IDENTITY TRIBALISM AND DYSTOPIAN BALKANIZATION: SATIRIZING INTERSECTIONAL DISCOURSE IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *ADJUSTMENT DAY*

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Abstract: This article examines Chuck Palahniuk's dystopian novel *Adjustment Day* (2018) as a satire of identity-based separatism, academic discourse, and radical social constructivism. By dramatizing the violent partition of the United States into racially and sexually segregated enclaves, including Gaysia, Blacktopia, and Caucasia, Palahniuk's narrative illustrates the inherent instability of communities organized around rigid identity categories. Through grotesque exaggeration, parody, and hyperbole, the novel ridicules theoretical jargon while revealing the fragility of social engineering projects. The study argues that *Adjustment Day* operates as a double-edged satire: it counters extreme constructivist discourse by stressing physical embodiment and institutional cohesion. Yet, it also exposes the categorical essentialism of the enclaves it imagines. It further explores how the novel's satirical vision resonates with contemporary American legal and political controversies on which identity-conscious policies are built.

Keywords: dystopian satire, intersectionality, identity politics, social constructivism, Balkanization

Résumé : Cet article examine le roman dystopique *Adjustment Day* (2018) de Chuck Palahniuk comme une satire du séparatisme identitaire, du discours académique et du constructivisme social radical. En imaginant la partition violente des États-Unis en enclaves ségrégées selon la race et la sexualité (Gaysia, Blacktopia et Caucasia), Palahniuk met en scène l'instabilité de communautés organisées exclusivement autour de catégories identitaires rigides. Par le recours à l'exagération grotesque, à la parodie et à l'hyperbole, le roman tourne en dérision le jargon académique tout en révélant la fragilité des projets utopiques d'ingénierie sociale. L'étude soutient qu'*Adjustment Day* relève d'une satire à double tranchant : il s'oppose aux discours constructivistes extrêmes en insistant sur l'incarnation et la cohésion institutionnelle, tout en dénonçant l'essentialisme catégoriel des enclaves qu'il imagine. Elle examine enfin les résonances du roman avec les controverses juridiques et politiques américaines relatives aux politiques tenant compte de l'identité.

Mots-clés : satire dystopique, intersectionnalité, politiques identitaires, constructivisme social, balkanisation

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary American cultural and academic debate, the human body has become a battleground for rival ideological visions. Disputes over race, gender, sexuality, and structural inequality have put increasing pressure on classical liberal ideals of civic universalism and institutional neutrality. Into this polarized climate comes Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Adjustment Day* (2018), a provocative and unsettling response to radical identity politics, academic insularity, and social constructivism. Palahniuk does not sketch a plausible political future. He stages a grotesque armed insurrection in which a coalition of disaffected young men topples the federal government and splits the United States into three racially and sexually segregated enclaves: Gaysia, Blacktopia, and Caucasia. By taking the metaphors of identity-based separatism literally, and by turning abstract academic theory into geography, the novel pushes the logic of group-based categorization to its end point and shows how unstable, and how coercive, such utopian social engineering becomes.

The critical background for this inquiry comes from several sources. Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 4-5), in a peer-reviewed study devoted to *Adjustment Day*, reads the novel as a satirical critique of political radicalization in the United States, one that attacks populist revolutions and excessive political correctness alike and warns against categorical thinking. Heinsohn (2003: 18) argued in *Söhne und Weltmacht* that major historical upheavals and bouts of political violence are driven mainly by demographic youth bulges, in which surplus young males compete fiercely for scarce social status. Booker (1994: 15) observed that dystopian fiction works best not as literal prophecy but as a critical mirror of the anxieties of its own historical moment. Crenshaw, finally, located the difficulty of identity politics not in a failure to transcend difference but in a tendency to conflate or ignore intragroup differences (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242). Since intersectionality was conceived to expose what single-category frameworks conceal (Crenshaw, 1989: 139-140), the demand for demographic purity staged in the novel runs against the logic of the intersectional discourse it parodies.

This article seeks to know how *Adjustment Day* uses dystopian satire to explore the tensions between academic constructivism, identity-based Balkanization, and embodied biological reality. More precisely, how do Palahniuk's hyperbole, parody, and use of the grotesque expose the limits of identity separatism, and what do they reveal about the relationship between academic abstraction and physical embodiment? The working thesis is that *Adjustment Day* is a double-edged satire. It mocks the insular language of academic constructivism, and it dramatizes the authoritarian coercion that seems almost inevitable once political communities trade universal civic bonds for rigid, group-based essentialism.

The contribution draws on Northrop Frye's typology of satire, particularly his notion of Menippean satire, which targets intellectual pedantry and abstract systems of thought (Frye, 1957: 309-312), Booker's (1994: 22) model of dystopian social critique. Collado-Rodríguez (2022) is equally engaged throughout this analysis, as his study of categorical thinking in the novel is the closest critical interlocutor. The argument unfolds in three sections: the first examines how the novel parodies academic discourse and institutional insularity; the second analyzes the dystopian Balkanization of the identity enclaves and their administrative failures; the third turns to the novel's emphasis on biological embodiment, structural cohesion, and legal resonance.

1. MOCKING THE ACADEMY: SATIRIZING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

1.1. The Parody of Constructivist Discourse

Palahniuk aims his satire squarely at the vocabulary and institutional authority of contemporary higher education. Through the caricature of Professor Emmet Brolly at the University of Oregon, the narrative presents the university as a self-referential ecosystem cut off from the material conditions of working-class life. Brolly's lectures flatten complex historical events and human struggles into abstract jargon, which shields the scholar from the consequences of his own ideas. His classroom discourse is steeped in performative radicalism that confirms his institutional privilege rather than clarifying anything about social reality. The text underlines this disconnect by setting Brolly's lofty socio-political theories against his blindness to the physical desperation growing around him. As the narrative puts it: "All major political upheavals in history were due to an excess of young males. A youth bulge, the savvy kraut called it" (Palahniuk, 2018: 213).

In this academic performance, which evokes Heinsohn's (2003) youth-bulge thesis, Brolly treats human populations as demographic data points and overlooks the conscription that threatens his own students. Palahniuk sharpens the satire when Brolly brushes off urgent student questions about a rising violent conspiracy, declaring with patronizing condescension that "power-reversal rituals" (Palahniuk, 2018: 248) explain all political unrest.

Critical scholarship on dystopian narrative helps explain what this parody does. For Booker (1994: 67), dystopian satire seizes on contemporary cultural trends and exaggerates them to their logical extreme in order to expose their institutional absurdity. Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 6) makes a similar point about Palahniuk, who targets academics that pose as liberals while practicing a radicalized political correctness and historical revisionism that reproduces a new categorical essentialism. By turning theoretical paradigms into comic performative scripts, Palahniuk shows how specialized academic language can harden into a defense mechanism. When intellectual discourse

loses touch with physical vulnerability, the novel suggests, it stops being a tool of liberation and becomes a sterile exercise in elite self-preservation.

1.2. Academic Isolation and Material Vulnerability

The conflict in the novel's academic scenes rests on a stark contrast between academic insulation and working-class precarity. Professor Brolly sits comfortably in his wood-paneled office among costly cultural artifacts, while the men who do the physical labor know they are economically obsolete and doomed. Palahniuk uses this spatial and economic divide to dramatize the resentment building outside the university gates. The academic elite looks at the working class through a patronizing theoretical lens and fails to see that these laborers are planning its destruction.

The excavation scene on campus makes the point vivid. Brolly confronts laborers digging enormous trenches without grasping their sinister purpose. Wearing a sweatshirt printed with the slogan "This Is What a Feminist Looks Like" (Palahniuk, 2018: 206), he condescendingly asks what they are doing, and the laborer Rufus mockingly replies that they are building "long-term underground parking for faculty" (206). Brolly does not recognize that the trench is a mass grave meant for the academic elite itself. Later, when the students Keishaun and Jamal confront him in his opulent office, they find him reclining with his feet in a warm bath, surrounded by a "signed sepia-tone photograph of Emma Goldman" and an upside-down American flag (246).

The confrontation illustrates the logic of the revolution described by Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 9): the insurrectionists' targets, namely politicians, reporters, and academics (especially scholars of Gender Studies), are selected through a referendum on an online list. Brolly cannot offer his students any practical help when they warn him of the coming insurrection, which underscores the paralysis of pure theory. Palahniuk sets Brolly's elevated rhetoric beside the brutal pragmatism of Keishaun and Jamal and shows how academic privilege breeds a false sense of immunity. The scene ends with Keishaun shooting the professor, a reminder that theoretical authority offers no protection against material violence.

1.3. Identity Categories and Social Fragmentation

Palahniuk then extends his critique beyond the university walls to ask how rigid identity categories erode broad social solidarity. In the world of *Adjustment Day*, reducing identity to a single demographic marker breeds perpetual grievance and competitive victimhood. Instead of building bridges between marginalized groups, the fixation on group-specific trauma lets the social fabric fray into hostile, insular factions. When institutions adopt constructivist identity frameworks and push

them to the extreme, the novel suggests, civic life turns into a permanent zero-sum struggle for dominance.

The novel dramatizes this fragmentation through the pronouncements of gender studies scholars who frame human relationships strictly in terms of power and historical revenge. Dr. Ramantha Steiger-DeSoto, for instance, declares on live television: "Federal criminal profiling shows the average arsonist to be a white male […] right-wing adherents poisoned by toxic masculinity […] the impending war, for example, will be an excellent opportunity for them to earn the acclaim they crave." (234-235)

Her remark treats the impending slaughter of young men as a fitting outlet for their supposed craving for acclaim, voiced without any trace of compassion. Palahniuk also underscores the wider Balkanization by noting that ordinary citizens were "too fractured along the fault lines of personal identity politics" (222) to unite against the corrupt political establishment.

This depiction is consistent with Collado-Rodríguez's (2022: 7) reading. He observes that the revolution grows out of a mix of populism, young people's aversion to the biased opinions of some liberal academics, and the humorous notion of "identity fatigue," and that Talbott Reynolds then offers his followers an old categorical recipe in which race and sexual preference become the last bastions of community. Palahniuk's satire shows what follows when group identity becomes the only basis of community, whether the idea comes from academics or from Reynolds's followers: a hyper-fragmented society incapable of collective action. Once group identity is the sole measure of moral worth, civic trust collapses and the way open to totalitarian violence.

2. DYSTOPIAN BALKANIZATION: THE APORIA OF IDENTITY ENCLAVES

2.1. Spatial Segregation and Tribal Division

The central dystopian premise of *Adjustment Day* is the physical separation of the American population into distinct, racially and sexually homogeneous territories after the insurrection succeeds. The United States is dismantled to create Gaysia in California, Blacktopia in the American South, and Caucasia in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest. By turning safe spaces and cultural autonomy into literal borders, Palahniuk puts territorial separatism through a narrative stress test. The result is a surreal geography in which state power is used to enforce strict demographic purity, and political identity becomes an inescapable physical prison.

Palahniuk shows the absurd bureaucracy needed to maintain these borders through characters caught up in the relocation process. In Blacktopia, state radio keeps broadcasting the ideological case for partition: "A house is not a homeland. This calls for the partitioning of the formerly united states

in order to provide separate, distinct autonomous nations wherein each people can conduct their lives." (339)

In Caucasia, likewise, the government enforces racial purity through rigorous genetic screening. Shasta learns that "having two grandparents from Quintana Roo had bit her in the ass" (374), which disqualifies her from living legally in the home she has chosen.

Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 7) notes that, in dividing the country into three disunited and confronting territories, Palahniuk plays with stereotypes and categorical excess to build his satire. The logic of purity also excludes hybrid identities: as the same critic observes, people of mixed heritage and bisexuals find no place in any of the three nations (11), a fate that Shasta's case dramatizes. The enclaves do not settle historical racial or sexual grievances; they magnify them by institutionalizing segregation. By sorting every citizen into a predetermined demographic bin, the novel shows spatial Balkanization replacing complex human relationships with rigid, state-mandated tribalism.

2.2. Governance and the Collapse of Civic Cohesion

Far from achieving utopian harmony, the enclaves of *Adjustment Day* soon slide into administrative dysfunction, economic paralysis, and social hypocrisy. Once the shared enemy, the old federal government, is gone, each enclave runs into internal contradictions that show how impossible it is to build a functioning society on shared demographic traits alone. Palahniuk undermines the founding myths of Gaysia, Blacktopia, and Caucasia one by one, showing how each territory produces new hierarchies, new forms of coercion, and new economic absurdities.

In Caucasia, the attempt to revive medieval feudalism produces a surreal economy in which men wear "tunics and cassocks and capes" (362) while economic life stagnates under a perishable currency, "skins" or "Talbotts," that fades to blank plastic within ninety days (335-336). In Gaysia, the complete absence of natural reproduction creates a demographic crisis, and officials set up an oppressive "liberation fund" (361) to purchase children from heterosexual nations. In Blacktopia, state broadcasts celebrate "gargantuan Cheops-sized pyramids levitating off the ground" (377), yet ordinary citizens like Arabella end up in new servitude, working as domestic servants for the new ruling elite who have moved into former plantation mansions (352-353).

This collapse is consistent with Collado-Rodríguez's (2022: 8) observation that, in Caucasia and Gaysia, parenthood becomes a central political issue that produces new forms of slavery and human trafficking, and with his conclusion that Reynolds's experiment ends by bringing back racism, male chauvinism, slavery, misery, and war among the new states (20). Palahniuk's satire pinpoints the fatal flaw of identity-based governance: shared identity guarantees neither administrative

competence nor moral virtue. Watching these utopian experiments decay so quickly, the reader sees that a society that puts ideological purity ahead of functional civic institutions is bound to collapse.

2.3. The Grotesque and the Limits of Identity Politics

To bring out the moral bankruptcy of identity-based separatism, Palahniuk turns to the grotesque, filling the narrative with violence, mutilation, and ritualized degradation. The body in *Adjustment Day* is never an abstract construct; it bleeds, rots, and suffers. By setting high-sounding ideological declarations beside the sickening reality of physical violence, the novel strips revolutionary social engineering of its romantic glamour and forces the reader to face the human cost of ideological extremism.

The grotesque is most striking in the execution of the political, academic, and media elites on Adjustment Day, when the insurrectionists collect the left ears of their victims as proof of assassination. Palahniuk writes: “Uniformed men were wading among the fallen journalists […] dragging a burlap sack […] and bringing his bright tool down with a single stroke. A knife, Nick realized […] dropping an ear into his bag.” (299)

Later, the narrative describes industrial bulldozers burying mountains of severed ears in mass graves, with “screaming flocks of seagulls […] circling the bulldozers […] a gull dove to grab something […] pinched in one of the bird’s talons was an ear” (356). The decay of the actor Gregory Piper’s body, bleeding out in his apartment while his pre-recorded television broadcasts declare that “a smile is your best bulletproof vest” (296, 365), sets media illusion against physical mortality with equal bluntness.

Critical perspectives on the novel clarify what this imagery does. As Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 9) notes, the insurrectionists must cut one ear from each victim as proof of the killing, and the more ears they collect, the higher they rise in the new social hierarchy. The severed ear thus becomes a grisly token of rank and of allegiance to the new order, which makes the satirical excess of Reynolds’s revolution unmistakable. The grotesque in *Adjustment Day* leaves no room for a romanticized revolution: political projects that promise to liberate humanity often end by mutilating the actual body.

3. BIOLOGICAL REALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL COHESION

3.1. Embodiment and Biological Difference

A central argument of *Adjustment Day* is that radical social constructivism inevitably collides with the stubborn facts of embodiment and biological limits. Throughout the text, characters who try

to remake human nature by ideological decree see their plans disrupted by hunger, sexual desire, disease, and reproduction. Palahniuk gives the physical body priority over linguistic abstraction, presenting biological reality not as an artificial social construct but as an inescapable limit on political ambition.

The novel's insistence on the biological necessity of heterosexual reproduction for societal continuity brings this theme into sharp focus and destabilizes the artificial borders of Gaysia. Delicious Bastille and her husband Gentry Tate must enter Gaysia under false pretenses, hiding their heterosexual marriage and seeking clandestine encounters in public restrooms in order to conceive a child. Palahniuk describes their desperate union in a dirty bus station stall, where "Delicious wondered about his burly black dinner partner […] Gentry put himself inside her from behind so she stepped her feet as wide as the little cubicle allowed" (372-373). In Caucasia, meanwhile, the government's effort to enforce traditional gender roles collapses into biological comedy: young women forced to wear Scandinavian crowns topped with lit candles repeatedly set fire to their clothes and to nearby awnings (374-376).

The critical implications of this focus on embodiment are twofold. On the one hand, Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 11) shows that Reynolds, like Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, shares a masochistic attraction to the body that is bound up with the old belief that truth reveals itself through suffering, so that the body becomes the site where ideology is tested. On the other hand, the same critic observes that hybrid bodies, such as those of people of mixed heritage and bisexuals, have no place in the pure territories of the new nations (11). Embodiment therefore cuts both ways. The novel does not endorse biological essentialism; it shows that bodies exceed the categories that ideologues, constructivist or essentialist, try to impose on them. In *Adjustment Day*, the body refuses to be rewritten by political manifestos, and the biological needs that assert themselves despite state prohibition show that any ideology denying embodiment is unstable and doomed to fail.

3.2. Structural Cohesion versus Social Fragmentation

As the dystopian narrative unfolds, *Adjustment Day* sets the social decay of the Balkanized enclaves against the need for broad institutional cohesion. The collapse of civic life after the old federal government is destroyed exposes the error of replacing universal legal frameworks with tribal loyalties. Palahniuk suggests that without shared public institutions, objective legal standards, and reciprocal civic duties, society quickly degrades into warlordism and arbitrary violence, where physical strength becomes the only measure of justice.

The narrative dramatizes this breakdown through the chaotic, predatory behavior of the warlords who seize power after the insurrection. In Caucasia, Chieftain Charlie lives in the looted

Maryhill castle, surrounded by stolen art and a harem of "team wives" subject to his whims (Palahniuk, 2018: 337, 362-363). The rule of law gives way to the arbitrary authority of the blue-black book, and fear becomes pervasive as citizens spy on one another to claim state bounties (310, 347). Palahniuk marks the loss of civic cohesion by observing that "money was no longer power […] the dollar was dead […] and because money could not be hoarded it had to be traded for bread and wine" (317), which leaves the population wholly dependent on the favor of local military chieftains. The novel's ending offers a counterpoint to this institutional collapse. Collado-Rodríguez (2022: 20) reads the final meeting of the surviving protagonists, who gather at the borderlands between the three nations to share a meal and recount their experiences, as a symbolic return to community, dialogue, and negotiation. Palahniuk's satire is thus a warning against dismantling universal civic structures. Destroying neutral institutions does not free the individual; it leaves the vulnerable at the mercy of local warlords, and only the restoration of shared spaces of exchange offers a way out.

3.3. Contemporary Institutional Resonances

Although *Adjustment Day* presents an intentionally hyperbolic fictional world, its satire resonates with contemporary legal and political controversies in the United States over identity-conscious policies and institutional neutrality. The novel's picture of a society obsessed with group classification mirrors real-world anxieties about the erosion of colorblind legal standards and civic universalism. Read alongside recent judicial landmarks, Palahniuk's text becomes a provocative commentary on the dangers of institutionalizing group-based preferences at the expense of individual rights.

The connection is clearest in the legal reasoning of *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023). In that ruling, a six-justice majority held that the race-conscious admissions programs of Harvard College and the University of North Carolina violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (and, in Harvard's case, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), reasoning that the programs relied on racial classifications that lacked measurable objectives, risked stereotyping, and had no logical endpoint. The decision was sharply contested: the dissenting justices countered that it entrenches racial inequality in education. Palahniuk's fictional world can be read as dramatizing the extreme conclusion of the dynamic that the majority criticized, since it depicts a society in which state institutions treat demographic identity as the sole criterion for citizenship, property ownership, and legal standing. In the novel, this group-conscious framework leads directly to the suspension of basic constitutional rights, as when the state uses genetic testing to force citizens out of their homes under the "Homeland Relocation Act" (307, 314).

Legal scholarship on intersectionality supplies a second framework for these parallels. In her foundational article, Crenshaw (1989: 139-140) argued that single-axis frameworks of race or sex erase the experiences of Black women. Intersectionality, in this founding formulation, is a diagnostic tool for uncovering forms of discrimination that single-category frameworks conceal; it does not call for separate, homogeneous communities, which is precisely what the novel's enclaves impose. Palahniuk's satire explores what happens when public institutions abandon any attention to overlapping experience and sort citizens into mutually exclusive categories. By depicting the collapse of civic life in a fully Balkanized America, *Adjustment Day* underscores how fragile a polity becomes when legal standing depends on group classification. This reading remains interpretive: the novel satirizes a fictional state and does not adjudicate the legal debates it evokes, which divide the Court and scholars alike.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Adjustment Day* is a powerful dystopian satire aimed at academic insularity, radical social constructivism, and identity-based separatism. By staging the violent overthrow of the federal government and the partition of the United States into segregated enclaves, the novel puts the logic of identity politics through a rigorous narrative stress test. The analysis has shown that the satire works on several levels: it parodies the jargon of the academy, turns contemporary anxieties about social Balkanization into geography, and stages the primacy of embodiment over pure theoretical abstraction.

These findings bear on broader debates in literary and political theory. Through Gaysia, Blacktopia, and Caucasia, the narrative shows that societies organized exclusively around rigid demographic categories drift toward administrative chaos, social hypocrisy, and authoritarian violence. By contrasting Brolly's sterile theoretical rhetoric with the visceral reality of physical suffering, Palahniuk exposes the gap between elite academic theory and the material conditions of working-class life. The novel's focus on reproduction and physical vulnerability, finally, shows that biological realities set inescapable limits on utopian social engineering.

Ultimately, *Adjustment Day* offers a double-edged critique that refuses easy partisan alignment. The novel ruthlessly mocks progressive academic discourse and identity politics, yet it offers no praise for traditionalist counter-revolutions and depicts the patriarchal feudalism of Caucasia as equally tyrannical and absurd. This ambivalence is confirmed by the novel's closing movement, in which surviving characters from the three territories reunite at the borderlands (Collado-Rodríguez, 2022: 20), pointing toward negotiation rather than purity. Palahniuk's dystopian

vision is a diagnostic warning about the fragility of civic cohesion in a hyper-polarized society: a nation that abandons universal civic bonds and individual rights in favor of tribal identity risks destroying the very freedom and humanity it seeks to preserve. Further research might extend this thematic reading to the novel's narrative form, in particular its non-chronological structure and its use of multiple focalizers (Collado-Rodríguez (16-18), and to the reception of its satire among readers of different political positions.

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