell—pure potentiality in suspension, holding some special germ of exemplarity in him that turned one way can open out onto the abstractions of role, function, and ideological identity (his Bob Dole side), and turned another way remains essentially unformed, prior to the divisions and individuations that produce the identities we track with pronouns and proper names (his Elmo side).

In being so flexible, so unformed, the Dude is also what holds together the 1990s L.A. world in which he lives. Somehow we have to think together the fact that the Dude is the man for his time and place, and that he is over and over again in the wrong place at the wrong time: both central, the hub to which all the spokes are attached, and aberrant—the wheel is veering off the road. This double condition—central and adrift, exemplary and underdetermined—is what is at stake in the Dude's mode of being, namely abiding. It is possible, of course, to abide something, or not abide something, transitively. The millionaire Lebowsky, for example, "will not abide another toe." In this sense, *abiding* is basically a synonym for "endure." But the differences between enduring and abiding are subtle and important. Consider the thumbnail sketches of his characters that Faulkner added to the end of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1946. After going through the cast—even Luster gets a sentence—Faulkner comes to Dilsey, the fictionalized version of his Mammy, Caroline Barr, she to whom he was to dedicate *Go Down, Moses*, "who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love." Alone among the

characters, Dilsey remains undescribed, Faulkner merely writing—and they are the book's final words—"DILSEY: They endured" (*Fury* 427). The "they" here, like the Dude's third person, invokes a trans-subjective identity, a rendering of Dilsey into an exemplarity "without stint," we might say. But Dilsey, in her summation of a capacity to endure on the part of her race, and her gender, still retains enough agency to qualify as a modulation of the heroic. If the classic hero is a vector of agency fulfilling his name's mandate, Dilsey as a "they enduring" is a kind of anti-hero, a figure whose mere lasting constitutes a baseline kind of agency. To endure is to maintain an identity, to withstand external assaults, while to abide is—according to the OED—"To remain in expectation, wait"; "To remain without going away, to stay"; "To remain in residence; to sojourn, reside, dwell."

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The idea that abiding is "to remain in residence," to "dwell," can remind us just how much of the action and conflict in *The Big Lebowski* concerns the Dude's dwelling. The Dude simply wants to dwell in peace, but it is his fate to have his most intimate spaces violated: his head is stuffed into his toilet, his bath is invaded by a ferret, his rug is pissed on. This rug may seem like a MacGuffin—the term given by Hitchcock to a wholly contingent object whose circulation generates a plot—but I think it is more than that. In "Building Dwelling Thinking," Martin Heidegger writes about the way buildings create the locations they might merely seem to occupy. His example is a bridge: "The location is not there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a location, and does so *because of the bridge*. Thus the bridge does not first come to a

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power to *gather*. The Dude's rug gathered, in this sense, it tied the room together: it was essential to his dwelling, in Heidegger's sense. When we watch the Dude standing in the middle of his room, on the rug he has taken from the millionaire's house to replace his own, performing his idiosyncratic *tai chi*, we are witnessing his well-nigh priestly efforts to reconstruct his dwelling.

The rug is the central element of the plot because it ties the room together; it symbolizes, and more than symbolizes, the Dude's mode of dwelling, his abiding. "When we speak of dwelling we usually think of an activity that man performs alongside many other activities. We work here and dwell there. We do not merely dwell—that would be virtual inactivity—we practice a profession, we do business, we travel and lodge on the way, now here, now there" (Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking" 147). But "virtual inactivity" summarizes quite precisely the Dude's mode of abiding. When asked whether he is employed, the Dude's incomprehension of the question is sublime: his slackerdom is metaphysical. The Dude embodies *potentia*, he is always employable because he is never employed—merely abiding. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he embodies the virtuality that goes along with all our activity—the virtuality of its not having been undertaken in the first place. The Dude would very much like not to be so active, and he somehow is able to make present what almost always, for most of us (as Heidegger says), remains invisible and out of reach: our not-having-done, the virtual inactivity of merely abiding. I think this is why more even than Mammy Dilsey's enduring "devotion," the Dude's

location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge" (154). Heidegger calls this transformative power of the building/dwelling a

sojourning, his standing by—as, for instance, when Walter scatters Donny's ashes—makes him a figure of immeasurable forgiveness. It's not impossible that Walter reads Heidegger, but whether he does or not, his decision to scatter Donny's ashes looks like an attempt to gather together what Heidegger calls the "fourfold" (earth, sky, mortals, and immortals), an attempt to dwell. The Dude stands by, he is sojourning at Walter's side, and it is he to whom the earthy dust of Donny's mortal remains sticks when the wind blows them into his face. The Dude is upset: if he's going to have stuff clinging to his beard, he'd prefer it to be white Russians. Walter is upset, too, and in the pain of his grief and his humiliation, he embraces the Dude, asking forgiveness. And the Dude grants the forgiveness, not by offering any fantasy bribe of a different world, but simply by standing by, making himself available for hugging. Like Whitman's other famous metaphysical loafer, the Dude conjoins virtuality and embodiment: he is "hankering, gross, mystical, nude" (45). And if he stands aside and waits, if he abides in expectation of our coming, it is not in the shape of some spirit or extraterrestrial creature, but precisely as the virtual inactivity of the earth itself, ashes in the beard, dirt under the bootsoles.