Abstract
This report examines maximalist voice in the nonfiction work of James Agee, Lester Bangs, and David Foster Wallace. The term maximalist voice is meant to capture a set of authorial strategies for depicting a vast, complex American reality with an equally complex literary style, one that is simultaneously didactic, chaotic, and intimate. In particular, this report examines Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Bangs’s Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung, and Wallace’s Consider the Lobster. In using “voice” as an analytic lens, this report highlight those qualities of the three author’s nonfiction writing that draw upon the particular conventions of oral communication. It concludes by arguing for increased use of voice as a way to analyze literary writing.
Wallace's novels often combine various writing modes or voices, and incorporate jargon and vocabulary (sometimes invented) from a wide variety of fields. His writing featured self-generated abbreviations and acronyms, long multi-clause sentences, and a notable use of explanatory footnotes and endnotes — often nearly as expansive as the text proper. He used endnotes extensively in Infinite Jest and footnotes in Octet as well as the great majority of his nonfiction after 1996. "Darkness Legible, Unquiet Lines: Mood Disorders in the Fiction of David Foster Wallace." Creativity, Madness and Civilization. Ed. The Shorter Fiction of David Foster Wallace. David Foster Wallace committed suicide in 2008, and in the four years that have passed since his death, his life and work have been a subject of constant discussion in American magazines, on Internet discussion groups and literary gossip sites, and among readers who gather wherever readers gather to talk about books. He rose to prominence as a writer of formally daring novels, stories and essays that did their best to interrogate American culture, including the culture of entertainment, while also — in a pleasurably idiosyncratic and sometimes difficult manner — succeeding on their own merits.