

Literature and the Public Sphere in the
Internet Age

Daniel James South

PhD

University of York

English

March 2019

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between literature and the public sphere in the internet age. The introduction identifies gaps on these three topics in current academic work, and outlines the need for clarification of the links between them. The chapters go on to explicate these links with reference to the work of four contemporary authors, namely Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace. In their writing, these authors all identify different challenges to the public sphere in the internet age and, in response, ‘model’ alternative modes of being in the public sphere. These modes of being emerge from the particular formal affordances of literature, and are described here as forms of ‘literary publicness.’ The thesis situates these authors on a spectrum of discursive agency, ranging from a view of the public sphere in which writers are seen as authoritative, to a view in which reading processes are prioritised. Each chapter also addresses how these authors have themselves been considered as figures in the public sphere. As such, the story that this thesis tells both helps to clarify the role that culture plays in the public sphere, and reveals the concept of the public sphere itself as a key locus of the relationship between contemporary literature and the internet.

List of Contents

Abstract	2
List of Contents	3
Acknowledgements	5
Declaration	6
Introduction: Literature and the Public Sphere in the Internet Age	7
Search Terms	7
Public Inquiry	18
Literary Iterations	30
Prose and Comms	38
Jonathan Franzen: Authority and Authorship	45
No Filter.....	45
Author IT	56
What the Dickens?.....	66
Strongman Motion.....	79
Dave Eggers: Platforms and Privacy	87
<i>Totally Wired</i>	87
Silicon Values.....	93
Democracy 2.0.....	101
Can We Speak Privately?	107
One Wise Man.....	116

Zadie Smith: Depiction and Difference	126
Comment Threads	126
Reduction Costs.....	135
All Modern Cons	142
Constructionist Sites.....	151
Writers’ Rights	160
David Foster Wallace: Reading and Refusal	168
Prescience or Precedents?.....	168
Homo Techonomicus.....	177
Re: Reading	183
“This is just my opinion”.....	191
On Reading DFW	200
Conclusion: Modelling Citizens	206
Bibliography	212

Acknowledgements

I have been sincerely grateful during the completion of this thesis for the loving support of my family, and the patience of my friends. I would also like to extend my thanks to Dr. Richard Walsh, and those attendees of IBAAS 2016, ACLA 2017, BACLS 2018, and other conferences, who provided feedback on my work.

Mostly, however, I am grateful for the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Adam Kelly, whose breadth of knowledge and soundness of advice have been rivalled only by his generosity and kindness.

This work was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/L503848/1) through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction: Literature and the Public Sphere in the Internet Age

Search Terms

In its December 11th, 2017 issue, *The New Yorker* magazine published a list of its most-read articles of the year. Calculated by collating the amount of time readers spent on each article on the magazine's website, the top of the list comprised a mixture of pieces about the two hottest topics covered by the publication that year – the serial sexual abuse committed by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, and U.S. president Donald Trump's tempestuous first year in office. Given the contexts of 2016's fractious presidential election, and the rapid rise to prominence of the #MeToo movement, the fact that the magazine's most-read articles of 2017 were pieces of journalism concerning topics of national conversation was unsurprising. But these contexts also ensured that the very idea of national conversation was itself a topic of public debate: the controversies surrounding the spread of fake news associated with the 2016 election, and the explosion of activism on social media that comprised #MeToo, drew attention to the ways in which public discussions of political issues occur in the internet age. Amidst this widespread consideration of the roles of journalism and digital technologies in public life, however, *The New Yorker* found itself at the centre of a cultural event that raised questions about where literature sat in this emerging narrative of public discourse in the internet age.

A week after the initial publication of its most-read list, the magazine posted an amended version of the rankings on its website, with Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person," a short story printed in the same issue as the original article rankings before being published online, now listed as *The New Yorker's* second most-read article of

the year.¹ Roupenian's story, about a series of increasingly unpleasant encounters between a young woman and a man she is dating, was perfectly pitched for the discursive atmosphere of 2017's close, and rapidly went viral. Although it never mentions the movement itself, Roupenian's story immediately contributed to the broader cultural debates about gender and power that were being foregrounded by #MeToo – as Tony Williams neatly summarises, “the story sparked passionate debate among readers, elevating it beyond the ghetto of short fiction to global conversations about gender, sex, violence and power.”² The story recounts the nascent relationship between Margot, a student, and Robert, an older man who she gets to know mainly via text messaging. When Robert drives Margot to a cinema on their first date, she suddenly realises how much trust she has placed in him – “as they got on the highway, it occurred to her that he could take her someplace and rape and murder her; she hardly knew anything about him, after all.”³ Margot is more ready to distrust her own instincts than to distrust Robert, however, and quickly considers whether the “discomfort” between them in the car “was her fault,” precisely “because she was acting jumpy and nervous, like the kind of girl who thought she was going to get murdered every time she went on a date.”⁴ Many female readers have highlighted their experiences of identification with Margot, and cited the story's portrayal of her fears (and her consistent second guessing of them) as an important representation of the gendered experiences of everyday life that #MeToo aimed to highlight.⁵

¹ Michael Luo, “The Twenty-Five Most-Read New Yorker Stories of 2017,” *The New Yorker*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/>.

² Tony Williams, “Cat Person: A Creative Writing Expert on Why You Should Read the Short Story for the #MeToo Age,” *The Conversation*, December 19, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/>.

³ Kristen Roupenian, “Cat Person,” *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rozina Sini, “Cat Person: The Short Story People are Talking About,” *BBC News*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-42307714>.

But if “Cat Person” was hailed by many as a nuanced depiction of the intimacies and intricacies of contemporary courtship, the story’s abrupt ending (when Robert drunkenly texts Margot, calling her a “whore,” the word with which the story finishes) proved controversial.⁶ Some saw the move as a “cheapening,” as Williams puts it, “a waste of the story’s resonant, teasing balance of effects in favour of mere polemic.”⁷ Yet Williams also points out that the story’s structure can be read as strengthening its contribution to public debate – “the way that abusive behaviour obliterates complexity in real life is mirrored by the way it obliterates nuance in the story.”⁸ In this reading, it was not only the story of Margot’s experience that contributed to public debate, but the way the story was told. By allowing readers to experience its protagonist’s plight on a formal level, “Cat Person” represented a particularly literary way of discussing experiences of modern dating. Roupelian herself conceives of the story specifically as an intervention into this wider cultural discussion – although it focusses on two characters, the patterns of behaviour portrayed are, she claims in one interview, “bigger than Margot and Robert’s specific interaction; [they speak] to the way that many women, especially young women, move through the world.”⁹

“Cat Person’s” interest in the social rules and assumptions at play in communication, however, also extends *beyond* the argumentative contributions that the story makes to debates about gender. Roupelian encodes in “Cat Person’s” form its own set of discursive rules, modelling the ways in which she believes the issues at play should be discussed. Throughout the story, Roupelian highlights Margot’s

⁶ Roupelian, “Cat Person.”

⁷ Williams, “Cat Person.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kristen Roupelian, “Kristen Roupelian on the Self-Deceptions of Dating,” interview by Deborah Treisman, *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/>.

uncertainties about Robert – as the writer glosses it in one interview, “Margot keeps trying to construct an image of Robert based on incomplete and unreliable information, which is why her interpretation of him can’t stay still.”¹⁰ Recognising that both Margot as a character, and we as readers, have access to limited information involves acknowledging the limitations of individual perspective – an important element of Roupenian’s modelling. Margot finds her first date with Robert awkward, noting that he is “disconcertingly quiet,” and she quickly imagines a future in which the two “wouldn’t talk again.”¹¹ But while trying to imagine how her own behaviour might have made Robert feel (she had been initially dismissive of the film he suggested they see together), “a totally different interpretation of the night’s events occurred to her.”¹² Roupenian highlights these different interpretations throughout her story, structuring the narrative around Margot’s affective oscillations in order to make an argument about the ways in which patriarchal society pressures women to doubt the legitimacy of their responses. But parallel to this feminist reading, we can also identify Roupenian’s attention to different interpretations as modelling a mode of discussing issues that respectfully considers alternative views before making decisions, and acknowledges the contingent perspectives of all discussants. Indeed, it is these facets that form the foundations of “Cat Person’s” model for debate, and structure both how the story progresses, and the reason it finishes in the way that it does. As Roupenian outlines, “the point at which [Margot] receives unequivocal evidence about the kind of person [Robert] is is the point at which the story ends.”¹³ “Cat Person” ends so abruptly, then, because there are red lines in Roupenian’s discursive world, and the story can no longer make room for Robert’s perspective in good faith – he has engaged

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Roupenian, “Cat Person.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Roupenian, “Self-Deceptions of Dating.”

in abusive behaviour, and the debate that the story stages is no longer tenable in line with the rules it has established.

Despite its modelling of these discursive ideals, public debates about “Cat Person” rarely framed the story's attention to other perspectives as anything more than narrative ambiguity – Margot’s recurrent equivocations, and her many miscommunications with Robert, seemingly resulted in many readers’ own uncertainties about how to interpret the story. A number of outlets published explanations of the piece online, as well as summaries of the controversies associated with it, and Roupenian gave several interviews concerning the story’s origins and meanings.¹⁴ The story’s consideration on such a large scale soon became a topic of conversation itself. The literature pages of myriad print and online publications covered the story’s popularity (and the subsequent backlash against it) as a significant cultural event, and offered analyses that connected its widespread online contemplation to broader debates about literature’s relationship with digital technologies. Indeed, if “Cat Person” is a story “for the #MeToo moment,” as one commentator suggested, this is not only because the story’s subject slotted easily into ongoing debates of the time.¹⁵ Just as centrally, its rapid spread was seemingly enabled by the same social media sharing that fuelled that movement’s initial rise. The story was quick to read and easy to share, and the cultural phenomenon of its publication was framed time and again as particular to the internet age.¹⁶

¹⁴ Constance Grady, “The Uproar Over the New Yorker Short Story ‘Cat Person,’ explained,” *Vox*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/>; Jonah Engel Bromwich, “‘Cat Person’ in The New Yorker: A Discussion with the Author,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/>. A later piece by Roupenian also reflects on her experience of reading these reviews and giving these interviews: Kristen Roupenian, “What It Felt Like When ‘Cat Person’ Went Viral,” *The New Yorker*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/>.

¹⁵ Olga Khazan, “A Viral Short Story for the #MeToo Moment,” *The Atlantic*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

¹⁶ Laura Miller, “The New Yorker’s ‘Cat Person’ Story Is Great. Too Bad the Internet Turned It Into a Piping-Hot Thinkpiece,” *Slate*, December 11, 2017, <https://slate.com/>.

Many of the conversations sparked by “Cat Person” either explicitly or implicitly addressed a topic that this thesis takes as its central subject – how literature operates in the public sphere in the internet age. The functioning of the public sphere, broadly defined as the space in which private citizens come together to discuss matters of public concern, depends upon both “quality of discourse and quantity of participation,” as Craig Calhoun puts it.¹⁷ “Cat Person” seemingly represented a remarkable example of literature’s circulation within the public sphere primarily because of the quantity of participation it inspired, but it also sparked important conversations about how literature discusses publicly relevant issues, and how it is itself discussed in public. Yet for all that “Cat Person” can tell us about the ways in which literature functions in the public sphere, its usefulness to understanding how the internet affects this functioning is less clear. For even if the story’s distribution online was a key part of its success, centring solely on this aspect occludes the fact that “Cat Person” was published by *The New Yorker*, a prestigious magazine with a wealth of cultural capital that surely also fuelled the story’s virality. And for all Roupenian’s interest in modelling discursive ideals, her story does not itself incorporate or reflect upon the context of the internet age in any detail. Beyond demonstrating that the architecture of the social internet makes the rapid sharing of content easy, “Cat Person” appears to tell us little about contemporary literature’s relationship with the internet. Rather, what it suggests more than anything is that the advent of the internet has, for the most part, affected how literature is discussed more than it has affected literature itself. Indeed, despite the steady publication over the past twenty years of anxious ruminations on the future of literature under a digital dispensation, ‘literature’ remains

¹⁷ Craig Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 2.

a category analytically separable from ‘the digital.’¹⁸ This is not to deny the impact of the latter upon the former – as Adam Hammond reminds us, contemporary writing and publishing practices nearly always comprise “a hybrid of digital and analog processes.”¹⁹ But one perspective within literary studies would take this to be the end of the matter, seeing digital technologies as no more than an inevitable, if not entirely banal, part of contemporary literary production. In one notable instance of this view, Mark McGurl has claimed that “to speak of, say, ‘fiction in the age of the Internet,’ however illuminating the discussion, would risk missing the extent to which literary experience remains even now unassimilated to the phenomenology of web browsing (let alone reading or writing HTML code), from which it is quite distinct.”²⁰

Yet it is precisely this seemingly enduring distinction between literary experience and web browsing that animates the enquiries of the four novelists on whom I focus in this thesis – Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, and David Foster Wallace. Recent novels by these writers that address the internet’s impacts upon contemporary life in fact draw attention to their own generic and formal qualities, and emphasise their separation from (and opposition to) digital interfaces. But these authors do not do this in order to represent what Jessica Pressman has called an “aesthetic of bookishness” – that is, they do not employ “an emergent literary strategy that [...] exploit[s] the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies.”²¹ Rather, these authors explore the particular qualities and roles that literature (as well

¹⁸ I use the phrase “digital dispensation” here and throughout to refer to the prevalence and importance of digital technologies in how contemporary societies and systems are organised.

¹⁹ Adam Hammond, *Literature in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 200.

²⁰ Mark McGurl, “Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2016): 452.

²¹ Jessica Pressman, “The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First Century Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48, no. 4 (2009): 465.

as norms and values associated more broadly with ideas of the literary) might be able to perform in the public sphere in an era when that sphere is being reformulated by a digital dispensation.

Working from the premise that the internet specifically, and society's digital dependence more generally, are having negative effects on public discourse, these authors write novels that make contributions to debates about how the public sphere should operate in the internet age. These contributions comprise, on the one hand, arguments about the internet's apparent denigration of public life, and, on the other, a potentially curative modelling of alternative norms, ideals, and values that the public sphere might instead adopt. By making their contributions in such a way, these authors make the case for a particularly literary form of publicness, one which they argue could refigure and revitalise the public sphere along literary rather than digital lines. Yet if each of these authors implicitly agree that part of literature's role in the public sphere of the internet age is to model discursive norms that contrast with the digital, the facets of *literary publicness* that they highlight differ from case to case. The four chapters of this thesis as such stage a debate about how we should conceive of literary publicness and its uses – broadly, however, I mean the term to refer to a mode of engagement in the public sphere which is specifically modelled on literature, and incorporates a variety of values, norms, ideals, and processes associated with it. Alongside narrating the interplay between these authors' varying conceptions of literary publicness, however, I also tell a concurrent story about the particular ways in which contemporary literature operates in the political public sphere. This second strand of my thesis also means that my chapters function as case studies in a broader attempt to clarify the role

of culture in the public sphere, a role which has been referred to by political scientists as a “lacuna in the theory of the public sphere.”²²

This is not the only theoretical lacuna I hope to address here – if work on the role of contemporary literature is absent in extant theories of the public sphere, the public sphere as a topic is itself a gap in academic thinking on literature and the internet. Instead, most of the popular and academic criticism concerning literature’s relationship with the internet has focussed on the twin tropes of *anxiety* and *adaptation*. As Hammond explains, “periods of medium transition have tended to be productive moments for literary thinking, presenting opportunities to understand better what literature is and how it can be adapted to thrive in a new media environment,” but “transitions in literary technology tend to produce very similar anxieties.”²³ A good deal of popular criticism concerning the internet and literature betrays, to use Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s phrase, an anxiety of obsolescence, a concern for the future of literature in a culture increasingly dominated by digital technologies.²⁴ Work in this vein draws sharp lines between analogue and digital culture, and often argues that the internet specifically is adversely affecting our critical faculties and the ability to attend to one task (such as reading) for a sustained period of time.²⁵ While there is some academic work that makes similar arguments, most sustained scholarly studies of literature and the internet focus on the other highlighted trope of adaptation.²⁶ A number of such

²² Jostein Gripsrud et al., “Editors’ Introduction,” in *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader*, eds. Jostein Gripsrud et. al (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), xxi.

²³ Hammond, *Literature in the Digital Age*, 22.

²⁴ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Sven Birkerts, *Changing the Subject: Art and Attention in the Internet Age* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015); Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read, and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011); Tim Parks, “Reading: The Struggle,” *New York Review Daily*, June 10, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/10/reading-struggle/>.

²⁶ Paul Socken, ed., *The Edge of the Precipice: Why Read Literature in the Digital Age?* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013); Naomi S. Baron, *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

studies place technological developments of general reading practices at the heart of their enquiries, while others examine how the digitization of existing texts can inflect and renew critical approaches.²⁷ Work in the rapidly expanding discipline of the Digital Humanities, which applies concepts and methodologies from computing to any number of humanities subjects, is most geared towards this latter focus.²⁸ The study of ‘born-digital’ texts also comprises a great deal of academic work concerning the internet and literature. Born-digital texts are composed and read on or via digital devices, and the term encompasses genres such as hypertext, network fiction, electronic literature, and post-internet poetry.²⁹ There is relatively little work, however, specifically addressing the internet’s relationship with literature published in print: Marta Figlerowicz has argued that novels by Ben Lerner and Karl Ove Knausgaard are structurally informed by digital storage and surveillance technologies; N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman have closed studies with chapters focusing on how digitality manifests in print literature, with both critics examining Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006).³⁰ This relative paucity of academic enquiry is

²⁷ Anouk Lang, ed., *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Peter L. Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁸ For an expansive primer on such work, see Ray Siemens and Susan Scribman, eds., *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). See also Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

²⁹ For a critical introduction to hypertext, see George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). ‘Network fiction’ is a term coined in David Ciccoricco, *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007). ‘Electronic literature’ is more commonly used, and is given perhaps its most thorough treatment in N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008). This category is compared with other digital forms in Roberto Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), and connected more specifically with literary history in Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For work on poetry and Internet culture, see Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Marta Figlerowicz, “The Novel of Infinite Storage,” *Poetics Today* 39, no. 1 (2018): 201-19; Hayles, *Electronic Literature*; Pressman, *Digital Modernism*.

understandable – as I have suggested, the two technologies of the internet and the book remain distinct, even oppositional. Yet this does not mean that the two do not intersect in ways that are vital to developing our understanding of contemporary literature.

For Simone Murray, the fact that “the vast majority of online literary discussion concerns traditionally linear, single-author narratives published either in print form or in e-book versions that mimic the codex experience,” begs questions of print literature’s circulation in the twenty-first century.³¹ Her book, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (2018), provides a thorough and much needed intervention in the study of contemporary literary production and reception, and comes closest to interrogating the idea of how literature and the public sphere interact in the internet age. But Murray’s focus remains on developing the emergent field of the “sociology of literature,” as she examines online communities and literary festivals, book review culture, and changing modes of authorship to empirically examine three aspects of the “digital literary sphere”: creation, circulation, and consumption.³² For this reason, “textual analysis is far from the main focus of [her] project” – but while her empirical research is enlightening, there is another story to tell about the internet and print literature that requires paying attention to specific texts.³³ Indeed, textual analysis must be central to our study if we are to fully understand how “literary discourse and its characteristic dispositions continue to shape the nature and norms of online book talk” in the context of the *public sphere*.³⁴

³¹ Simone Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 3.

³² *Ibid*, 17; 170.

³³ *Ibid*, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

My thesis will focus on the twin processes of how literature *contributes to* and is *considered within* the public sphere. Examining these processes with reference to writers who tackle head on the topic of life under a digital dispensation will reveal the public sphere as a key concept that has been hitherto lacking in academic thinking on literature's relationship with the internet. The difficulty of outlining my argument in detail before defining my key terms is evident here – 'public sphere' is a complex term, one with different resonances in different contexts. This introduction will proceed, then, by defining the public sphere as a key term of enquiry, and describing key debates about its manifestation in the internet age. From there, I will outline some of the ways in which the public sphere's links with literature have been conceived, situate my intervention in relation to other treatments of the topic, and offer some justifications for my methodology. I will then introduce the authors and works on which my chapters focus by outlining the concurrent stories that each chapter will tell, before briefly restating the central claims that this thesis will make.

Public Inquiry

In 1962, the German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a text which has animated a half century of debate amongst political scientists, philosophers, historians, and literary scholars.³⁵ Habermas's book has three main strands: a historical account of the emergence of what he calls the bourgeois public sphere, an interrogation of the normative ideals of that sphere (although these first two strands are intricately linked), and an argument concerning the structural transformation of that sphere which

³⁵ Several primers dedicated to Habermas's work on the public sphere go into much more detail on the topic than I can here. The most useful and thorough of these are: Calhoun, "Introduction"; Gripsrud et al., "Editors' Introduction," xxi-xxviii; Luke Goode, *Jürgen Habermas: Democracy and the Public Sphere* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

incorporates an account of its twentieth-century manifestation. In an encyclopaedia article summarising his argument, Habermas defines the public sphere as “the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed,” and *Structural Transformation* enters into dialogue with previous work about public opinion, including that of Hegel, Kant, Mill, and Hannah Arendt, whose influential *The Human Condition* was published just four years before Habermas’s intervention.³⁶

Habermas distinguishes his project, however, by grounding his argument in the interrogation of public debate in a particular historical moment, one which he contends “was unique and without historical precedent.”³⁷ His study explores the bourgeois public sphere, which functions as “the sphere of private people come together as a public [...] to engage [public authorities] in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publically relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.”³⁸ Habermas outlines how the development of a mercantilist phase of capitalism throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created a “traffic in news” parallel to “the traffic in commodities,” as “merchants’ market-oriented calculations required more frequent and more exact information about distant events.”³⁹ From here he tracks the emergence of political journals, which made previously private news more widely available, and describes how state authorities “made use of this instrument to promulgate instructions and ordinances.”⁴⁰ In doing so, “the addressees of the authorities’ announcements genuinely became ‘the public’ in the proper sense,” and the expanding stratum of a bourgeois reading public gained

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1974): 49.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (1962; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

an awareness of themselves as “the abstract counterpart of public authority [...], as the public of the now emerging public sphere of civil society.”⁴¹ As the critical press developed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the proliferation of salons and coffee houses across major Western European cities provided a site for bourgeois men (and, rarely, select women) to debate the ideas expounded in print. By “functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters,” the historically specific bourgeois public sphere developed, shifting “from properly political tasks of a citizenry acting in common to more properly civic tasks of a society engaged in critical debate.”⁴²

Having explained and interrogated the beginnings and workings of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas turns to the titular story of its structural transformation. The ideals of increasing both quantity of participation and quality of discourse became, Habermas argues, incompatible in the particular form of the bourgeois public sphere. To understand why, it is important to comprehend Habermas’s apparently paradoxical claim that

the model of the bourgeois public sphere presupposed strict separation of the public from the private realm in such a way that the public sphere, made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state, was itself considered a part of the private realm.⁴³

This passage highlights one of the difficulties of Habermas’s work, namely the slipperiness and recurrence of terms in different contexts. Here, ‘private’ essentially means outside of state control. The bourgeois public sphere, encompassing the deliberative practices of private citizens, could only function if it remained a private

⁴¹ Ibid, 21; 23.

⁴² Ibid, 51; 52.

⁴³ Ibid, 175-6.

endeavour; the public sphere could only influence the state if the state held no sway over the public sphere. As Calhoun usefully explains, “structural transformation came about [...] as private organizations began increasingly to assume public power on the one hand, while the state penetrated the private realm on the other.”⁴⁴ Concurrently, “the inclusion of more people in the public sphere made it impossible to escape addressing the class divisions of civil society,” and put an end to the supposed ‘bracketing’ of participants’ identities, which proponents claimed underwrote the rationality of debates.⁴⁵ In summary, the structural transformation of the public sphere comprised two shifts: one from a public of private individuals to a public of private *organizations*; and, as a corollary, another shift towards *state* involvement in the private realm (and hence the public sphere). All of this was aggravated by the fragmentation consequent to the expansion of the public sphere.⁴⁶

It is important to remember, however, that this historical story is only one strand of Habermas’s work. *Structural Transformation* is just as interested in the normative ideals that underwrote the *idea* of the bourgeois public sphere as in its actual historical manifestation. Perhaps this multiplicity of meaning would be more immediately obvious if I were writing in German. The original title of Habermas’s study was *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* – this latter word (perhaps better translated as ‘publicness’ or ‘publicity’) being strongly linked to Enlightenment ideals of intellectual and expressive freedom in public debate, while also indicating the spaces where such exchanges can take place and the nature of their practice.⁴⁷ We must

⁴⁴ Calhoun, “Introduction,” 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this “mutual infiltration of public and private spheres,” see Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 141-159.

⁴⁷ Habermas’s translator, Thomas Burger, notes that the difficulty of translating Habermas’s key term also extends to *bürgerlich*, rendered in English as ‘bourgeois,’ but also connoting in the original German the terms ‘civil,’ ‘civic,’ ‘citizen,’ and ‘middle class’ (Thomas Burger, “Translator’s Note,” in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of*

bear in mind these multiple associations when we discuss the public sphere – it is not to be taken as merely denoting a set of institutions. Rather, it also connotes the normative ideals and practices that comprise the very idea of publicness. Habermas identifies the definitive locus of this publicness in the exercise of reason. He intends his historical story to demonstrate how the bourgeois public sphere was founded on the ideal of rational-critical argument, an ideal which broadly bracketed the identities of discussants in favour of a supposed meritocracy of argumentation. Efficacy was important, too – the ideal public sphere would strive for consensus based on the strength of argument alone, and could expect to have a recognisable impact on political decisions. Given that the bourgeois public sphere was almost entirely “composed of narrow segments of the European population, mainly educated, propertied men,” however, we might be more than a little sceptical about this sphere’s claims to democratic legitimacy.⁴⁸ Indeed, many critics have responded to Habermas by calling into question the efficacy, desirability, and logic of several of the normative ideals he presents. Although much important work has also been done on particular historical manifestations of the public sphere, it is those critiques that initiate conceptual debate about norms and ideals that I am most interested in here.⁴⁹ For when the idea of the public sphere has been at least partly abstracted from its concrete historical contexts, a more politically philosophical kind of work can take place – exactly the kind of work,

Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (1962; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1989), xv). For more on the potential critical ramifications of Burger’s translation, see Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 74.

⁴⁸ Calhoun, “Introduction,” 3.

⁴⁹ In their significant collection on historical manifestations of the public sphere, Peter Lake and Steven Pincus highlight how “the ‘public sphere’ has become ubiquitous in the historiography [...] of early modern England,” and is in fact “moving backwards in time” as a relevant term, now appearing in scholarly work about periods as far back as the early Stuarts (Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, “Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England,” in *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, eds. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 1.)

I will argue later, that Franzen, Eggers, Smith, and Wallace so often undertake in their writing.

Goode notes that, as a piece of “overtly political history writing, [*Structural Transformation*] lays itself open to the charge that the end justified distorted means,” and many historians have made a point of highlighting the book’s “imbalanced methodology.”⁵⁰ Most notably, the “narrative of exclusion” which Habermas uses to explain the absence of women and working-class participants from the bourgeois public sphere has been shown to be flawed, with much historiographic work demonstrating both the “convergences with and divergences from the dominant male bourgeois model privileged by Habermas.”⁵¹ Further to this, the narrative of ideological exclusion fails to sufficiently interrogate its own problematic assumptions. As Nancy Fraser puts it,

the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be *the* public. [...] On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics.⁵²

Fraser’s concept of counterpublics is an important feminist revisionist approach to the concept that names those “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated

⁵⁰ Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 29; 30. For more on how “the normative level of Habermas’s analysis is compromised by the historical,” see Alexandra Halasz, *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (1997; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43; Steven Pincus, “The State and Civil Society in Early Modern England: Capitalism, Causation and Habermas’s Bourgeois Public Sphere,” in *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, eds. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). And for critical historiography more directly linked to ideas of the literary, see Jeffrey S. Doty, *Shakespeare, Popularity and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), and Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998).

⁵¹ Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 31; 32.

⁵² Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 116. Fraser’s chapter here also contains an explication of her influential concept of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ publics, which has since been taken up by Habermas.

social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”⁵³ Fraser’s concept also serves a related purpose, gestured to in her problematising of the notion of *the* public; acknowledging the idea of counterpublics means accepting that the public sphere is no longer (or, as Fraser shows, has never been) unitary – multiple publics, and as such multiple public spheres, exist.

The notion of counterpublics has become a foundational part of public sphere theory, and is worth stressing here for three reasons. Firstly, even if “the idea of *a* public, as distinct from both *the* public and any bounded totality of audience, has become part of the common repertoire of modern culture,” as Michael Warner has claimed, “our intuitive understanding” of publics often occludes the particular ways in which these publics operate.⁵⁴ Public spheres not only differ in *what* they discuss (the term ‘issue publics’ is often used to denote public spheres dedicated to specific political topics), but also in *how* they discuss. As Warner puts it, “public discourse says not only ‘Let a public exist’ but ‘Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.’”⁵⁵ A key question for academics tracking the development of the public sphere in the internet age has been what character digital public spheres have. Whatever their findings, the internet’s proclivity for, as Habermas describes it, “the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics,” identifies the idea of counterpublics as central to understanding the public sphere in the internet age.⁵⁶ Secondly, recognising that different public spheres operate in different ways draws attention to the need to clarify the particular

⁵³ Ibid, 123.

⁵⁴ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 66; 67.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 114.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “A Rare Interview with Jürgen Habermas,” interview by Stuart Jeffries, *Financial Times Magazine*, April 30, 2010, <https://www.ft.com>.

facets of literary publicness, which I will attempt to do in the next section of this introduction. The fact that the authors I focus on each conceive of literary publicness in different ways, however, highlights the third reason that the idea of counterpublics is important here: the recognition that multiple publics exist simultaneously serves as a prompt to clarify my use of terms and articles in reference to various public spheres. When I refer to *the* public sphere, I am referring to the broad concept of *Offentlichkeit*, rather than a particular manifestation of it. I believe that ‘the public sphere’ is a useful term because it provides some conceptual stability – we can understand *the* public sphere as an umbrella term under which those multiple public spheres that comprise actual public discourse operate. It is for this reason that I sometimes use the definite article in relation to public spheres – I do not mean to perpetuate discriminatory practices that foreground certain forms of publics in order to discount others, but rather as an umbrella term that also gestures to the idealised version of the concept, whatever that ideal comprises for a particular speaker.⁵⁷

Fraser’s conception of counterpublics is just one example of how she systematically challenges a number of assumptions at the heart of the bourgeois, patriarchal public sphere. Her intervention also troubles the idea that a requirement of a functioning public sphere is a strictly upheld separation between the state and civil society, the feasibility of bracketing the social status of participants, and the view that private issues and interests are always anathema to public discourse.⁵⁸ This latter view

⁵⁷ Warner has pointed out how, historically, “the unity of the public” has been “ideological,” depending on “arbitrary social closure (through language, idiolect, genre, medium, and address)” and “institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 117).

⁵⁸ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 117. See also Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 19-52. Other key scholars who have developed feminist critiques of Habermas include Seyla Benhabib, Mary P. Ryan, and Geoff Eley, each of whom has contributed chapters to Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992).

is given further attention by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in *Public Sphere and Experience* (1972), in which they attempt to theorise a ‘proletarian public sphere’ in contrast to Habermas’s bourgeois one. In their view, for an emancipatory proletarian public sphere to come into being, “the interests of the productive class must be the driving force.”⁵⁹ For Negt and Kluge, theorising a corrective that establishes a space for working class interests means not taking any elements of the public sphere to be intractable – rather, “the proletarian public sphere is none other than the form in which the interests of the working class develop themselves.”⁶⁰ *Public Sphere and Experience* thus challenges the idea that the public sphere should be focussed entirely upon verbal or written discourse. Rather, as Goode glosses it, their model “privileges *praxis* over discourse,” and includes “material and cultural production, as well as political action.”⁶¹ Combined with the earlier suggestion that different publics operate in different ways, this notion of contributions to a public sphere manifesting in whatever form best expresses the interests of a public points to the concept’s malleability. Indeed, the public sphere as *topic* seems to be perpetually present *in* the public sphere, as we debate how best to debate, across cultural contexts, myriad media, and disparate disciplines.⁶² But enacting or encouraging the formation of any idealised forms of the public sphere has become, over the last twenty-five years, even more complicated than Habermas initially envisaged.

⁵⁹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (1972; London: Verso, 2016), 91. For a direct response to *Public Sphere and Experience*, see Frederic Jameson, “On Negt and Kluge,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 42-74. For an alternative Marxist explication of the idea of the bourgeois public sphere, see John Brenkman, “Mass Media: From Collective Experience to the Culture of Privatization,” *Social Text* 1 (1979): 94-109.

⁶⁰ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 92.

⁶¹ Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 35-6.

⁶² For a good summary of the most common approaches to the idea of the public sphere, see Myra Marx Ferree et al., “Four Models of the Public Sphere in Modern Democracies,” *Theory and Society* 31, no. 3 (June 2002).

Since *Structural Transformation* was published in its English translation in 1989, Gisprud et al. note,

three interlinked phenomena have emerged as crucial to the future of the public sphere, as both an idea and an ideal: the transnationalization of the political, economic, and cultural domains; the growth of digital communication technologies; and the amplification of pluralism in multicultural societies.⁶³

There has been much work on transnationalization, particularly in the European context, and some scholars have also explored the role of pluralism in the public sphere.⁶⁴ The most attended to of these phenomena, however, and the most important for my purposes here, has been the ascendancy of digital communication technologies, particularly the internet. Media has always played a key part in conceptions of the public sphere – Habermas brings his account in *Structural Transformation* up to date by writing about mass media, claiming that with the development of “radio, film, and television [...] the form of communication as such has changed”, and that “in comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients.”⁶⁵ In this way, as Calhoun notes, Habermas’s account “is typical of the critique of mass culture in which members of the Frankfurt School had already played a prominent role.”⁶⁶ The social, political, and media landscape is

⁶³ Gisprud et al., “Editors’ Introduction,” xxiv.

⁶⁴ See Kate Nash, ed., *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014); Armando Salvatore, Oliver Schmidtko, and Hans-Jörg Trezn, eds., *Rethinking the Public Sphere Through Transnationalizing Processes: Europe and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Sükösd Miklós and Jakubowicz Karol, eds., *Media, Nationalism and European Identities* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011); John A. Guidry and Mark Q. Sawyer, “Contentious Pluralism: The Public Sphere and Democracy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003), 273-289; Kari Karppinen, “Against Naïve Pluralism in Media Politics: On the Implications of the Radical-Pluralist Approach to the Public Sphere,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 29, no. 3 (2007), 495-508.

⁶⁵ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 170. For in-depth studies of broadcast media’s role within the public sphere, see Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy, and the Media* (London: Sage Publications, 1995); Richard Butsch ed. *Media and Public Spheres* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁶⁶ Calhoun, “Introduction,” 23. Having said this, it is worth pointing out that there has been some debate over the extent to which Habermas mirrors a Frankfurt School position – for an alternate view, see Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 21.

so changed, Habermas argues, that we cannot simply return to a bourgeois model of the public sphere. In more recent work, Habermas has acknowledged that digital technologies have complicated matters even further. For one thing, even if the internet cannot be said to curtail users' reactions, Habermas is clearly suspicious of its capacities for fragmentation (its "splintering effect," as he puts it).⁶⁷

Despite Habermas's own doubts, the spread of the World Wide Web was initially met by many commentators with an optimism that was often undergirded by "an appeal to values which should surely tug at the Habermasian heart strings: the promise of radicalized citizenship [...] and a more participatory democracy."⁶⁸ Yet it might seem to many today that claims about the Web's radical potential for deliberative democracy were, if not entirely misguided, then at least overblown. Its spread undoubtedly enhanced quantity of participation, but its effects on quality of discourse have been less immediately clear. Indeed, one's perspective on this depends upon how one defines quality discourse. Many critiques seem to follow Habermas in this regard, lamenting the internet's rapid colonisation by private corporations, increasing surveillance by the state, and the lack of civility that many attribute to the anonymity of Web users.⁶⁹ But there is by no means complete agreement on this. Christian Fuchs has surveyed a number of thinkers to delineate between optimistic and sceptical views – the former emphasizing new media's potential to extend freedom of

⁶⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Jürgen Habermas: 'For God's sake, spare us governing philosophers!,'" interview by Borja Hermoso, *El País*, May 25, 2018, <https://elpais.com>. See also Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006), 423n3.

⁶⁸ Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 107.

⁶⁹ One early example of work on these ideas is a relatively popular polemic: Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The topics have been given more recent attention in Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017), and Franklin Foer, *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (London: Penguin, 2017). A good place to start for a more qualitative study is Joseph M. Reagle, *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015).

speech, collapse artificial boundaries of public and private, and bracket social differences; the latter highlighting how capitalist ideology inflects the development of many digital platforms, the weak and often apolitical ties fostered by social media, and the potential myopia of *post hoc* thinking about technology and politics.⁷⁰

There is disagreement too on the issue of the internet's fragmentation of the public sphere. On the one hand, Bohman argues that the internet's intrinsic features and effects, both positive and negative, suggest that "the space opened up by computer-mediated communication supports a new sort of 'distributive' rather than unified public sphere with new forms of interaction."⁷¹ On the other hand, Keane warns against such an approach – although "the vision of a unified public sphere in which 'public opinion' and 'the public interest' are defined is a chimera [...], for the sake of democracy it ought not to be jettisoned."⁷² The authors whose work I focus on in this thesis enter this very same debate about the possibility of fostering public spheres online – they all share an anxiety about the internet's effects on public discourse as much as (if not more than) the threat technology poses to the novel of formal obsolescence. They consistently contrast the norms and values associated with the digital and the literary in order to suggest that a public sphere that is literary in character is better for democracy than those public spheres fostered online. But before sketching how this debate unfolds over the course of my chapters, it will be necessary

⁷⁰ Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 185-9. For more on this debate, see Joss Hands's, John Downey's, and Lincoln Dahlberg's contributions in Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, eds., *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁷¹ James Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy," *Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (2004): 139.

⁷² John Keane, "Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere," in *Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practice*, eds. Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 88.

to flesh out the role literature plays in the public sphere, and clarify where my intervention stands in relation to current understanding.

Literary Iterations

As I have noted, the role of literature, and indeed of culture more generally, is a “lacuna in the theory of the public sphere.”⁷³ I believe that one way to correct this is to clarify, with examples, how literature operates in the *political public sphere* through the distinct but reciprocally affecting processes of *contribution* and *consideration*. Although this description may seem obvious to some, it cannot simply be taken for granted as an adequate explanation in the theory of the public sphere. But to understand why this represents a necessary clarification of the links between literature and the public sphere, and to appreciate properly how these processes operate in a contemporary context, we must first take a historical view. The public sphere’s connections with literature are clearly important in Habermas’s work – indeed, in his account the bourgeois public sphere emerges from what he calls variously the ‘public sphere in the world of letters,’ or the ‘literary public sphere.’ Habermas’s conception of the literary public sphere has manifold associations. Firstly, his use of the term points to how journalism played a vital role in constructing the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas argues that, during the inception of the early capitalist commercial system, “the press [...] developed a unique explosive power,” and helped to formalise the notion of an addressable public (not least due to the upsurge of governmental proclamations made in print journals).⁷⁴ A vital role was also later played by “the institution of art criticism, including literary [criticism],” wherein the “lay judgement

⁷³ Gripsrud et al., “Editors’ Introduction,” xxi.

⁷⁴ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 20.

of a public that had come of age [...] became organized.”⁷⁵ Secondly, Habermas identifies a key part of the literary public sphere in his analysis of the social institution of the family; in his view, “the conjugal family’s audience-oriented intimate sphere provides a key both to the development of a literary public sphere and to certain conditions of its collapse.”⁷⁶ Habermas links the emergence of rational-critical debate with the specific subjectivity of bourgeois family life, paying particular attention to those discussions within this intimate sphere that focussed on literature. As Terry Eagleton puts it, literature provided “a vital nexus or mediation between the now privatized nuclear family and the political public sphere; it provided the symbolic forms for the negotiation of new modes of subjectivity, which could then be transmitted into the public domain.”⁷⁷ Thirdly, then, Habermas means the literary public sphere to refer to the role that the rise of the novel played in constructing notions of public and private, as well as how it modelled modes of subjectivity and norms of behaviour for interactions in the bourgeois public sphere. The basic premise of this strand of Habermas’s argument is that the rise of the novel coincided with, and helped to foster, the rise of the bourgeois public sphere: reading practices ensured that “bourgeois subjectivity was essentially intersubjective,” as epistolary fictions like Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) provided a “great mirror of the eighteenth century soul.”⁷⁸ As Grisprud et al. gloss it, the literary public sphere was instrumental in inculcating citizens with the “key resources of empathy, self knowledge, as well as

⁷⁵ Ibid, 41.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 160. For more on the role of the family and literature in the development of the public sphere, see Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, (1984; repr., London: Verso, 2000), 115-123. It is further worth noting that, in Habermas’s usage, the term ‘literary public sphere’ also encompasses the *economic* institutions underwriting the bourgeois public sphere’s development, such as printers and the postal service. For more explication of these ideas, see Baker, “Defining the Public Sphere,” 182-9, and Halasz, *The Marketplace of Print*.

⁷⁷ Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 116.

⁷⁸ Keith Michael Baker, “Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 184.

workable procedures, [without which] political deliberation is[,] at best, severely impoverished and[,] at worst, impossible.”⁷⁹

It is important to note that the literary public sphere was conceived of as separate to the political public sphere. As Gripsrud et al. usefully summarise,

Habermas identified two public spheres: a political public sphere organized around discussion of issues of common concern, and a literary public sphere, or more accurately, a cultural public sphere, devoted to discussion of the problems and dilemmas encountered in everyday life as presented in cultural productions, particularly the newly emerging form of the novel.⁸⁰

It was the end of this separation that signalled the end of the bourgeois public sphere itself. By the mid-eighteenth century, the rapid expansion of a reading public and the relative diminution of the sway of salons had shifted the public sphere’s centre. “Book clubs, reading circles, and subscription libraries” took on a key role, so much so that they in fact “constituted the public that had long since grown out of early institutions like the coffee houses”; the public sphere “was now held together through the medium of the press and professional criticism.”⁸¹ But if in its final manifestation the bourgeois public sphere was held together by print media, this did not signal the compatibility of the two. Rather, it spelled the end of the bourgeois public sphere’s integrity, as the structural transformation of that sphere was triggered in part by its infiltration by private organisations (not least those comprising ‘the media’).

Several other critics have taken steps to develop Habermas’s conception of the literary public sphere, abstracting it from the context of the bourgeois public sphere,

⁷⁹ Gripsrud et al., “Editors’ Introduction,” xxi.

⁸⁰ Ibid, xx-xxi.

⁸¹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 51. This state of affairs is mirrored in the twentieth-century public sphere that Habermas later turns to analyse, with the press and professional criticism replaced by broadcast mass media.

and focussing on its operation in different contexts.⁸² As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has noted, “Habermas’s typology is confusing given that the ‘public sphere in the world of letters’ is defined as a third space” between the private lives of citizens and the state, “yet it also seems, at various moments in the text, to be assimilated to both the public and the private sphere.”⁸³ Dillon’s work points out the need for clarification of the literary public sphere, and she follows Eagleton in her proposed solution: we should think of the literary public sphere as “a social space that links the public and private and mediates between the two.”⁸⁴ Yet Dillon’s solution is just as productive for understanding literature’s role in the *political* public sphere as it is for understanding the literary public sphere itself. By understanding how literature circulates in a social context, we will be able to see as reciprocal the ways in which it both *contributes to* and is *considered within* the public sphere. Yet to examine these twin processes properly, we must acknowledge that literature operates in the public sphere in ways particular to its form – an idea which theorists have debated for some time. Most strikingly, Rosa A. Eberly has claimed that “literary public spheres have nothing *de facto* to do with aesthetics; historically and contemporarily, literary public spheres reflect various publics’ common concerns about the consequences of the news

⁸² Debates about gender are foregrounded, and twinned with considerations of modernism and the role of the public intellectual, in Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and in Georgina Taylor, *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers, 1913-1946: Talking Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). Jago Morrison and Susan Watkins, eds., *Scandalous Fictions: The Twentieth-Century Novel in the Public Sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) focusses on public literary scandals, and Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere* (London: Verso, 2000) aims to make the case, following Percy Shelley, that individual writers should be thought of as consensus-breakers, and celebrated for their political intelligence. Literary criticism is brought into dialogue with work on religion’s place in the public sphere in Susan VanZaten Gallagher and M. D. Walhout, eds., *Literature and the Renewal of the Public Sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). For more on the cultural institutions that can be thought of as comprising literature’s “public life,” see David Carter and Kay Ferres, “The Public Life of Literature,” in *Culture in Australia: Policies, Publics and Programs*, eds. David Carter and Tony Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 140-60.

⁸³ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5-6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

of literary and cultural texts for their collective lives.”⁸⁵ This definition is useful on the one hand, pointing us to the use of literary and cultural texts in public arguments, but on the other hand, its outright dismissal of the role of the aesthetic ignores the ways in which both writers and readers conceive of the particular use of literature *as* an aesthetic form in such arguments. I will demonstrate this capability of literature by close reading a number of novels over the following chapters. But first I must justify my methodology, and explain why literature’s aesthetic contributions to the public sphere are better understood through the lens of *literary publicness* than through attention to the concept of the *literary public sphere*.

In Habermas’s story, the bourgeois public sphere adopted the practices, norms, and ideals of a mass media controlled by corporate interests, and was structurally transformed as a result. Franzen, Eggers, Smith, and Wallace narrate a similar story in their recent fiction – the public sphere is still held together by mass media, but the fact that the internet takes up an increasing percentage of that media has particular consequences, ones which these writers also believe results in a structural transformation. In opposition to this transformation, these authors draw attention to what they see as a preferable form of engagement in the public sphere – literary publicness. For my purposes, the separation between the political public sphere and the literary public sphere is unhelpful – although the fact that I am able to call on a distinct notion of literary publicness would seem to align with the literary public sphere’s conceptual separation from the political public sphere, the authors whose work I address are making contributions to the *political public sphere* specifically with the hope of reforming *that* sphere along literary lines. Further work clarifying the idea

⁸⁵ Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 9.

of the literary public sphere is needed in critical theory, literary studies, and political philosophy, and I will gesture to some potential avenues for enquiry at the end of this thesis. But the following chapters develop the connections between literature, the internet, and the public sphere, by demonstrating how literature responds to the internet through two forms of contribution to the *political* public sphere (which I will refer to from here simply as ‘the public sphere’).

The most recognisable kind of contribution that literature makes to the public sphere is an argumentative one – a contribution which can manifest in both content and form, and can be either a straightforwardly presented contention about an issue, or a point more complexly embedded in narrative.⁸⁶ But another kind of contribution is just as central to the story this thesis tells – those contributions that inherently address the idea of the public sphere itself by modelling discursive norms, ideals, and practices. To understand this second form of contribution, it is important to recognise the innate circularity of discursive publics – “a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself,” Michael Warner reminds us, one which depends, “from one point of view, on the rhetorical address and, from another point of view, on the real context of reception.”⁸⁷ Warner argues that “it is only meaningful to speak of public discourse where it is understood as the discourse of a public rather than as an expansive dialogue among separate persons.”⁸⁸ From here, it becomes clear that we must interrogate how each public sphere is constructed through reference to the texts and utterances that circulate within them, as “all discourse [...] addressed to a public

⁸⁶ Argument may, of course, be embedded in forms other than diegetic or mimetic narrative – poetry, for example, has its own particular relation to the public sphere. For more, see Shira Wolosky, *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Springer, 2010); Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry 1800-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁸⁷ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 67.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 161.

must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate and it must attempt to realize that world through address.”⁸⁹ The authors on whom I focus here attempt to characterize their work’s publics by instantiating certain forms of literary publicness – a mode of being in the public sphere modelled on facets associated with literature and ideas of the literary. The idea of literary publicness, it is worth reaffirming, changes from model to model and writer to writer, and these authors define their notions of literary publicness in two different ways. Firstly, they draw attention to different discursive qualities of the processes of writing and reading; and secondly, they model certain ideals, norms, and values that apply to the public sphere.

Yet, as Habermas reminds us, “there can be no public sphere without a public,” and acknowledging the circularity of publics means that, alongside its contributions, we must also acknowledge how literature is *considered* within the public sphere.⁹⁰ Warner has summarised how, for “literary criticism, journalism, theory, advertising, fiction, drama, [and] most poetry[,] the available addressees are essentially imaginary, which is not to say unreal. [...] They are in principle open-ended. They exist by virtue of their address.”⁹¹ The open-ended, essentially unknowable nature of the publics instantiated by literary texts means that there are very few preconditions for discussion – understanding literature as a valid form of contribution to the public sphere contravenes the bourgeois public sphere’s requirement of face-to-face discussion that aims for consensus and efficacy. Discussions may take place between anyone included in the text’s public, be that through direct conversation, or written responses published over time. Literature can either initiate debates in the political public sphere, or it can

⁸⁹ Ibid, 114.

⁹⁰ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 364.

⁹¹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 73.

contribute to and foment extant debates. Either way, when literary texts are themselves considered in the public sphere, this consideration is intertextual in nature.

In *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), Habermas describes the political public sphere using the metaphor of a text, but his metaphor can also serve here as a literal description of how literature operates in that sphere: “the one text of ‘the’ public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radially in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context; yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next.”⁹² When we think of how literature is considered in the public sphere, we must bear in mind how the process of consideration can connect any texts that are being discussed with other material. This includes peri-, epi- or hypo-texts – in responding to a text, readers might reflect on how it relates to its author’s previous work, biographical information, their comments in interviews, or the work of another author.⁹³ In this way, even if an author thinks of themselves as making separate contributions to the public sphere in their remarks in interviews (as opposed to in their writing), these comments can be connected to their written work in how that work is considered and discussed. This is especially prevalent in the internet age, due to the widespread accessibility of such material – as Murray notes, “in such a context, the author does not (as post-structuralists might have it) disappear from the text so much as continuously offer pronouncements on how readers should interpret it.”⁹⁴ It is for this reason that I will read novels by Franzen, Eggers, Smith, and Wallace in this thesis in relation to relevant

⁹² Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 374.

⁹³ For extended discussion of these terms, see Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (1987; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁹⁴ Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*, 4. Having said this, it is worth noting that a similar sentiment can be found as far back as in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, when Socrates delineates between oratorical and textual contributions to debate, claiming that the latter “always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Reginald Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 158).

intertexts, including essays and interviews. It also accounts for why this project's title refers to 'literature' rather than 'the novel' – even if I focus my enquiries primarily on contemporary novels, considering their circulation within the public sphere necessarily involves connecting them with other texts and comments by their authors.

Prose and Comms

Having now clarified two of the key terms in my project title, I will briefly address the third, and explain why I refer to the 'internet age,' as opposed to using another term for the period. Referring to the 'digital age' puts us in mind of a time when digital technology has become an inextricable part of contemporary life; when we talk about the 'information age,' we connote a more complex set of cultural associations and values that were made possible by the proliferation of digital technology. For my purposes, I will refer to the contemporary period as the 'internet age,' as it alludes to both of these other terms, but focusses attention on one particular part of our technological landscape. My use of the term 'internet' is meant to encompass a range of associations – while most of the time I will use it, as many do, as a colloquial way of referring to the World Wide Web, I also hope that readers will associate with the term the pervasive cultural impact of online life, and the infrastructure upon which the Web is dependent. Pinning down exactly *when* the internet age is, however, is more difficult to clarify. As John Naughton points out,

the Internet that we use today [...] is now relatively old technology. Research on its design commenced in 1973 and the network became operational in January 1983. For the first two decades of its existence, it was the preserve of a technological, academic, and research elite. From the early 1990s, it began to percolate into mainstream society and is now (2016) widely regarded as a

General Purpose Technology (GPT) without which modern society could not function.⁹⁵

I am mostly concerned here with the period during which the internet has been accepted as a General Purpose Technology. Indeed, the novels I examine in this thesis were written and published over a period that saw the rapid expansion of the social internet, the biggest resurgence of popular cyberutopianism since the early 1990s (a resurgence often associated with protest movements), and the increasingly obvious power of the digital landscape in our politics.

More specifically, nearly all of these novels were published during Barack Obama's two terms as President of the United States.⁹⁶ Christian Lorentzen has attempted to map trends in "the novel in the Age of Obama," and while it is by no means my primary focus, the story that this thesis tells may well contribute to such attempts at periodisation, and help to clarify some of the chief concerns of contemporary Anglophone literature.⁹⁷ Examining these particular novels, however, is at least certain to fill gaps in the existing scholarship on the authors who have written them. The two extant monographs on Franzen examine his work in relation to the legacy of postmodernism, and the links between form and ideology.⁹⁸ Studies

⁹⁵ John Naughton, "The Evolution of the Internet: From Military Experiment to General Purpose Technology," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 1, no. 1 (2016), 5.

⁹⁶ David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, although posthumously compiled by an editor and released in 2011, comprises material Wallace completed before his death in 2008. Zadie Smith's Britishness might also appear conspicuous in the group of authors I consider here. But her integration into American literary culture is by now unquestionable. Indeed, in an interview in January 2017, Smith put it plainly: "I'm pretty American now. [...] My 'news' brain is focussed here. I can't keep up with two apocalypses at the same time. [...] Everything I've said or felt about Obama to this point suggests to me that I've become American." ("Salon@615-Zadie Smith with Ann Patchett," *YouTube*, video, 1:05:39, posted by "Nashville Public Library," February 14, 2017, <https://youtu.be/MSqmHto4DJM>). She was also, along with Eggers, one of five novelists who Obama invited to the White House in the last weeks of his presidency (Michiko Kakutani, "Obama's Secret to Surviving the White House Years: Books," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com>).

⁹⁷ Christian Lorentzen, "Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama," *Vulture*, January 11, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/01/considering-the-novel-in-the-age-of-obama.html>.

⁹⁸ Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London: Continuum, 2009); Jesús Blanco Hidalgo, *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Another resource, a biography-cum-analysis of Franzen, could arguably be

interrogating Eggers's writing look at genre, authorship, and his role as a publisher.⁹⁹ Smith is often written about in terms of postcolonialism and identity politics.¹⁰⁰ Swathes of Wallace criticism connect his work to literary theory, philosophy, and politics.¹⁰¹ It is not unprecedented for these authors to be grouped together, but although the internet and the public sphere are present as contexts and terms in some of these studies, they have never been interrogated at length.¹⁰² I contend that these authors have written novels that expressly and complexly engage with the internet's effects on the public sphere. They enter contemporary debates while evoking antecedent literary moments or figures, suggesting ways in which to read our cultural present through the past that led to it. Just as importantly, these authors' popular profiles allow me to marry an exploration of their fiction with an analysis of their own statuses as public figures.

My first chapter focusses on Jonathan Franzen's 2015 novel *Purity*, which makes the case that the internet is adversely affecting journalism. Franzen locates the

included in this category: Philip Weinstein, *Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁹⁹ Timothy W. Galow, *Understanding Dave Eggers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014); Caroline D. Hamilton, *One Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing and Publicity* (London: Continuum, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Tracey L. Walters, ed., *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008); Philip Tew, *Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Philip Tew, ed., *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁰¹ Wallace is by far the most academically written about of these four authors – edited essay collections on his work can give a good introduction to the breadth of Wallace Studies: Ralph Clare, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Marshall Boswell, ed., *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); David Hering, ed., *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010); Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, eds., *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn, eds., *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Samuel S. Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, eds., *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012).

¹⁰² Key examples of multi-author studies include Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016).

heart of this crisis in the concept of journalistic authority, which is replaced in the public sphere of the internet age with an abundance of unfiltered information and uninformed opinion. Franzen connects his focus on journalism with what he sees as an equivalent crisis in literary authority more broadly, and suggests that in the face of the internet's denigration of public discourse, stable figures of authority are needed. To this end, Franzen highlights the role that writers can play in the public sphere, presenting a form of literary publicness that is underwritten by the expertise of the author figure. For this reason, he chooses Charles Dickens as an antecedent literary model. But Dickens is also suited to Franzen because of their shared ambivalence about success, and their knowledge that the public sphere is the ultimate arbiter of literary authority, that readers inevitably play as much of a role in that sphere as writers do. For Franzen, the internet represents a useful scapegoat here – ways of reading are being impacted by the internet, he argues, and the public sphere is shifting its focus from cerebration to celebrity. Yet having bemoaned the internet age's attention to authors, Franzen conversely invites author-inflected readings of his work by casting himself as an expert figure.

In the second chapter, I examine Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013). Eggers suggests that Franzen's anxiety about changes in journalistic practice is misplaced – rather, he believes that the real problem lies with the institution most effectively infiltrating journalism: Silicon Valley. Eggers's novel argues that Silicon Valley is rewriting the public sphere's values in a dangerous way, with corporations increasingly translating their financial power into public influence. Eggers draws comparisons between the outsize power of Silicon Valley and the totalitarian state as represented in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Orwell presents an ideal antecedent model for Eggers, who intends his novel to be taken as political critique, and whose

notion of literary publicness rests on reifying ideas of public and private through literary forms. Eggers seemingly agrees with Franzen on the notion of the author's centrality to the public sphere, but also draws attention to the institutional contexts of their work. Eggers is himself often considered through the lens of institutional affiliation – his association with the publishing house McSweeney's, and magazines like *The Believer*, inform the ways in which his fiction is contextually understood. For this reason, we can also read Eggers's model of authorship as present in *The Circle*'s exploration of institutions, and see how he looks to redeem the corporate practices his novel pillories.

For Zadie Smith, focussing too much on institutions distracts from a much-needed interrogation of the role individual behaviour has played in the rise of the internet. Corporations such as Facebook attract plenty of ire from her, but she also encourages readers to ask questions of their own agency. In my third chapter, I read Smith's novels *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016) as evidence of her attempts to understand how digital technologies change the ways in which the stories of individual lives are told. She creates an opposition between the categories of the literary and the digital, suggesting that the former is interested in portraying individual experience, while the latter prioritises instrumental data. Her attention to literary depictions of individual experience highlights her interest in difference, and points to the perspectivism of her fiction. She looks to Virginia Woolf as an example, building on certain core insights of modernism to develop a model of literary publicness that respects difference. This attempt reflects her formal belief that writers cannot conceive of themselves as more important than readers – the equal opportunities of consideration afforded to both parties underwrite the discursive freedom of her model of literary publicness. Smith's attention to perspective, however, often means that she

is read through the lens of her *own* perspective, linked sometimes reductively to her identity. While often important to acknowledge, this approach can occlude the ways in which Smith explores other perspectives, and the arguments she makes about literature's discursive potential.

In my closing chapter, I explore David Foster Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King* (2011). For Wallace, attending to agency is problematised by neoliberalism's co-option of the idea of the individual, and his novel explores how the internet plays a key part in the story of this ideology's rise. Like Smith, he creates an opposition, but here between the categories of the digital and the human. He portrays a public sphere that has become impossible to navigate, in part due to its oversaturation with information. Because of this dilemma, Wallace cannot in good faith look to writing for a solution or model – although he is working out of the encyclopaedic tradition, he finds no one antecedent suited to the problems of the internet age. Rather, he suggests that we must focus on strategies of reading to revitalise a public sphere inundated with excessive information. He does not simply align himself with a rational-critical approach, however – rather, he attempts to model a Bakhtinian public sphere, where dialogue is an end in itself, rather than one which strives for consensus. Debates about whether Wallace's work should even be studied at all come to the fore here – in light of a number of protests against evidence of abusive behaviour in his personal life, some have suggested that the author's writing should not be engaged. Examining these debates will help to delineate some of the different ways in which literature is considered in the public sphere – while such discussions ask important questions about how gendered power circulates in cultural discourse, they cannot hope to tell us anything about Wallace's work without actual attention to those texts.

In these chapters, then, I will stage a debate about the public sphere in the internet age as it is found to play out in a number of contemporary Anglophone novels. I will outline four approaches to problems that arise from this debate, and sketch the different models that these authors conceive of as correctives to the internet's apparent denigration of public discourse. Through these case studies, I will lay out a spectrum of discursive agency, beginning with a view in which writers must reclaim authority in the public sphere, through to one in which reading processes are highlighted as central to substantive public discourse. I will ask how each author's writing relates to actual public discussion of their work, and whether these discussions align with or depart from the authors' analyses. These narratives coalesce to tell a hitherto unexamined story about literature's relationship with the internet, demonstrate the importance of four authors to contemporary literary studies' understanding of this relationship, and develop extended examples of how literature operates in the public sphere in the internet age.

Jonathan Franzen: Authority and Authorship

No Filter

Early in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* (2015), readers are informed of a ritual that the novel's protagonist, Purity 'Pip' Tyler, enacts every week. "From somewhere, in college, Pip had gotten the idea," we are told, "that the height of civilization was to spend Sunday morning reading an actual paper copy of the Sunday *New York Times* at a café."¹ Pip's ritual, mentioned only in passing, at first seems to be a small element of her life, a detail included by Franzen to efficiently establish her as a character at odds with the digital dispensation that much of *Purity* addresses. But the way that Pip's ritual develops over *Purity*'s first section in fact serves as vital fuel for the novel's plot (which it will be worth briefly outlining here). In its early stages, Pip's routine meant that she "happily forgot herself for a few hours"; when she notices "a nice-looking, skinny boy who had the same Sunday ritual," however, she suddenly becomes more aware of how she looks or acts within the public space of the café.² Pip's emergent self-consciousness leads conversely to her ability to connect with the boy, Jason, and they soon find themselves sharing a newspaper every Sunday. The two begin dating, and their conversations cover all manner of cultural and political topics, from *Breaking Bad* to nuclear disarmament. When Pip takes Jason back to her house to have sex, however, she is interrupted by a visitor, Annagret, who convinces Pip to abandon her plans. Instead, Annagret shepherds Pip through an application for an internship at the Sunlight Project, a website that publishes leaked information about current events. Pip breaks up with Jason, and the following "four months of

¹ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: 4th Estate, 2015), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

abstinence” are “dreary” for her – so when she begins emailing Andreas Wolf, the Sunlight Project’s charismatic founder, she is pleased “to have begun a flirtatious correspondence with somebody world-famous,” and soon accepts an internship.³

The development of Pip’s Sunday ritual is not only important to *Purity*’s plot, however – it also encapsulates many of the novel’s key concerns. Franzen’s references to a printed newspaper, a coffee shop, self-consciousness, political and cultural dialogue, and ideal, civilized behaviour all gesture towards an historical notion of the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, whereas in Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* (2001), Chip Lambert is forced to sell his copy of “Jürgen Habermas’s *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, which he’d found too difficult to read, let alone annotate,” we might infer that Pip would take to the critical theorist’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* more enthusiastically.⁴ And, just as *Purity* explores how the public sphere is being once more transformed by the disruptive potential of the internet, Pip’s burgeoning relationship with Jason is disrupted by the Sunlight Project, the institution most closely aligned with the internet in *Purity*. The interruption of Pip’s relationship also highlights a further central theme of *Purity*’s – authority. While applying for the internship, Pip asks if Annagret is a recruiter for the Sunlight Project. Annagret replies by saying: “Yes, I have authority,” but quickly corrects herself: “Or not authority, we reject authority.”⁵ Annagret’s slip of the tongue raises questions about how much readers should believe in the Sunlight Project’s purported neutrality, but also highlights the slippery nature of authority as a concept, especially as it relates to how information circulates in the internet age.

³ Ibid, 37; 61.

⁴ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, (London: 4th Estate, 2002), 92.

⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, 19.

Purity goes on to address ideas relating to the internet's relationship with information in much further detail over its course, but the novel's contribution to this debate is already present in how Pip's ritual has been developed. The argumentative core of Franzen's novel in fact follows the same pattern as his treatment of Pip's ritual: he draws attention to the public sphere as it relates to journalism, argues that its priorities are being disrupted by the internet, and questions what this means for contemporary conceptions of authority. Franzen's reservations about internet culture are well-known, and he has gained a reputation for being, as Curtis Sittenfeld's tongue-in-cheek description has it, "a pompous white male Luddite who gazes disdainfully down at us tweeting, Facebooking fools."⁶ But despite this reputation, Franzen's major complaints are not born of a generally distrustful Luddism – rather, his contributions to debates about the internet consistently focus on the public sphere's discursive priorities, and how the concept of authority relates to them. His critique in *Purity* is twofold: the public sphere of the internet age is saturated with unfiltered information because it lacks stable figures of authority to discern what is important; and yet, when it comes to online debate, too much focus is given to individual figures, rather than the content of their contributions. Because of his awareness that his novel will itself be discussed in this imperfect public sphere, Franzen attempts to build a model of literary publicness that rejects current notions of authority while simultaneously appealing to them. To do this, Franzen must cohere his two (potentially conflicting) arguments by casting himself as an authoritative figure *through his critique* of authority – a complex task that, I will argue, mainly draws attention to Franzen's own ambivalent position in the public sphere.

⁶ Curtis Sittenfeld, "Purity by Jonathan Franzen Review – Dazzling, Hilarious and Problematic," *The Guardian*, August 26 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/26/purity-by-jonathan-franzen-review/>.

For all that Franzen seeks to highlight the importance of authors' *contributions* to the public sphere, he cannot escape the fact that the contemporary public sphere is held together by the media that publicly *considers* his work.⁷ Indeed, *Purity's* central argument concerns the public sphere's domination by media, as Franzen draws attention to how the internet is changing journalism's operation, which in turn is changing the operation of the public sphere. Throughout *Purity*, journalism is described in terms of its role in the public sphere. When one character, Tom Aberant, outlines his reasons for becoming a journalist, he emphasizes its dialogic potential: "the truth is somewhere in the tension between the two sides" of a debate, and "that's where the journalist is supposed to live, in that tension."⁸ Another journalist character, Leila Helou, likewise locates journalism's importance within its discursive qualities, describing her mission as being at its core about "adults trying to communicate with other adults."⁹ And when Leila defends her profession by claiming that journalists "may not always have the best of motives, but at least we have some investment in civilization," Franzen tellingly establishes a link with his earlier description of Pip's ritual – how her "Sunday mornings were when she felt most civilized."¹⁰ Identifying journalism as key to civilization is not just a positive, normative statement about journalism itself; it is the foundational premise of *Purity's* depiction of the internet as a negative, disruptive force. For Franzen, when the internet threatens journalism, it threatens civilized society – and in *Purity*, the internet is always getting in the way of good journalism.

⁷ As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere's final manifestation was "held together through the medium of the press and professional criticism," a role shared in the contemporary public sphere by broadcast and online media. (Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (1962; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 51).

⁸ Franzen, *Purity*, 365.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 493.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 493; 10.

Much of *Purity*'s attention to journalism concerns how the internet is transforming the fourth estate's priorities and processes. Tom abandons his ambition to set up a "journal of opinion called *The Complicater* [that] could change the world" and reinvigorate the public sphere, due to the pressing concern that, in the internet age, "covering daily news responsibly was a worthier and more embattled cause."¹¹ Leila laments the loss of analogue investigative practices, suggesting that "Google and Accurint can make you feel very smart, but the best stories come when you're out in the field."¹² Most centrally, an online culture of leaking is characterised as redefining journalistic priorities. Rather than individual figures such as "Snowden or Manning," who Leila describes as "glorified sources," Franzen directs our attention at "outlets like WikiLeaks," or his fictional equivalent, the Sunlight Project.¹³ One danger of leakers' cultural dominance, *Purity* suggests, is that the reliance of these outlets on the infrastructure of the World Wide Web means that some of the very companies that should be held to account in the public sphere are instead left alone. So, despite the fact that "there were a lot of could-be Snowdens inside" Silicon Valley companies, "most of the could-be Snowdens kept their mouths shut"; even when Wolf is offered "dumps of internal email and algorithmic software" from Google, he refuses to publish the information, "fearing what Google could do to him."¹⁴

The fact that some of the most high-profile leaks in the years since *Purity*'s publication have in reality concerned the malpractice of large technology companies dampens this element of Franzen's critique.¹⁵ Indeed, it is redolent of the rapidity with

¹¹ Ibid, 442.

¹² Ibid, 204.

¹³ Ibid, 493.

¹⁴ Ibid, 450.

¹⁵ The still unfolding consequences of *The Guardian* and Channel 4's investigation into Cambridge Analytica's use of Facebook data is perhaps the most prominent of these. For more, see Tim Adams, "Facebook's Week of Shame: The Cambridge Analytica Fallout," *The Guardian*, March 24 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

which digital culture tends to change that *Purity*'s primary concern with leaking seems overblown just a few years after the novel's release – especially when compared with the increasingly obvious threats posed to journalism by fake news and falling revenues. But Franzen's focus on leaking is still valuable for how it relates to his discussion of the changing nature of journalistic authority. *Purity* makes the case that, by valorising information over investigation, the internet has robbed journalists of their authoritative role in the public sphere. Instead, many have been drawn into working on the terms of data-mongers like Andreas Wolf: "The leakers just spew. It takes a journalist to collate and condense and contextualize what they spew."¹⁶ As Leila puts it, once again aligning these journalistic practices with Pip's earlier vision of the public sphere, "filtering isn't phoniness – its civilization."¹⁷ And if the Sunlight Project is proud to call itself a "neutral and unfiltered platform," this is just another example of what Leila calls "the false promise of the internet and social media as substitutes for journalism."¹⁸ Franzen maintains that there are concrete consequences of this substitution: the internet's perceived reduction of filtering has led to, as the title of *Purity*'s third section has it, "Too Much Information."¹⁹ When Leila receives some awkward personal information from a source, she suggests that it "would have been TMI if there were such a thing in this business."²⁰ The idea of excessive information is here initially cast as anathema to journalism's operation – yet it becomes clear that Leila holds the view that in an age of prolific leaking, there *is* an excess of information. The mass availability of information online has, she admits, "made the journalist's job so much easier, [...] but the internet is also killing journalism" by ignoring the

¹⁶ Franzen, *Purity*, 493.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 226; 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 169.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 203.

importance of curation and investigation, eliding “the difference between a story and a non-story,” and overwhelming the public sphere with irrelevant information.²¹

It is worth noting that the importance placed on filtering by Leila and other characters does not negate their earlier characterisations of journalism’s role in the public sphere as dialogic. Rather, this filtering process is to be understood as guaranteeing the vitality of a liberal democratic public sphere. As Habermas argues in *Between Facts and Norms*, we should think of journalists as actors within the public sphere, whose processes of selection are one source of the mass media’s power.²² Habermas suggests that “these official producers of information are all the more successful the more they can rely on trained personnel, on financial and technical resources, and in general on a professional infrastructure.”²³ He links these traits of success to the *institution* of journalism, and highlights “tasks that the media *ought* to fulfil in democratic political systems,” principles that “orient the professional code of journalism and the profession’s ethical self-understanding,” including “meaningful agenda-setting” and “dialogue across a diverse range of views.”²⁴ Even if this promotes an outside role for the concerns of individual *journalists*, the process of filtering functions as a pronouncement of faith in the institution of *journalism* in such a way that journalists’ power is not a problem.²⁵

Franzen’s contribution to debates about the public sphere in the internet age comprises a focussed series of arguments about waning journalistic authority. Yet if

²¹ Ibid, 204.

²² Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (1992; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 376.

²³ Ibid, 376-7.

²⁴ Ibid, 378.

²⁵ As Ferree et al. explain, journalistic expertise is central to the representative liberal notion of the public sphere, where “editorial opinion should reflect what journalists, as experts, think is right and need not be either representative or neutral” (Myra Marx Ferree et al., “Four Models of the Public Sphere in Modern Democracies,” *Theory and Society* 31, no. 3 [June 2002]: 293).

Franzen's defence of this journalistic authority's importance to the public sphere is sound enough, his analysis of why it must be reasserted in the internet age is less convincing. For although the question of authority emerges from Franzen's novel as a contemporary problem, it requires historical, cultural, and political theorising to be properly understood. As Matt Carlson points out, "technological change has become an organizing principle for understanding journalism; it acts as a metanarrative."²⁶ This is an important part of the story of contemporary journalism, but runs the risk of turning "into a problem when technology becomes a linguistic wedge referring only to recent technological developments while ignoring – and even naturalizing – existing technologies."²⁷ This is a mistake not least because it conceives of journalism primarily as a form of information transfer, whereas Carlson argues that we should understand journalism within a social context that moves beyond an exclusive focus on news texts and their delivery. A more useful way to understand how journalism operates in the internet age, he argues, is to ensure a "greater historical grounding to expose the deep-seated connections between the technologies of journalism and journalistic authority."²⁸ Lennard J. Davis has in fact argued that the problem of journalistic authority is as old as journalism itself. The invention of the printing press and moveable type, Davis suggests, can also be thought of as the invention of the (relatively) instantaneous publication of textual materials. This technology "permitted, but did not guarantee, a text of recentness" to readers; "likewise, with the beginning of the report of recent events came the problem of proving the truth of that report."²⁹

²⁶ Matt Carlson, *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 147.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 148.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 145.

²⁹ Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 70.

Franzen's neglect of the broader questions of journalistic authority (such as those attending to its social, political, and historical contexts) inflexibly premises the problem as primarily related to a digital dispensation. His oversight here is a telling one, as it represents a departure from how his novels have previously foregrounded complexities rather than looked to resolve them, a strategy that Stephen J. Burn has highlighted as "one of the crucial distinctions between Franzen's novels and his non-fiction."³⁰ In his essays, Franzen "frequently expresses his divided feelings about a subject, or presents an opposition, but he nearly always reaches some kind of resolution by the end of the essay."³¹ Burn claims that Franzen's fiction, on the other hand, "works on much more complex ground than the rhetorical flourishes of his nonfiction suggests."³² Burn's main focus is the relationship between *The Corrections* and Franzen's 1996 essay "Why Bother?," but in the case of *Purity* this distinction between rhetorical strategies is not as clear cut. Certainly, there are moments in *Purity* when Franzen appears to complicate the position that the internet is the cause of a crisis in journalistic authority. When Andreas Wolf highlights how Google "actively filtered the information it claimed passively to reflect," for example, he cites this as one of the company's most insidious practices, despite this process echoing the journalistic filtering that Leila claims is vital.³³ And, as Tom points out, the online newspaper he and Leila work for is arguably "just as wedded to the internet as the Sunlight Project."³⁴ But both of these counterpoints are dismissed with ease – in

³⁰ Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London: Continuum, 2008), 48.

³¹ Ibid, 48. Indeed, Franzen has admitted that this is his model for essay writing: "Doesn't a good argument begin by positing some difficult problem? And doesn't it then propose an escape from the problem through some bold proposition, and set up obstacles in the form of objections and counterarguments, and finally, through a series of reversals, take us to an unforeseen but satisfying conclusion?" (Jonathan Franzen, "The Essay in Dark Times," in *The End of the End of the Earth* (London: 4th Estate, 2018), 7-8).

³² Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, 51.

³³ Franzen, *Purity*, 450.

³⁴ Ibid, 227.

Wolf's case by aligning Google's brand of filtering with totalitarian ambitions of obfuscation rather than the journalistic dedication to democracy and truth; in Leila's by reframing the question of reliance on the internet, suggesting that if journalists and leakers depend on the same technology, this means that the two are ineluctably "competing," and the likes of Wolf are "winning."³⁵ In both cases, just as in Franzen's essays, the central question (of whether the internet is uniquely and inherently disruptive for journalistic authority or not) is easily resolved. Indeed, as I have shown, even by suggesting that journalistic authority's instability is a problem of the internet age, Franzen has already resolved the issue. Franzen's engagement with the issue of journalistic authority in this way reveals an important element of his approach to authorship. In *Purity*, Franzen reveals his anxieties about maintaining his literary authority by employing the definitive resolution of an issue in a manner characteristic of his essays; his appeals to the rhetorical strategies of his non-fiction function as attempts to bolster that authority.

In his monograph on Franzen, Jesús Blanco Hidalgo reads *Purity* as an assertion of literary authority, stated through a proxy discussion of journalistic authority in the internet age. In Hidalgo's reading, the "antagonistic dichotomy drawn by the novel between leakers and true journalists" clearly points to "a self-legitimizing intention on Franzen's part."³⁶ The importance that Franzen places on "social investigation, selection of relevant, representative features, and careful edition" in *Purity*'s vision of good journalism is evidence that "Franzen is also vindicating his own position as a novelist."³⁷ Hidalgo is right to draw a connection between these two

³⁵ Ibid, 227.

³⁶ Jesús Blanco Hidalgo, *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 231-2.

³⁷ Ibid, 232.

forms of authority – filtering is central, for example, to Henry James’s notion of literary authority. But we cannot simply map these two forms of authority onto each other. As I have shown, the vision of journalistic authority that Franzen foregrounds depends upon maintaining faith in the *institution* of journalism. His vision of literary authority, however, like James’s, emerges from the individual figure of the author. James was a proponent of the idea of consequent authority, whereby authority necessarily follows the author’s “careful ascertainment” of how their “subject most completely expresses itself.”³⁸ In other words, by writing an authoritative text (or writing a text *authoritatively*), authors produce their own authority. James is aware of his argument’s circularity, and indeed its lack of precision – he describes authority’s production as akin to alchemy. But his notion of consequent authority is apposite here, particularly the suggestion that it is through an author’s curation of a story, and all its attendant themes and issues (“drawing the positive right truth out of the so easy muddle of wrong truths”), that they produce their own authority.³⁹

Franzen likewise looks to model a consequent authority in *Purity*. At first glance, his rhetorical appeals might appear to be evidence that his vision of literary authority lies more squarely in the essay form than the novel, but this is not the case. Rather, it lies in the figure of the author. In a recent essay, Franzen reflects on the process of writing. His opening gambit is to undermine his own authority by suggesting that an essay is “something *essayed* – something hazarded, not definitive, not authoritative; something ventured on the basis of the author’s personal experience and subjectivity.”⁴⁰ He opens the essay’s next section by embracing this venture,

³⁸ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (1934; repr., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 123.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁰ Franzen, “The Essay in Dark Times,” 3.

explicitly introducing “a personal and subjective micronarrative” in order to make an argument about the purpose of essay-writing.⁴¹ By the end of the piece, after Franzen has lamented various groups’ responses to a previous essay of his on the subject of climate change, he reasserts his faith in his own authority, claiming that the problems of his work could have been solved had he just “kept revising.”⁴² In other words, after initially appearing to deny his authority, Franzen works towards an assertion of it – even if the essay is not an authoritative form, he seems to suggest, its author has the capacity to be authoritative.⁴³ If, in *Purity*, the content of Franzen’s contributions seem confused, the way in which he makes them is still revealing, and points us to the core facet of his form of literary publicness – the situating of authority in the figure of the author. In his novel, Franzen makes the case that the public sphere faces a crisis of authority, and laments the apparent loss of a public sphere underwritten by expertise. In response to this, he models an idealised literary publicness that casts the contributing author as an authoritative figure. Yet Franzen is aware that his ideal is far from reality – indeed, as I will now show, his construction of a form of literary publicness based on the expertise of the author emerges precisely from his knowledge that literary authority exists as an unstable quality.

Author IT

In his work on the authority of literature, Edward W. Said argues that it is “nomadic: it is never in the same place, it is never always at the center, nor is it a sort of ontological capacity for originating every instance of sense.”⁴⁴ In *Purity*, Franzen

⁴¹ Ibid, 4.

⁴² Ibid, 22.

⁴³ Indeed, we might think of the “difficult problem” that Franzen looks to provide “an escape from” in *this* essay as the problem of his own threatened literary authority (Ibid, 7).

⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 23.

foregrounds his awareness of literary authority's instability when he writes about Leila's husband, Charles Blenheim. Charles is an American novelist whose trajectory in the novel mirrors the same anxiety of declining literary authority that Franzen's rhetorical appeals point to. When readers are introduced to Charles, he is "at the apex of his career," the attendant authority of which depends upon several factors.⁴⁵ Richard Sennett has claimed that "the work of authority has a goal: to convert power into images of strength."⁴⁶ Charles's initial portrayal comprises several images of strength that are all of a piece. The fact that "he rode a Harley-Davidson to class, he wore his corn-silk hair down to the shoulders of his leather jacket, [and] he referred to literary giants by their first names" ensures that Charles is hubristically confident of his literary authority.⁴⁷ More than this, Charles's images of strength are intensely patriarchal – a fact which receives a knowing wink from Franzen in the title of Charles's successful novel: "*Mad Sad Dad*."⁴⁸

We meet Charles in the section of *Purity* that focusses on Leila – he is her creative writing teacher, immediately placing him in a position of power over her. When the two later get married, Leila realises what "her function" is in his eyes: "to be younger and fresh and somewhat exotic, to excite the envy of male writers."⁴⁹ Charles's images of strength, often linked to his sexual relationship with Leila, are just one example of what Urmila Seshagiri has highlighted as *Purity*'s preponderance of "phallogentric" imagery.⁵⁰ Charles's literary ambitions are described in these terms too: "He settled down to write the *big book*, the novel that would secure him his place

⁴⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, 186.

⁴⁶ Richard Sennett, *Authority* (1980; repr., London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 165.

⁴⁷ Franzen, *Purity*, 186.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 192.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 186.

⁵⁰ Urmila Seshagiri, "Biology, Destiny, Purity," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 1, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/biology-destiny-purity/>.

in the modern American canon. Once upon a time, it had sufficed to write *The Sound and the Fury* or *The Sun Also Rises*. But now bigness was essential. Thickness, length.”⁵¹ But further to her convincing critique of *Purity*’s problem with “female autonomy,” Seshagiri also credits Franzen by suggesting that Charles mainly functions as “Franzen’s laudable parody of himself.”⁵² Indeed, I would add that far from endorsing Charles’s images of authority, Franzen goes on to demonstrate their inadequacy, and yet in doing so also doubles down on his model of authorially centred literary publicness.

One influential way of conceiving of authority, put forward by Max Weber in his work on the authority of states, is that it functions as “a belief in legitimacy, measured by voluntary compliance.”⁵³ Franzen suggests that in the case of literary authority, this belief in legitimacy is culturally produced – Charles’s legitimacy rests on fellowships, prizes, and social connections.⁵⁴ This dependence upon a veritable industry of authority extends to literary production pre-publication as well – when Charles delivers his second book to his publisher, “his editor wanted revisions and he couldn’t make up his mind about the smallest change.”⁵⁵ Even the process of writing a novel is portrayed here as a tug of war of authority over the text. The most significant arbiter of authority in *Purity*, however, is literary journalism. For Charles, reviews are life-or-death. His early success is marked, if not guaranteed, by a “front-page Times

⁵¹ Franzen, *Purity*, 186.

⁵² Seshagiri, “Biology, Destiny, Purity.”

⁵³ Sennett, *Authority*, 22.

⁵⁴ Franzen, *Purity*, 186. For the most significant treatment of these ideas of belief and cultural legitimacy, see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods,” trans. Richard Nice, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by Randal Johnson (1977; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 74-111. For more on this phenomenon as it relates directly to literary prizes, see James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 190. For more on the links between editing processes and authority, see Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994).

review,” and his masculine image of authority is propped up by critics’ assessments of his novel’s “twinned muscularity and febrility.”⁵⁶ When the reviews’ tones turn, on the other hand, this image starts to look suspect (Charles’s second book is “slaughtered” by the press – rather than muscular, his prose is now “‘stale,’ ‘obese,’ ‘exhausting’”).⁵⁷ Further cementing the idea that literary journalism is central to success, Leila assigns herself a share of blame: “the fault was his, but also undeniably hers,” as she had “allowed her husband’s life to spin out of control.”⁵⁸ Charles’s dependence on the intangible notion of status, and the reactions of others to his work, reveals the scaffolding around his images of strength (the only part of his authority that he had control over). Indeed, in one scene, they are cast as wholly inadequate, and far inferior to the authority that emerges from the public considerations of an author’s work – with nothing to fuel them, the images fail, and “on a warm Colorado night in late June, [...] Charles went over the front of the XLCR 1000 he’d bought with the last third of his U.K. advance.”⁵⁹ Charles’s legs are paralysed in the accident, but if his “paraplegia had objectified his grievance with the literary world,” his subsequent dependence on Leila (who helps to organise, and sometimes provide, his care needs) objectifies the world of journalism’s power over him.⁶⁰

Yet even if Franzen clearly sees literary authority as the debilitated poor relation of journalistic authority, the latter’s power is not inviolable – as Tom remarks to Leila upon hearing of Charles’s bad reviews: “Fuck the reviewers. I’m still going to buy it.”⁶¹ The distinctions between different forms of authority are important here – Tom promises to invest in Charles’s new novel because of the authority that Charles

⁵⁶ Franzen, *Purity*, 186.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 187; 192.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

has built up through his previous publications. But even if Charles's authority is shown to persist under the threat of negative reviews, a danger still remains – “when the only usable, effective capital is [...] ‘prestige’ or ‘authority,’” Pierre Bourdieu claims, “the economic capital that cultural undertakings generally require cannot secure the specific profits produced by the field [...] unless it is reconverted into symbolic capital.”⁶² In other words, as many people can buy Charles's book as they like – if those economic profits are not re-translated into the symbolic capital of authority (as the book's bad reviews suggest they will not be), they count for very little in what Bourdieu terms the field of cultural production.⁶³ Interestingly, Charles's situation here in fact mirrors that of Leila and Tom – despite their concerns about the internet's disruptive power, a good number of people still read their online newspaper. These characters inhabit a complex of precarious authority, and represent a sort of kinship in the threats Franzen believes both journalists and novelists face in the internet age. The novel form's dependence on journalism for critical and commercial success means that it too is liable to the changes that Leila has railed against – as Charles puts it in one conversation with her, “when you suffer, I suffer.”⁶⁴

Here we can see how, through his portrayal of Charles's fragile literary authority, Franzen looks to justify his model of authorially centred literary publicness. If, as Franzen argues throughout the novel, the internet is adversely affecting the public sphere, this means that the processes by which literary authority emerges are adversely affected too, and must be replaced with a superior model. Yet for Franzen's own model to convince, he must first gain authority by the very methods he critiques. In Susan

⁶² Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief,” 75.

⁶³ Bourdieu notes that the field of cultural production should be “understood as the system of objective relations between” any number of cultural actors or institutions (such as publishers, critics, and influential artists), through which “the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated” (Ibid, 78).

⁶⁴ Franzen, *Purity*, 189.

Sniader Lanser's study of women writers and narrative voice, she describes an unintended consequence of attempts to challenge extant notions or constructions of authority: novelists who challenge authority are often "constrained to adopt the authorizing conventions of narrative voice in order, paradoxically, to mount an authoritative critique of the authority that the text therefore also perpetuates."⁶⁵ We can identify a version of this perpetuation in Franzen's attempts to challenge the authority of how his novels are considered in the public sphere in the internet age. This risk of perpetuation, however, might also seem to advantage Franzen's critique: to bolster the image of himself as an authoritative literary figure, he embeds within his novel a demonstration of his awareness of the processes of consideration on which he is dependent. To emphasise this awareness, Franzen invites readers to reflect upon how his *own* work is considered in the public sphere. When Charles's second book is published, he receives an unfavourable review from one named critic: "'bloated and immensely disagreeable,' Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*."⁶⁶ Here, Kakutani is cast as an arbiter of failure; tellingly, the positive reviews of Charles's previous book are given no attribution. This can be read all too easily through the lens of Franzen's personal history with Kakutani – after her unfavourable review of Franzen's memoir *The Discomfort Zone* (2006), the author called her "the stupidest person in New York City" during an interview.⁶⁷

Franzen's personal connection here serves as a useful reminder of the role that an author's public persona plays in the public sphere. Indeed, contrary to Kakutani's own claim that Franzen's most recent novel is his "least self-conscious," *Purity*

⁶⁵ Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 7.

⁶⁶ Franzen, *Purity*, 191.

⁶⁷ Leon Neyfakh, "Jonathan Franzen: Michiko Kakutani Is 'The Stupidest Person in New York City,'" *Observer*, April 29, 2008, <http://observer.com/>.

represents an exploration of the overlap between literature and the public sphere that is highly self-referential.⁶⁸ In one scene, Charles talks to Pip about literary culture, complaining that there are “so many *Jonathans*. A plague of literary *Jonathans*. If you read only the *New York Times Book Review*, you’d think it was the most common male name in America. Synonymous with talent, greatness. Ambition, vitality.”⁶⁹ In this scene, Franzen makes it clear that he recognises literary authority is bound up not only with how an author’s novel circulates in the public sphere, but also with how their *persona* does – his portrayal of Charles concedes that this reality reduces the ability of authors to control their reception. Indeed, we can understand Franzen’s use of his essayistic strategies as rhetorical appeals to his authority as a persona in the public sphere – as Paul Dawson points out, appeals like this are evidence of an author’s endeavour to draw “authority not from the novelist as observer of human nature and guide to ethical conduct, but from the writer as public intellectual both competing with and deploying other nonliterary discourses of ‘knowledge’: journalistic, historical, scientific, critical, and so on.”⁷⁰ Franzen attempts his rhetorical performance to establish himself as an authority both specifically on the issues that his novel addresses, and more generally as a public intellectual. But rather than reading this kind of performance through the lens of narrative voice, as Dawson does, it is more fruitful to conceive of Franzen’s attempt at authority as defining his authorial *ethos*.

Liesbeth Korthals Altes has usefully explicated the notion of authorial ethos as it relates to processes of narrative interpretation. She begins her study by evoking Aristotle’s rhetorical theory, defining ethos as “a person’s or community’s character

⁶⁸ Michiko Kakutani, “Review: ‘Purity,’ Jonathan Franzen’s Most Intimate Novel Yet,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

⁶⁹ Franzen, *Purity*, 207.

⁷⁰ Paul Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 248.

or characterizing spirit, tone, or attitude.”⁷¹ In particular, Altes draws out those parts of the *Rhetoric* relating to the authority of a speaker. She sums up how, for Aristotle, the three ethical means of speech (ethos, pathos, and logos),

whether directly or indirectly expressed, buttress each other and cooperate to warrant the reliability and authority of the speaker, and hence of his discourse. In what looks like a feedback loop, it is indeed the discursively produced effect of trustworthiness or reliability that, for Aristotle, grounds that same discourse’s effectiveness.⁷²

This use of particular rhetorical strategies to both produce and prove a speaker’s authority results in a situation whereby “speakers need only to hint at recognized signals of authority and ethos topoi to make their audience jump to attention and adopt the expected receptive attitude.”⁷³

Whereas Aristotle believed “that a speaker had to convey his ethos through discursive means alone,” other rhetoricians such as Cicero “insisted on the importance of the *prior ethos*, the image an audience already has of the speaker on the basis of his reputation, previous deeds, or generally known character traits.”⁷⁴ The insight that follows from this, “that discourse through its whole form is likely to be understood as expressing its enunciator’s character,” is central to understanding *Purity*’s treatment of literary authority.⁷⁵ Altes suggests that prior ethos is a key facet of authorial image, which is one way readers can attribute “symbolic value, authority, and relevance to the literary work.”⁷⁶ She defines this facet as follows:

⁷¹ Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), vii.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. As will later become clear, Franzen presents these problems as particular to a digital dispensation, aligning with Altes’s claim that the idea of prior ethos “seems indeed appropriate [...], the more so in our own times of increased mediatization” (*ibid.*, 5).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

The image of the author constructed on the basis of a writer's previous oeuvre, which may be considered to function as a *prior ethos*, in light of which a (new) work is classified, interpreted, and invested with value – or divested of it. Besides the author him or herself, literary historians and critics, among others, contribute to the construction of this oeuvre-based ethos. Such an ethos need not be monolithic or consistent [...].⁷⁷

In the public sphere, Franzen's prior ethos does a lot of work. Stephen J. Burn has argued, for example, that "virtually every critical interpretation of *The Corrections*" took "Why Bother?" to be "a kind of preface" to the novel, which could be read as a representation of "a successful resolution to the creative problems Franzen suffered in the early 1990s."⁷⁸ James Wood suggests that "Franzen partly has himself to blame for the idiocy of [*The Corrections*' media] coverage," as "Why Bother?" was "so autobiographically infected" that it "predictably [...] appealed to the media" as a way to 'explain' the text.⁷⁹ Even if, as he claimed in one interview, Franzen is "not here to tell [readers] how to interpret the book,"⁸⁰ it seems that his infamous essay is inadvertently doing that job for him: to take just a few examples, reviews of *Purity* for *The Nation*, *The Millions*, and *BBC Culture* all begin with discussions of "Why Bother?"⁸¹ This would all be well and good were it not for the fact that, as Burn points out, "Franzen's own comments about his work are often misleading" – in the case of "Why Bother?," for example, "the aesthetic foundations of *The Corrections* are more complex than the essay intimates."⁸²

⁷⁷ Ibid, 158.

⁷⁸ Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, 50.

⁷⁹ James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 186.

⁸⁰ Jonathan Franzen, "Jonathan Franzen on Freedom – Books Podcast," interview by John Mullan, *The Guardian Books Podcast*, podcast audio, December 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

⁸¹ Jon Baskin, "Jonathan Franzen Withdraws," *The Nation*, October 8, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics-as-pathology/>; Lydia Kiesling, "Flamed but Not Forgotten: On Jonathan Franzen's 'Purity'," *The Millions*, August 27, 2015, <http://www.themillions.com/>; Lucy Scholes, "Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*: Is it the Great American novel?," *BBC Culture*, September 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/>.

⁸² Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, 50.

Yet in Franzen's view, the real problem with prior ethos lies in his being misunderstood, as he explains in the introduction to his first essay collection, *How to Be Alone* (2002). Franzen claims that, when he was promoting the publication of *The Corrections*, he was constantly questioned about the novel's relation to "Why Bother?," even though "most interviewers hadn't read the essay, and [...] the few who had read it seemed to have misunderstood it."⁸³ Two novels, tens of essays, and hundreds of interviews later, Franzen's prior ethos has taken on a recognisable shape, one I referenced earlier in Curtis Sittenfeld's terms: "a pompous white male Luddite."⁸⁴ To Franzen, the fact that this joke is even a recognisable description is evidence of his being misread time and time again, something that he appears to have resigned himself to ("I know that if you are hostile, you will find ammunition [...] There's a sense that there is really nothing I can do except die – or, I suppose, retire and never write again").⁸⁵ Elsewhere, he takes particular issue with how online indictments of his work have taken the form of ad hominem attacks.⁸⁶ All of which is to say that, for Franzen, the internet age has overinflated the role of prior ethos in narrative interpretation, and corrupted it with a debased cultural logic that has less to do with the actual content of literature than with its author's public persona. Yet, as I have shown, Franzen finds himself appealing to notions of prior ethos all the same. He is by no means averse to making extreme statements that garner much commentary, and is aware that his being a "public novelist" is linked to his "having strong opinions and enjoying speaking them."⁸⁷ His choice of verb here is important – in claiming that

⁸³ Jonathan Franzen, "A Word About This Book," in *How To Be Alone* (London: 4th Estate, 2010), 3.

⁸⁴ Curtis Sittenfeld, "Purity by Jonathan Franzen."

⁸⁵ Jonathan Franzen, "Jonathan Franzen Interview: 'There is No Way to Make Myself Not Male,'" interview by Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, August 21, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

⁸⁶ Franzen, "The Essay in Dark Times," 21.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Franzen, "Start the Week," interview by Tom Sutcliffe, *BBC Radio 4*, radio broadcast, October 5, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06fk9ph/>.

his *speaking* of strong opinions is responsible for his reception, rather than his *writing* of them, Franzen suggests that being a public novelist might be more about being in public than about being a novelist. Examining *Purity*'s references to one archetypal public novelist can help to further clarify Franzen's ambivalence towards his position within the public sphere, and bring into sharper focus his novel's treatment of the topic.

What the Dickens?

If, through the character of Charles, Franzen is to some extent lampooning the fragile literary authority dependent on the sometimes inadequate considerations of readers in the public sphere, he is less cynical about one other potential source of literary authority: history. In the face of the internet's obsession with the present and the future, antecedent forms and figures present a useful link to the past – at least, this is how Franzen's work is often framed by the author and others. Upon the release of Franzen's fourth novel, *Freedom* (2010), much was made by reviewers of the contrast between the book's supposedly nineteenth-century style and its twenty-first-century setting. Adam Hammond has outlined how, in interviews given at the time of the novel's release, Franzen “went out of his way both to reaffirm his commitment to novels of Victorian scope and proportions and to argue that such novels could only be composed through a studied and disciplined avoidance of the digital.”⁸⁸ Hammond goes on to summarise Franzen's belief that it is not just literary forms that are being corrupted by the internet (hence the need to invoke a more ‘pure’ antecedent), but the practice of writing itself. The supposedly lost goals of nineteenth-century social realism are for Franzen incompatible with the influence of online life – a perspective

⁸⁸ Adam Hammond, *Literature in the Digital age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 198.

which accounts for his composition of *Freedom* on a laptop “from which he had not only removed the wireless card but also physically blocked the Ethernet cable.”⁸⁹ The question facing Franzen in *Purity*, however, is whether it is possible to successfully engage with the internet as subject matter while maintaining a disciplined avoidance of the digital. Yet for him, there is no contradiction between these endeavours – indeed, he has openly admitted to how little research he undertook in preparation for writing his fifth novel.⁹⁰ As with *Freedom*, *Purity* resists the call for innovation inherent to digital culture, instead reaching into the past to find ways of understanding our present. As Franzen puts it, the novel has “a nineteenth-century premise” involving a “very nineteenth-century quest” which leads Pip “through a twenty-first-century world.”⁹¹

As *Purity*’s protagonist’s nickname suggests, Franzen has one particular antecedent literary figure in mind – Charles Dickens. The way that Franzen’s fiction itself aligns with Dickens’s, however, is not immediately clear. While it may be tempting to hold up Dickens’s work as a general example of the kind of social realism that Franzen aims to write, this does not give us much detail about the way that Franzen’s association with Dickens functions. A comparative reading can help unpack the authors’ alignment – in particular, reading Joshua Cohen’s *PCKWCK* (2015) and *Book of Numbers* (2015) can elucidate how it would be wrong to mistake Franzen’s formal conservatism for an active engagement with nineteenth-century style. Reading

⁸⁹ Ibid, 198. Contrary to Franzen’s suggestions, Richard Salmon has shown that a similar attitude of avoidance itself stretches back to the nineteenth century, playing out in Henry James’s 1888 novella *The Lesson of the Master* – “where one [character] construes the world beyond the private space of authorial creation as potentially liberating fiction from its status as a market commodity, the other sees the external world as a distraction from the necessary solipsism of the artist” (Richard Salmon, “Authorship,” in *Henry James in Context*, edited by David McWhirter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 111).

⁹⁰ Isaac Chotiner, “Jonathan Franzen on Fame, Fascism, and Why He Won’t Write a Book About Race,” *Slate*, July 31, 2016, <http://www.slate.com>.

⁹¹ Franzen, “Start the Week.”

Cohen, on the one hand, we can clearly identify an author who is interested in Dickens's ways of telling, and who looks to echo Dickens's contingent, experimental style. Franzen, on the other hand, is better understood as a writer interested in what Dickens tells us as a canonical figure whose command of form and structure proved his authority. As I will show, by casting Dickens as an expert whose knowledge contemporary readers can draw on, Franzen incorporates his references to antecedent texts into his model of authorially centred literary publicness. But I will also problematise Franzen's association, and argue for another way of reading Dickens in relation to *Purity* that has less to do with authority than with ambivalence.

Franzen and Cohen represent two opposing approaches to how literature might address the topic of the internet. Six weeks after *Purity*'s publication, Cohen wrote, in instalments, "a reinterpretation of Charles Dickens's first serialized novel *The Pickwick Papers* [...] in front of the entire internet."⁹² A press release for the project, titled *PCKWCK*, outlined its process: "Every day from 1pm-6pm EST visitors to pckwck.com will be able to watch Cohen write in real time, offer feedback that may affect the outcome of the novel, and talk with Josh and other readers in the chat room."⁹³ *PCKWCK* represents an alternative method of engagement with novels of Victorian scope and proportions, one that manages to both formalise Dickens's own creative labour, and to satirise the internet's commercialisation. Rather than picking Dickens as a model just because of *The Pickwick Papers*' "seriality," Cohen admitted in an interview that the "enormous pressure [the author] was under" interested him, as Dickens was "writing at a time when it was cheaper than ever to mass-produce content,

⁹² Useless Press, "PCKWCK," *uselesspress.org*, October 12, 2015, <http://uselesspress.org/things/pckwck>.

⁹³ Ibid.

and to disseminate it, [and] it seemed to me to be a time close to our own.”⁹⁴ *PCKWCK*’s website clearly alludes to this pressure, with its strict “rules for both the writer and readers” outlined in the website’s terms of service.⁹⁵ Cohen’s suggestion that the experience of Victorian novelists is similar to his own highlights his opposition to Franzen’s belief that the internet always threatens the writer’s ability and craft, and not for the first time. In his review of Franzen’s polemical commentary on the writings of Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, *The Kraus Project* (2013), Cohen bemoans how “Franzen’s unstructured exegeses attempt to summon a similar abhorrence of the digitisation of the novel” as Kraus had done with journalism’s fin-de-siècle transformation.⁹⁶ Cohen points out, however, that Franzen “never considers that if German poetry was able to survive the German-language press (and two wars, and communism), the odds are that American fiction will survive Google.”⁹⁷ If Cohen and Franzen disagree on how Kraus’s work resonates with our contemporary moment, they are more aligned in their belief that Dickens’s writing provides a useful perspective for addressing contemporary issues. The ways in which they evoke Dickens in their treatments of the internet, however, are starkly divergent.

Book of Numbers, despite setting itself up in direct opposition to projects like *PCKWCK* from its very first line (“If you’re reading this on a screen, fuck off”) is certainly a more formally experimental work of fiction than *Purity*, steeped as it is in engagement with the digital rather than avoidance of it.⁹⁸ But it arguably also engages more fully with Dickens’s work than Franzen’s novel does, at the very least at the

⁹⁴ Andrew Leland, “An Experiment in Anxiety,” *The Believer Logger*, October 15, 2015, <http://logger.believermag.com/>.

⁹⁵ Useless Press, “PCKWCK.”

⁹⁶ Joshua Cohen, “No One Hates Him More,” *London Review of Books*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n21/joshua-cohen/no-one-hates-him-more>.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Joshua Cohen, *Book of Numbers* (London: Vintage, 2015), 1.

level of style. In an interview for the radio show *Bookworm*, Cohen suggests that “the convoluted ways in which information passes in the Victorian novel, specifically in a Dickens novel,” were very influential upon *Book of Numbers*.⁹⁹ *Bookworm*’s host links Cohen’s wordplay explicitly to Dickens’s, using *The Pickwick Papers* as the model of a novel in which “events are [...] linked by verbal events,” suggesting that he is a writer “who, when he’s not making *things* happen, [is] making *words* happen.”¹⁰⁰ This is a notable component of Dickens’s writing – as Daniel Tyler puts it in his introduction to an essay collection on style in Dickens’s work, “his prose is rich with acoustic effects, such as the linkages of alliteration, assonance and internal rhymes, chimes that build connections of their own amid the representation of fragmented reality.”¹⁰¹

A significant part of Cohen’s debt to Dickens is paid at the level of the sentence, demonstrating Cohen’s interest in evoking the *way* in which Dickens writes about the world. Examples abound in *Book of Numbers*, from its descriptions of passersby, one wearing a “cap, Red Sox and red crocs,” and the protagonist’s meditation on the artefacts in a museum: “Roll me in scrolls, volumina of vellum and parchment, papyri.”¹⁰² At one point, Cohen humorously foregrounds the complicated neologisms and ubiquitous acronyms of contemporary life: “AMOR, AROM, MARO, MORA, OMAR, ORAM. Administration. Management. Organization. Responsibility. The Reign of Multiple Acronyms, ROMA. The Regency of Authoritarian Maturity, ROAM.”¹⁰³ *Book of Numbers* is packed with such punning, and Cohen proves to be,

⁹⁹ Joshua Cohen, “Joshua Cohen: Book of Numbers,” interview by Michael Silverblatt, *KCRW*, podcast audio, March 10, 2016, <http://www.kcrw.com/>.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Daniel Tyler, “Introduction,” in *Dickens’s Style*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁰² Cohen, *Book of Numbers*, 67; 53.

¹⁰³ Cohen, *Book of Numbers*, 284.

like Dickens, “alert to the latent meanings in words, to buried etymologies that prompt, in an instant, a lively wordplay.”¹⁰⁴ Most interesting is when Cohen refigures such Dickensian strategies in computational terms, linguistically riffing on the novel’s digital theme, as in his use of coding terms to outline the protagonist’s thinking:

find (Indian)

find (\$\$\$\$)

if (amount of \$\$\$ Indian has left < amount of \$\$\$ that was ours)

then# beat him down

else (he can bring us our \$\$\$ within start=datetime end=datetime with interest compounded daily for range at rate_float)

else (we would derive > satisfaction from having beaten him to death).¹⁰⁵

At one point in *Purity*, Pip ruminates on the similarities between keyboard shortcuts and spoken commands (“*Control pee*, she told herself. *Control-P*”), but elsewhere Franzen’s novel shares little of Cohen’s restive, digitally-inflected prose style;¹⁰⁶ indeed, in *The Kraus Project*, Franzen admits to finding “linguistic accidents [...] a little cheap.”¹⁰⁷

Clearly, Franzen is not interested in evoking Dickens for his use of language. Rather, he cites *Great Expectations* (1881) as a text to help us understand the internet age, because of its expert handling of one particular theme: secrecy. Working from the premise that an online culture of leaking raises important ethical questions about information, transparency, and secrecy, *Purity* enters into dialogue with provocations made about these topics in *Great Expectations*. Both novels heavily thematise secrecy,

¹⁰⁴ Tyler, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, *Book of Numbers*, 258.

¹⁰⁶ Franzen, *Purity*, 64.

¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Franzen, *The Kraus Project* (London: 4th Estate, 2013), 23.

and stage debates about the value of keeping or disclosing secrets. When Andreas Wolf sets forth a theory that having secrets lets “you know that you’re a person, distinct from other people,” but that “closeness with other people” is built “by sharing secrets,”¹⁰⁸ the implicit question being asked of his interlocutor is one that Mr. Jagers asks Pip in *Great Expectations*: “For whose sake would you reveal the secret?”¹⁰⁹ Dickens’s Pip concludes that the fact that “it is not my secret, but another’s,” should prevent him from revealing the identity of his benefactor.¹¹⁰ But Wolf’s public rallying cry for the Sunlight Project dismisses such sentiments out of hand, with the self-promoting claim “that secrecy was oppression and transparency freedom.”¹¹¹ Importantly, however, Franzen ensures that Wolf later has a change of heart. His realisation that the Sunlight Project “functioned mainly as an extension of his ego” aligns with Dickens’s suggestion that revealing another’s secret can be a selfish act – Wolf has, in fact, built a career doing this, fuelling his charismatic reputation by disclosing information about others.¹¹² Through Wolf’s realisation, Franzen highlights a difference between the internet age and Dickens’s own period – if Franzen sees overlaps between these times, he also suggests that our contemporary moment is far more concerned with self-promotion at the expense of others’ reputations than Dickens’s was.

Purity’s attention to secrecy also inflects its form, chiefly through its intricate plotting: in a Dickensian manner, the novel’s plot relies on the disclosure or guarding of various secrets. Franzen’s plotting represents an example of the curation and ordering that Leila suggests is lacking in the leaks and data dumps of the Sunlight

¹⁰⁸ Franzen, *Purity*, 275.

¹⁰⁹ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1881; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 409.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹¹¹ Franzen, *Purity*, 17.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 450.

Project, and serves as a formal link to the novel's exploration of journalism and the public sphere. *Great Expectations* is thus an apposite novel for Franzen to refer to, as it features one of the few scenes in Dickens's work that addresses the public sphere. Dallas Liddle suggests that Dickens does not show "great interest in using his art to analyse how discourse circulates and ramifies within his culture"; the scene in *Great Expectations* in which Mr. Jaggers and Mr. Wopsle argue over the contents of a newspaper in a public house, however, does show such an interest.¹¹³ Whereas in *Great Expectations* journalism and secrecy are linked in the public spaces of village and city life, in *Purity* the themes coalesce in the virtual public space of the Web. The Sunlight Project exemplifies Manuel Castells's observation that "there are no more political secrets in the internet age, once they have gone beyond a very small circle of insiders."¹¹⁴ *Purity* stages the personal ramifications of this emerging political logic: for Castells, the circulation of secrets and rumours means that "the borderline between gossip, fantasy, and valuable political information becomes increasingly blurred, thus further complicating the use of information as the privileged political weapon in the internet age"; for Franzen, information is the ultimate personal weapon, as characters' relationships turn on their discovery of secrets, such as when a document recounting Tom's affairs with Anabel is sent to Pip, who then discovers that her mother has been hiding a vast personal fortune from her.¹¹⁵

For several critics, however, these links are insufficient to earn Franzen the authority of the label 'Dickensian'. James Meek has claimed that Franzen's elaborate plotting operates as little more than a cursory nod to Dickens: "the most *Great*

¹¹³ Dallas Liddle, *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 93. See also Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 130.

¹¹⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 157.

¹¹⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, 158.

Expectations aspect of *Purity* is the treatment of Pip's difficulty in paying back her college debt", which is posed "as a Dickensian plot problem: how will she land the fat inheritance her goodness deserves?"¹¹⁶ Michiko Kakutani also suggests that "*Purity* uses Dickens and *Great Expectations* as a touchstone only in so much as it invokes an array of classics."¹¹⁷ And Benjamin Hale argues that, although Dickens is "the ancestor Franzen claims in *Purity*, [...] the real father to his style is also still his real bête noir, William Gaddis."¹¹⁸ Hale presents a reading of *Purity* in dialogue with Franzen's 2002 essay "Mr. Difficult," to suggest that *Purity*'s pessimistic "tone and worldview" is evidence that "Gaddis is still an influence on Franzen in spite of himself."¹¹⁹ But even if, as these critics show, *Purity*'s debts to Dickens can appear superficial, I believe that it is Dickens who is still an influence on Franzen in spite of himself.

In particular, the Victorian novelist can be read as emblematic of Franzen's own ambivalence about his position within the public sphere. To demonstrate this, it will first be necessary to outline Dickens's views on the public sphere. Dickens was a vocal proponent of political modernisation, and Borislav Knezevic has highlighted how many of Dickens's political views are encapsulated in a speech he gave to the Administrative Reform Association in 1855.¹²⁰ Dickens's speech comprised a "dramatic polarization of middle-class society and patrician political society"¹²¹ – in

¹¹⁶ James Meek, "From Wooden to Plastic", *London Review of Books*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/james-meek/from-wooden-to-plastic>.

¹¹⁷ Kakutani, "Review: 'Purity.'"

¹¹⁸ Benjamin Hale, "Hate Expectations," *Dissent*, October 23, 2015, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/jonathan-franzen-purity-dickens-internet-hater/.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Ironically, given my topic here, this organisation was founded to promote transparency in political office – for more, see David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35-6.

¹²¹ Borislav Knezevic, *Figures of Finance Capitalism: Writing, Class and Capital in Mid-Victorian Narratives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 135.

his address, the author laments the astronomic power differential between “the ‘governors’ and the ‘governed,’” and calls for “the awaking of the people, [...] to effect a great peaceful constitutional change in the administration of their own affairs.”¹²² Knezevic is careful to avoid propagating the argument, however, that “by insisting on the tension between civil society and political society in Britain Dickens tried to recreate the originary moment of the bourgeois public sphere,” and encourage rational-critical debate amongst citizens.¹²³ Rather, Dickens’s message, of the need for administrative reform that incorporates civic engagement, is inseparable from “the symbolic capital he accumulated as a professional writer and a public figure.”¹²⁴ His claim early in the speech that it is “by literature I have lived, and through literature I have been content to serve my country,” is affirmed in the rest of his address.¹²⁵ His rhetoric rests on storytelling, as he recounts an “old indisputable, very well-known story, which has so pointed a moral at the end of it,” and evokes images of the “miserable people,” and “seething, hard-worked millions” whose needs are not met by their government.¹²⁶

As such, Knezevic argues, we see that in Dickens’s “idea of the public sphere what counts is not so much the enlightenment emphasis on reason but an emphasis on sentiment capable of mobilizing the reading public in the cause of reform – a sentimental re-education of civil society.”¹²⁷ In *Purity*, Franzen gives voice to a number of similar assertions through Andreas Wolf, contrasting the internet age’s supposed penchant for democratisation with the fact that its “ruling elites consisted of

¹²² Charles Dickens, “Charles Dickens on Administrative Reform,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1855; available at *The National Library of Australia* website, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/12980779/>.

¹²³ Knezevic, *Figures of Finance*, 134.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹²⁵ Dickens, “Charles Dickens on Administrative Reform.”

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Knezevic, *Figures of Finance*, 135.

the grasping, brutal old species of humanity” operating an impoverished public life.¹²⁸ Franzen is, similarly to Dickens, loath to hold up reason as the answer to these public problems, as the societal fears (“of unpopularity and uncoolness, [...] of missing out, [...] of being flamed or forgotten”) that produce the internet’s “state of nature” are all “entirely reasonable.”¹²⁹ Indeed, these fears are “the *product* of reason,” or, rather, the product of a technocratic society defined by its “impatience with irrationality.”¹³⁰ Franzen’s alignment of the internet with a state of nature here is strange, as he also suggests that one of the main problems with “technocracy” is its overt interference in social life, particularly how it seeks “to liberate humanity from its humanness through the efficiency of markets and the rationality of machines.”¹³¹ By focussing on this apparently insidious ‘liberation,’ however, Franzen puts forward an analogous argument for the need for a sentimental re-education of civil society: if one wishes to resist technocracy, maintaining a sense of humanness will be key.

If it is opposed to efficiency and rationality, we might think of humanness here as instead connected with affective states – states that the author of the realist novel is far more equipped to intelligently foreground, we might presume, than the brutally rational technocratic imagination. Yet even if Franzen’s critique of technocracy here serves mainly to prop up his arguments for a stabilised literary authority located in the author figure, the contradictions of his contribution remain. In Wolf’s tirade, technocracy’s apparent promotion of mechanic rationality over irrational humanness is held up as a threat; in Franzen’s treatment of journalism, the appeal by digital culture to intimate emotions and personal opinions appears to frustrate the author. This kind

¹²⁸ Franzen, *Purity*, 449.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 450.

of split is common in Franzen's work – as Colin Hutchinson has noted, Franzen wavers “between a radical and a pragmatic political outlook[,] and between a rejection of, and a persistent adherence to, traditional distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.”¹³² Hutchinson includes both Franzen's own work and his critical reception in this analysis, suggesting that “themes of entrapment within circularities, and of resistance being undermined by ambivalent impulses, are at the heart of *The Corrections*,” and also of his work's reception.¹³³ In particular, Hutchinson highlights the contradictory claims of James Wood, for whom “Franzen's approach is insufficiently conservative,” and James Annesley, for whom “Franzen's fiction is too conservative.”¹³⁴ Bearing in mind that this double stance has so far defined Franzen's career can provide another way of reading the author's relationship to Dickens. In light of Franzen's unstable relationship with reputation and authority, Dickens becomes a figure who stands for a certain kind of authorship, and a certain mode of being in the public sphere – a writer who can be better understood as an analogue not for Franzen's style, but for his attitude.

For Dickens, success came with its own struggles: “the public sphere of unregulated print and vocal culture seemed increasingly dangerous and unsympathetic” to him as his work became more and more popular.¹³⁵ Ivan Kreilkamp has noted how, in the passage from *Great Expectations* that I earlier highlighted, in which Mr. Jaggers and Mr. Wopsle argue over a newspaper, readers can identify “two competing models of literary reception: one in which reading is a creative public

¹³² Colin Hutchinson, “Jonathan Franzen and the Politics of Disengagement,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50, no. 2 (2009): 192.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹³⁵ Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 94.

performance of a script-text, and another in which it is an exact decoding.”¹³⁶ Dickens himself oscillated between critique and endorsement of these two models of reading, as his potential discomfort with the tenor of popular discussions of his work was tempered by the dependence of his popularity on such discussions. Kreilkamp suggests that, “in Dickens’s writings and his performances of authorship, we witness a new kind of uneasy reconciliation with a mass audience,” and as such his experience of fame resonates strongly with discussions of Franzen’s own literary celebrity.¹³⁷ This is most notable in relation to Franzen’s controversial comments about the selection of *The Corrections* for the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. It may well be the case, as Jeremy Green suggests, that the “fractured terrain of cultural authority” foregrounded by the Book Club controversy “reflects the objective status of the literary novel in the media age,” but the mass of contradictions generated by Franzen’s response also functions as a link between the contemporary moment and Dickens’s own era.¹³⁸ If, for Franzen, being a public novelist is more about being in public than about being a novelist, as I earlier suggested, his conflicted view of literary authority can be partly explained by the apparent ceding of authority from the novel to the novelist, not as author but as *celebrity*. We can identify a particularly ambivalent stance in Franzen’s tendency to play up to this situation, one that mirrors Dickens’s uneasy reconciliation. As Hutchinson summarises, Franzen enters into “an incoherent circularity that castigates extraliterary culture even as it seeks justification from that culture.”¹³⁹ This attitude represents a significant but hitherto overlooked connection between Franzen’s work and Dickens’s, and is just as important to understanding *Purity*’s antecedents as the

¹³⁶ Ibid, 96.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 99.

¹³⁸ Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 96.

¹³⁹ Hutchinson, “Politics of Disengagement,” 198.

authors' complimentary treatments of secrecy. By attending to one further critique of the internet that Franzen foregrounds in *Purity*, I will be able to highlight the problems that Franzen's reliance on his own celebrity create for his model of authorially centred literary publicness.

Strongman Motion

Franzen's references to Dickens are in my reading related to his ambivalence about the workings of literary authority – in this regard, *Great Expectations* is once again an apposite text to reference. Edward W. Said argues that *Great Expectations* represents an exemplary staging of the problem of literary authority, particularly novelistic authority. He points out that Pip's drive for authority in Dickens's novel (the attempt to meet his 'great expectations') is problematized by his awareness of the origins of his benefactor. For Said, this encapsulates the problem of novelistic authority, a form of authority which he argues is tempered by 'molestation.' Molestation here refers to the implicit "sham" of a novelist's claims to authority – it "occurs when novelists and critics traditionally remind themselves of how the novel is always subject to a comparison with reality and thereby found to be an illusion."¹⁴⁰ For Franzen, the biggest threat to literary authority lies not in awareness of the novel form's 'molestation,' however, but in how novels are considered in the internet age. As I have suggested, Franzen particularly laments what he sees as the ceding of authority from the novel-as-contribution to the novelist-as-celebrity, even as he plays up to this transfer by appealing to his credentials as a public intellectual. Indeed, Franzen confuses things further by aligning himself with his characters' views (his suggestion in one interview that "there's no way to make myself not male,"¹⁴¹ for

¹⁴⁰ Said, *Beginnings*, 84.

¹⁴¹ Franzen, "There is No Way."

example, echoes Andreas Wolf's claim that he "never asked to be born male"), and thus inviting readers to find connections between him and his characters.¹⁴² Altes argues that this phenomenon arises from the "tensions between [...] the author as private and public person, which intensify readers' search for the author's 'true' communicative attitude."¹⁴³ It is precisely these tensions, and this search for communicative attitude, that Franzen draws attention to in *Purity*, in order to justify his simultaneous critique and endorsement of a literary publicness focussed on the authority of the author figure. He attempts this justification primarily through what Seshagiri calls the novel's "governing analogy," which casts the internet as a totalitarian technology.¹⁴⁴

In the novel's penultimate chapter, Wolf compares the East German government of his youth with what he refers to as the "New Regime" of the internet age, calling both "*totalitarian*."¹⁴⁵ This metaphor lends itself to multiple interpretations, including one related to literary authority. But it is first worth unpacking the metaphor on Franzen's own terms, and noting that he seems aware of its ambiguity – as Wolf observes, several people misunderstand him when he uses the word, inferring claims about "total surveillance, total mind control, [and] gray armies in parade with medium-range missiles."¹⁴⁶ Instead, Wolf means to draw comparisons between the "apparatchiks" of both regimes, their corresponding "buzzwords", and their braggadocio – that is, the role of agents within the system.¹⁴⁷ Most centrally, however, Wolf means to refer to "a system that was impossible to opt out of," a claim

¹⁴² Franzen, *Purity*, 65.

¹⁴³ Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation*, 62.

¹⁴⁴ Seshagiri, "Biology, Destiny, Purity."

¹⁴⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, 447.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 447.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 448-9.

which then deflects attention from individual agency.¹⁴⁸ If totalitarianism is *Purity*'s governing analogy, then it is a paradoxical one. Yet this is part and parcel of the ideology itself. Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism highlights the "paradoxical situation" of "a movement, international in organization, all-comprehensive in its ideological scope, and global in its political aspiration, seiz[ing] power in one country."¹⁴⁹ But the internet's borderless 'Regime' appears to solve this problem of domination, and Wolf's claim could be taken to follow from Arendt's provocation that the "potentialities [of totalitarianism] can be fully realized [...] only when no human being can any longer live outside its murderous domination."¹⁵⁰

Even with Wolf's caveat that he means to highlight the internet's *cultural* dominance with his references to totalitarianism, however, Franzen's decision to compare the German Democratic Republic with the 'New Regime' of the internet age may still seem strange, particularly how he seems to conflate a technology with a political ideology. Indeed, as Hidalgo suggests, "it is hard [...] not to feel that positing the Web and its ubiquity as what is most wrong with the world today is an ideological act" itself, one that might be taken to "dismiss and drive out of focus a variety of social and political problems."¹⁵¹ Franzen's analogy, however, does lend itself to a social and political reading. As Castells has usefully highlighted, "in the last quarter of the twentieth century [...] a new social structure predominantly based on networks" emerged, and the internet "became the lever for the transition to a new form of society – the network society."¹⁵² Despite the "horizontal communication" enabled by the network form, "the most important role of the internet in structuring social

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 447.

¹⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 507.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 618.

¹⁵¹ Hidalgo, *Romance of Community*, 230.

¹⁵² Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*, 2.

relationships is its contribution to the new pattern of sociability based on individualism.”¹⁵³ As Arendt has claimed, totalitarianism “could not exist without destroying the public realm of life,” which it does by “isolating” people, and as such “destroying [...] their political capacities.”¹⁵⁴ One reading of Franzen’s analogy, then, might maintain that it highlights how the technologizing of network relations in the internet age powerfully renders them as instruments of individualism, decimating the public realm. Yet, once again, the contradictions of Franzen’s metaphor are still conspicuous – if the metaphor is to work, it requires more attention to the structures and systems of the internet than Franzen’s novel allows for. In *Purity*, the metaphor’s real value lies in what it tells us about Franzen’s problems with literary authority.

It is notable that the character who describes the internet as totalitarian is Andreas Wolf (who Franzen aligns himself with to an extent), and that he does so in a section of the novel where he also considers his public reputation. At one point, Wolf observes that, “in his own case, when he’d started to be properly famous, he’d recognized that fame, as a phenomenon, had migrated to the internet, and that the internet’s architecture made it easy for his enemies to shape the Wolf narrative.”¹⁵⁵ Franzen’s characterisation of the internet here chimes with his focus elsewhere in *Purity* on how literature is considered in the public sphere – his portrayal of the internet suggests that the technology is partly responsible for what he sees as the public sphere’s excessive focus on the prior ethos of authors, rather than on what they have written. In light of this, it is worth reconsidering a question that Franzen initially posed in “Why Bother?,” of whether the cultural frames that the internet produces have made it more difficult for a writer “who’s really serious about resisting a culture of

¹⁵³ Ibid, 130.

¹⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 612.

¹⁵⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, 448.

inauthentic mass-marketed image [to] resist becoming an image himself.”¹⁵⁶ This question is inevitably accompanied by another, however, about the extent to which we can think of Franzen as a resistant author. Again, Wolf’s tirade is relevant here, as he goes on to propose that there exists “in utopianly titled books [...] a smarmy syrup of convenient conviction and personal surrender” to the New Regime of internet boosterism.¹⁵⁷ Might this suggest that there is a degree of convenient conviction and personal surrender in such utopianly titled books as *Freedom* and *Purity*? The context of Franzen’s career since the publication of *Freedom* certainly provides an interesting perspective from which to re-examine the relationship between his fiction, non-fiction, and popular discussions of his work. Franzen’s complaint in “Why Bother?” that *Time* magazine “not long ago aspired to shape the national taste, [but] now serves mainly to reflect it,” takes on a different significance in the context of Franzen’s own appearance on that magazine’s cover in 2010.¹⁵⁸ Likewise, his comments on Mark Leyner’s strategy of marketing “by making fun of marketing [...] on *Letterman*,” are interesting to note in light of Franzen’s own appearances on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Franzen seems to have adopted Leyner’s approach to marketing: his appearance in a video clip for the latter show’s YouTube channel, in which he performs a reading from *Purity* with deliberately heavy-handed, tongue-in-cheek references to Adidas products inserted throughout, is a parody of product placement that seems to balk at the very idea that a novel could be co-opted in the same way that journalism and television have been, even if promotion is an inevitable part of the contemporary writer’s working life.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Jonathan Franzen, “Why Bother?,” in *How To Be Alone* (London: 4th Estate, 2010), 86.

¹⁵⁷ Franzen, *Purity*, 448.

¹⁵⁸ Franzen, “Why Bother?,” 62.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁶⁰ “Jonathan Franzen Reads From *Purity*, Paperback Sponsored By Adidas,” *YouTube*, video, 3:25, posted by “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” August 6, 2016,

Yet even if these appearances seem to represent a departure from Franzen's assertion that "the writer for whom the printed word is paramount is, ipso facto, an untelevisable personality," Franzen is more than capable of maintaining a double stance towards his audience.¹⁶¹ Through Andreas Wolf, Franzen seems to imply that, since the structures of fame have migrated to the internet, and since the internet is an unavoidable context that champions individualism, fame and its appurtenances are phenomena that high-profile writers simply must contend with:

He could either ignore the haters and suffer the consequences, or he could accept the premises of the system, however sophomoric he found them, and increase its power and pervasiveness by participating in it. He'd chosen the latter, but the particular choice didn't matter.¹⁶²

Just as he has characterised the internet's totalitarianism as robbing subjects of their agency, Franzen here looks to play down his agency as a writer of contemporary literature. The note of resignation this strikes marks an important moment in Franzen's work. Across his essays, Franzen has criticised the ideology of technological consumerism, suggesting that "media technology" is to blame for a "national foregrounding of the personal,"¹⁶³ and that "subjectivity [...] is the essence of the blog."¹⁶⁴ He claims that such radical individualism not only commodifies social relationships, but causes the private and public worlds to bleed into one another.¹⁶⁵ In its ideological insistence that the personal be publicised, the internet represents "the

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28M4UqEdCHM>. This attitude also functions as another link between Franzen and Dickens – "in the nineteenth century, exponents of literary professionalism (such as Dickens, for example) commonly sought to distinguish the value of their labour as professionals from the production of commodities for the literary market, even if they accepted the legitimacy of the market mechanism in concrete terms" (Salmon, "Authorship," 107).

¹⁶¹ Franzen, "Why Bother?," 86.

¹⁶² Franzen, *Purity*, 448.

¹⁶³ Jonathan Franzen, "I Just Called to Say I Love You," in *Farther Away* (London: 4th Estate, 2013), 153.

¹⁶⁴ Franzen, *The Kraus Project*, 49.

¹⁶⁵ Jonathan Franzen, "Pain Won't Kill You," in *Farther Away* (London: 4th Estate, 2013), 6.

ugly spectacle of a privacy triumphant.”¹⁶⁶ But whereas in “Why Bother?” Franzen was worried about the risk of “writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine,” in *Purity* he suggests that he has no choice but to do this.¹⁶⁷

Purity serves as a contribution to the public sphere that does indeed make this same point over and over, even if doing so in a novel marks Franzen’s attempt at a formally different approach to making it. His reliance on the authority that he derives from being a ‘public novelist,’ however, embeds within *Purity* a reading that encourages the lens of the personal. Indeed, whereas Henry James’s writing of prefaces “historicizes his relation to the artwork by embedding it in the history of his consciousness in order to claim the authority of origins,” Franzen historicizes his relation to *Purity* by embedding *in it* that same history of compositional struggle.¹⁶⁸ As with James, “the text becomes a history of his struggles to compose; the reader reads for authorial performance; the imperfect text signifies an imperfect world and an idealized author who therefore does not fit in that world except as totem.”¹⁶⁹ In *Purity*, Franzen must work against his reputation, preface the novel within itself, and employ an essayistic tone to reify, paradoxically, his self-sufficiency as authoritative novelist.

Yet the response to Franzen’s latest essay collection, *The End of the End of the Earth* (2018), suggests that his attempts at authority have not been successful. When one piece from the collection was published online, a list of Franzen’s “ten rules for novelists,” it attracted such ire from online commentators that several news outlets

¹⁶⁶ Jonathan Franzen, “Imperial Bedroom,” in *How to Be Alone* (London: 4th Estate, 2010), 50.

¹⁶⁷ Franzen, “Why Bother?,” 69.

¹⁶⁸ John H. Pearson, *The Prefaces of Henry James: Framing the Modern Reader* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 70-1.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

published pieces chronicling its “trolling.”¹⁷⁰ Ironically, the scale of this public mockery proves the premise of *Purity*’s argument more than the novel itself could. For Franzen’s work is by no means as misanthropic as his reputation has it. At the end of *Purity*, when Pip has completely extricated herself from the Sunlight Project, she returns to her hometown and gets a job at the café where she had previously read the *New York Times* every Sunday. She rekindles her relationship with Jason, and begins to rebuild her life. The novel’s final sentences strike a hopeful note:

It had to be possible to do better than her parents, but she wasn’t sure that she would. Only when the skies opened again, the rain from the immense dark western ocean pounding on the car roof, the sound of love drowning out the other sound, did she believe that she might.¹⁷¹

After forgoing the affirmation that she has previously received from Andreas Wolf, the Sunlight Project, and her parents, Pip can envisage a new life for herself. Bombarded by the onslaught of rain, listening to her parents argue inside a nearby cabin, she finds herself able to take comfort with Jason, and work towards a better future in a relationship that was born of good conversation. Perhaps, like Pip, when Franzen is free of the forms of authority he formerly depended on, he will be able to do the same.

¹⁷⁰ Jonathan Franzen, “Jonathan Franzen’s 10 Rules for Novelists,” *Literary Hub*, November 15, 2018, <https://lithub.com/jonathan-franzens-10-rules-for-novelists/>; Eleanor Ainge Roy, “‘Ignore This’: Jonathan Franzen’s Top 10 Writing Tips Get Gleefully Trolled on Twitter,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/>; UGC Hub & Social News, “Franzen’s Rules for Writing Mocked on Twitter,” *BBC News*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/>.

¹⁷¹ Franzen, *Purity*, 563.

Dave Eggers: Platforms and Privacy

Totally Wired

In 1993, the editorial staff of *Wired* magazine moved out of their offices in San Francisco and into a larger space two floors up in the same building. Their old floor was quickly filled by the landlord, a consultant who had helped to launch the monthly publication about technology, culture, and politics. Among the replacement tenants were the editors of a new magazine, *Might*, whose number included the twenty-three-year-old Dave Eggers. In his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), Eggers recalls the mixture of contempt and awe he and his friends felt for the “young creative elite of San Francisco” who worked for the “countless start-up software companies, Web developers, [and] Internet providers” nearby.¹ While proximity alone was enough to make Eggers “kind of even believe” the widespread internet boosterism of the area, he also knew that this kind of thinking was resulting in a lot of people “doing dumb, doomed things.”² And even if there was “no prestige like the prestige in working for *Wired*,” *Might*’s brand of detached irony meant that the staff could not “let on that we’re part of this scene, or any scene.”³ The public face of the editors, based on the “ridiculing [of] other magazines, especially *Wired* upstairs,” obscured the effective private seduction by which cyberutopianism was winding its way into the hearts of even the most resistant.⁴

This reluctant acquiescence was due less to any engagement with emergent technologies themselves than to the culture surrounding their creation – we can see in

¹ Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000; repr., London: Picador, 2001), 171; 170.

² *Ibid.*, 171.

³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

Eggers's parodic detailing of the lives of Silicon Valley workers (the "sophisticated and gorgeous youth [...] each day lathered in sun and possibility"⁵) a reflection of the claim that an editorial for the UK edition of *Wired* made in 1996, that "Technology = Culture" and "Culture = Technology."⁶ Before such bold claims became mainstream, however, while Eggers was downstairs writing parodies, *Wired* were asking the kind of questions that would very much come to interest the author twenty years later – including, in one article by Steven Levy, the question of "whether privacy will exist in the 21st century."⁷ This concern lies at the heart of Eggers's 2013 novel *The Circle*, which is set in a near future San Francisco where the titular technology company has monopolised the social internet. The legacy of Eggers's early exploration of Silicon Valley in *A Heartbreaking Work* is identifiable in *The Circle*, which argues that privacy, power, and the public sphere are all being refigured by the culture surrounding technology as much as by technology itself.

For Eggers, the institutional seat of this cultural shift is Silicon Valley. As Zara Dinnen points out, *The Circle* is chiefly concerned with "the becoming historical event of Silicon Valley," the early history of which depended on the "two-pronged instantiation of sanctioned knowledge and counterculture experimentation in the San Francisco Bay area."⁸ The importance of "slacker-turned-cyber manifestos expounded by magazines such as *Wired*" to this story should not be underplayed – in the early 1990s these magazines produced "a peculiarly localized ethos of the potential future of digital technologies that underwrites many of our contemporary encounters with

⁵ Ibid, 172.

⁶ Wired, "The Wired Manifesto," *Wired*, October 1996, *The Wired UK Archive*, <http://archive.gyford.com/1997/wired-uk/2.10/features/manifesto.html>.

⁷ Steven Levy, "Crypto Rebels," *Wired*, February 2, 1993, <https://www.wired.com/1993/02/crypto-rebels/>.

⁸ Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 105.

that technology.”⁹ As *A Heartbreaking Work* shows, Eggers was particularly tuned in to this localized ethos. Indeed, when *The Circle* was released, the author was keen to play down the existence of any “real-life corollaries” for the titular company whilst simultaneously affirming his credentials for writing the novel in terms of proximity (“I’ve been living in the Bay Area for most of the last twenty years, so I’ve been very close to it all for a long time”).¹⁰ This position mirrors the one that Eggers describes in his memoir: “We begin to perfect a balance between being close to where things are happening, knowing the people involved and their patterns, while keeping our distance, an outsider’s mentality, even among other outsiders.”¹¹

The ethos that Eggers was tuned into, however, was not just localized but specialized – the distance he maintains is specifically that of a journalistic detachment. Detectable amidst the complex of reasons for *Might*’s disparaging stance towards *Wired* is a position on the role of magazine journalism in the era of the commercial internet’s nascence. With a tongue-in-cheek tone aware of his youthful over-optimism, Eggers describes his attempts to create “the very first meaningful magazine in the history of civilization,” as compared with the “computer rags” running out of the same building. For *Might*, the aim is to take a “mute mass of human potential and [...] mold it into a political force” – “advertising [and] distribution” are just “flotsam.”¹² In this section of *A Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers’s anxieties about journalism are mostly absorbed into the book’s broader concerns with irony and sincerity, but he also berates similar ideas to those that Franzen does in *Purity* – the boosterism, sycophancy, and

⁹ Ibid, 105. Dinnen’s argument here operates in dialogue with previous work on ‘the Californian ideology.’ See Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” *Science as Culture* 26, no. 6 (1996): 44-72.

¹⁰ Dave Eggers, “A Brief Q&A with Dave Eggers About His New Novel, ‘The Circle,’” interview by McSweeney’s, *McSweeney’s*, September 27, 2013 <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-brief-q-a-with-dave-eggers-about-his-new-novel-the-circle/>.

¹¹ Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work*, 172.

¹² Ibid, 174; 169.

commercialism of the so-called computer rags. This perspective stays with Eggers all the way through to the publication of *The Circle*. But whereas in *Purity* Franzen looks to convince readers that “the best stories come when you’re out in the field,” and that “it takes a journalist to collate and condense and contextualize” the information that leakers inundate the internet with, Eggers dramatizes a world where this is no longer considered true.¹³ The threat to journalism in *The Circle* is not state surveillance (as Levy’s *Wired* article had suggested in 1993), nor increasingly lax standards of journalism (as Franzen fears), but the logic of Silicon Valley itself.

In a 2017 report for The Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Emily Bell and Taylor Owen claimed that “the influence of social media platforms and technology companies is having a greater effect on American journalism than even the shift from print to digital.”¹⁴ Although *The Circle* does not focus its attentions on journalism for long, one scene imagines the possible extent of this effect. One of the Circle’s products is an openly accessible network of cameras around the world called SeeChange, which users can access livestreams from at any time. When the novel’s protagonist Mae Holland takes a tour of the Circle’s “newsroom,” she notes that the company’s “news gatherers” (no longer ‘journalists’)

were able to do most of their reporting via SeeChange. There were now over a hundred million cameras functional and accessible around the world, making in-person reporting unnecessarily expensive and dangerous, to say nothing of the carbon expenditures.¹⁵

¹³ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: 4th Estate, 2015), 493.

¹⁴ Emily Bell and Taylor Owen, “The Platform Press: How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 29, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/platform-press-how-silicon-valley-reengineered-journalism.php/.

¹⁵ Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 2013), 320.

The seemingly virtuous reasons given for this sea change in reporting practices, however, are cast in a sceptical light by the preceding passage, when Mae first enters the newsroom:

[It was] modelled on old-time newspaper offices, with a hundred low cubicles, news tickers and clocks everywhere, each desk with a retro analog telephone, a row of white buttons below the numbers, blinking arrhythmically. There were old printers, fax machines, telex devices, letterpresses. The décor, of course, was for show. All the retro machines were nonfunctional.¹⁶

Although appearing to acknowledge the long history of journalistic practices, the Circle's model only comprises now-obsolete technology. The machines no longer function not just because they have been replaced by more efficient ones, however: the style-over-substance newsroom also points to a time when journalism has been disconnected from its historical values. Eggers's novel suggests that the acquisitive logic of Silicon Valley must lead to such an end. For him, Bell and Owen's findings would surely not state the case urgently enough – it is not just that “publishing is no longer the core activity of certain journalism organizations,” and that technology companies have “forced news organizations to rethink their processes and structures.”¹⁷ Rather, the future might be one in which journalism as an entire industry is absorbed by Silicon Valley. If it is in the nature of these companies to be expansionary, Eggers asks, what is at stake?

The Circle attempts to answer this question, as Eggers examines the ideological reach of corporate power and what this means for privacy, work, democracy, and the public sphere. He draws attention to key practices and qualities of Silicon Valley companies, and highlights the corporate obsession with data collection as a potential

¹⁶ Ibid, 320.

¹⁷ Bell and Owen, “The Platform Press.”

threat to democracy through its revision of the public sphere's relation to privacy. Just as Franzen responds to a crisis of the authority of individual voices in the public sphere by modelling a form of literary publicness that centres on trusted author figures, Eggers's literary publicness sets great stall by the idea of authorship – *The Circle* demonstrates how Eggers's form of literary publicness rests on making political critiques through literary forms and styles in a performance of authorial expertise. Furthermore, a number of his other books focus on telling the stories of real people he has met, a move which suggests Eggers's alignment with Franzen's belief in the filtering function of the author.¹⁸ But Eggers is also more interested than Franzen in the contexts in which authors work, both societally and institutionally, and his literary publicness incorporates this interest. Indeed, he has extended his belief in the importance of authorship well beyond published writers, particularly in his work as an activist and advocate for the literacy charity 826 National.¹⁹ The charity comprises a network of different 'chapters' across America that work within communities to provide writing classes for students aged six to eighteen – as their website glosses it, “while each 826 community is unique, our common practices and vision unify us.”²⁰ In *The Circle*, however, Eggers highlights the difficulty of championing these ideas when corporations have co-opted the ideals of community and communication to self-interested ends.²¹ Caroline Hamilton has suggested that it is “through books [that

¹⁸ See Dave Eggers, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006); Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2009); Dave Eggers, *The Monk of Mokha* (London: Penguin, 2018).

¹⁹ Eggers's interest in institutions manifests in *The Circle* as an interest in corporations, but Amy Hungerford has argued that his earlier work is equally bound up with ideas of educational institutions: see Amy Hungerford, “McSweeney's and the School of Life,” *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (2012): 646-680.

²⁰ 826 National, “About,” *826 National*, n.d, <https://826national.org/about/>.

²¹ While my chapter focusses on the contemporary context of technology corporations, other studies have examined the 'corporate rationalization' of the public sphere with reference to political, legal, and media theory more generally. For examples, see David S. Allen, *Democracy, Inc.: The Press and Law in the Corporate Rationalization of the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Carl Boggs, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York: Guilford

Eggers] affirms the power within the individual and the community” – if this remains the case in *The Circle*, it is because Eggers is able to frame literature as a potential curative to the internet’s effects on one arena where individuals and communities overlap: the public sphere.²²

Silicon Values

The Circle draws attention to what Eggers sees as the insidious operations of Silicon Valley companies by thematising platform capitalism – a business model focussed on providing software and hardware to connect users rather than just trying to sell directly to them, typified by corporate entities such as Google, Apple, and Facebook. Nick Srnicek points out that critical reflection about these platforms has mostly “focused on them as political and cultural actors,” neglecting the fact that “they are first and foremost economic actors [...] operating within a capitalist economy.”²³ Yet Eggers does not overlook this aspect; he highlights how the company’s drive for profit inflects every encounter Circle users engage in.²⁴ As a Circle user, Mae consistently demonstrates a mode of interaction with others that legitimates and supports what one character calls the Circle’s “ruthless capitalistic ambition.”²⁵ In one scene, Mae posts pictures of her ex-boyfriend Mercer’s artwork on various design appreciation pages, thinking that “if he wasn’t smart enough to get business for

Press, 2000); David Croteau and William Hoynes, *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest* (Newbury Park: Pine Forge Press, 2006).

²² Caroline D. Hamilton, *One Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing and Publicity* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 96.

²³ Nick Srnicek, “The Challenges of Platform Capitalism: Understanding the Logic of a New Business Model,” *Juncture* 23, no. 4 (2017): 254. For an extended explication of this concept, see Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

²⁴ Indeed, as Eggers put it in a recent interview, such companies are “voraciously profit-driven and completely uninterested in privacy or any rights of the individual.” (Dave Eggers, “Dave Eggers: ‘I Always Picture Trump Hiding Under a Table,’” interview by Paul Laity, *The Guardian*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/22/dave-eggers-interview-circle-lifters>.)

²⁵ Eggers, *The Circle*, 484.

himself, she would be happy to do it for him.”²⁶ She ignores his protests, instead focussing on raising his “ranking” on one particular site, searching for feedback that would make his “resistance [...] fall away.”²⁷ Mae is the ideal Circle user, as Mercer’s complaints attest: “every time I see or hear from you, it’s through this filter. You send me links, you quote someone talking about me [...] and] it becomes like we’re never alone.”²⁸ In this instance, Mae has become what Kylie Jarrett describes as “the endlessly phatic subject who continues to express his or herself through, and because of, these mediating platforms.”²⁹

Even these parts of the novel concerning what appear to be cultural interactions can be convincingly understood in economic terms. As Jarrett notes, “user activity [...] adds value” to platform companies, be that through “the tangible production of content [...] or] the traces of user activity [...] sold to advertisers.”³⁰ Writing about Facebook, Jarrett outlines how, “in the context of commercial websites, such data exchanges can be seen as a form of exploitation, as they are unpaid contributions to the content of the site and the economic surplus generated by the company.”³¹ Through projects such as Retail Raw (which calculates “the total gross purchase price of [...] products” Circle users recommend to each other), PastPerfect (a family history project using “billions” of photos and videos provided by “the digital community”), and LuvLuv (a dating site that gathers information about people from their social media profiles³²), the Circle can be seen to represent the apotheosis of “a capitalism that has an enhanced capacity

²⁶ Ibid, 255.

²⁷ Ibid, 257.

²⁸ Ibid, 131.

²⁹ Kylie Jarrett, “Let’s Express Our Friendship by Sending Each Other Funny Links instead of Actually Talking’: Gifts, Commodities, and Social Reproduction in Facebook,” in *Networked Affect*, eds. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015), 214.

³⁰ Ibid, 204.

³¹ Ibid, 205.

³² Eggers, *The Circle*, 250; 350; 123.

to extract value directly from our sociality.”³³ No wonder, then, that when Mae first visits the Circle’s campus, and finds that the paths cutting through it are made up of “tiles with imploring messages of inspiration,” one commands her to “Find Community.”³⁴ Time and again, Mae is reminded of the importance of community to the Circle’s endeavours – in a briefing, her supervisor places emphasis on “the fostering of community”; she is encouraged to visit a coworker’s page and write something on the wall” as an “act of *community*”; another of the company’s slogans is “Community First.”³⁵ In all these cases, however, what it seems that communities are important to is merely the tautological advancement of the company’s culture of community. For Mae’s boss, the reason that “communication should never be in doubt” is simply because “it’s what we do here” – he never offers any elucidation as to why this is a preferable state of affairs, instead simply echoing the steadfast belief in connection that is often provided by technology companies as their *raison d’être*.³⁶ Yet the Circle’s economic ambitions are once again key here: connection and community bolster the company’s endeavours because, as Srnicek reminds us, “one of the key features of platforms is their reliance on (and ability to generate) network effects.”³⁷ This means that “the more users are using a platform,” and the stronger their community becomes, “the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone” – including the platform themselves.³⁸

Yet it is not only Circle users’ absorption of its culture that Eggers concerns himself with. He recognises that the increasingly pervasive culture of Silicon Valley is a “culture of work, of workaholism,” as Castells puts it, and so extends his

³³ Jarrett, “Let’s Express,” 215.

³⁴ Eggers, *The Circle*, 1-2.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 47; 94; 47.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

³⁷ Srnicek, “Platform Capitalism,” 256.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 256.

exploration to how the Circle's labour practices also perpetuate their cultural values.³⁹ One particular scene points to the facets of work that most interest Eggers. After a heated argument with Mercer at her parent's house one night, Mae drives past a kayak rental business that she frequently uses, and which she has been chastised by her Circle colleagues for not sharing information about online. Upon finding that the business has closed for the evening, Mae borrows an unattended kayak and sets out across the water to an island on the bay. Over the next few pages, Eggers highlights the uncertainty and ephemerality of Mae's situation: a seal appears and she "wondered, briefly, if the seal would follow her [...] but the next time she turned around, the animal was gone"; "the distances" between landmarks are "impossible to tell"; she becomes "aware of the millions of permutations possible around her, and take[s] comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all."⁴⁰ All this stands firmly in opposition to the Circle's ethos that "ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN."⁴¹ It is also important to note that, before Mae borrows the kayak, she compares Mercer (a "man, fast approaching thirty, making antler chandeliers") to herself ("who worked at the Circle!").⁴² Mae's defining feature in her own mind has become her work, and it is this context that must be kept in the reader's mind when Mae indulges in her leisure activity, which has been framed in opposition to the ideology of the Circle. In doing so, Eggers' sly reveal at the end of this section, that the owner of the kayak business is called "Ms. Lefebvre," becomes a telling one.⁴³

Evgeny Morozov has claimed that *The Circle's* depiction of "unceasing and utterly trivial updates delivered to [users] on a rapidly proliferating number of screens"

³⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

⁴⁰ Eggers, *The Circle*, 266; 270.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 67.

⁴² *Ibid*, 265.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 272.

is a portrayal of “mediated boredom,” one which echoes philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s description of a similar “modern condition in a splendid essay from the early nineteen-sixties.”⁴⁴ Eggers may well “sit firmly in Lefebvre’s camp,” but if he is directing his readers towards Henri Lefebvre’s work with the inclusion of Ms. Lefebvre in Mae’s leisure activity, another aspect of the philosopher’s writing appears to be more relevant.⁴⁵ In his *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. 1*, Lefebvre suggests that “leisure [...] cannot be separated from work,” given that “we work to earn our leisure, and leisure only has one meaning: to get away from work.”⁴⁶ It is surely this idea that is most apposite here: the dialectic of work and leisure, at “the same time united and contradictory.”⁴⁷ Yet Lefebvre’s remarks stand somewhat in contrast to the situation in *The Circle*. For employees of the Circle, work does not earn leisure. Rather, leisure *is* work. Circle employees’ social media use is aggregated into a Participation Rank and considered to be “integral to participation” in the culture of the company, but so too is attendance at social events.⁴⁸ When she fails to attend a brunch organised by a colleague, Mae is reprimanded for “causing worry and emotional distress [...] not to mention threatening the delicate ecology” of the workplace; when she attends an event that night on the campus, she ensures that her supervisors know she is there, and is “happy they’d seen her, had registered her attendance” by the time she leaves.⁴⁹

Furthermore, Mae’s work is also framed as leisure – most of her labour comprises social interactions that mirror Circle employees’ mandatory leisure

⁴⁴ Evgeny Morozov, “Only Disconnect,” *The New Yorker*, October 28, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/28/only-disconnect-2/>. The essay Morozov refers to here is Henri Lefebvre, “Tenth Prelude: Renewal, Youth, Repetition,” in *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes September 1959-May 1961*, trans. John Moore (1962; repr., London, Verso: 2011), 157-167.

⁴⁵ Morozov, “Only Disconnect.”

⁴⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. 1*, trans. John Moore (1947; repr., London: Verso, 1992), 29; 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁸ Eggers, *The Circle*, 94.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 108; 164.

activities. In her initial role in ‘Customer Experience’, Mae interacts with Circle users to answer their queries. In a briefing for the role, Mae is told that she “should always be sure to inject humanity into the process,”⁵⁰ and her job includes producing what Jarret calls the “troika of affective immaterial products within contemporary capital,” as she *communicates* with customers to give them *knowledge* about the Circle in a way that produces a *social relationship*.⁵¹ As the novel progresses, and as Mae’s visibility increases, these social relations become more intense, producing very strong affective responses in customers, as when one woman claims that Mae knows her “pretty well by now” simply after Mae signs a petition and briefly browses her online profile.⁵² The importance of such interactions is amongst the “core beliefs [of] the company”, and the “fostering of community” is considered “just as important as the work” the Circle does.⁵³ This is surely because a lot of the work done in ‘Customer Experience’ is precisely to create the same sense of community that keeps users coming back to Circle products.

Another of Lefebvre’s claims, that “leisure and work and ‘private life’ make up a dialectical system,”⁵⁴ is brought to mind at the end of *The Circle*, in Ty’s warning to Mae that the company’s ideology means that “public-private leads to private-private.”⁵⁵ Readers might infer that this is the trajectory of all such dialectics under the Circle’s dispensation: online-offline becomes online-online, work-leisure becomes work-work (even as Circle employees convince themselves that it is leisure-leisure). When one of Mae’s supervisors calls her into his office to talk about her role in the company, he once again parrots the company’s obsession with community: “We see

⁵⁰ Ibid, 49.

⁵¹ Jarrett, “Let’s Express,” 205.

⁵² Eggers, *The Circle*, 373.

⁵³ Ibid, 46.

⁵⁴ Lefebvre, *Critique*, 4.

⁵⁵ Eggers, *The Circle*, 484.

the workplace as a community, and every person who works here is part of that community. And to make it all work it requires a certain level of participation.”⁵⁶ The double meaning of this last line, with its implication that the Circle wants to make everything into work, is indicative of the attitude to work that *The Circle* presents. The culture of community from which the Circle extracts value and perpetuates its power is seen here to extend to any who interact with it, including its employees. The belief that leisure cannot be separated from work is truly embodied by the Circle, in a way that goes beyond the meaning of the claim for Lefebvre himself.

The economic endeavours of platforms are clearly an important element of their motivations, and Eggers’s interest in the labour of Circle users and employees situates these endeavours as central to his exploration of technology companies’ dominance. Indeed, *The Circle*’s effective demonstration of how social connection is co-opted by platforms for profit is a key part of Eggers’s contribution to debates about the internet’s effects on society. Yet focussing solely on the Circle’s drive for profit would do little to distinguish platforms from any other kind of corporation. To properly understand Eggers’s engagement with platforms, and how it relates to the public sphere, it is important to examine how he situates the Circle’s accumulation of economic power within the frames of culture and politics. Eggers makes it clear that the Circle should be taken as a company comprising all three strands of Silicon Valley’s rise (the political, cultural, *and* economic) through the company’s founders, the ‘Three Wise Men.’ If Manuel Castells believes that “the Internet entrepreneur is a two-headed creature,” combining tech-savvy creators and venture capitalists, then Eggers thinks it is more Cerberian.⁵⁷ The Circle’s “world-striding CEO” Tom Stenton

⁵⁶ Ibid, 178.

⁵⁷ Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 57.

is a “self-described *Capitalist Prime*” who undeniably fuels the company’s rise, but he does not do this alone.⁵⁸ The other two founders, Ty Gospodinov and Eamon Bailey, are equally important to the Circle’s dominance – the former is the epitome of a tech-wunderkind cliché, brilliantly innovative and often self-effacing, who later becomes the novel’s voice of political uncertainty; the latter is an out-and-out performer who embodies the culture of the Circle with boundless optimism, “a first-term Teddy Roosevelt, accessible and genuine and loud.”⁵⁹

Morozov has berated his “occasional fellow travelers who write literary essays or works of fiction attacking Silicon Valley,” such as “Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, [and] Zadie Smith,” because their “attacks mostly focus on the values and beliefs of the companies’ founders.”⁶⁰ For Morozov, this attention misses the point – it betrays a naïve assumption that “tech entrepreneurs could simply be talked out of the disruption that they are wreaking on the world.”⁶¹ More than this, it reaffirms a tired liberal humanist belief in the transformative powers of literature: “if Mark Zuckerberg would just miraculously choose a tome by Isaiah Berlin or Karl Kraus for his ongoing reading marathon, everything could still go back to normal.”⁶² Eggers does arguably betray such a belief, but if he wants to persuade anyone of anything it’s simply his readers, tech entrepreneurs or not. And if Eggers focusses on the potentially curative elements of culture, he does not do so out of naivete. Rather, he does so precisely because he recognises that Silicon Valley has cemented its economic and political power through the inculcation of its *own* culture into the lives of its users. In *The Circle*, Eggers enters debates about how the internet is changing contemporary life,

⁵⁸ Eggers, *The Circle*, 23.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 25.

⁶⁰ Evgeny Morozov, “The Taming of Tech Criticism,” *The Baffler*, March, 2015, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/taming-tech-criticism>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

arguing that when it comes to understanding the effects of platforms on broader society, we cannot separate the political, cultural, and economic issues at play – and nowhere is this clearer than in his novel’s treatment of the public sphere.

Democracy 2.0

In one scene in *The Circle*, Eamon Bailey introduces a new initiative at a public meeting by declaring his belief that “it’s the natural state of information to be free.”⁶³ Bailey’s sentiment casts corporations as liberators of information, defenders of natural rights acting purely in the interests of its users, but the statement also harks once again to the economic revisions being wrought by platform capitalism. The idea itself is not exclusive to the internet age – as Cory Doctorow points out in his appositely titled *Information Doesn’t Want to Be Free* (published by Eggers’s own McSweeney’s Books), the founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog* Stewart Brand famously drew attention to the economic double bind information exists in as early as 1984: “On the one hand,” Brand claimed, “information wants to be expensive, because it’s so valuable. [...] On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time.”⁶⁴ The nuance of Brand’s idea has all but disappeared in Bailey’s version – information is no longer caught between two competing impulses, but instead has a natural state which it must be returned to. This evolution echoes Doctorow’s claim that the idea of free information “has gone from a useful way of provoking discussion about the philosophy of the information society to a trite slogan that obscures more than it illuminates.”⁶⁵ In the Circle’s case, Bailey’s

⁶³ Eggers, *The Circle*, 302.

⁶⁴ Cory Doctorow, *Information Doesn’t Want to Be Free: Laws for the Internet Age* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2014), 94.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

slogan obscures the company's primary ambition: Eggers knows that behind public paeans to information there often lies a private pining for saleable data.

As Srnicek points out, “data is the basic resource that drives these firms,” who cash in as they “develop ways to siphon off and aggregate this information.”⁶⁶ Importantly, this “drive towards more and more data has a nefarious consequence: impingement on privacy becomes a necessary feature of platform capitalism.”⁶⁷ In *The Circle*, this fact is where the cultural and economic strategies of platforms meet. The way that the Circle is said to have “crushed all meaningful opposition [...] started with the commerce sites,” because these platforms began to require use of the Circle’s “TruYou” feature, an account tied to a user’s real identity.⁶⁸ From here, “the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision” (a situation not too far from the present reality of many Facebook users).⁶⁹ The way that Circle users consume information is apparently changed by TruYou – “the messages [they received] were more focused and accurate and, most of the time, even welcome” – and this newfound convenience placates users, at least enough for them not to mind that their information is being used to more successfully achieve the same ends as the previously “buckshot marketing that guessed, at best, within a mile of their desires.”⁷⁰

Silicon Valley’s inculcation of its culture of efficiency, novelty, and community into users means that they willingly provide their data for what is seen as

⁶⁶ Srnicek, “Platform Capitalism,” 254; 255.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 255.

⁶⁸ Eggers, *The Circle*, 22.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 22. In an article about Facebook, John Lanchester outlines the company’s partnership with various consumer credit firms that “know all there is to know about your name and address, your income and level of education, your relationship status, plus everywhere you’ve ever paid for anything with a card. Facebook could now put your identity together with the unique device identifier on your phone” (“You Are the Product,” *London Review of Books*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n16/john-lanchester/you-are-the-product/>).

⁷⁰ Eggers, *The Circle*, 22.

a beneficial economic payoff – impingement on privacy is perceived as a necessary feature, but not a nefarious one. *The Circle*'s analysis of platforms sharpens here, as Eggers suggests that when economic and cultural shifts occur, political changes will likely follow. The Circle's culture of data extraction, born of a willing surrender of privacy, denigrates the public sphere by making *everything* public – by erasing the line between public and private that Habermas argues was so central to the bourgeois public sphere's emergence. Eggers nods to the importance of the idea of the public throughout his engagement with platform capitalism: Bailey, the most vocal proponent of the Circle's cultural values, is described as the “public face of the company”; when one Circle employee lectures Mae about the importance of community, she informs her that “community and communication come from the same root word, communis, Latin for common, public, shared by all or many.”⁷¹ But Eggers's contribution to debates about the public sphere in the internet age is particularly prominent in his invention of one specific Circle product.

Demoxie is an interface through which Circle users can vote on everything from “a local ordinance” to a referendum on “a new tax.”⁷² Even before its release, Mae suggests that Demoxie could allow the Circle to integrate government services such as voting and tax payment into their system, saving the country “*hundreds of billions*” of dollars – the company's CEO even begins to wonder whether their system might be able to “eliminate much of Washington” altogether.⁷³ For Carl Boggs, this was precisely the effect of increased corporate power in America across the twentieth century – “corporate colonization” undermined political discourse and governmental

⁷¹ Ibid, 24; 95.

⁷² Ibid, 391.

⁷³ Ibid, 390; 392.

efficacy, not least through “extensive lobbies and influence over legislative activity.”⁷⁴ Writing in 2000, Boggs argued that whatever “utopian hopes and dreams” the digital revolution offered for the public sphere had been dashed by its development into “yet another extension of the corporate multimedia complex.”⁷⁵ Indeed, a number of Silicon Valley staples openly admit that this is their ultimate aim: for contemporary figures like Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal and an early investor in Facebook, “monopoly businesses like Google, Facebook, and Amazon serve as a welcome replacement for government.”⁷⁶ Thiel has written about how large, dominant corporations avoid being “audited, scrutinized, and attacked,” suggesting that they “tend to do whatever they can to conceal their monopoly, usually by exaggerating the power of their (nonexistent) competition.”⁷⁷ In *The Circle*, however, the titular corporation aren’t lying about their dominance – their explicit (and publicly broadcast) ambition is to “require every voting-age citizen to have a Circle account.”⁷⁸ Rather, they are lying about their aims – they don’t want to “eliminate lobbyists” and “polls,” just *other companies’* lobbyists, and polls that they do not administrate.⁷⁹ Just as Bailey earlier cast the Circle as a liberator of information with no mention of the company’s use of data, Tom Stenton here frames them as liberators of American citizens without disclosing his private interests. The company’s decisive ambition, to perhaps “even eliminate congress,”⁸⁰ is an all-too-recognisable version of “Thiel’s [...] anti-

⁷⁴ Boggs, *The End of Politics*, 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁶ Noam Cohen, “The Libertarian Logic of Peter Thiel,” *Wired*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-libertarian-logic-of-peter-thiel/>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Eggers, *The Circle*, 388.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 391.

democratic fantasy, where tech businesses set policy priorities rather than elected officials.”⁸¹

The corporate takeover of democracy dramatized in *The Circle* is further demonstrated by the way Demoxie is run – it is, essentially, an app for data-gathering that is indistinguishable from the CircleSurveys that characters complete to register their consumer preferences elsewhere in the novel.⁸² But even when Demoxie is used to engage with political issues, claims that the Circle “might really *perfect* democracy” through direct and mandatory engagement with voters fail to see what is missing: the democratic public sphere’s dialogic element.⁸³ At one point, while taking part in a test of Demoxie, Circle employees are told to imagine that they “had the direct and immediate ability to influence U.S. foreign policy,” before voting on whether or not to launch a drone strike “in a lightly populated area of rural Pakistan” with the aim of killing a known terrorist, “considering the likelihood of moderate collateral damage.”⁸⁴ For Mae, “the power felt real” when answering, but even for a question as politically charged (and potentially violent) as this one, she appears to have no chance to debate or discuss the decision with anyone other than herself.⁸⁵ Mae is said to be “weighing the pros and cons,” but the short deliberation readers are given access to is one-sided, given that it goes on in her own head.⁸⁶

Eggers here traces a direct line from Mae’s inculcation with the Circle’s ideas and ideals to the monologic public sphere fostered by Demoxie. Because privacy is inextricably bound up with the notion of the public, when our relationship to the former

⁸¹ Cohen, “Libertarian Logic.”

⁸² Eggers, *The Circle*, 229.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 392.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 404.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 404.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 404.

is changed, our relationship to the latter must be too. As Peter Boxall puts it, Eggers's novel demonstrates how "the experience of hyperconnectivity that comes with the emergence of the internet leads to the loss of any kind of privacy, any sense that we can withdraw from the public sphere, into some inner space of contemplation or thought."⁸⁷ For even Mae's apparent withdrawal inwards during her engagement with Demoxie cannot be thought of as the kind of contemplation that the liberal democratic public sphere requires. As Habermas argues in *Between Facts and Norms*, it is "an authoritarian, distorted public sphere that [...] merely provides a forum for plebiscitary legitimation"; this in contrast to a liberal public sphere which, Habermas claims, both "prevents the accumulation of indoctrinated masses that are seduced by popular leaders," and "pulls together the scattered critical potentials of a public," allowing "subinstitutional political movements" to thrive (in theory).⁸⁸ If Franzen feared technocracy's totalitarian streak, then, we can see how Eggers is keen to establish the Circle's corporatocracy as equally authoritarian. The questions asked via Demoxie – about cafeteria options and musicians as well as interventionist foreign policy – all point to a redefinition of the liberal democratic public sphere where, as Jeffrey Severs puts it, "applied to technological formations, liberal now essentially refers not to citizens' rights but to the freedom they grant corporate systems to instrumentalize their tastes and habits."⁸⁹

Eggers' novel here presents a view of the public sphere in the internet age shared by a number of political theorists, echoing in particular Jodi Dean's claim that many of the "norms articulated together by the notion of the public", such as

⁸⁷ Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 139.

⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (1992; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 382.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 217.

“inclusivity, equality, transparency, and rationality,” have effectively “been co-opted by a communicative capitalism that has turned them into their opposite.”⁹⁰ As Dean summarises it, “regulatory interventions are invoked and pursued so as [...] to make appear a public sphere what is clearly the material basis of the global economy.”⁹¹ It is the Circle’s corporate identity, then, as much as the technologies it produces, which brings into focus the novel’s view of the public sphere in the internet age. It is not so much that technology itself precludes the development of an effective public sphere – indeed, as Dean suggests, “computer-mediated interactions seem to materialize aspirations long associated with the public sphere.”⁹² Rather, Demoxie’s choice-based public sphere presents an example of the social internet’s intractably corporate character. In the Circle’s illiberal vision of democracy, the logic of the market has won out through its imbrication of culture, politics, and economics. Eggers’s novel represents his contribution to debates about the internet’s effects on the public sphere; his central argument is that changing attitudes to privacy are influencing public life. Elsewhere in the novel, Eggers brings this argument into alignment with his model of reparative literary publicness, by referencing another novelist who shares his interest in political critique.

Can We Speak Privately?

In his 1945 essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell claimed that “when the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.”⁹³ In *The Circle*, language is always suffering in the rarefied air of the company’s campus. At a product launch early in the novel, Bailey outlines the Circle’s insistence “that all that happens

⁹⁰ Jodi Dean, “Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere,” *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 109.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹³ George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (1945; repr., London: Penguin, 2013), 15.

should be known,” but when his “words dropped onto the screen” behind him, the sentence reads “ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN.”⁹⁴ The change of modal verb from “should” to “must,” and of the sentence’s formatting from lowercase to capitalised, imply that this technology saps nuance from language. When language is mediated through the Circle’s technologies at other moments during the novel too, it is rendered as either tautological nonsense (“*The past is past, and Annie is Annie*”), or as nothing more than a string of consumer preferences (“Yes, yes, no, Cancun, deep-sea diving, upscale resort, breakaway weekend”).⁹⁵ At another point in *The Circle*, Eggers not only echoes an Orwellian sentiment, but mirrors an Orwellian text. During one key scene, Mae announces that, “in the interest of sharing all she saw and could offer the world,” she will be “going transparent immediately.”⁹⁶ This entails livestreaming video and audio online for nearly all her waking hours, sharing her every experience with any Circle user who wishes to watch. Introducing the announcement, Mae and Bailey outline three “revelations” that have inspired her to do this:

SECRETS ARE LIES

SHARING IS CARING

PRIVACY IS THEFT⁹⁷

These three slogans comprise a clear allusion to *The Circle*’s central antecedent influence, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and the equivalent “three slogans of the Party”:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

⁹⁴ Eggers, *The Circle*, 67.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 443; 440.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 304.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 303.

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH⁹⁸

The formatting of the slogans in *The Circle*, laid out as a separate, centrally-aligned, capitalised paragraph, clearly emulates Orwell's text, but despite the allusion, the sentiments expressed here differ notably. In *The Circle*, knowledge is the ultimate goal, and withholding it is to be seen as a crime; in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to not know is the aim, an idea reflected in the destabilising false equivalencies of the first two statements. If Eggers evokes Orwell as a useful guide for engaging with ideas of political, economic, and cultural power, he does not simply reproduce the conditions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Oceania. Yet this is precisely the point – Eggers invites readers to directly compare the two institutions of the Circle and the Party to suggest that the former's brand of cyberutopianism is closer to the censorial and dictatorial tone of Ingsoc than it appears on the surface. In Orwell's novel, Boxall argues,

the emergence of global superpowers in the wake of the Second World War, combined with the development of information technology that allows for the manipulation of recorded reality, has produced in the novel a situation in which the past has become infinitely malleable.⁹⁹

In Eggers's novel, the emergence of corporate superpowers, combined with (and resulting from) the development of information technology, has produced a situation in which the past has become infinitely storable and profitable. The Circle cannily monetises the archives of rival social media companies, and attempts to crowdsource a complete register of every user's family history, "to fill in your memory and the historical record."¹⁰⁰ The past is inescapable for the novel's characters, as when Mae is told that a video of her that has been filmed without permission cannot be deleted

⁹⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; repr., London: Penguin, 2013), 19.

⁹⁹ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 47.

¹⁰⁰ Eggers, *The Circle*, 123; 350.

because “the deleting of any information [is] like killing babies.”¹⁰¹ All the Circle’s data, one employee tells Mae proudly, will “be here next year and next century.”¹⁰²

The inverse of the Party’s practices nevertheless serves a similar purpose to Orwell’s novel. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the past is inaccessible so as to completely deny the reality of the Party’s actions; in *The Circle*, the past is consistently invoked to the same end, to hide the Circle’s interest in accumulating power. Dinnen points out that “everything about the [Circle’s] campus – from the garden to the naming of each area after a historical era, to the user you are becoming – is designed to make all that is new appear not new, appear familiar.”¹⁰³ This comforting obfuscation, she argues, creates “subjects defined by their exposure to, rather than comprehension of, novelty.”¹⁰⁴ In Dinnen’s view, this situation robs subjects of their agency, and she cites Christine T. Wolf to argue that denying the opportunity for comprehension impedes the formation of discursive publics.¹⁰⁵ This reading can illuminate Eggers’s allusions to Orwell too, as this obstruction of public discourse is arguably also the end Orwell portrays. Boxall suggests that Orwell sees the historical relativism of a number of twentieth-century thinkers as a “compliant preparation for the manipulation of history by tyrannical superpowers – and for the production of an entirely fungible public sphere, endlessly adaptable to the demands of the global market place.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, whether arrived at through the violent tyranny of the Party, or the willing purchases of Circle users, when institutions are allowed to govern our sense of history, those institutions often proceed to govern the public sphere as well, dictating the forms

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 204.

¹⁰² Ibid, 43.

¹⁰³ Dinnen, *The Digital Banal*, 105.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 116.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 116. Also see Christine T. Wolf, “DIY Videos on YouTube: Identity and Possibility in the Age of Algorithms,” *First Monday* 21, no. 6 (June 2016).

¹⁰⁶ Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 49-50.

of discourse, and indeed the very form of the public or publics, that are permitted within it. Like Orwell, Eggers depicts a public sphere devoid of dissent – those scenes in *The Circle* when characters discuss the company negatively happen in private (such as Mae’s arguments at home with her ex-boyfriend Mercer, or when Ty disrupts her live-stream to talk with her unobserved). Eggers identifies the Circle’s malign elimination of privacy and concealment of its objectives as the cause of this situation, but his contribution does not end here. He responds to the problematic public sphere he portrays by modelling his own form of literary publicness, which, I will argue, involves employing a particularly literary strategy (here, free indirect discourse) to reveal these conditions of contemporary life to the reader.

Whereas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston’s position in the Ministry of Truth stands in juxtaposition to his desire to rebel against the Party, Eggers places Mae within the confines of the Circle to foreground an environment that makes her particularly susceptible to its ideology, surrounded as she is by its followers. *The Circle* performs Mae’s experience of acquiescence in its free indirect style, through which the narrative voice often asserts opinions, justifications, or thought processes of Mae’s. Margaret Atwood points out that this style “demands that the reader think [the Circle’s] positions through in the same way that the characters must.”¹⁰⁷ Galow also outlines how this intellectual challenge is a key feature of the style,” which is “designed to help the reader understand, and not merely experience, the protagonists’ gradual conversion to the supposedly utopian ideology that governs the progress of one major technology company.”¹⁰⁸ *The Circle* asks its readers to deeply engage with

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Atwood, “When Privacy Is Theft,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 21, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/11/21/eggers-circle-when-privacy-is-theft/>.

¹⁰⁸ Timothy W. Galow, *Understanding Dave Eggers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 116.

Mae's perspective, and in this way, despite lacking any depictions of direct attempts at resistance on Mae's part similar to Winston's, Eggers's attitude still echoes Orwell's towards his reader. If, as Raymond Williams suggests, "it is central to Orwell's arguments that what is being described, in its main tendencies, is not only a universal danger but a universal process," Eggers mirrors this interest in his demonstration of the *process* by which people might capitulate to the Circle's governing logic.¹⁰⁹

Yet the effectiveness of Eggers's strategy has a potential downside – as Dinnen points out, it is a somewhat limiting approach, as "Eggers's narrative can only rarely disclose its fear of a company that preaches absolute transparency and an end to privacy because Mae is silent witness to the logic of software ideology."¹¹⁰ She goes on, however, to suggest that this is precisely Eggers's intention, and that "we can read in this novel something of a contemporary culture of computation – even if what we read is the project of effacement."¹¹¹ Indeed, rather than thinking of Eggers's approach as limiting the disclosure of his fears about Silicon Valley's ideology of intrusion, we can understand the novel's narrative voice as a constant disclosure of such anxiety. In the novel's final paragraph, Mae thinks how "exasperating" it is to not know "what was going on in [her friend Annie's] head," calling it "an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world."¹¹² The extent to which Mae has absorbed the Circle's ideals here is clearly disquieting, and the novel's final two sentences promise a bleak future of mind-reading beyond the final page: "Why shouldn't they know? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait."¹¹³ By this point, Mae has completely

¹⁰⁹ Raymond Williams, "Nineteen Eighty Four in 1984," *Marxism Today*, January, 1984, 12. Available at *The Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust* website, http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/84_01_12.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Dinnen, *The Digital Banal*, 110.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 110.

¹¹² Eggers, *The Circle*, 491.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 491.

immersed herself in the ideology of the Circle, and she eagerly awaits “completion.”¹¹⁴ If readers take on the intellectual challenge of trying to understand Mae’s conversion, however, they might be tempted to complete the circle of the novel itself, and return to its opening line. To do so, in fact, would be to experience and understand what completion of the Circle would be like within the world of the novel, with the first sentence (“My God, Mae thought”) providing a direct glimpse into Mae’s mind, as the rest of the novel also does.¹¹⁵

The particular dynamics of free indirect discourse, however, are still more intricately linked with the novel’s arguments about privacy. Indeed, it would be wrong to claim that Eggers looks only to make an argument *for* privacy through his use of narrative voice. Instead, he reveals its relationship with publicness, and in doing so situates literature as a site for revealing this relationship in nuanced ways. In one of *The Circle*’s final scenes, Ty makes a plea to Mae, asserting that the “barrier between public and private must remain unbreachable.”¹¹⁶ This is a more complex position than it initially appears to be. Throughout his appeal, Ty presents what Helen Nissenbaum has called a “normative conception of privacy,” one which “incorporates a presumption that privacy is something worthwhile, valuable, and deserving of protection.”¹¹⁷ In other words, Ty’s argument, mainly comprising unanswered rhetorical questions, follows the form of the unsubstantiated beliefs in connection and knowledge espoused by the Circle. More than this, however, Ty’s claim is essentially

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 491.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 485.

¹¹⁷ Helen Fay Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 68.

for a “private/public dichotomy,” which may itself only play into the Circle’s hands.¹¹⁸

As Nissenbaum notes,

dichotomy theories are spared having to explain why video surveillance of public spaces or trawling public records for purposes of aggregation is problematic because, according to them, they are not in the private sphere and therefore are not a privacy problem. [...] A stark way of expressing this alignment is that the private warrants privacy protection while the public does not; in the public ‘anything goes.’¹¹⁹

The problem for Ty’s argument here is that this dichotomy “neglects a range of situations,” many of which are fostered by “technology-based systems and practices.”¹²⁰ The limitations of the private/public dichotomy “have come to light as digital information technologies radically alter the terms under which others [...] have access to us and to information about us in what are traditionally understood as private and public domains.”¹²¹ Social network sites in particular “seem to defy obvious categorization as either public or private,” and Ty’s suggestion that there be an unbreachable barrier seems to miss the point: “in this case, we may at least conclude that whatever expectations of privacy are in play, they do not appear reducible to whether a network, or a space in a network, is deemed public or private.”¹²² Rather, as Eggers suggests in his depiction of Demoxie, privacy must be understood as more complexly bound up with ideas of publicness, as a shifting concept that varies with context. For Eggers, free indirect discourse provides an ideal way to reveal these complexities. The style’s “effect of greater interiority,” Michael McKeon reminds us, “is achieved by the oscillation or differential *between* the perspectives of narrator and

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 114.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 114.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 114.

¹²¹ Ibid, 117.

¹²² Ibid, 119.

character, by the process of moving back and forth between ‘outside’ and ‘inside,’” from the public to the private.¹²³ Furthermore, by “simultaneously ‘concealing’ and ‘revealing’ itself, free indirect discourse encapsulates in miniature the dialectical impulse of the novel’s ideological function” – in particular, it “provides the grammatical basis for the dialectical construction of the public over against the private.”¹²⁴ Rather than simply providing an argument for privacy, or an indictment of technology companies’ intrusive practices, Eggers employs the novel form to reconsider the dynamics of the issue, using style to reify the interconnected nature of the public and the private in the internet age.

Even as Ty tries to mitigate his part in the Circle’s damaging actions by making an argument for a public/private dichotomy, he cannot extricate himself from the company’s way of thinking. Bearing this in mind, Eggers’s revealing of the contingent conditions of the public and the private can be read as an opposition to Ty’s situation – literature, Eggers’s novel suggests, can provide a way of speaking publicly that remains uninflected by corporate ideology (or, at the very least, that can perform or reveal the existence of that inflection). In an interview given at the time of *The Circle*’s publication, Eggers acknowledged the particularly literary quality of his engagement with the internet’s effects on society, claiming that “we’re already engaged in a constant and meaningful examination of how the available technology is affecting us, but maybe fiction can shine a different kind of light on it.”¹²⁵ The free indirect discourse through which the novel traces Mae’s capitulation to the Circle provides this different kind of light – Ann Banfield has outlined how it is an “exclusively literary

¹²³ Michael McKeon, “Subjectivity, Character, Development,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 485.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 486; 487.

¹²⁵ Dave Eggers, “Behind the Cover Story: Dave Eggers on Imagining the Future World of Over-Sharing,” interview by Claire Gutierrez, *The 6th Floor*, September 28, 2013, <https://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/>.

style.”¹²⁶ Eggers’s use of this style is the most obvious manifestation of his model of literary publicness, which rests on the ability of an author to engage in debates through the particular affordances of literary forms. Yet even if literature *can* provide a way of speaking publicly that remains uninflected by corporate ideology, Eggers does not simply accept this as inevitable. In *The Circle*, Eggers portrays the inculcation of institutional values into the Circle’s users and employees. In this way, his perspective is similar to Franzen’s – both identify problematic issues for the public sphere that arise at an institutional level. For Franzen, the solution is a return to a model of expert authorship founded on the abilities of individuals to contribute to the public sphere, a solution which is threatened by the ways in which those contributions tend to be considered through a personal lens. Yet for Eggers, this form of consideration is key – he knows that he cannot forgo institutions entirely, so looks instead to build and associate himself with alternative institutions which can underwrite the authority of the arguments he makes as an author in the public sphere. Just as Eggers’s interest in and proximity to Silicon Valley pre-dates *The Circle*, his career was bound up with corporations, institutions, and the internet long before he wrote the novel. Examining these contexts, and how his work is considered in the public sphere, will help clarify the form of literary publicness that Eggers models in response to the internet’s apparent denigration of public discourse.

One Wise Man

Five years after *The Circle*’s publication, Eggers helped to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by contributing an essay to

¹²⁶ Ann Banfield, “From ‘Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction’,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 517.

a series that reimagined the Declaration for our contemporary moment. The participating authors chose to address those rights they felt were most important to protect in 2018, and Eggers's essay addressed a topic that readers of *The Circle* will be familiar with: "the right to a life offline."¹²⁷ In one of the novel's final scenes, Ty implores Mae to publicly announce "a list of assertions" that he has written on a piece of paper "under the headline 'The Rights of Humans in the Digital Age,'" including calls for "the right to anonymity" and an end to "the ceaseless pursuit of data."¹²⁸ If Eggers aligns himself with Ty's opinions through his essay on human rights in the internet age, however, this is not the only overlap between the two. Ty's concerns are broadly applicable to debates about the internet, but are also tinged with the founder's personal desires to disappear from public view and build a life outside of the Circle. At the bottom of his written declaration is "one line, written in red ink: 'We must all have the right to disappear.'"¹²⁹ Ty's red line is, however, impossible for him to achieve. As noted at the beginning of the novel, "his fingerprints [...] were on every major Circle innovation."¹³⁰ Ty cannot disappear from the code he wrote, Eggers suggests – he and his work are etched into every part of the company. As I will show, Eggers mirrors Ty's situation here, but instead of lamenting this, the author in fact draws attention to the institutional contexts of his own creative work.

Eggers's early career took a similar turn to Ty's, as both looked to move beyond the institutions that fuelled their initial success. Eggers's first book was met with huge media fanfare and, Keith Gessen notes, "from the first, much of [his] fate as

¹²⁷ Dave Eggers, "The Right to a Life Offline," in Margaret Atwood et al., "Human rights for the 21st century: by Margaret Atwood, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Dave Eggers and more," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/08/universal-declaration-human-rights-turns-70>.

¹²⁸ Eggers, *The Circle*, 485.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 485.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

a popular icon was beyond his control.”¹³¹ As Caroline Hamilton has explained, this experience had a distinct effect on Eggers, whose “vocal frustration with corporate publishing, and [...] ambivalence regarding the media,” led to his decision to release his second book, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), through “his own newly created McSweeney’s Books.”¹³² Beyond the commercial and critical success of his writing, Eggers has built a literary career on a number of endeavours in the publishing industry and charitable sector:

Keeping in mind the modest ambition of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* with its 1,500 copies distributed by hand, it is remarkable to consider Eggers’s publishing success and his business’s growth: three magazines (*McSweeney’s*, the monthly review *The Believer* and the DVD magazine of short films, *Wholpin*), three book imprints and countless charitable enterprises devoted to literacy projects.¹³³

Anthony Hutchison has usefully referred to McSweeney’s as an “institutionalizing of Eggers’ own early style,” highlighting the links between the author and his work beyond writing, and how this can inflect readings of his work in the public sphere.¹³⁴

Yet this inflection cuts both ways – as well as reading McSweeney’s as an institutionalized expression of Eggers’s own literary style, his work has in turn been read as reflecting those values and ambitions of contemporary literary production that publishing houses attend to in their business. Just after the publication of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, for example, a seventeen-year-old student called Gary Baum set up a “controversial literary website” devoted to “trac[ing] the

¹³¹ Keith Gessen, “Eggers, Teen Idol,” *n+1*, Summer 2004, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-1/essays/eggers-teen-idol/>.

¹³² Hamilton, *One Man Zeitgeist*, 65.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹³⁴ Anthony Hutchison, “Immaterial World: Precarity and Post-Industrial Labor in George Saunders’s ‘Sea Oak’ and Dave Eggers’s ‘A Hologram for the King,’” *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 2, no. 1 (2013): 17.

rise of the unstoppable Eggers.”¹³⁵ The website combined “an undisguised affection for Eggers [...] with an unrelenting and often highly critical scrutiny of his every move”: Baum’s first post on the website “amounted to a damaging exposé [...] of all the connections Eggers had at his disposal.”¹³⁶ Keith Gessen suggests that Baum’s blog “is both a literary document and a sign of the times,” a hit-and-miss representation of a contemporary literary network.¹³⁷ Baum’s blog also serves as an interesting example of how the internet can come to partially blur the lines of cultural authority: several writers, including Zadie Smith, were sufficiently “annoyed with Gary’s antics” to contact him and tell him so.¹³⁸ Despite his acknowledgement that much of the media fanfare surrounding his first book was “out of [Eggers’s] control,” Gessen concludes his article by calling Eggers a “marketing genius,” suggesting that he is a “New York media insider” who has managed to “get away [...] with pretending otherwise” by employing the persona of an outsider.¹³⁹ Hamilton has also suggested that the success of Eggers’s career with McSweeney’s is not simply down to “his control of the means of production, but his management of the production of his persona and his ability to put this into the service of his business.”¹⁴⁰

The links between Eggers’s business and creative work are interesting to note alongside Michael Szalay’s examination of the anxiety expressed by several of Eggers’ contemporaries about the corporate contexts of the production and dissemination of their writing. Szalay notes how, in *Freedom* (2010), Jonathan Franzen inquires “into the terms and conditions of [his] own entrance into a middle-class mainstream.”¹⁴¹ By

¹³⁵ Gessen, “Eggers, Teen Idol.”

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Hamilton, *One Man Zeitgeist*, 86.

¹⁴¹ Michael Szalay, “The Incorporation Artist,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 10, 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-incorporation-artist/>.

contrast, Szalay claims, Dana Spiotta's *Stone Arabia* (2011) proposes "that novelists have more affinities with the working class than they do with the middle," and asks questions of an author's artistic integrity within a corporate system: if a writer's "insides are branded, has she become, in effect, the kind of person that corporations are understood to be?"¹⁴² In light of the critique of corporate ideology that *The Circle* presents, one might be tempted to conclude that Eggers shares these anxieties. Indeed, Hutchison has suggested that the critique of corporate ideology and globalization in the internet age present in Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* (2012) continues beyond the text itself, with Eggers extending the novel's thematic "commitments to the realm of material production," by having it printed and bound by "an employee-owned printing and bookbinding firm based in Clayton, Michigan."¹⁴³

Yet to conclude that Eggers' work unequivocally represents an anxious questioning of corporate contexts would be false. Indeed, Ralph Clare has argued, contra Hutchison, that in *A Hologram for the King*, protagonist Alan Clay's "final decision to create something lasting is figured as a rebirth of the salesman, global capitalist style, and is thus a curious and sincere reaffirmation of globalization."¹⁴⁴ Further to this, outside of his texts Eggers does not adopt an entirely anti-corporate or anti-internet stance: the 826 National chapter 826 Valencia has an ongoing partnership with Google, and McSweeney's has previously used the website Kickstarter to fundraise.¹⁴⁵ These decisions suggest that Eggers has a more pragmatic than anxious relationship with corporations in the internet age, one that puts up with certain means to reach certain ends. Hamilton goes as far as to say that "McSweeney's Books

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Hutchison, "Immaterial World," 17.

¹⁴⁴ Ralph Clare, *Fictions Inc.: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁴⁵ Elisabeth Leoni, "Google and 826 Valencia invite you to a 'planet ruled by love,'" *The Keyword*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.blog.google/>.

provides a model for the publishing industry that seizes the advantages of the capitalist system and harnesses them to positive political ends.”¹⁴⁶

Zadie Smith, in a commencement speech at The New School in New York, seems to agree with this evaluation, citing Eggers as an exemplary figure to the graduating class:

I look at the fine example of my friend, the writer and activist Dave Eggers, and see a man who took his own individual prestige and parlayed it into an extraordinary collective action: 826 National, in which many hands work to create educational opportunities for disadvantaged kids all over this country.¹⁴⁷

Eggers’ biggest achievement, Smith suggests, is that he has found a way to “make a gift” of himself and his success as a writer, and we can think of the way in which Eggers uses his cultural authority to help others as linked to his model of literary publicness.¹⁴⁸ One of 826 National’s stated aims is to promote “writing as a tool for young people to [...] advocate for themselves and their community.”¹⁴⁹ Part of the charity’s work, in other words, is to prepare young citizens for interactions in the public sphere. 826 National’s identification of *writing* as the tool with which to prepare their students also aligns this aim with Eggers’s modelling of a literary publicness that centres on the specific uses of literary writing in public debates. But we must also acknowledge that Eggers’s own writing is considered in the public sphere alongside the attendant facts of his association with McSweeney’s and 826 National (indeed, his author biography at the end of *The Circle* lists his achievements with both companies before information about his literary career). Readers with knowledge of 826

¹⁴⁶ Hamilton, *One Man Zeitgeist*, 94.

¹⁴⁷ Zadie Smith, “Zadie Smith | Commencement Speech 2014 | The New School,” *YouTube*, video, 23:38, posted by “The New School,” 29 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjdm06EKn8I/>.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ 826 National, “About.”

National's 'mission' are able to understand *The Circle* as providing its readers with a similar kind of training for the public sphere too, as Eggers's association with his charity's ambitions underwrites the authority of his model of literary publicness. Lee Konstantinou's reading of *A Heartbreaking Work* shows that this institutional guarantee has in fact informed Eggers's creative practice since long before *The Circle*:

Eggers has asked his readers to believe in *him*, in the truthfulness of his memoir, the sincerity of his various enterprises. This is why Eggers's experiments in self-publication – his institution-building drive – turn out to be *the primary contents* of his memoir [...]. As an empirical organization, of course, McSweeney's necessarily transcends the particular personality and life story of Eggers [...]. Nonetheless, Eggers's public performances [...], his publishing enterprises [...], and his philanthropic activities [...] can be profitably understood as extended interlocking paratexts of *A Heartbreaking Work* itself.¹⁵⁰

By the time of *The Circle*'s publication, Eggers's institutional affiliations had become interlocking paratexts of *all* his creative work, and he uses this to his advantage to underwrite his model of literary publicness.

The Circle, or, rather, those technology companies that the Circle represents, have co-opted an idea that Eggers has always expressed faith in: the idea that everyone has a story to tell. Taken as a trite truism this might not mean much, but Eggers intends it in part as a corrective to the way that the internet encourages constant contact instead of considered connection. As he puts it simply in one recent interview, "social media separates and isolates us"; his response, the interviewer suggests, "is to focus on personal stories": "'On this block,' [Eggers] says, 'I could introduce you to nine people whose stories would make interesting books ... If you're listening, the stories are

¹⁵⁰ Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 198-99.

never-ending.”¹⁵¹ Eggers’s literary publicness is founded on this idea of universally enfranchised authorship, but is not tied to the criterion of expertise like Franzen’s is. Rather, Eggers recognises that the ways in which stories are told often depends upon the institutional contexts in which authors find themselves, and he directs readers to recognise how their own values are affected by the institutions they are part of. Eggers’s literary ideals (including the use of form and style to reveal conditions of contemporary life) must be underwritten by ideal institutions – institutions which have developed pragmatic attitudes to compromise in their attempts to improve political, cultural, and economic conditions, and look to reclaim concepts that have been co-opted by platform capitalism.¹⁵² Attempting to realise such a mode of being in public might, Eggers implies, restore some of the balance that is lost in online life.

The Circle, in conjunction with the facts of Eggers’s career, suggest that since the internet age is increasingly characterised by malevolent institutions seeking to co-opt social connection for profit, we must align ourselves with *better* institutions to ensure the effectiveness of the public sphere. Yet once again, a parallel with *The Circle* arises here – by inviting readers into what Konstantinou calls “McSweeney’s magic circle of (small-batch, sincere) production, (non-profit) circulation, (nonsnarky) criticism, and (postironic) reception,” Eggers to some extent replicates the expansionary cult of community he pillories in *The Circle*.¹⁵³ Indeed, Eggers’s pragmatic relationship with the corporate in his philanthropic work represents something of a double bind for him. In another article, Konstantinou examines Lewis

¹⁵¹ Eggers, “Dave Eggers: I Always Picture.”

¹⁵² Eggers is tuned in here to contemporary debates about deliberative democracy, which often taken the form of questions about “the type of institutions required to ensure deliberative democracy could be actualised in complex societies” (Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty, “Introduction: Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy,” in *Deliberative Democracy*, eds. Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁵³ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 201.

Hyde's *The Gift* (a book which "addresses itself to the problem of whether it is possible to freely give gifts under unrestrained capitalism") in the context of Hyde's own grant-awarding foundation, before turning his attention to McSweeney's.¹⁵⁴ Focussing on McSweeney's Kickstarter campaign, Konstantinou claims that "such gift-funded – and gift-giving – organizations invoke a fascinating hybrid discourse" by offering alternatives to mainstream, market-driven commerce, whilst simultaneously invoking "the language of venture capital."¹⁵⁵ This is no condemnation of the campaign's aims, and the "success of such worthy projects is reason for celebration," but Konstantinou points out that the form of such a campaign could be said to "institutionalize all of the well-documented problems of the neoliberal nonprofit sphere, which [...] privatizes support for the arts."¹⁵⁶ Konstantinou's essay reflects a potential problem for Eggers: attempts to construct alternatives to a system can nevertheless themselves be co-opted by that system. Adam Kelly has written about how many of David Foster Wallace's "generation of writers [...] have absorbed the depictions of institutional interpellation in the postmodern fiction of authors like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon," but that "the result of this inheritance is that for twenty-first-century writers, interpellation is now acknowledged as a given."¹⁵⁷ For writers like Eggers, "speaking or writing in the contemporary moment involves expressing forces beyond one's own authentic interiority; subjectivity is not only a cause but also an effect, whether of technology, culture, neurochemistry, or language."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Lee Konstantinou, "Lewis Hyde's Double Economy," *ASAP/Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016): 124.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵⁷ Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace," *Post45*, October 17, 2014, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/>.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

By tracing Mae's acquiescence to the Circle's ideology, Eggers' novel implies that Mae's subjectivity is as much a construct of the Circle as it is her own. As such, *The Circle* portrays a world in which "it is impossible to isolate ourselves [...] outside the instrumentality of capital and the mass media," as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have claimed is the case of our own time.¹⁵⁹ Yet unlike Franzen, whose resignation to this point in *Purity* functions to absolve himself of agency, Eggers takes this as his work's starting point, apparently accepting Hardt and Negri's further claim that if "there is going to be any ethical redemption it will have to be constructed inside the system."¹⁶⁰ Indeed, we can see something of Eggers present inside the system of *The Circle*. The contexts of his work with McSweeney's and 826 National, however, surely mean that it is no longer with Ty that the author is most appositely aligned. Nor is it, as Severs suggests, Mercer who "signifies Eggers the small publisher, obsessing over a low-profit venture in beautiful artifacts."¹⁶¹ Rather, I believe that the Three Wise Men more accurately represent the trinity of traits inherent to Eggers's mode of authorship in the internet age. The context of his career surely invites such a reading: he is equal parts driven businessman (with his numerous McSweeney's ventures), interminable optimist (with his charity work and founding of *The Believer*), and critical creator (as evidenced by the critiques presented in *The Circle*). Even if he has the right to disappear, Eggers can't quite manage to do so.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004), 261.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁶¹ Severs, *David Foster Wallace's*, 217.

Zadie Smith: Depiction and Difference

Comment Threads

If the quasi-religious following of the Circle represents an extreme imagining of the reception of social media, the rapidity of the corporation's rise to prominence is a wholly plausible detail of Dave Eggers's speculative novel. When Mae starts her job with the company, it is "less than six years old, [but] its name and logo [...] were already among the best-known in the world."¹ Facebook experienced a similarly dramatic expansion in its first decade, with just one million users in 2004 becoming over a billion by 2013.² Alongside the rapid growth and subsequent market dominance of specific internet companies (one study estimates that, in 2013, websites and services owned by Google alone accounted for twenty-five percent of North American consumer internet traffic³), the more general forms of content popularised online proliferated with extraordinary speed: in 1999, there were only twenty-three blogs on the internet; over the next ten years, 126 million blogs were created.⁴ Statistics like these point to an important element of the story of the internet's rise – the fact that, as Jacob Weisberg notes, "our transformation into device people has happened with unprecedented suddenness."⁵

For Zadie Smith, this suddenness has had an inordinate impact on how we understand the internet's role in our daily lives. In an interview given in 2010, the author pointed out that "any other revolution that took place with so many people in

¹ Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 2013), 2.

² Ami Sedghi, "Facebook: 10 Years of Social Networking, in Numbers," *The Guardian*, February 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/feb/04/facebook-in-numbers-statistics>.

³ Robert McMillan, "Google Serves 25 Percent of North American Internet Traffic," *Wired*, July 22, 2013, <https://www.wired.com/2013/07/google-internet-traffic/>.

⁴ Gil Troy, *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 256.

⁵ Jacob Weisberg, "We Are Hopelessly Hooked", *The New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/02/25/we-are-hopelessly-hooked/>.

so little time would have a philosophy, a period of thought, a period of discussion, an argument, but the internet revolution has happened [too quickly for that].”⁶ But whereas in *The Circle* Eggers casts corporate actors as primarily to blame for this paucity of reflection, Smith would have internet users also carefully consider their own roles in the internet revolution, and acknowledge that “most of us have just fallen into it without serious consideration.”⁷ In other words, Smith believes that the internet, despite its ubiquity, has evaded adequate consideration within the public sphere, and that this should be remedied lest the technology’s more creeping and insidious effects go unnoticed for too long. Across Smith’s work, she returns to one particular effect of the internet’s development that can help to explain her concern further – if the internet has not been considered adequately within the public sphere, this might be because the technology has itself adversely *affected* the public sphere.

Smith’s most well-known exploration of this argument comes in her 2010 essay “Generation Why?,” which focusses her digital scepticism on Facebook, and stages a debate that scholars of the public sphere have been having for some time, asking to what extent social media actualises long-held aspirations for a web-based public sphere. In her essay, Smith identifies Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as a particular brand of cyberutopian *par excellence*, one whose obsession with ‘connection’ (“he uses the word ‘connect’ as believers use the word ‘Jesus,’ as if it were sacred in and of itself”) establishes him as a champion of an online public sphere.⁸ Yet even if Facebook’s spread has undoubtedly enhanced quantity of participation in an online public sphere, Smith is concerned about its effects on the quality of discourse

⁶ Zadie Smith, “LIVE from the NYPL: Zadie Smith,” interview by Paul Holdengräber, *NYPL*, video, 96:13, November 22, 2010. <https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/zadie-smith?nref=90281>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Zadie Smith, “Generation Why?,” in *Feel Free: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), 52.

therein. For Zuckerberg, Smith claims, this concern is beside the point: “Connection is the goal. The quality of that connection, the quality of the information that passes through it, the quality of the relationship that connection permits – none of this is important.”⁹ Platforms like Facebook may look like discursive spaces, even Habermasian ones – “a uniform environment in which it genuinely doesn’t matter who you are, as long as you make ‘choices’” – but on such platforms these choices always mean, “finally, purchases.”¹⁰ Debate in Facebook’s public sphere is something which is to be chiefly expressed through the market, whatever Zuckerberg’s protestations. We might glean from this element of Smith’s critique in “Generation Why?” that she can easily be aligned with Eggers, as both authors condemn the fungible public sphere fostered by social media platforms in pursuit of profit. But one of Smith’s own comments about her essay can help nuance our understanding of her contributions to debates about the public sphere in the internet age, and introduce the argumentative threads that run through the rest of her work.

Discussing the publication of “Generation Why?” during an interview, Smith outlines her interest in how social media platforms discourage discourse by robbing users of their ability to be “relational rather than performative,” and fostering “an idea of being human which is one way,” neglecting the fact that “real life is relational.”¹¹ Here Smith usefully explicates her contribution: the forms of communication encouraged by platforms are partly to blame for a decline in discourse, but the real danger of platforms lies in how they might rewrite users’ ideas of what it is to be human. Performativity’s association with the internet, and relationality’s with “real life,” in fact informs Smith’s perspective on the public sphere in the internet age

⁹ Ibid, 52.

¹⁰ Ibid, 59.

¹¹ Smith, “LIVE from the NYPL.”

throughout her work. Such a dichotomy is characteristic of Smith's writing – as she has noted herself, one of the recurrent “deep structures” of her work is that she is “always thinking about opposites.”¹² Her interventions into debates about the internet's effects on public discourse are no exception: they are structured around a series of oppositions between the performative and the relational, the digital and the literary, and information and experience. I do not use Smith's explications of her own work here simply to bow to authorial interpretation – rather, I do so because they represent a key part of her model of literary publicness. Indeed, whereas Eggers was reticent to make many public comments about *The Circle* upon its release, and whereas Franzen's glosses of his fiction can be misleading, Smith is a frequent and intelligent reader of her own work. Smith's consideration (and reconsideration) of her ideas in public contexts represents one way in which she models her literary publicness, which rests on a further opposition, between writing and reading. Smith's form of literary publicness promotes parity between the processes of writing and reading, and the ways in which she discusses her own work (in essays or interviews) are key to understanding how she models certain ways of thinking critically. But the balance Smith strikes between writing and reading is by no means reflected in the other oppositions that structure her thinking about the internet, in which one side tends to be promoted over the other.

Smith's contributions to debates about the public sphere in the internet age often stem from one key question: if we cannot be relational online, how are we to deliberate there? In *NW* (2012), for example, when the protagonists Leah and Natalie message each other online, their conversation is tellingly structured:

¹² Zadie Smith, “George Saunders,” *Interview*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/george-saunders>.

cant believe you getting hitched

whats happening to

me too

universe?

we iz old

we're not fucking old

at least u achieving something. I'm just slowly dying

this my 2nd year as pupil. May be pupil for rest of

dying of boredom

life¹³

The fractured nature of the characters' dialogue here points to a potential problem for fostering fruitful debate through online forms. Smith's portrayal represents several features of online discussion that Lincoln Dahlberg has suggested trouble the development of reflexivity (a vital process for the development of a rational-critical public sphere), wherein participants do not just broadcast their opinions, but critically examine their own "cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context."¹⁴ In Smith's terms, a public sphere devoid of reflexivity is not relational, but performative. Dahlberg has analysed the key traits of computer-mediated communication which can be seen as "retarding the operation of reflexivity," highlighting "bite-sized postings [...], the non-linear structure of conversations, and the rapidity of the exchanges" as potentially problematic, all of which Smith foregrounds in her portrayal.¹⁵

¹³ Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Penguin, 2012), 241.

¹⁴ Lincoln Dahlberg, "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7, no. 1 (2001).

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2001.tb00137.x/full>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In *Swing Time* (2016) too, Smith gestures towards online forums' frequent divergences from rational-critical relationality in favour of performativity. One character, Tracey, often posts messages in the kind of online chat rooms that had once been a source of hope for those tracking the emergence of a digital public sphere, but her tendency to "abus[e] anyone who did not agree with her arguments" can be read as an indictment of the state of online debate.¹⁶ Indeed, the description of Tracey's chat room as "a bizarre world, filled only with the echoing voices of people who had apparently already agreed with each other," posits online discussion as devoid of deliberation.¹⁷ Yet, once again, Smith is reluctant to absolve internet users of agency by directing her critique solely at the affordances of online methods of communication. The "dozens and dozens" of emails, "abusive even in their subject heading," that Tracey sends to the unnamed narrator's mother are framed as the discursive failure of a user, rather than the technology itself, by an earlier passage in the novel, when the narrator describes the entrance of digital communication into her life: "together we entered this new space that now opened up between people, a connection with no precise beginning or end, that was always potentially open."¹⁸ Smith suggests here that it is in fact possible to be relational online, but we must combine the right forms of communication with the right attitudes to achieve this goal. If real life is relational, as she has suggested, the solution might appear to lie in recreating the conditions of that real life in our online encounters. Yet Smith's optimism fades at this point in her argument, as she suggests that the opposite situation is increasingly occurring – the performativity of online life is replacing relationality even in the offline world.

¹⁶ Zadie Smith, *Swing Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), 440.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 93.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 446; 306.

In one of her most recent short stories, “Now More Than Ever” (2018), Smith draws attention to how the influence of the internet manifests in life offline. In particular, she highlights how digital technology’s ability to capture information, and as such our ability to access information about the past at any time, has paradoxically produced a cultural logic devoid of historical understanding. The narrator of the story describes her friend, Scout, as an “involved and active” internet user who “is on all platforms, and rarely becomes aware of anything much later than, say, the three-hundredth person.”¹⁹ The narrator is less savvy (“the earliest I’ve ever been aware of anything was that time I was the ten-million-two-hundred-and-sixth person to see that thing”), but is given up-to-date news by Scout.²⁰ The story’s thematic focus is on one such piece of news: “Now, according to Scout, the news was (is?) that the past is now also the present.”²¹ Rather than referring to the ways in which history has informed or led to present circumstances, or to how technology might give us access to information about the past, Scout means to highlight the importance of the personal trait of “consistency”:

You’ve got to reach far, far back, she explained, into the past [...], and you’ve got to make sure that when you reach back thusly you still understand everything back there in the exact manner in which you understand things presently. For if it should turn out that you don’t – that is, if, after some digging, someone finds evidence that present-you is fatally out of step with past-you – well, then, you’ll simply have to find some way to remake the connection, and you’ve got to make it seamless.²²

¹⁹ Zadie Smith, “Now More Than Ever,” *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/23/now-more-than-ever>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

The idea of uncompromised consistency offends a right that Smith has evoked across her career, not least in her own reconsideration of ideas: the right to change one's mind. Smith's story casts the notion of pure consistency between one's public life and one's inner life across time in an absurd light by having Scout explain it through the medium of a puppet show – it is in this way rendered a childish and unrealistic prospect. But just as important as the logic of Scout's claim itself is the fact that Scout has been aligned so strongly with a digital dispensation. The public sphere that Scout promotes has entirely foregone the relational in favour of the performative – the character's thinking represents that of the online milieu, applied to offline encounters without consideration or justification.

Smith explores the irrationality of such application further by mapping the online world onto a 'real life' site. The narrator describes a "new routine" that has taken hold in her apartment building: "We stand at our windows, all of us, from the second floor to the seventeenth, and hold aloft large signs with black arrows on them. The arrows point to other apartments."²³ Smith pillories the call-out culture endemic to social media here, as she imagines its manifestation in the offline world. In this way, Smith's story echoes another sentiment from "Generation Why?," where she suggests that "world makers, social network makers, ask one question first: How can I do it? [...] The other question, the ethical question, [comes] later: Why?" "Now More Than Ever" depicts a world Smith foresaw in her earlier essay, where societies "race ahead with technology and hope the ideas will look after themselves" – in her story, technological ability precedes and ultimately shapes morality.²⁴ This points to an important reason that Smith has her story narrated by a philosophy professor – Smith

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Smith, "Generation Why?," 52.

believes that the existence of the internet is directly relevant to some of that discipline's historically core questions. In another story, "The Lazy River" (2017), the again unnamed narrator poses two of these questions: "What is the solution to life? How can it be lived 'well'?"²⁵ The following paragraphs describe two young women who relentlessly photograph themselves for social media, hiding anything unsightly in their surroundings to present a palatable image. Yet Smith's narrator is not critical of their actions. She suggests that "it is easy to say they make being young look like hard work," but also asks, "wasn't it always hard work, even if the medium of its difficulty was different? They are making a project of their lives, a measurable project that can be liked or commented upon. What are we doing?"²⁶ If we leave companies such as Facebook to provide answers to questions about how to live 'well,' Smith suggests, we might eventually lose the power to complain about their solutions as they become more and more entrenched.

In her work, Smith challenges the internet's model of a 'good life,' not simply by pointing to the technology's failures to follow through on its potential for encouraging quality connections between people, but by contrasting these failures with visions of literature's own communicative capacities. As I have shown, one of Smith's key complaints is that the communal arena of the internet is not amenable to proper debate, as it replaces the public-minded ideal of relationality with that of performativity. The threads that run through her exploration of the topic of the internet – the actions of technology companies and users; the discursive forms, logics, and practices that proliferate online – all represent committed interrogations of the actors within, and the norms and ideals of, the public sphere in the internet age. Smith clearly

²⁵ Zadie Smith, "The Lazy River," *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/the-lazy-river>.

²⁶ Ibid.

has lots to say about the topic, and her contributions to the public sphere on the issue are important. But what makes her work most apposite here is another thread that runs through it, namely the idea that art and the aesthetic realm might somehow stand in opposition to the internet's denigrating effects, and subtend a more effective public sphere. To properly understand Smith's literary model of the public sphere, we must first understand the ways in which she creates a more general tension between the values associated with the digital and the literary in her early fiction. Her model of literary publicness emerges from and builds on this tension, and lays the groundwork for a more thorough interrogation of representation and the public sphere that Smith comes to later in her career.

Reduction Costs

Smith's first sustained reference to the internet is found in her second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), when she uses the technology as a detail of her protagonist Alex-Li's everyday life to comic effect:

One day he will take advantage of this incredible resource. He will find out about ancient Babylonia and gain a working knowledge of Estonian. He will learn how to make a bomb. One day. For now, he means to head straight for his corner of the world, an imaginary auction room [...] And he will in no way be tempted by that friendly, clumsy woman, falling in and out of her bikini, beckoning to him from the corner of the screen... Look, five minutes only.²⁷

Alex-Li knows that the internet could give him access to a world of knowledge (both useful and dangerous), but he defers this kind of engagement to an uncertain future. When Alex-Li watches the pornographic pop-up, Smith includes a knowing reference that highlights a key tenet of her engagement with the internet as a topic: "Wallala

²⁷ Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man* (London: Penguin, 2002), 153.

leialala, cried the woman.”²⁸ This cry is a quotation from Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, by way of the third section of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. By incorporating this reference, Smith gestures to the network of literary influence and allusion that much of the rest of *The Autograph Man* is interested in exploring. Literature has a memory, she seems to suggest; in contrast, when Alex-Li closes his web browser, “it was gone, as if it had never been.”²⁹ In this brief scene, Smith subtly creates one level of tension between the values associated with the digital and the literary, aligning the former with individual satisfaction and the present moment, and the latter with connection and history.

Smith builds on this alignment in her following novel, *On Beauty* (2005), a contemporary re-telling of E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End* (1910). Instead of beginning with “Helen’s letters to her sister,”³⁰ Smith brings Forster forward into the twenty-first century, and opens her novel with “Jerome’s e-mails to his father.”³¹ *On Beauty*’s reference evokes both the overlaps and differences between communicative forms, and points to the restive nature of communications technologies. In a slightly later allusion to Forster’s novel, Smith capitalises on the fact of these overlaps and differences to once again create a tension between the values associated with the digital and the literary. Towards the end of the novel’s first chapter, *On Beauty*’s Howard Belsey makes the same mistake as Mrs. Munt does in *Howard’s End*, travelling to advise his son against a marriage that has already been called off. The fact that this happens despite the technological advances that could have forewarned him shows a reluctance to embrace the increasing ubiquity of digital devices not just on the character’s part

²⁸ Ibid, 154.

²⁹ Ibid, 154.

³⁰ E. M. Forster, *Howard’s End* (1910; repr., London: Penguin, 2012), 1.

³¹ Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Penguin, 2005), 3.

but on Smith's too – a feature endemic to what Toby Litt has called the “pseudo-contemporary novel.”³² For Litt, this type of novel, “in which characters are, for some reason [...] technologically cut off,” is a way for novelists to “avoid the truly contemporary (which is hyperconnectivity).”³³ *On Beauty*'s transposition of Forster's plot, however, does not signify a lack of engagement with the contemporary world. Rather, it can be read as another reminder of the novel form's retention of a useful sense of history, and an active opposition to technology's obstinate inexorability, as Smith excuses her plotting through her own character's technophobia (there is “no way to contact him. Howard [...] had never owned a cellphone”).³⁴ Smith knows that her world is no longer that of Forster's fiction – computers and mobile phones do appear later in *On Beauty*, assimilated into the everyday without much apparent consideration (from characters and author alike) – but she nonetheless refuses to allow the affordances of technology to structure her characters' encounters with that world and compromise her *homage*.

Smith's early fiction thus considers how the internet and literature interact and inflect each other, and associates each with different values and ideals. Characteristically, Smith expands upon these ideas in an essay, and lays the groundwork for a reconsideration of the tension she has established. In “Generation Why?,” Smith unpacks the broader ramifications of allowing digital technology to prefigure representation:

When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendships. Language. Sensibility. [...] Software may reduce humans, but there are

³² Toby Litt, “The Reader and Technology,” *Granta*, April 10, 2012, <https://granta.com/The-Reader-and-Technology>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Smith, *On Beauty*, 26.

degrees. Fiction reduces humans, too, but bad fiction does it more than good fiction, and we have the option to read good fiction.³⁵

Smith here identifies reduction as an inevitability, a fundamental problem of any kind of representation. Yet if her conclusion is clear enough (good fiction does a better job of representing human beings than social media platforms like Facebook do), a question hangs over it: what constitutes the better reduction of good fiction? One answer to this question may lie in how Smith characterises Facebook's worse reduction, which she suggests happens "when a human being becomes a set of data." If the internet can be thought of as trying to reduce humans to a saleable dataset of the kind that Facebook produces, perhaps literature can be thought of as trying to reduce them to another kind of information – Smith's next novel *NW* will suggest that this is information related to *experience*.

The tension between the digital and the literary established in Smith's earlier fiction is rephrased in *NW* as a specific question about how different forms aim to depict human lives – a question which Smith also brings into dialogue with her thoughts on the public sphere in the internet age. In *NW*, Smith makes clear her anxieties about representation. Early in the novel, one character, Leah, ruminates on narrative's relation to reduction after a charged encounter with a neighbour: "But already the grandeur of experience threatens to flatten into the conventional, into anecdote [...] Nothing survives its telling."³⁶ An echo of Smith's argument in "Generation Why?" can be identified here: Facebook takes representation's inherent threat to flatten experience into anecdote and makes it a certainty, denying any real chance to portray individuality, difference, or 'unsanctioned' forms of community. In

³⁵ Smith, "Generation Why?," 58-60.

³⁶ Smith, *NW*, 14.

other words, its form is too rigid. The novel, however, is a broad church: as Smith points out in an essay on George Eliot, “what is not universal or timeless [...] is form. Forms, styles, structures – whatever word you prefer – should change like skirt lengths.”³⁷ What, then, does *NW*’s form tell us about Smith’s priorities for representation? The novel’s shifting perspectives, multiple voices, and fluid structures might seem to represent a fractured and uncertain world. But as Joanna Biggs points out, “the prose shards of *NW* manage to tell us something about the way we tidy our lives into stories” – and, I would suggest, by attending to the internet’s capacities for representation while doing so, the novel compares the kinds of stories that different technologies allow us to tell.³⁸

David James identifies the “note of artistic resignation or concession” in Leah’s suggestion that nothing survives its telling, but insists that it does not mean that “Smith has given up on what the novel as a form can capture and convey with its powers of ‘telling.’”³⁹ *NW*’s interest in *ways* of ‘telling’ is evidenced by its formal diversity, but the novel’s second section is particularly apposite here in how it connects this concern with Smith’s broader interest in the public sphere. The section follows one character, Felix, during the last twenty-four hours of his life. Smith has admitted in various interviews that the section is based on Gustave Flaubert’s novella *A Simple Heart* (1877), but Flaubert’s influence on Smith is one less of story than of ambition. “I wanted to see if I could make somebody,” she claims, “and then, I guess, kill them, and have you care about it. It’s quite a difficult thing to do – it’s not a real person, it’s just thirty pages. You really have to put some work in to make anybody feel that

³⁷ Zadie Smith, “Middlemarch and Everybody,” *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), 39-40.

³⁸ Joanna Biggs, “Whomph!,” *London Review of Books*, December 1, 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n23/joanna-biggs/whomph>.

³⁹ David James, “Wounded Realism”, *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 1 (2013): 208-9.

someone's been lost."⁴⁰ This explicit ambition to create and portray a full and convincing life informs Smith's model for the 'better reduction' of good fiction. In Felix's case, it stands in opposition not just to the internet, but to another potentially inadequate form of reduction in the public sphere, the newspaper report.

Smith claims that at the time of writing *NW*, it "was like a stabbing epidemic seemed to be going on in London," and this shaped how and why she decided to write Felix as she did:

It's really easy for people to dismiss a young black man dying in the street – [...] it's just going to be a little paragraph in the *Evening Standard*: 'Black youth stabbed on...' And that's your son, that's your brother, that's your uncle. [...] He had a life, he had a history, and now he's gone in five minutes, for nothing.⁴¹

For Smith, the novel is a space in which to insist upon the importance and reality of these lives and histories of others. This is an ethical stance as much as an aesthetic one; more precisely, it codes "aesthetic choices" as "ethical ones."⁴² Indeed, Smith's representation of Felix can be seen to manifest a particular link between aesthetics and ethics that she has identified elsewhere in her work. In the novel's final section, after Leah has found out about Felix's death, she considers the contingency of her more privileged circumstances: "I just don't understand why I have this life [...] You, me, all of us. Why that girl and not us. Why that poor bastard on Albert Road. It doesn't make sense to me."⁴³ In her essay "Man versus Corpse," Smith takes Leah's

⁴⁰ Zadie Smith, "Zadie Smith on Bad Girls & the Hard Midlife," interview by Synne Rifberg, *Louisiana Channel*, video, 26:14, 2013, <http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/zadie-smith-bad-girls-hard-midlife>.

⁴¹ Zadie Smith, "Guardian Books Podcast: Zadie Smith on *NW*," interview by John Mullan, *The Guardian Books Podcast*, July 26, 2013, www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2013/jul/26/zadie-smith-nw-london-podcast/.

⁴² Having said this, Smith characteristically reconsiders the legitimacy of this coding in a later essay, claiming that "in Britain we are always doing this: mistaking an aesthetic choice for an ethical one" (Zadie Smith, "The I Who Is Not Me," in *Feel Free: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), 334.)

⁴³ Smith, *NW*, 331.

incomprehension and applies a similar question to “the unequal distribution of corpses” in the world.⁴⁴ She expresses understanding but dismay at the “conceptual gap between the local and the distant corpse [that] is almost as large as the one that exists between the living and the dead,” and at first uses this to outline “a persistent problem for artists: How can I insist upon the reality of death, for others, and for myself?”⁴⁵ She goes on to ask whether “the premature corpsification of others [would] concern us more if we were mindful of what it is to be a living human”; importantly, for her this is “the point where aesthetics sidles up to politics.”⁴⁶ Smith’s argument places exposure to a multiplicity of stories at its heart, while suggesting that the internet lets us down in this regard (or, rather, our use of it does): “it’s claimed that Americans viewed twelve times as many Web pages about Miley Cyrus as about the gas attack in Syria.”⁴⁷ The ambitions that Smith lays out in “Man vs Corpse” are clearly already present in *NW*. The depiction of Felix’s lived experience functions as Smith’s attempt to make readers mindful of what it is to be a living human, with the direct hope that they will care more about the “premature corpsification” of young black men that they might otherwise only read about in short newspaper notices.

Reading Smith’s essays can elucidate her aim to make readers believe in Felix, “and then feel sad that he was gone,” in another way, too.⁴⁸ In “Man vs. Corpse,” Smith ruminates on the mourning process, and how “insist[ing] upon the *reality* of a once-living person” ensures that they are “never reduced to matter alone”; in “Generation Why?,” she wonders whether the online world instead insists upon an equivalent *unreality*.⁴⁹ She outlines how she has “noticed – and been ashamed of noticing – that

⁴⁴ Zadie Smith, “Man versus Corpse,” in *Feel Free: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), 371.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁴⁸ Smith, “Guardian Books Podcast.”

⁴⁹ Smith, “Man vs. Corpse,” 370; emphasis mine.

when a teenager is murdered, at least in Britain, her Facebook wall will often fill with messages that seem to not quite comprehend the gravity of what has occurred.”⁵⁰ Smith goes on to consider whether the undeveloped tone of the messages is down to “poor education,” but admits to having “a darker, more frightening thought. Do they genuinely believe, because the girl’s wall is still up, that she is still, in some sense, alive? What’s the difference, after all, if all your contact was virtual?”⁵¹ The supposedly communicative interactions of online life are framed here as no better than the newspaper articles that populate the public sphere and reduce the lives of young men like Felix to facts about their deaths. The relationality of real life is absent from these interactions, but Smith looks to counter this in *NW*. She does this not only by depicting Felix’s relation to other characters in a full and convincing way, however, but also by highlighting how literature might better depict how readers relate to the world around them.

All Modern Cons

As I have suggested, in *NW* Smith uses the novel form to draw attention to the question of how different technologies aim to represent (and, consequently, reduce) a life. Smith poses a dichotomy in answer to this question: representations of lived experience are contrasted with rigidly categorised, instrumental information; the former the substance of literature, the latter the mainstay of the internet. Chapters nine and ten of *NW*’s first section provide the most overt examples of this dichotomy, as Smith directly contrasts the internet and literature’s abilities to represent characters’ experiences of London. Chapter nine consists of a list of “suggested routes” and

⁵⁰ Smith, “Generation Why?,” 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

directions to take Leah “From A to B,” laid out as one would be given them by an online routefinder such as Google Maps:

A5	47 mins
2.4 miles	
A5 and Salisbury Rd	50 mins
2.5 miles	
A404/Harrow Rd	58 mins
2.8 miles. ⁵²	

At the bottom of the route plan, readers are told that they “may find that construction projects, traffic, weather, or other events may cause conditions to differ from the map results.”⁵³ This is a reminder of the breach between representation and the physical world that gestures towards what chapter ten immediately goes on to demonstrate further – literature is characteristically more interested in portraying experience than stripping events down to efficient information, and, by extension, does a better job of representing a human life. Chapter ten, introduced as “From A to B redux”, outlines the experience of Leah’s journey by emphasising sensory details, from the olfactory (“sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes”) to the auditory (“I give you good price, good price [...] Boomboxes just because [...] Birdsong!”). Stories emerge from the smallest details of what Leah sees (“Lone Italian, loafers, lost, looking for Mayfair”), and she is connected to memory by visual experience (“Here is the school where they stabbed the headmaster”). She is surrounded by examples of London’s rich and varied cultural past in the buildings she passes (“Tudor, Modernist, post-war, pre-war, stone pineapples, stone lions, stone eagles”), and this emphasises

⁵² Smith, *NW*, 38.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 38.

the pluralistic make-up of contemporary London too (“Polish paper, Turkish paper, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, News of the World”).⁵⁴

These two sections may seem to propose an unfair comparison – a novel is not, after all, the same thing as a map, nor would we expect (or desire) a routefinder to include irrelevant information about affects in its results. Yet Smith’s comparison aims to draw attention to the broader ramifications of privileging a data-driven and digital *way of telling* over a literary one. The acknowledgements in Smith’s *Swing Time* can be helpful in clarifying this, as they contain “a note on geography: North London, in these pages, is a state of mind. Some streets may not appear as they do in Google Maps.”⁵⁵ Given that all of Smith’s novels are set, at least in part, in North London, this note could be taken as a retrospective comment on geography applicable to each of her books, and the reference to Google Maps is telling of a particular notion. Smith does not concede that that the streets in *Swing Time* may not appear as they do *in the world*, as for her their experiential texture in the novel provides a less reductive representation than the more utilitarian mode of information privileged online.

The divide between online information and depictions of human experience in *NW* does not only manifest in relation to the city. One of Smith’s most enduring themes is time (“the idea of what does it really feel to be in time, to exist in it,” as she puts it in one interview), and *NW* represents the first major effort in Smith’s fiction to contend with how digital technologies change how we experience it.⁵⁶ When Leah wants to use the computer she shares with her husband, he shouts back “five minutes!” – the fact that “he says it irritably whether thirty have gone by or a hundred or two hundred”

⁵⁴ Ibid, 39-40.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Swing Time*, 455.

⁵⁶ Zadie Smith, “Zadie Smith [English Novelist, Born 1975] Talks With Ian McEwan [English Novelist, Born 1948],” *The Believer*, August 2005, <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200508/>.

gestures towards the inexorability of digital culture, how it is always extending itself, headlong into the future.⁵⁷ When *NW*'s internet users are not demanding five more minutes, they are expecting something to be done in less time than it currently takes, wanting the future to appear quicker (“though incredibly fast, her phone was still too slow”).⁵⁸ Smith mostly foregrounds the links between time and technology, however, in how she writes about memory.

In one scene, whilst on the Underground, Natalie believes that she has misremembered a quotation from an interview, and decides that “once she got within network she would check the year and whether or not that was the correct wording.”⁵⁹ She immediately doubts this impulse, however, conceding that “perhaps the way she had remembered it was the thing that was important” – in other words, that her *experience* of remembering was more important than the *information* being remembered.⁶⁰ Smith endorses this attitude further when she directly follows Natalie’s revelation by describing two processes that privilege visceral experience over information-gathering. Readers are told that “in her tube seat, Natalie Blake moved her pelvis very subtly back and forth,” a clear allusion to Natalie’s discovery as a teenager that “a vaginal orgasm can be provoked by [...] simply moving one’s pelvis forward and backwards in a small motion while thinking about something interesting.”⁶¹ The “interesting” thing that Natalie is thinking about in her tube seat is a branch of an apple tree, “heavy with blossom,” that she had broken off and taken with her on her way to the tube station, having been “surprised by [its] beauty.”⁶² “Beauty,” readers are told, “created a special awareness” in Natalie, which causes her

⁵⁷ Smith, *NW*, 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 255.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 253.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 253.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 253;190.

⁶² *Ibid*, 253.

to consider “the difference between a moment and an instant.”⁶³ The next numbered section of the chapter consists of a quotation from Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, a description of the “peculiar character” of a moment, which “is decisive, and filled with the eternal.”⁶⁴ Given that Natalie’s memory of this description is triggered by her recognition of the blossom’s beauty, we can identify that aesthetic experience as a decisive and eternal moment for her. The heading of this section, by contrast, is a web address for a google search that would ‘instantly’ help her find “the philosophical significance of the distinction” she hopes to make.⁶⁵ One implication here is that the instantaneous nature of online life is devoid of that which makes a moment special. Moreover, by highlighting Natalie’s experiences of memory, desire, and beauty in such close proximity to each other, Smith seems to seek to elicit from her readers a ‘special awareness’ of how experience is represented by different forms. By contrasting the literary and the digital, Smith portrays the novel as more temperamentally, formally, and historically suited to documenting and enquiring into experience than online media is. Indeed, we can identify this attention to experience as a particularly *literary* way of telling, and connect this back to Smith’s vision of literary publicness, by situating her work in relation to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

Drawing on the modernist impulse to conduct narrative “through the moment-by-moment experience – sensory, visceral, and mental – of the main character or characters,” Leah’s traversal of the city in *NW* echoes what Robert Alter calls “the experiential realism of the novel as a searching response to the felt new reality of the

⁶³ Ibid, 253.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 254.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 253.

European city.”⁶⁶ The sensorial description of Leah’s walk is immediately reminiscent of Clarissa Dalloway’s perambulatory pondering at the beginning of Woolf’s novel:

In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.⁶⁷

For Alberto Fernández Carbajal, Natalie and Nathan’s walk across London later in the novel also recalls Woolf’s novel, and operates as a “simultaneous reflection and refraction of Clarissa Dalloway.”⁶⁸ Whereas Clarissa’s “epiphany about the self in the city comes to fruition in [...] a place that best mirrors her own socioeconomic background,” Natalie’s ambivalent relationship with class troubles such a realisation.⁶⁹ Rather, her conversation with Nathan, which focusses on “his impression that she has risen far above him socially and that she no longer understands his plight,”⁷⁰ is mirrored in the ever-changing city that the two characters traverse: “the world of council flats lay far behind them, at the bottom of the hill. Victorian houses began to appear, only a few at first, then multiplying.”⁷¹

As Alter notes, this kind of “fragmentation [...] is an essential element in the experience of the modern metropolis.”⁷² In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf attempts to “imagine a kind of unity in the heterogeneity or at least a sort of unity imposed by the perceiving consciousness that enables it to exult in the heterogeneity instead of being disoriented

⁶⁶ Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), x-xi.

⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; repr., London: Vintage, 2004), 2.

⁶⁸ Alberto Fernández Carbajal, “On Being Queer and Postcolonial: Reading Zadie Smith’s *NW* Through Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 1 (2016): 84.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷¹ Smith, *NW*, 273.

⁷² Alter, *Imagined Cities*, 111.

by it.”⁷³ Smith imagines a similar unity at the end of Leah’s walk in *NW*’s first section. Further to noticing the categories that separate people, by experiencing the physical world in its rich detail Leah can identify connections between certain pockets of the diverse population of this area: “Everybody loves fags [...] Everybody believes in destiny [...] Everybody loves fried chicken [...] Everybody loves sandals [...] Everybody loves the Grand National.”⁷⁴ That each of these declarations is followed by a repetition of the word “Everybody” is significant, highlighting as it does the idea of a group, the communal, and the possibility of community. Indeed, Nick Hubble glosses Wendy Knepper’s reading of *NW* to suggest that such interpersonal connections, whether characters are conscious of them or not, structure the novel, revealing a “hidden set of networks and connections that extend beyond the city’s surface appearance to an otherwise submerged intersubjective London.”⁷⁵

Mrs Dalloway’s influence on Smith’s depiction of urban experience is made clear in how she structures *NW* around a network of diverse yet overlapping experiences of London, but taken alongside *NW*’s references to Flaubert, the novel’s engagement with Woolf can be read as part of a more general engagement on Smith’s part with the legacies of modernism. Whereas Franzen and Eggers look to foreground antecedent authors and novels to provide ready-made ways of understanding the contemporary public sphere’s problems, Smith looks to build on the insights of the past in a critical act of reconsideration. As David James and Urmila Seshagiri have argued, *NW* is one of a number of contemporary novels that could be said to “reassess and remobilize narratives of modernism,” in this case by employing “an aesthetics of

⁷³ Ibid, 111.

⁷⁴ Smith, *NW*, 39-40.

⁷⁵ Nick Hubble, “Common People: Class, Gender and Social Change in the London Fiction of Virginia Woolf, John Sommerfield and Zadie Smith,” in *London in Contemporary British Fiction: The City Beyond the City*, eds. Nick Hubble and Philip Tew (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 196.

discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority, and chronological play”; in particular, a “self-reflexive perspectivism” pervades the novel.⁷⁶ If, as James and Seshagiri suggest, *NW* joins a slate of recent fiction which “incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier cultural moment,” then it is in Smith’s engagement with perspectivism that this most interestingly occurs – not least because it extends beyond this one novel to her work more generally.⁷⁷ As alluded to, Smith’s perspectivism is self-reflexive – in her 2007 essay “Fail Better,” she draws attention to the contingent perspective from which she writes, outlining how “writers know that between the platonic ideal of the novel and the actual novel there is always the pesky self.”⁷⁸ In the essay, Smith challenges T.S. Eliot’s insistence that “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”⁷⁹ For Smith, this is an untenable description of writing, which in her view is always to some extent inflected by the personality responsible for producing it.

Smith’s perspectivist approach extends not only to writing, however, but to reading, and in such a way that it cannot be simply aligned with the modernist perspectivism of her evoked forebears. Summarising the eighteenth-century debates between ‘ancients’ and ‘moderns’ that characterised the nascent stages of aesthetic modernism, Art Berman points out that, “for the modernist, the event called art,” as experienced by readers or spectators, “is always fundamentally a personal event occurring in an individual mind, whereas for the classicist it is equally or more a communal or societal event.”⁸⁰ The way that Smith’s work “incorporates and adapts,

⁷⁶ David James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 89.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁸ Zadie Smith, “Fail Better,” *The Guardian*, January 13, 2017. This essay is no longer available on the Guardian’s website – it can be read instead at https://ineptwriter.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Fail-better-Zadie_Smith.pdf.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 9.

reactivates and complicates” the modernist version of perspectivism is through her attempts to reconcile these two ways of conceiving of our encounters with art.⁸¹ For her, the public sphere is the critical concept that can help most in this endeavour.

In the foreword to her second essay collection, *Feel Free*, Smith suggests that essays about one person’s affective experience have, by their very nature, not a leg to stand on. All they have is their freedom. And the reader is likewise unusually free, because I have absolutely nothing over her, no authority. She can reject my feelings at every point, she can say: ‘No, I have never felt that’ or ‘Dear Lord, the thought never crossed my mind!’⁸²

The imperative title of Smith’s collection is revealed here as a directive for both herself and her readers, a description of the free interpretation enacted at both ends of her creative process. For Smith, it is of the utmost importance that we recognise “that reading involves all the same liberties and exigencies as writing” – we can in fact understand this balance as the basis of her model of literary publicness.⁸³ Her 2017 essay “Getting In and Out,” provides an apposite statement of this model. Writing in opposition to a public call to have a painting in the Whitney Biennial destroyed, Smith suggests that

art is a traffic in symbols and images, it has never been politically or historically neutral [...]. Each individual example has to be *thought through*, and we have every right to include such considerations in our evaluations of art [...]. The solution remains as it has always been. Get out (of the gallery) or deeper in (to the argument). Write a screed against it. Critique the hell out of it. Tear it to shreds in your review or paint another painting in response.⁸⁴

⁸¹ James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 93.

⁸² Zadie Smith, “Foreword,” in *Feel Free: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), xi.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁸⁴ Zadie Smith, “Getting In and Out,” in *Feel Free: Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), 220-22.

Smith asserts her faith in the power of the public sphere in relation to art here, and in doing so combines her insistence upon individual perspective with a recognition of the importance of collaborative debate. Indeed, Smith presents the affordance to readers or spectators of the same rights as artists as the very thing which underwrites any important issue's consideration in a piece of art. Her literary publicness rests on a guaranteed parity between the processes of reading and writing, and she models this literary publicness by herself reading and rewriting modernist ideas of perspectivism. This is by no means the end of Smith's consideration, however – in her following novel, *Swing Time*, she revisits the notion of perspectivism, and more concretely connects it with her thinking about the public sphere.

Constructionist Sites

In “Generation Why?,” Smith imagines the possibly forthcoming effects of a change that Facebook introduced to their service in 2010, which allowed users to connect their accounts to other websites:

In this new, open Internet, we will take our real identities with us as we travel through the Internet. This concept seems to have some immediate Stoical advantages: no more faceless bile, no more inflammatory trolling: if your name and social network track you around the virtual world beyond Facebook, you'll have to restrain yourself and so will everyone else.⁸⁵

Although prescient in other ways, this part of Smith's essay has not aged well – her hopeful perspective seems naïve now, with anonymity, trolling, and tracking all coexisting in the continually fractious online world. In *Swing Time*, however, Smith

⁸⁵ Smith, “Generation Why?”, 54. Eggers imagines a similar situation in *The Circle*, when “TruYou,” an operating system that is tied to a user's real life identity, is introduced: “TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year. [...] Overnight, all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls, who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness” (Eggers, *The Circle*, 21-22).

reconsiders the salience of our online identities from a different viewpoint, one that is informed by the perspectivism of her previous novel. *Swing Time* complicates the idea of online anonymity by suggesting that Tracey is detectable online, even when operating under a pseudonym, by the very nature of the information that she divulges or the stories she tells. Tracey “wasn’t hard to find” in the comments sections of news websites, as

she always went at it full tilt, every time, no compromise, aggressive, full of conspiracy. She had many aliases. Some were quite subtle: tiny references to moments from our shared history, songs we’d liked, toys we’d had, or numeral re-combinations of the year we first met or our dates of birth. I noticed she liked to use the words ‘sordid’ and ‘shameful’, and the phrase ‘Where were their mothers?’ Whenever I saw that line, or a variation upon it, I knew it was her.⁸⁶

Just as the online world bleeds into the offline one in Smith’s recent stories, this passage points to how the facts of a person’s offline existence are not entirely mutable when mediated. As well as contemporary questions about how technology changes public discourse, this means that we should of course still be asking more traditional questions about the public sphere when considering its online manifestations. And as Dahlberg suggests, we should dismiss the utopian idea “that social hierarchies and power relations are levelled out by the ‘blindness’ of cyberspace to bodily identity” – rather, “identity becomes just as salient online as offline [... and] leads to the reassertion of authority and subsequently power differentials online.”⁸⁷ By gesturing to these power differentials that reassert themselves online in *Swing Time*, Smith asks a foundational question: what does *difference* mean for the public sphere?

⁸⁶ Smith, *Swing Time*, 440.

⁸⁷ Dahlberg, “Computer-Mediated Communication.”

From a Habermasian perspective, difference is irrelevant to the public sphere – it is something to be bracketed during discussion, and moved away from in the search for consensus. Yet Smith has no such interest in bracketing difference. As she put it in a recent interview,

it's correct to say that people's experiences absolutely matter and that they are completely various. [...] Our experiences are entirely different, and that is a revelation more important than [the idea] that we are all the same on the inside. [...] That's not true at all. In a million ways we're all incredibly different on the inside.⁸⁸

Smith recognises that this difference extends further than just what opinions people hold – it might also have an impact on how those opinions are expressed. In order to formulate a vision of the public sphere that makes room for difference, Smith considers two key questions: firstly, what forms of contribution should be allowed in the public sphere, and secondly, who should be able to contribute to debates about particular issues. In both cases, Smith looks to literature for a model of success.

Late in *Swing Time*, the novel's unnamed narrator describes the entrance of digital communication into her life: "the first email I received came from my mother. She sent it from a computer lab in the basement of University College London, where she had just taken part in a public debate, and I received it on a computer in my own college library."⁸⁹ The internet is foregrounded here as a tool for communication, access to which is linked to educational institutions. Furthermore, by mentioning a public debate, Smith draws attention to different discursive spaces, and puts readers in mind of how the online world might redraw the boundaries of public and private. By

⁸⁸ Zadie Smith, "Novelists Édouard Louis and Zadie Smith on Writing in a Distracting Political Present," interview by Nathan Taylor Pemberton, *Document*, April 12, 2018, <http://www.documentjournal.com/2018/04/novelists-edouard-louis-and-zadie-smith-on-writing-in-a-distracting-political-present>.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Swing Time*, 306.

highlighting these details, Smith gestures to how education inflects communication and debate throughout the rest of the novel. The divergent educations and experiences of *Swing Time*'s narrator and Tracey are central to the novel, in which Smith is keen to foreground (as she did in *NW*) how "class [...] shapes your reality," and how education is a primary site of this difference.⁹⁰ Implicit within the divergent lives of Tracey and *Swing Time*'s narrator is the recognition that rational-critical conceptions of the public sphere can privilege certain kinds of education. "The issue here is not the inability of some groups to provide rational arguments for their beliefs," as Ferree et al. clarify, "but that narrative and other preferred modes may be unfairly devalued."⁹¹ In *Swing Time*, Smith creates a narrator who refuses to assent to a gold standard of participation in public life, and who appears sympathetic to a constructionist approach to interaction in the public sphere, one which evinces "a strong norm of popular inclusion, which in turn serves the goals of empowerment of the marginalized and recognition of differences."⁹²

It is this recognition of differences that Smith emphasises the need for – a part of her contribution to debates which in fact dovetails with how her work is considered in the public sphere. Popular accounts of Smith's literary success are often taken as "proof, among all society's sadness and badness, that education works," as one of her interviewers has suggested.⁹³ Smith is usually quick to point out, however, that this depends on "if it can be accessed" – as she sees it, "plenty of people from my school could have got to Cambridge, it's just that they didn't know it existed."⁹⁴ That said,

⁹⁰ Smith, "Guardian Books Podcast."

⁹¹ Myra Marx Ferree, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht. "Four Models of the Public Sphere in Modern Democracies," *Theory and Society* 31, no. 3 (2002): 311.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 315.

⁹³ Kirsty Young, "Desert Island Discs," *BBC Radio 4*, radio broadcast, September 22, 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03bg4v7>.

⁹⁴ Zadie Smith, "Lunch with the FT: Novelist Zadie Smith," interview by Jan Dalley, *Financial Times*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/>.

Smith's fiction has increasingly thematised what she acknowledges as the problematic assumption at the heart of the idea of social mobility: "there's something slightly obscene about the idea of 'You!,' like it's a talent show [...] You alone will be picked out of your class and shown as an example, like a kind of performing monkey – 'look what can happen!'"⁹⁵ In an interview for *The Penguin Podcast*, Smith talks about the "deal offered to kids" of her generation who did well in their exams and dedicated themselves to learning about British culture, with the attendant promise that they could "go all the way."⁹⁶ Such an idea, Smith claims, while not false, comes with caveats, questions at the forefront of her mind while she was writing *Swing Time*: "What do you have to do to yourself in order to meet those requirements? What do you have to ignore? What do you have to pretend isn't in you? And who do you have to leave behind?"⁹⁷

Attendant to Smith's insistence on recognising difference is an attempt to find a way for citizens to participate in public life without having to leave behind any part of themselves. Smith does this primarily by foregrounding a constructionist perspective in the later, more fractious interactions between Tracey and *Swing Time*'s narrator. Constructionists "do not devalue deliberation and formal argument in discourse,"⁹⁸ and as such Tracey's anger and abusive tones are, quite rightly, not taken lightly by *Swing Time*'s narrator – she is "stunned by the rage."⁹⁹ Importantly, however, this anger does not supersede the rest of Tracey's story, which comprises "a surreal mix of personal vendetta, painful memory, astute political protest and a local resident's complaints," and understandably employs an affective register to outline a

⁹⁵ Smith, "Guardian Books Podcast."

⁹⁶ Zadie Smith, "The Penguin Podcast," interview by David Baddiel, *Penguin*, podcast audio, November 30, 2016, <https://www.acast.com/thepenguinpodcast/zadiesmithwithdavidbaddiel>.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Ferree et al., "Four Models," 311.

⁹⁹ Smith, *Swing Time*, 398.

“catalogue of pain: child-support woes, rent arrears, skirmishes with social workers.”¹⁰⁰ For Smith, like most constructionists, narrative “reveals experiences based on social locations that cannot be shared fully by those who are differently situated.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, when the narrator goes to confront Tracey about her abusive emails and online posts, she cannot ignore their shared personal history and divergent present circumstances, and finds herself unable to disagree with Tracey’s claim that “there can’t be no understanding between you and me any more! You’re part of a different system now.”¹⁰²

But Smith herself seems unable to fully accept Tracey’s pronouncement about an inevitable lack of understanding, and explores the idea that the existence of ‘different systems’ means that the public sphere must make room for different systems of expression. To be truly accepting of difference, the public sphere needs to incorporate norms and ideals that go beyond the narrow constraints of a Habermasian model. The central means of expression in the constructionist view, as mentioned above, is narrative. One of the most interesting manifestations of this idea in Smith’s work is her interest in conspiracy theories. At one point, while *Swing Time*’s narrator is living in The Gambia to oversee the development of a school that her popstar boss, Aimee, is trying to set up, she meets “a lively young woman called Esther,” who is amazed that Aimee “knows Jay-Z, she knows Rihanna and Beyoncé.”¹⁰³ When the narrator confirms that Aimee also “knows Michael Jackson,” Esther asks: “Do you think she is Illuminati, too? Or she just is acquaintances with Illuminati?”¹⁰⁴ When challenged on the veracity of claims she has read online about the Illuminati, Esther

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 399; 446.

¹⁰¹ Ferree et al., “Four Models,” 313.

¹⁰² Smith, *Swing Time*, 405-6.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 274.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 274.

declares that “here for us it is real, because there is a lot of power there for sure.”¹⁰⁵ Smith points to the value of translating such perspectives when she links Esther’s conspiracy theory with others in the novel. Tracey looks to the internet to find “truth,” posting in a chat room “under the alias Truthteller_Legon,” first about grand conspiracies that Smith models on David Icke’s ‘reptoid hypothesis,’ and later about “a secret eighteenth-century Bavarian sect [...] at work in the world today.”¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, however, the novel’s narrator suggests that Tracey’s perspectives should not be immediately discounted. Indeed,

if you could put aside their insane first premise, [Tracey’s posts were] striking in their detail and perverse erudition, linking many diverse historical periods and political ideas and facts [...] which, even in its comic wrongness, required a certain depth of study and persistent attention.¹⁰⁷

The narrator is able to “*read* between the lines” to find the valid message at the heart of this ridiculous story – one that also applies to how she explicates Esther’s belief in the existence of the Illuminati: “Wasn’t it all a way of explaining power, in the end? The power that certainly exists in the world? Which few hold and most never get near? A power my old friend must have felt, at that point in her life, she utterly lacked?”¹⁰⁸ Even though conspiracy theories are not accounts of personal experience in the way that constructionist theories might expect contributions to the public sphere to be, the fact that Smith frames these stories as valid attempts to articulate structural political problems, and that she suggests *reading* as the process in which this validity can be unpacked, proposes narrative as a central tenet of Smith’s model of literary publicness. Indeed, it is important that Smith has her narrator unpack these perspectives – if Smith

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 274.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 92; 399.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 94.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 94; emphasis mine.

suggests that the public sphere might benefit from being more literary in character, this is not just because she believes that any narrative should be taken as a permissible and helpful contribution. Rather, she expects all actors within the public sphere to think of themselves as simultaneously writers and readers, and to bring a critical mind to their encounters with other perspectives. As Burbules and Rice importantly point out, this kind of approach “does not require embracing the other standpoint or letting it supersede our own, but it does stress the value of incorporating that perspective into a more complex and multifaceted framework of understanding.”¹⁰⁹ Smith’s model of literary publicness attempts to build such a multifaceted framework, and guarantee that all perspectives are fairly considered regardless of how unconventional their forms appear.

In one interview, Smith links her perspectivist approach with ideas about argumentation, claiming that

we’re living in an age where people feel that pathos is all you need when you make an argument – as in, ‘I feel it, and so it is true.’ However, an argument is not just emotion. You can feel something with incredible strength, but that’s not enough. It’s not true just because I feel it to be true. That world is chaos in my opinion.¹¹⁰

In the face of this chaos, Smith looks back to her own education for an alternative: “I was educated in things like Aristotle’s idea of rhetoric [...]. When you make an argument, you make it through Ethos, Pathos and Logos — Ethos appeals to ethics, Pathos appeals to emotion and Logos appeals to logic.”¹¹¹ The fact that Smith summarises Aristotelian ethos here as an ethical appeal, rather than as “a person’s or

¹⁰⁹ Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, “Dialogue across Difference: Continuing the Conversation,” *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (1991): 405.

¹¹⁰ Zadie Smith, “An Interview with Zadie Smith,” interview by Lisa Sproull, *Cult MTL*, October 26, 2017, <http://www.cultmontreal.com/2017/10/zadie-smith-interview/>.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

community's character or characterizing spirit, tone, or attitude" as Liesbeth Korthals Altes summarises it, shores up the links that I have already shown Smith makes between a writer's aesthetic contributions and their ethical positions.¹¹² Her comment also suggests a more accurate way of describing the vision of the public sphere that emerges in *Swing Time*: an Aristotelian constructionism, a form of public discourse that makes room for narrative, ethical and emotional appeals, but also maintains the logical elements of a rational-critical public sphere. As Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos has claimed, "Aristotle's fusion of reason, emotion, and performance also provides us with a unique alternative to both agonistic and rational/deliberative conceptions of the public sphere"; we can identify this alternative in the forms of the public sphere that Smith portrays.¹¹³

If Smith believes that her perspectivism is a curative for contemporary modes of argumentation, it is worth stressing that this is because, for her, literature's value to the public sphere lies as much in how it constitutes a model for interactions as in the contributions it can make to debates. Indeed, she admits that she is "less interested in convincing people of an argument than in modelling a style of thinking."¹¹⁴ Her model of literary publicness is founded on the notion of parity between the processes of writing and reading, but to achieve this equality both writer and reader must recognise their own perspectives as contingent. For Smith, this recognition of difference can embed relationality into the public sphere: the "extension away from yourself, into other people, is maybe what fiction could model as a kind of citizenship behaviour,"

¹¹² Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), vii.

¹¹³ Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion: Toward an Aristotelian Conception of the Public Sphere," *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 3 (1999): 744.

¹¹⁴ Zadie Smith, "Zadie Smith: 'I have a very messy and chaotic mind,'" *The Guardian*, January 21, 2018, www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/21/zadie-smith-you-ask-the-questions-self-doubt.

in an attempt to build a “coalition across difference.”¹¹⁵ Finding the most inclusive way to approach different elements of identity in the public sphere is key to building this coalition – the overall aim, for Smith, is “to create a citizen [...] who thinks as a writer does about identity.”¹¹⁶ Yet for all that Smith’s contributions look to model a specific way of thinking about identity, her work is not always considered in the public sphere in this way. Rather, as I will now show, a reductive focus on the facts of Smith’s individual identity can serve to obscure some of the nuances of her form of literary publicness.

Writers’ Rights

In *Swing Time*, when the narrator describes going online after missing one of Aimee’s gigs, readers are put in mind once more of how different forms represent experience:

Search Aimee, search venue, search Brooklyn dance troupe, image search, AP wire search, blog search. At first simply out of a sense of guilt, but soon enough with the realization that I could reconstruct – 140 characters at a time, image by image, blog post by blog post – the experience of having been there, until, by one a.m., nobody could have been there more than me.¹¹⁷

This scene, more than it initially appears, reaffirms *NW*’s position on information and experience. As Mark McGurl points out in an article on fiction and Amazon.com, “to speak of, say, ‘fiction in the age of the Internet,’ however illuminating the discussion, would risk missing the extent to which literary experience remains even now unassimilated to the phenomenology of web browsing, from which it is quite

¹¹⁵ Zadie Smith, “A conversation between authors Zadie Smith, Yaa Gyasi, and Courtney Martin,” interview by Courtney Martin, *YouTube*, video, 22:54, posted by “Obama Foundation,” November 19, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4g-_hir2AE.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Smith, *Swing Time*, 369.

distinct.”¹¹⁸ For Smith, this is precisely the point – just as she encourages readers to be mindful of different ways of representing experience, here she foregrounds the phenomenological differences between experiences of those representations. Despite the narrator’s claim that “nobody could have been there more than me,” the fact remains that she has been sitting in bed “aimless[ly] surfing” the internet for hours.¹¹⁹

The narrator’s online experience is extended when she begins to observe “the debates as they form and coalesce” as to whether the costumes Aimee and her dancers were wearing (they were “dressed up to resemble Asante nobles”), and the dances they performed, could be considered examples of cultural appropriation.¹²⁰ When the narrator challenges Aimee on this, Aimee responds by claiming that “the aim of art is love,” a belief Smith uses to explain her own approach to alterity in her fiction:¹²¹

Aimee, the pop star, says something that I don’t disagree with, which is that art involves an act of love, and of imitation. I would maybe use the word “voyeurism”. I think of myself explicitly as a voyeur, somebody who wants to be inside other people’s lives. To write *On Beauty*, I wanted to know: what’s it like to be a middle-aged, white male academic? Or in *The Autograph Man*, what’s it like to be a young, Chinese-Jewish guy who collects autographs? [...] The identity facts of your life are so profoundly contingent – where your parents happened to be on the day you were born – that I can only take identity seriously as an act of commitment and love.¹²²

Even though Aimee’s performance itself could be considered culturally and politically problematic, the fact that Smith aligns herself with her character’s aim is telling. Time and again, Smith claims the right to a creative freedom to write about whatever, or

¹¹⁸ Mark McGurl, “Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2016): 452.

¹¹⁹ Smith, *Swing Time*, 369.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹²² Zadie Smith, “‘Trump is a Great Opportunity For Us Writers’: Zadie Smith On Fighting Back,” interview by Tom Gatti, *New Statesman*, December 2, 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/>.

whoever, she wants to – as long as it is done respectfully, she sees no problem with the process. Indeed, despite her belief that writing is always an expression of an author’s personality or perspective, Smith also suggests that aesthetic freedom to some extent means refusing the limits that being a self places on one’s imagination. As she puts it in one interview, “if I had to rely on my experience, as it is at the moment [...] if I had to believe that this was the only scope of my existence, the only thing available to me as subject or as idea, I think I would go mad.”¹²³

Smith’s approach, of course, isn’t without its detractors – and, characteristically, Smith herself is one of them. In “Getting In and Out,” her contribution to the debate about white artist Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till, *Open Casket*, Smith points out that when artworks like Schutz’s are “facilely celebrated as proof of the autonomy of art,” this is “more often than not hoary old white privilege dressed up as aesthetic theory.”¹²⁴ Furthermore, it is important not to conceive of this freedom to write about, or from the perspective of, *other* identities as a refusal or denial of any part of one’s *own* identity – again, that way lies a false neutrality: the insidious idea, as she puts it in one interview, “that blackness, or any other kind of identity apart from white identity [...] is a narrowing of vision.”¹²⁵ In the same interview, when asked about the impulse to restrict the treatment of certain subjects to those with direct experience of them, however, Smith’s ambivalence is clear: “I don’t think it’s the worst crime [...] but I don’t think it’s ideal.”¹²⁶ Smith’s ambivalence about what she calls “an artist’s right to a particular subject” actually structures “Getting In and Out,” manifesting in the fact that much of the essay’s

¹²³ Smith, “Novelists Édouard Louis and Zadie Smith.”

¹²⁴ Smith, “Getting In and Out,” 220.

¹²⁵ Smith, “Novelists Édouard Louis and Zadie Smith.”

¹²⁶ Ibid.

treatment of the issue comprises questions rather than positions.¹²⁷ Her questions are mainly phrased as responses to a letter sent to the curators of the Whitney Biennial by artist Hannah Black, who called for the destruction of Schutz's painting. Smith focusses in particular on one part of the letter, Black's argument that "the subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights."¹²⁸ In the interview I cited earlier, Smith suggests that thinking of the issue of an artist's right to a particular subject in terms of *individual* rights misses the point: "the question of duties is more important than the question of individual rights because individual rights echo a kind of capitalist dogma [...]: What's accrued to me? What can I get? What am I owed? That, I find, is a depressing political place."¹²⁹ Rather, if Smith wants all subjects to be available to all minds, it is because there exist "collective duties" in need of renewal, and "structural inequalities" that require collective attention.¹³⁰ An etic perspective (that from outside a particular social group) should never override an emic one (from within that group) outright, but Smith believes that the former should not be dismissed out of hand, either – rather, "each individual example has to be *thought through*."¹³¹

Smith hopes that her own work will be given this opportunity too. Indeed, her changing style itself reflects a process of thinking through the various aesthetic and ethical ramifications of writing in particular ways. Throughout Smith's career, her work has been consistently considered in the public sphere through a particular lens, as critics have debated her use of voice. Upon *White Teeth*'s publication, James Wood criticised Smith's dominant authorial presence, claiming that she "not only speaks over

¹²⁷ Smith, "Getting In and Out," 218.

¹²⁸ Hannah Black, qtd. in Smith, "Getting In and Out," 218.

¹²⁹ Smith, "Novelists Édouard Louis and Zadie Smith."

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Smith, "Getting In and Out," 220.

her character, she reduces him, obliterates him.”¹³² But Dorothy J. Hale believes that, in *On Beauty*, Smith’s authorial intrusions work to overturn “both modernist pieties about the value of authorial impersonality and postmodernist pieties about the impersonal sources of all subjective agency.”¹³³ In *NW*, David James argues, the authorial voice becomes more ambivalent, so much so that he is tempted to ask whether readers are “witnessing a new kind of ethical maneuver, one that [...] highlights how the deliberate quelling of authorial evaluation might itself be ethically motivated.”¹³⁴ Smith’s novella *The Embassy of Cambodia*’s (2013) first-person plural voice gestures towards how “the political narrative of collective action is something we experience in first-person plural” but Kaya Genç proposes that, by revealing the narrator to in fact be just one character “speaking on behalf of her community,” Smith also asks the implicit question of whether a writer has “the right to do such a thing.”¹³⁵ For Smith herself, no stranger to considering her own work in the public sphere, *Swing Time*’s narrator represents an “open ‘I,’” a figure who can “exist in relation to other people,” but still presents an uncertainty about what her own character might “consist of.”¹³⁶

Throughout the evolution of Smith’s style, we see her grappling with various issues of representation and voice, but all of them identify the defining feature of Smith’s identity in her fiction as, unsurprisingly, her identity as a writer and reader. References to literature abound in her novels, as well as references to her own work:

¹³² James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman,” *New Republic*, July 24, 2000, <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>.

¹³³ Dorothy J. Hale, “On Beauty as Beautiful?: The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith,” *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (2012): 820.

¹³⁴ James, “Wounded Realism,” 210.

¹³⁵ Kaya Genç, “The Embassy of Gossip: Zadie Smith’s First-Person Plural,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 1, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/embassy-gossip-zadie-smiths-first-person-plural/>.

¹³⁶ Smith, “The Penguin Podcast.”

her cameo as “a feckless novelist on a visiting fellowship” in *On Beauty*¹³⁷; in *NW*, Natalie’s mother’s mention of *White Teeth*’s “Mrs. Iqbal”¹³⁸; and *Swing Time*’s reference to “a buck-toothed girl called Irie,” also from Smith’s first novel.¹³⁹ This identity, however, is firmly grounded in her fictional worlds and the question of how best to represent them, and Smith seems loath to let her extraliterary persona inflect her writing too much. This concern animates Smith’s anxiety about the effects of the internet on writers. If, early in her career, Smith complained that English literary culture was “driven by the celebrity mania that this whole country is sunk in,”¹⁴⁰ then the rapid rise of the internet has only made things more performative:

I think the main effect [the internet] has had on writers [...] is it depresses the hell out of you because the first thing people do, obviously, is Google themselves. Everybody does it. And if you’re a writer like me, who is very attracted to negative opinions of yourself – it was taking up my day, you know?¹⁴¹

For *Swing Time*’s narrator, the internet offers an abundance of “meanings and subtexts [...] the insults and the jokes, the gossip and the rumour, the memes [...] and all the many varieties of critique given free rein”; what this ephemeral, “mighty act of collation” is missing, of course, is any act of commitment and love.¹⁴² To be relational instead of performative, to attempt the act of love Smith strives for in representation, involves, she seems to claim, to some extent forgoing the rigid identity that fame has thrust upon her. Since the beginning of her career, Smith has spoken about her discomfort with being “expected to be more than a novelist – a spokesperson for race,

¹³⁷ Smith, *On Beauty*, 324.

¹³⁸ Smith, *NW*, 247.

¹³⁹ Smith, *Swing Time*, 34.

¹⁴⁰ David Steven, “Zadie Smith: Where Did It All Go Wrong?,” *Bookslut*, March, 2004, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2004_03_001702.php.

¹⁴¹ Zadie Smith, “Episode 4: Work,” interview by Lena Dunham, *Women of the Hour*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.acast.com/womenofthehour/episode-4-work>.

¹⁴² Smith, *Swing Time*, 369.

youth, women”: “I was expected to be some expert on multicultural affairs, as if multiculturalism is a genre of fiction or something, whereas it's just a fact of life – like there are people of different races on the planet.”¹⁴³ The point for Smith is not to elide any issues related to race, age, gender, or class – rather, her fiction allows her to explore these ideas in ways that don't centre solely on her individual identity as a celebrity figure, or force her to be a spokesperson for any one group, and instead allow for a multiplicity of responses.

We can in fact return to Facebook for a neat example of Smith's place within the public sphere. Smith's American publisher, Penguin Press, runs a Facebook page on the author's behalf, dedicated to marketing her work. One post on the individualised page advertises her second essay collection, *Feel Free*, with a quotation from Smith's essay “The I Who Is Not Me”: “For me fiction is a way of asking: what if things were other than they are? And a central component of that is to ask: what if I was different than I am? I have always found the practice of writing fiction far more an escape from self than an exploration of it.”¹⁴⁴ To the left of the quotation is a picture of the book's cover, emblazoned with her name; on the right, Facebook's commenting interface, a picture of Smith, and a reminder that the new collection is forthcoming. This image sums up how Smith's writing is often caught between the concerns of the market and the perceptions of the public, and serves as a prompt for us to pay more attention to where the ideas that she explores sit in this relationship. Her writing situates her as central to contemporary fiction's exploration of the public sphere, and instantiates a model of literary publicness where authority emerges not from the author figure, nor

¹⁴³ Zadie Smith, “White Knuckle Ride,” interview by Simon Hattenstone, *The Guardian*, December 11, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/dec/11/fiction.whitbreadbookawards2000>.

¹⁴⁴ Penguin Press, “Feel Free, Zadie's new collection of essays, is coming 2/6,” *Facebook*, December 28, 2017, <http://www.facebook.com>.

from their connections to esteemed institutions, but from the exchange of ideas between writers and readers. The result of this work, Smith hopes, is that we will all feel free to change our minds whenever we need to.

David Foster Wallace: Reading and Refusal

Prescience or Precedents?

Upon first inspection, it seems that the internet has far more to say about David Foster Wallace than the author ever had to say about the internet. If this appears obvious (of course ‘the internet’ has more to say, comprising the contributions of its billions of users as opposed to those of one writer), it is still worth reflecting on the abundance of articles and blogs published online wondering what Wallace’s ‘take’ on the technology would be if he were still writing.¹ As the author’s biographer D. T. Max highlights, “people frequently ask what David Foster Wallace would have made of the Web,” a “weird question” given the fact that Wallace, who died in 2008, “actually lived well into the Internet era.”² Max goes on to offer a possible explanation for the question’s continued prevalence: “When he wrote about how the media permeates all of our actions and thoughts he was referring to television.”³ Yet this recurrent focus on television, others argue, can also be read as part of a broader attention to the intersections of technology and entertainment, and we can infer from Wallace’s work many interesting insights about the internet age. Indeed, in his introduction to *Infinite Jest*’s (1996) twentieth anniversary edition, Tom Bissell goes as far as to suggest that, “as a novel about an ‘entertainment’ weaponized to enslave and destroy all who look upon it, *Infinite Jest* is the first great internet novel,” mainly due to Wallace’s almost “Delphic” foresight in his depictions of video bingeing and mediatised communication.⁴

¹ One such article in fact opens with a whole list of topics which the author wishes she knew Wallace’s thoughts on: Megan Garber, “Could the Internet Age See Another David Foster Wallace,” *The Atlantic*, August 11, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

² D. T. Max, “In the D.F.W. Archives: An Unfinished Story About the Internet,” *The New Yorker*, October 11, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Tom Bissell, “Everything About Everything: David Foster Wallace’s ‘Infinite Jest’ at 20,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

Bissell's suggestion here is redolent of a broader trend in popular Wallace criticism, namely the frequent attribution of an impressive prescience to *Infinite Jest* (an indicative sample of headlines would include "Our Lives on the Internet as Prophesied by David Foster Wallace," and "The 5 Impressive Ways David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* Predicted the Future").⁵ This perspective, however, can often feel rather forced. After all, how similar to contemporary smartphones can the novel's 'teleputers' really be said to be? And how much of Netflix and Google can actually be seen in the fictional entertainment company InterLace TelEntertainment?⁶ This focus on prescience results from a lack of attention to Wallace's writing – it examines contemporary events and looks for similarities within his work, rather than interrogating how and why Wallace's vision converges with and diverges from both the 1990s America in which he was writing, and our own present reality. As a result, the relationship between Wallace's work and the internet remains relatively untheorized.⁷ Even some of the comments that he did directly make about the technology are confused by context, such as those in an unpublished story (described again, this time by Max, as "prescient"), or an unverified interview conducted in a chat room.⁸

One remark of Wallace's can point us in a more useful direction, however, and help to unpack the relevance of the internet to his later work in particular. In a 1996

⁵ Jake Offenhartz, "Our Lives on the Internet as Prophesied by David Foster Wallace," *Book Riot*, August 18, 2015, <https://bookriot.com/>; Duncan White, "The 5 Impressive Ways David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* Predicted the Future," *The Telegraph*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.

⁶ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996; repr., London: Abacus, 1997), 410-418.

⁷ A number of articles do link Wallace's work, primarily *Infinite Jest*, to technology more broadly, including Tom LeClair, "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollman, and David Foster Wallace," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38, no. 1 (1996), and Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007).

⁸ Max, "In the D.F.W Archives"; Ilia Blinderman, "David Foster Wallace Talks About Literature (and More) in an Internet Chatroom: Read the 1996 Transcript," *Open Culture*, January 28, 2014, <http://www.openculture.com/>.

interview, Wallace offered some thoughts on the nascent technology of the commercial internet:

This idea that the Internet's gonna become incredibly democratic? I mean, if you've spent any time on the Web, you know that it's not gonna be, because that's completely overwhelming. There are four trillion bits coming at you, 99 percent of them are shit, and it's too much work to do triage to decide.⁹

Wallace here makes two key points about the internet: first, he suggests that its democratic potential is wildly overstated, and second, he highlights how its scale poses important questions about the value of information, and attendant processes of discernment. His comment is less prescient than it is descriptive, and if it scans as prophetic this may simply be because the internet has developed along consistently expansionary lines since the mid-1990s. What is most important to note about Wallace's insight, however, is the fact that he links these two ideas, establishing a connection between the questions of how technology might support or impede democratic ideals, and how information circulates in complex societies. These questions, which sit at the core of many debates about the contemporary public sphere, return as central themes in Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King* (2011).¹⁰

Whereas in his interview Wallace suggests that triaging information is too much work, *The Pale King* concerns itself with people for whom it *is* their work. The novel follows a number of employees of the Internal Revenue Service in the 1980s, many of whom work with abstract information every day, and for whom “the point of a procedure is to process and reduce the information in your file to just the information that has

⁹ David Foster Wallace, interview by David Lipsky, in David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 87.

¹⁰ Indeed, one passage in that novel seems to recycle the second of Wallace's suggestions in its use of similar language: “The phone book has lots of information,” one character points out, “but if you're looking for a phone number, 99.9 percent of that information is just in the way” (David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2012), 344).

value.”¹¹ These characters are employed during a tempestuous period for the IRS, when the very principles of the organisation are in flux, prey to the reconfiguration of American economic policy under Ronald Reagan. The novel’s concern is not with the impossibility of discernment in online life specifically, then; rather, deciding what information is valuable is characterised as a more general difficulty facing American democracy. But even if *The Pale King* is a historical rather than a prophetic novel, this does not mean that Wallace has nothing to say about the internet age. In *The Pale King*, the author tells a story about the relationship between digital technology and neoliberalism, exploring how the norms and ideals of the public sphere are refigured by this relationship.

As with the other authors I address in this thesis, Wallace looks to literature to provide a recuperative model for a public sphere undergoing a contemporary structural transformation. But unlike Franzen, Smith, and Eggers, he does not engage with one antecedent author or movement to inform his model. Wallace identifies the inability of citizens to decide what information is valuable as a problem particular to the public sphere in the internet age, due both to the internet’s oversaturation with information, and neoliberalism’s outsourcing of valuation to market forces. Because of this, he focusses his attention on the process of reading, modelling a form of literary publicness centred on it. *The Pale King* highlights the role of contingent perspectives in individual reading, but in order to avoid perpetuating a neoliberal valorisation of individualism, Wallace also stresses the importance of recognising our intersubjective condition as citizens. In an era when that intersubjectivity is being devalued and denigrated by neoliberal priorities and politics, Wallace suggests, a renewed vision of the public sphere might have to abandon

¹¹ Ibid, 344.

its aims for consensus-building, and instead work towards instantiating dialogue as an end in itself.

Wallace's interest in neoliberalism is evident throughout *The Pale King*. In §19 of the novel, for example, several IRS employees engage in a debate about contemporary politics while stuck in an elevator. Their discussion takes in a wide range of issues, including civics, taxes, the American Revolution, individual responsibility, consumerism, and the upcoming 1980 presidential election (which Ronald Reagan would win in a landslide). Adam Kelly has highlighted how in this scene, "in keeping with swathes of emerging scholarship on the era of 'neoliberal' capitalism, Wallace places the key transitional moment to contemporary American society in and around 1980."¹² Many of the elevator discussion's themes also play out elsewhere in the novel in the ongoing debate over the Spackman Initiative, a restructuring process which, "distilled to its essence," concerns the question of "whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a for-profit business."¹³ Although fictional, the Initiative is grounded in historical shifts associated with Reagan's economic policies – it functions as Wallace's dramatization of the integration of a neoliberal rationality into liberal democratic institutions. Wendy Brown has summarised this rationality as one which "disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities – even where money is not an issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*."¹⁴ This latter term, Brown notes, has a long and complex history, but its referent emerges in the contemporary era as a triumphant figure,

¹² Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," in *David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing': New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 17.

¹³ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 85.

¹⁴ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 31. As a governing ideology, neoliberalism identifies competition, unregulated ('free') markets, and self-interest as the driving features of truly free societies. The most widely read primer on the subject is David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

one that is “normative in every sphere.”¹⁵ A number of Wallace scholars have attended to the author’s interest in this characteristic of contemporary life, and have read his work as both critical of, and as prey to, neoliberal norms and values.¹⁶ But two facets of Wallace’s focus here remain relatively unexamined. The first, which I will deal with in this section, is how Wallace’s attention to neoliberalism addresses (and attempts to resist) the ideology’s effects on the public sphere; the second concerns how Wallace connects neoliberalism with technology in *The Pale King*.

The rise of a neoliberal dispensation has had particular impacts on the public sphere’s conception and operation. Robert Asen has identified “three significant [...] challenges” that neoliberalism presents to the public sphere, challenges which in fact recur throughout *The Pale King* as thematic strands.¹⁷ The first challenge Asen highlights is to traditionally public-minded notions of subjectivity – he cites Hannah Arendt’s work on the public sphere to outline how publicity helps to fashion subjects: “individuals do not appear as discrete, ready-made actors prior to their interactions with others. Rather, interactions constitute the individual.”¹⁸ By contrast, “neoliberal models of publics assert a view of the subject as an atomistic individual motivated by their own self-interest.”¹⁹ Throughout *The Pale King*, as he details the effects of neoliberal governance on the IRS, Wallace employs a strategy that looks to provide formal resistance to this atomising view.

¹⁵ Ibid, 80. For more, see William Dixon and David Wilson, *A History of Homo Economicus: The Nature of the Moral in Economic Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁶ I will reference many of these works as this chapter goes on. Other interventions which do not play a part in the following discussion but are still worth noting include Ryan M. Brooks, “Conflict Before Compromise: A Response to Rachel Greenwald Smith,” *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose and Thought* 4 (May 2015), <http://theaccountmagazine.com/?article=forum-on-compromise-aesthetics>; Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts,” *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 2 (2017); Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Mark West, “‘Observation of these Articles’: Surveillance and the 1970s in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 2 (2018).

¹⁷ Robert Asen, “Introduction: Neoliberalism and the Public Sphere,” *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 172.

¹⁸ Ibid, 173.

¹⁹ Ibid, 173.

To this end, he includes snippets of stories from the lives of previously unknown or minor characters at unexpected moments in the narrative. For example, on the bus to an IRS facility, one character's mind wanders, and as he remembers a high school girlfriend, readers are given a brief insight into her life and that of their classmates:

And without being conscious of any of the connections between the field that now passed [...] and the girl[, he] was thinking in a misdirected way of Cheryl Ann Higgs, now Cheryl Ann Standish and now a data-entry girl at American Twine and a divorced mother of two in a double-wide trailer her ex had apparently been arrested for trying to burn up [...] Danny something, his daddy died not much later, but he couldn't play Legion ball that summer because of it [...] and lost his scholarship and God knows what-all became of him.²⁰

Similar interruptions recur sporadically throughout the novel, and function as Wallace's reminders to readers of our intersubjective social condition, in contrast with the neoliberal vision of a society comprising atomised individuals. Even inanimate objects spark stories of the humans who have used them ("the corrugate trailer where it was said the man left his family and returned some time later with a gun and killed them all as they watched *Dagnet*").²¹ Wallace concludes another paragraph by pivoting from the section's focus, Leonard Stecyk, to sketch one of his nameless classmate's experiences of the Vietnam War ("he had just stood up and told them to strip ordnance off the dead and form a defilade against the opposite side of the creek-bed, and everyone had obeyed").²² Not only do these interruptions provide reminders of characters' intersubjective formations, then – they also allow the narrative to gesture outwards, moving from one character's interiority to another's, engaging with multiple perspectives, as most conceptions of the public sphere would expect participants to do.

²⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 51.

²¹ *Ibid*, 55.

²² *Ibid*, 424.

Leonard Stecyk is also key to Wallace's treatment of the second challenge that neoliberalism poses to the public sphere, namely the wholesale dismissal of public concerns. According to Asen, engagement with public life "draws importantly on the promise of a public good," which "refers to a practice of cultivating relationships with others that recognizes the mutual standing required to address shared concerns."²³ This notion of public good is not tenable in a neoliberal model, as "calls to advance a public good cannot produce efficacious action" precisely because "they ask people to make decisions outside of their direct experiences."²⁴ §5 of *The Pale King* concerns the many good deeds of a ten-year-old Leonard Stecyk, whose selfless actions mount throughout the chapter in parodic escalation. He volunteers helping younger children cross the road, delivers Meals on Wheels at a home for the aged, donates his allowance to UNICEF, and, when he breaks his leg, donates his crutches to the paediatrics wing of a local hospital "even before the minimum six weeks the doctor sternly prescribed."²⁵ Yet despite Stecyk's public mindedness, "everyone hates the boy": parents swerve their cars towards him as works on the crosswalk; the charity home's "administrator lunges to bolt her office door" as he approaches; his teacher has a nervous breakdown and threatens to "kill first the boy and then herself."²⁶ In §5 Wallace looks not only to characterise Stecyk, but also to describe the world and institutions he exists in, which collectively find his public mindedness not only distasteful, but repulsive. Those around him are, knowingly or not, expressing a neoliberal model of publicity, which identifies "self-interest as a universal human motivation, [... and asserts] a limited view of knowledge as direct experience as

²³ Asen, "Introduction," 173. For more on neoliberalism's potential effects on public engagement, see Robert Asen, "Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (2017).

²⁴ Asen, "Introduction," 173.

²⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 31-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34; 31; 36.

the [sole] basis for public engagement.”²⁷ Furthermore, this chapter is set in and around 1964, suggesting that Wallace recognises how the roots of neoliberal thought were already taking hold well before the 1980s. A general suspicion of public mindedness existed in America that was ripe for exploitation, he suggests – indeed, it *had* been exploited just two years earlier by Milton Friedman, who claimed in his *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) that, “to the free man, the country is the collection of individuals who compose it, not something over and above them.”²⁸

This refusal to believe that forces beyond the decisive actions of individuals can affect society, highlights the third and final problem that Asen claims neoliberalism poses for the public sphere. Much post-Habermasian work on the public sphere has been concerned with acknowledging how structural conditions limit the agency of subjects in public, be that due to marginalization of certain identities, or untenable norms and expectations. By contrast, neoliberal publics discount these structural constraints, and focus instead on individuals’ behaviours. Even as *The Pale King* perpetuates some of the more problematic elements of Wallace’s writing regarding race and gender, his interest in the links between agency and structures is undeniable.²⁹ Stretches of the novel are spent detailing the minutiae of the U.S. tax system, as readers are reminded of their existence within systems of governance that they do not have the specialized knowledge to fully understand. The bureaucracy that characterises the day-to-day life of IRS employees is so all-encompassing, Wallace suggests, that is “a parallel world, both connected to and independent of this one, operating under its own physics and

²⁷ Asen, “Introduction,” 173.

²⁸ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962), 1-2.

²⁹ For more on these problematic elements of *The Pale King*, see Lucas Thompson, “Wallace and Race,” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 204-219, and Jorge Araya, “Why the Whiteness? Race in *The Pale King*,” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (Ipswich: Salem Press, 2015), 238-251.

imperatives of cause.”³⁰ Wallace wants readers to remember that they are always implicated in systems, and that their lives are beholden to the ripple effects of invisible structures: “tiny movements” in one part of a system are “transmitted through that system to become the gross kinetic charges [...] at the periphery.”³¹ Even if we experience our lives as *individuals within* a system, Wallace would not have his readers believe for a second that their agency is limitless. Throughout *The Pale King*, Wallace highlights how a neoliberal dispensation is affecting public life – his contribution to debates about the public sphere in the internet age suggests that we should balance our attention to technology with an equal focus on the ramifications of neoliberalism. But Wallace also believes that the internet has an important part to play in this debate, and his interest in digital networks is key to *The Pale King*’s contribution. Examining the links between technology and neoliberalism will help to elucidate the second element of Wallace’s attention to the ideology that so far remains unexamined in academic inquiries, namely how in *The Pale King* Wallace associates a transitional moment in socioeconomic thinking with an equally important transition in technological development.

Homo Techonomicus

At one point in §19, a character outlines his view that “corporate advertisers” have turned “*buying* a certain brand of clothes or pop or car or necktie into a gesture of the same level of ideological significance as wearing a beard or protesting the war.”³² The conversation then turns to a more specific example:

³⁰ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid*, 88.

³² *Ibid*, 147.

‘Just wait sixteen quarters till ’84. Just wait for the tidal wave of ads and PR that promote this or that corporate product as the way to escape the gray 1984 totalitarianisms of the Orwellian present.’

‘How does buying one kind of typewriter instead of another help subvert government control?’

‘It won’t be government in a couple years, don’t you see?’

‘There won’t be typewriters, either. Everyone’ll have keyboards cabled into some sort of central VAX, and things won’t even have to be on paper anymore.’³³

Kelly’s reading of §19 points out that, “while in *Infinite Jest* Wallace was concerned to ask how technological developments should alter our political commitments, in *The Pale King* it is the rise of the corporation that is front and center, placing historic ideas of citizenship under crushing pressure.”³⁴ While this is true, we can see in this extract that technology is still importantly bound up with Wallace’s attention to corporations and citizenship. As with Dave Eggers, Wallace is concerned about the particular dynamics of technology companies’ power – indeed, in §19 we can think of Wallace as historicising the story that Eggers tells in *The Circle*.

The above-quoted conversation from §19 makes a direct link between technology and the other cultural shifts being discussed, and although 7-Up, Virginia Slims, and Alka-Seltzer advertisements are mentioned in passing by other characters in this section, Wallace’s reference to typewriters makes it clear that he has Apple’s “1984” advert in mind here. In the company’s famous TV spot, “a Big Brother figure addresses a room full of drab, bald-headed people and praises the futuristic society’s achievement of the ‘Unification of Thoughts,’” before a colourfully dressed woman “runs into the room,

³³ Ibid, 148.

³⁴ Kelly, “Novel of Ideas,” 17.

chased by policemen, and throws a sledgehammer through the screen.”³⁵ Manuel Castells suggests that the iconic advert points to how Silicon Valley’s key innovators “were intentionally trying to undo the centralizing technologies of the corporate world,” but that this was, importantly, “both out of conviction and as their market niche.”³⁶ By referencing the advert through a character’s prediction of it, Wallace slyly sends up the idea of prescience, too – the ad’s existence was inevitable, he seems to suggest, just as the internet’s problematic relationship with democracy was obvious to him in 1996. But Wallace also makes it clear in his reference that his novel should not be taken as entirely detached from contemporary concerns. As Tom McCarthy puts it, “by backtracking to the ‘Flintstonianly remote’ era of mainframe computers, tape-and-card-based data storage and so on, Wallace identifies a watershed moment, a kind of base layer in the archaeology of the present.”³⁷

What Wallace unearths in this archaeology of our current moment is evidence of an encounter between technology and neoliberalism. This link is primarily made through descriptions of the Spackman Initiative, which is the subject of a deep conflict between the “traditional [...] officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue” on the one hand, and the “policymakers who prized the market model, efficiency, and a maximum return on the investment of the Service’s annual budget” on the other.³⁸ Importantly, Wallace draws attention to the fact that this conflict “subtend[s the] operational battle over human vs. digital enforcement of the tax code.”³⁹ Traditional officials favour human examiners, while the new profit-seekers wish to

³⁵ Aaron Taube, “How The Greatest Super Bowl Ad Ever – Apple’s ‘1984’ – Almost Didn’t Make It To Air,” *Business Insider*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/apple-super-bowl-retrospective-2014-1>.

³⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Wiley, 2000), 6.

³⁷ Tom McCarthy, “David Foster Wallace: The Last Audit,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

³⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 84-5.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 84.

automate certain parts of the examinations process. At one point, Kenneth Hindle explicitly links “the advent of automated letter audits” with the IRS’s overhaul via the Initiative; another character suggests that Reagan’s policies make “technology and efficiency serious objectives.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the conflict is phrased as one “between advocates and opponents of an increasingly automated, computerized tax system.”⁴¹ Wallace links technological advancement with the Initiative to highlight how technology can be thought of as underwriting neoliberal governance and policymaking, and vice versa. As Castells argues, “without new information technology global capitalism would have been a much-limited reality,” and Wallace’s novel is concerned with the idea that “informationalism is linked to the expansion and rejuvenation of capitalism.”⁴²

The opposition that Wallace establishes between technological automation and human examining in the Spackman Initiative is important on still another level, as the alliance of certain values with humans and others with machines forms part of a constellation of similar divisions articulated throughout *The Pale King*. Once again, alongside the author’s contributions to debates about the public sphere in the internet age, we find a parallel modelling of an alternate form of publicness which emerges from the specific affordances of literary forms; to understand Wallace’s particular literary publicness, we must understand how the complex of oppositions that he establishes operate. Whereas Zadie Smith opposes technology and literature to explore different forms of representation, in *The Pale King* Wallace contrasts technology with the category of the human. Wallace’s interest in the human raises important questions of how we should read his oppositional complex – as Kathleen Fitzpatrick has noted, drawing on

⁴⁰ Ibid, 116; 150.

⁴¹ Ibid, 84.

⁴² Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 19. Pfister and Yang have argued, in a similar vein, that “the condition of digitality intensifies neoliberal governing rationalities in the context of public sphere deliberation” (Damien Smith Pfister and Misti Yang, “Five Theses on Technoliberalism and the Networked Public Sphere,” *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 259).

the work of Donna Haraway, “the blurrier that boundary [between human and machine] becomes, the more the privileged category of the human, and the hierarchies that category has for centuries been used to support, come under threat.”⁴³ Fitzpatrick convincingly questions “the ‘human’ values that these technologies are represented as eroding [...] for their gendered specificity, and for the hierarchies that they seek to reinstate,” reading Wallace’s apparent anxieties of obsolescence in *Infinite Jest* as a “writerly anxiety about exclusion from ‘the culture’ [that] seems to circulate around [his] whiteness and maleness.”⁴⁴ Yet in *The Pale King*, establishing these opposing categories allows Wallace to do a certain kind of work.⁴⁵ Wallace constructs a complex of oppositions in order to interrogate the alignment of forms, values, and ideas: technology and neoliberalism lie on one side, while civic virtue and the human lie on the other.

The Initiative and its attendant computerization have “only one primary, overarching goal: results,” and it is this element of neoliberal rationality (its focus on efficiency and one acceptable outcome) that most troubles Wallace.⁴⁶ *The Pale King* demonstrates Wallace’s belief that technology, in tandem with a neoliberal vision of selfhood, has the power to insidiously redefine the human in such a way that, as Brown summarises, “all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality.”⁴⁷ Wallace’s notion of the human, on the other hand, is frequently characterised in *The Pale*

⁴³ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 64.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 65; 209.

⁴⁵ Indeed, Wallace also arguably demonstrates his awareness that technology and the human are bound up in complicated ways. Much of the IRS’s technological infrastructure in the novel, for example, is made by a company called ‘Fornix,’ which Wallace names after a central part of the human brain (Wallace, *The Pale King*, 412).

⁴⁶ Ibid, 116. Wallace is right to link this kind of neoliberal effacement of multiplicity to technology – as Mirowski notes, “one of the most studied examples of the rise of neoliberal agency is the behaviour of people while surfing the internet” (Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013), 112).

⁴⁷ Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 39. Stephen Shapiro also argues that representing how this rationality affects individuals is a central part of *The Pale King* – see Stephen Shapiro, “From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King*’s Cultural Fix,” *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014): 1258.

King as something defined by its multiplicity and variety. In a section narrated by David Wallace (ostensibly the book's author), one character is quoted as saying: "The tax code, once you get to know it, embodies all the essence of [human] life: greed, politics, power, goodness, charity."⁴⁸ The parentheses around the word 'human' indicate that it is David Wallace's insertion, and we can thus infer that he wishes to characterise the human as a multivalent category. "As all mature people know," he declares in another section, "it's possible for very different kinds of motives and emotions to coexist in the human soul"; later he suggests that, "as every American knows, it is totally possible for contempt and anxiety to coexist in the human heart."⁴⁹

As these examples show, the category of the human is also strongly linked with affect throughout *The Pale King*. This comprises another node of opposition in Wallace's complex – as McCarthy points out, "machines will never feel, [...] nor do they allow for human agency and its offshoots (free will, ethics, compassion, love) to unfold and blossom in their arid data fields."⁵⁰ For Wallace, technology takes us away from this full range of affective possibilities – the internet serves to help us "distract ourselves from feeling [...] directly or with our full attention."⁵¹ As one character says towards the end of the novel, to "think in terms of data" is to have "none of the feeling attached to it."⁵² For Wallace, then, the lines are clearly drawn: the human is multiple and affective, the technological (in part because of its links to neoliberal ends) is unilateral and unfeeling. Wallace articulates these oppositions both to establish links between technology and neoliberalism, and to set up his own work as modelling an alternate form of publicness. Wallace's oppositions create a shorthand for his literary publicness – he wants his writing

⁴⁸ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 84; parentheses in original.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 83; 303.

⁵⁰ McCarthy, "David Foster Wallace."

⁵¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 87.

⁵² Ibid, 428-9.

to resist neoliberalism's denigration of the public sphere, so must align literature with the other side of his oppositional complex (that is, with the human, the multiple, and the civically minded). He does this both through the resistant strategies that I earlier highlighted and, as I will now show, by foregrounding the activity of reading.

Re: Reading

The Pale King takes place in a world saturated with information, and the novel follows suit formally. Streams of data interrupt the narrative: §11 comprises a list of forty-two “syndromes/symptoms associated with Examinations postings in excess of 36 months,” while §34 outlines the sixteen parts of the United States’ alternative minimum tax formula for corporations.⁵³ §38 consists of a recounting of problems with the IRS’s “integrated data system,” complete with separately formatted words to indicate computer commands (“a BLOCK and RESET sub-subroutine”), while the lyrically written account of Toni Ware’s childhood is interjected by a list of her address, height, weight, and “Mother’s Stated Occupations, 1966-1972 (from IRS Form 669-D [...]).”⁵⁴ Implicit within these interruptions is the question of whether, and why, the information provided is valuable or not. Wallace draws out this question more directly when he writes about Claude Sylvanshine, an IRS employee who is described as a “*fact psychic*,” a person who experiences “sudden flashes of insight or awareness” into mundane, niche, and unverifiable information, such as “how many people faced south-east to witness Guy Fawkes’s hanging in 1606,” or “the number of frames in *Breathless*.”⁵⁵ The information that Sylvanshine receives is less important to note than his experience of receiving it,

⁵³ Ibid, 89; 388.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 416; 62.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 120-1.

however, as this experience clarifies the way that Wallace's other informational interruptions function for readers of *The Pale King*.

Through Sylvanshine, Wallace dramatizes the experience of online informational triage that he first described in his 1996 interview, the "completely overwhelming" feeling of "four trillion bits coming at you."⁵⁶ Sylvanshine is forced to confront life in terms of data – he is given no other option. For him, the pieces of information "come out of nowhere, are inconvenient and discomfiting like all psychic irruptions."⁵⁷ He has no use for anything he intuits – "perhaps one in every four thousand such facts is relevant or helpful"; others, like "the number of blades of grass in the front lawn of one mailman's home," simply "intrude, crash, rattle around."⁵⁸ "Random Fact Intuition" afflicts Sylvanshine so much not just because of its relentlessness, then, but because he is unsure of what any of the information relates to, and how he should relate to it.⁵⁹ Wallace's interrupting data streams function in similar ways, and draw attention to questions he thematises elsewhere in the novel. In §24, Wallace again uses blades of grass as an example to explore these broader questions attending Sylvanshine's situation:

There are vastly different kinds of truth, some of which are incompatible with one another. Example: A 100 percent accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass in my front lawn is 'true,' but it is not a truth that anyone will have any interest in. What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point – otherwise we might as well just be computers downloading raw data to one another.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Wallace in Lipsky, *Although Of Course*, 87.

⁵⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 120.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 122; 121.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 120.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 261.

Wallace continues to articulate his opposition between the human and the technological here, but whereas Jeffrey Severs suggests that, for Wallace, we are approaching a time when “human decision making can no longer disentangle itself from computing’s complexity,” this section of the novel also seems to locate the possibility of an alternative form of valuing within literature.⁶¹ In §24, Wallace introduces another important element to his complex of oppositions: “I have no intention of inflicting on you a regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought I happen to recall,” he announces at one point, “I am about art here, not simply reproduction.”⁶² Wallace here aligns art with a kind of truth that is not solely mimetic, and suggests that its ability to produce such truths sets it apart from the exhaustive data streams of technology.⁶³ The ‘truth’ of Wallace’s informational interruptions, then, lies in how they relate to the rest of the novel – and their ‘relevance’ is guaranteed by the reader’s very questioning of whether or not the information is valuable.

Having established the dual problems of overwhelming information and a culturally prevalent inability to decide what is valuable, Wallace moves to establish literature as a potential curative for the public sphere. But precisely because the problems he identifies are to do with an abundance of information, he cannot follow the same process as Franzen, Eggers, and Smith. In previous chapters, I have outlined how these authors address conceptions of authorship, the links between economic and political power, and questions of representation in their allusions to specific texts and authors. To combat his concerns for the public sphere, however, Wallace must model his literary

⁶¹ Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 180.

⁶² Wallace, *The Pale King*, 261.

⁶³ Indeed, the author-character David Wallace underscores this by linking art and the human, when he reveals that he wrote *The Pale King* in part for “literary/humanistic” reasons (Ibid, 82).

publicness on a process of interpretation rather than creation: namely, the process of reading.

In one section of the novel, the author-character David Wallace outlines his decision to write *The Pale King* in the way that he did, claiming that it is in fact “substantially true and accurate [...] and] more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story.”⁶⁴ Stephen J. Burn notes that “amidst the calculated misdirection” of this section’s false details about the real Wallace’s life, the “commentary on the author’s past shades into a suggestive account of the novel’s literary ancestors.”⁶⁵ The author recounts how his “specific dream” as a young person “was of becoming an immortally great fiction writer à la Gaddis or Anderson, Balzac or Perec, & c.”⁶⁶ Burn convincingly argues that this list marks “a richer entry point than it first seems in determining what distinguishes Wallace’s generation from the first-generation postmodern novelists who mostly came to prominence in the 1960s,” but it is also important to remember that the version of Wallace narrating this section is not the ‘real’ one.⁶⁷ David Hering has suggested, in fact, that Wallace conceived of “the ‘author’ of *The Pale King*” as directly linked to his previous journalism, and that the novel is framed as a narrative “‘written’ by Wallace’s non-fiction persona, *not* by the ‘fiction writer.’”⁶⁸ Understanding Wallace as a character within the novel aligns his references to the novelists here with *The Pale King*’s other mentions of books and writers, which are articulated with specific reference to the lives of its characters. So, Anderson, Balzac, Perec, and Gaddis are framed as exemplary figures of individual genius that the author-character David Wallace aspired to emulate as a young adult. Later, Chris Fogle recalls a formative moment when taking drugs and

⁶⁴ Ibid, 69.

⁶⁵ Stephen J. Burn, “Second-Generation Postmoderns,” in *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, eds. Brian McHale and Len Platt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 450.

⁶⁶ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 75.

⁶⁷ Burn, “Second-Generation Postmoderns,” 450.

⁶⁸ David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 144.

“pretending to sit here reading Albert Camus’s *The Fall* for the Literature of Alienation midterm.”⁶⁹ Another key figure, Toni Ware, moves from reading road signs in her itinerant youth in order “to know the facts of her own history and present,” to a broader selection of fiction and non-fiction:

The girl read stories about horses, bios, science, psychiatry, and *Popular Mechanics* when obtainable. She read history in a determined way. She read *My Struggle* and could not understand all the fuss. She read Weiss, Steinbeck, Keene, Laura Wilder (twice), and Lovecraft. She read halves of many torn and castoff things.⁷⁰

Franzen, Smith, and Eggers have directly modelled elements of their literary publicness on antecedent texts, drawing on a cache of what is, for them, relatively stable cultural meaning. In *The Pale King*, however, through scenes like those quoted above, Wallace draws attention to the process of individual reading, and as such the contingency of meaning, and the importance of perspective.⁷¹ As Michael Warner has noted, “the attribution of agency to publics,” which emerges from a Habermasian model of a rational-critical public sphere, “works in most cases because of the direct transposition from private reading acts to the sovereignty of opinion.”⁷² But even if Wallace’s literary publicness sets great stall by the idea that reading is a contingent process, and that readers will draw their own conclusions, he does not look to replicate an Enlightenment

⁶⁹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 186; italics in original.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 60.

⁷¹ This is not to say that Wallace lacks influences. Indeed, McCarthy links Wallace’s process of historicising the internet age to “Thomas Pynchon tracing the origins of the 1970s to 1945 in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” and draws comparisons between *The Pale King* and the work of Eliot, Kafka, Beckett, and Melville (McCarthy, “David Foster Wallace”). Elsewhere, Brian McHale makes further links between Wallace and Pynchon, and notes “the echo of Nabokov in the title of Wallace’s last novel” (Brian McHale, “*The Pale King*, Or, The White Visitation,” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, eds. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (London: Palgrave, 2013), 191). Clare Hayes-Brady also reads *The Pale King* as operating in dialogue with Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (Clare Hayes-Brady, “Palely Loitering’: On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 142-158). As this abundance of readings suggests, however, no one literary influence is predominant in *The Pale King*.

⁷² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 123.

rationality wherein reading processes move through the discussion of opinions towards establishing a single, convincing truth. Rather, he recognises, like Warner, that “the unity of the public [... is] ideological,” and rests upon “the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable.”⁷³ For in *The Pale King*, reading is never characterised thus: even when novels are referenced as shorthand for certain cultural values or ideas, the notion of their accuracy or stability as artefacts of signification is undermined. When one character mentions the rise of “the corporation and the military-industrial complex” in the 1950s, for example, another makes a throwaway comment: “The man in the gray flannel.”⁷⁴ This reference to Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) however, is not taken up: “What *is* gray flannel anyway?,” another character asks.⁷⁵ Later, an IRS employee mentions Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958) in a list of iconic cultural works and events that defined the American 1960s, making numerous comments about how his interlocutors “won’t get some of it,” as the artefacts’ manifold meanings are “impossible to describe” to those who weren’t “alive in the late sixties.”⁷⁶ *The Pale King*’s characters’ experiences of books always depend upon their previous experiences in life, as when Toni Ware is said to have “read a coverless *Red Badge* and knew by sheer feel that its author had never seen war.”⁷⁷

This attention to reader response is consistent with Wallace’s past comments about reading. As early as his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace aligned his view with “Barthian and Derridean post-structuralism,” claiming to feel that “once I’m done with the thing, I’m basically dead, and probably the text’s dead; it becomes simply

⁷³ Ibid, 117.

⁷⁴ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 147.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 147.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 428-9.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 60.

language, and language lives not just in but ‘through’ the reader.”⁷⁸ This sentiment endured throughout Wallace’s career, forming the foundations of his thinking about aesthetic value. Severs draws attention to the author’s meditation on literary value in “Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report,” suggesting that the essay

makes vivid Wallace’s commitment to making this search for value a performative process for a reader – in fact, one in which differentiating one detail’s importance from another’s and being the ‘human doing the valuing’ are, in effect, aesthetic value itself.⁷⁹

What makes this perspective important in *The Pale King* is how it operates in relation to the previous oppositions that I have outlined. The literary and the human, both defined in Wallace’s novel by their affordance of interpretative ability and manifold affective possibility, stand in contrast to the supposed individual freedom afforded by a free market and digital dispensation. Wallace’s literary publicness centres on reading as a radically contingent, democratically vital task, and recasts aesthetic value (that is, the valuation enacted by a reader in their very engagement with a text) as a political imperative.

Indeed, in “Deciderization” (so named as a parody of George W. Bush’s 2006 claim that he was “the decider” in American politics), Wallace explicitly links the question of how to discern aesthetic value to a broader premise about the “emergency” facing “America as a polity and culture,” which manifests as a “retreat to narrow arrogance, pre-formed positions, rigid filters, [and] the ‘moral clarity’ of the immature.”⁸⁰ In his essay, Wallace once again contrasts literature and the internet. He takes care to highlight how the shifts in public life that he describes are being exacerbated by a digital

⁷⁸ David Foster Wallace, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” interview by Larry McCaffery, in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (1993; repr., Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 40.

⁷⁹ Severs, *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books*, 173.

⁸⁰ David Foster Wallace, “Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), 313; 316.

dispensation – his contribution attempts to establish links between the overwhelming character of modern information, and the technology used to disseminate that information. For this reason, Wallace believes that the public sphere requires serious remodelling: “Whatever our founders and framers thought of as a literate, informed citizenry can no longer exist, at least not without a whole new modern degree of subcontracting and dependence packed into what we mean by ‘informed.’”⁸¹ For Wallace, literature might offer hope by functioning “as a model for what free, informed adulthood might look like in the context of Total Noise.”⁸²

Taking this suggestion seriously can help clarify Wallace’s literary publicness. A Habermasian vision of truth depends upon instrumental discourse – for him, as Hirschkop puts it, “claiming that something is true is claiming that one could, in an ideal situation, persuade others that it is the case through sheer force of argument alone.”⁸³ The importance that Wallace places on being properly informed in “Deciderization,” and on individual reading in *The Pale King* suggest, however, that his literary publicness is closer to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, truth is “formally unified not by the notion of the ‘better argument’ but by virtue of the dialogical action – the taking of positions, the making of assertions, agreement and disagreement.”⁸⁴ Bakhtin’s vision of truth rests on the “higher ethico-religious truth [...] of our intersubjective condition,” a condition which, it could be argued, was the most enduring theme in Wallace’s writing, and which I have already shown is a central concern in *The Pale King*.⁸⁵ It will be worth bearing Bakhtin in mind while attempting to unpack the further treatment of the public sphere in *The Pale King*, as his work plays a central role in understanding Wallace’s

⁸¹ Wallace, “Deciderization,” 314-5.

⁸² Ibid, 317.

⁸³ Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 206.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 206.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 207.

perspective – both writers overlap especially in how they highlight the particularity of human experiences. By focussing on the contingency of these experiences, Wallace is able to insist upon the value of the particular without valorising neoliberal individualism, and, as I will now argue, it helps him to articulate his vision of a dialogic, agonistic public sphere.

“This is just my opinion”

In a 2003 interview with *The Believer*, Wallace identifies something of a double bind for the politically minded author. On the one hand, he suggests, writing that is too political becomes “totally ideological and reductive.”⁸⁶ On the other hand,

the reason why doing political writing is so hard right now is probably also the reason why more young [...] fiction writers ought to be doing it. As of 2003, the rhetoric of the enterprise is fucked. 95 percent of political commentary, whether spoken or written, is now polluted by the very politics it’s supposed to be about [...]. Opposing viewpoints are not just incorrect but contemptible, corrupt, evil. There’s no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or ‘dialogue’); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one’s own choir and demonizing the opposition. Everything’s relentlessly black-and-whitened.⁸⁷

The particular qualities that Wallace highlights here as absent from a dysfunctional public sphere – complexity, messiness, dialogue, nuance, and breaking of formulas – are frequently linked to literature in aesthetic theory. Indeed, Amanda Anderson has noted, after offering caveats acknowledging “the long and varied history of thinking on the aesthetic,” how “the aesthetic, as a governing orientation of the field, involves a broad spectrum of values associated with complexity, difficulty, variousness, ambiguity,

⁸⁶ David Foster Wallace, “David Foster Wallace,” interview by Dave Eggers, *The Believer*, November 2003, http://www.believmag.com/issues/200311/?read=interview_wallace.

⁸⁷ Ibid. For more on Wallace’s personal and professional engagement with politics, see Andrew Warren, “Wallace and Politics,” *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 173-189.

undecidability, hermeneutic open-endedness and threshold experiences.”⁸⁸ Wallace’s formulation of literary publicness gets its clearest statement in this interview: it is his “own belief [...] that since fictionists or literary-type writers are supposed to have some special interest in empathy, in trying to imagine what it’s like to be the other guy, they might have some useful part to play in a political conversation that’s having the problems ours is.”⁸⁹ Having made this argument for literature’s discursively recuperative abilities, however, Wallace also immediately problematizes his position: “implicit in this brief, shrill answer, though, is obviously the idea that at least some political writing should be Platonically disinterested, should rise above the fray, etc.; and in my own present case this is impossible (and so I am a hypocrite, an ideological opponent could say).”⁹⁰ Yet by imagining the other perspective, Wallace is also modelling here the behaviour he has just endorsed. Hering has outlined how Wallace completed the bulk of the novel’s composition in the four years following this interview,⁹¹ and Boswell notes that, in the interview, Wallace “seems to be speaking very much in the language of” *The Pale King*.⁹² If this is the case, we might be led to wonder what other behaviours, norms, and ideals Wallace models in *The Pale King*.

The conversation in §19 that I earlier highlighted is key to understanding how Wallace models his literary publicness, especially the section’s formal qualities. Kelly has traced Wallace’s development as a writer across his novels with specific reference to scenes of dialogue. Applying Bakhtin’s conception of monologic and dialogic notions of truth, Kelly suggests that Wallace’s fiction increasingly moves towards dialogism,

⁸⁸ Amanda Anderson, “The Liberal Aesthetic,” in *Theory After ‘Theory,’* eds. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 253.

⁸⁹ Wallace, *The Believer*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 123-163.

⁹² Marshall Boswell, “Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*,” in *David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 211.

wherein forms of speech “emphasize responsivity and open communication with others in the joint pursuit of truth.”⁹³ Wallace’s particular employment of dialogism “rests in the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel when addressing others,” so that when the process of speech “becomes genuinely dialogic in Bakhtin’s sense – when truth appears to be generated ‘between people’ – something important has occurred in Wallace’s ethical world: the means have become the ends.”⁹⁴ If §19 – with its informed, rational, and considered arguments – can “be read as Wallace’s depiction of what an informed and open conversation about American political and intellectual history might look like,”⁹⁵ however, it is not immediately obvious that Wallace’s literary publicness is Bakhtinian in character (that is, founded on multiplicity, alterity, affect, and “interhuman [...] relations that are not simply cognitive or narrowly ‘rational’”).⁹⁶ Rather, we might initially be tempted to take Wallace as aligning with a Habermasian view.

In §19, DeWitt Glendenning’s reminder that he is “not a political scientist” evokes the ideal of popular inclusion, and his suggestion that “the concrete reality of [civic decline’s] consequences” are of utmost importance also endorses a Habermasian discursive model, focussed as it is on tangible outcomes.⁹⁷ So too does Nichols’s comment that “politics is about consensus.”⁹⁸ Furthermore, several deferent phrases recur throughout the conversation, gesturing towards idealised civil discourse – “that example makes it a lot easier to see your point”; “let him finish”; “this is just my opinion.”⁹⁹ The dialogue is unattributed, echoing the Habermasian ideal that it should not matter who is delivering an argument, and the conversation avoids the kind of partisan positioning

⁹³ Kelly, “Novel of Ideas,” 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁶ Michael Gardiner, “Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on Dialogue, Everyday Life and the Public Sphere,” *Sociological Review* 52, (2004): 45.

⁹⁷ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 137.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141; 146; 149.

Wallace laments in his essay “Host,” as he “is not particularly interested,” Kelly claims, “in dividing the positions of his characters into traditional liberal/conservative or left/right binaries.”¹⁰⁰ There are other traces of Habermasian dialogue in the novel to make this case with, too. One such scene takes place between two examiners, Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion. Rand is a “legendarily attractive but not universally popular” examiner, while Drinion is described by colleagues as “a total lump in terms of personality, possibly the dumbest human being currently alive.”¹⁰¹ As Mary K. Holland notes, when Rand asks questions, Drinion “responds to her perfectly logically, speaking of ‘true answers,’” and engaging in critical reflection about his own positions.¹⁰² Could we think of Drinion as a Habermasian subject, then? It is not just his habit of critical reflection that suggests so. Habermas’s focus on rationality in his theorisation of the public sphere has been criticised for not paying due attention to “the embodied experiences and activities of actual people in the context of their everyday lives.”¹⁰³ Gardiner suggests that “there is a Habermasian subject, but it is a rather insubstantial entity, one marked by an interchangeable, ‘minimalist’ body (mainly having to do with the human capacity for labour), subtended by a rational mind that engages in purposive dialogue and moral reflection.”¹⁰⁴ Drinion himself is primarily defined through his capacity for labour, as a “very solid [...] examiner,” one “several orders of magnitude more effective than Rand.”¹⁰⁵ Drinion’s definition as a worker is linked directly to his ability to pay deep attention to whatever he is doing, a trait that manifests in this scene as a literal minimisation of his body – at the start of the section, it is noted that “he’s there

¹⁰⁰ Kelly, “Novel of Ideas,” 15.

¹⁰¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 449; 450.

¹⁰² Mary K. Holland, “‘By Hirsute Author’: Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58, no. 1 (2016): 9.

¹⁰³ Gardiner, “Wild Publics,” 31.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ Wallace, *The Pale King*, 450; 460.

but in an unusual way; he becomes part of the table's environment, like the air or ambient light."¹⁰⁶ As the scene progresses, Drinion becomes literally weightless: at first, his "bottom is hovering very slightly [...] above the seat of his wooden chair"; later, "no part of his bottom or back is touching the chair."¹⁰⁷

Yet Drinion's presentation as a Habermasian subject is not without an implied critique from Wallace, not least because Drinion is linked to technology. When Rand recalls a conversation with a health worker, describing them as a "computer [who] can't proceed until you give the properly formatted answer," she claims that the experience was "a little bit like talking to" Drinion.¹⁰⁸ This comparison aligns Drinion, and the Habermasian rationality which he represents, with the negative side of Wallace's oppositional complex. Indeed, upon further inspection, we can identify one simple reason that Wallace cannot endorse the mode of discussion that Drinion represents – his conversation with Rand entails no actual communication. As Holland notes,

the asexuality that allows Drinion to pay concerted, unself-conscious attention to [the intimidatingly attractive Rand] amounts to total disaffection rather than any kind of care. [...] The result is that he is never in conversation, merely processing information according to his own interests [...] and] his utter self-containment short-circuits the communication cycle it seemingly enabled.¹⁰⁹

Drinion's disaffection can be taken as a critique of a Habermasian model, in which, Stanley Aronowitz claims, "the public sphere is always a *restricted* space," dependent upon "the separation of knowledge from interest, manifested in the ability of the intellect to transcend the materiality of the body, including emotion."¹¹⁰ Throughout the rest of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 450.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 470; 471.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 471

¹⁰⁹ Holland, "'By Hirsute Author'," 9.

¹¹⁰ Stanley Aronowitz, "Is a Democracy Possible?: The Decline of the Public in American Debate," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 91.

The Pale King, as I have shown, Wallace actively asserts that “all cultural formation is embodied and interested,” with the attendant hope that such recognition means that “antidemocratic exclusions” along these lines cannot continue.¹¹¹ If Drinion’s and Rand’s conversation cannot evince the dialogic qualities of §19, then, this is partly because where Drinion is an affectless drone in dialogue, the interlocutors of the elevator scene are resolutely not. Revisiting the elevator conversation with these affective qualities in mind, then, will reveal Wallace’s literary publicness as far less Habermasian than it is Bakhtinain – that is to say, as interested in dialogue as an end in itself, rather than as instrumental means.

The dialogue of §19 is at times heated, as one would perhaps expect from a political topic, and at several points during the discussion, a character referred to as ‘X’ interjects with fair questions and commentary only to be (comically) threatened by one of his interlocutors: “If you don’t shut up I’m going to put you up on the roof of the elevator and you can stay there”; “I’ll throw you off this elevator, X, I swear to God I will”; “let me throw him off, Mr. G., I’m pleading with you.”¹¹² These comments draw attention to the personal relationships between these characters, and their affective reactions to the rational points raised in conversation – as does the meandering nature of the topic. By the dialogue’s conclusion, its instigator, DeWitt Glendenning, notes that “we’re now very very very far afield from what I started out trying to describe as my thinking about taxpayers’ relation to the government,” this being in part due to Glendenning’s attempt to strengthen his argument with an appeal to the personal (which itself stems from his own emotional reaction to the debate):

“I’m regretting this conversation more and more. It – you like movies?”

¹¹¹ Ibid, 91-2.

¹¹² Wallace, *The Pale King*, 137; 139; 143.

“You bet.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Nothing like cozying up on a rainy evening with a Betamax and a good film.”¹¹³

More than any of this, however, it is Nichols’s contribution that persuades me of the importance of affect to Wallace’s view of the public sphere. Nichols suggests that the story of “civic decline” in America “goes beyond politics, civics,” and is “almost more a matter of metaphysics,” or perhaps “existential.”¹¹⁴ He ruminates on “the individual US citizen’s deep fear [... of] our smallness, our insignificance and mortality,” imagining both a future where he will not be remembered, and a past whose inhabitants he knows nothing about.¹¹⁵ He links the avoidance of this fear that “we’re all less than a million breaths away from an oblivion more total than we can even bring ourselves to even try to imagine” with the “manic US obsession with production,” and suggests that a person’s “terror of not really ever even existing makes them that much more susceptible to the ontological siren song of the corporate buy-to-stand-out-and-so-exist gestalt.”¹¹⁶ By placing Nichols’s rumination on the vulnerability and irrationality of human affect within this particular dialogue, and by having him be carried away on a personalised tangent (“not only will I have passed away but it will be like I was never here, and people in 2104 or whatever will no more think of Stuart A. Nichols Jr”) Wallace considers how such affects play out in public discourse.¹¹⁷

This is not simply humanistic pondering on Wallace’s part – “hundreds of empirical studies have provided support for the theory by confirming something called

¹¹³ Ibid, 149; 139.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 145. Nichols is here echoing the sentiment of an earlier statement about technology, when the author-character David Wallace writes that he “can’t think anyone really believes that today’s so-called ‘information society’ is just about information. Everyone knows it’s about something else, way down” (Ibid, 87).

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 145.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 145; 151.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 145.

the mortality salience hypothesis,” which shows that fear of death “can amplify nationalism and intensify bias against other groups.”¹¹⁸ Clearly there is a danger to ignoring the effects of affect in political life. As Chantal Mouffe has outlined, in an argument that runs in parallel with much of the elevator dialogue’s, “by privileging rationality, both the deliberative and the aggregative perspectives [on the public sphere] leave aside a central element which is the crucial role played by passions and affects in securing allegiance to democratic values.”¹¹⁹ For Mouffe, a functioning democracy requires “providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves.”¹²⁰ Her model of public discourse, which she names ‘agonistic pluralism,’ involves identifying those with whom we debate as ‘adversaries’ rather than as ‘enemies’ – that is, as legitimate opponents in a public sphere underwritten by the shared ethico-political principles of liberty and equality. Mouffe concludes her vision by gesturing to the future: “By warning us against the illusion that a fully achieved democracy could ever be instantiated, [‘agonistic pluralism’] forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive.”¹²¹ In her monograph on the author, Clare Hayes-Brady argues that “the persistent structural and stylistic resistance to closure that marks Wallace’s work” in fact stems from “a dogged and sometimes uneasy pluralism,” one which “emerges as a fundamentally political invocation of free will.”¹²² She suggests that an Aristotelian notion of perfectibility runs through all his work, a concept which conversely “precludes the achievement of perfection, focusing instead on constant improvement.”¹²³ In Hayes-Brady’s reading,

¹¹⁸ Bobby Azarian, “How the Fear of Death Makes People More Right-Wing,” *Aeon*, 17 November, 2016, <https://aeon.co/ideas/how-the-fear-of-death-makes-people-more-right-wing/>.

¹¹⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 95.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 103.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 105.

¹²² Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 9.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 30.

Wallace's Perfectionist resistance to ending, and the concomitant commitment to process are a fundamentally political series of actions, seeking to draw readers out of the search for finality, and toward a comfort with ambiguity that would allow for simultaneous conservative and liberal politics.¹²⁴

This recurrent element of Wallace's work highlights his alignment with Mouffe's vision of agonistic pluralism, and points us to the ideal outcome of his form of literary publicness – which is to say, Wallace hopes for no final outcome at all, but rather an ongoing debate along agonistic, pluralistic lines.

Wallace's literary publicness presents as a patchwork of ideas that reflect his consistent interest in the validity of multiple perspectives. His writing's resistance to finality echoes Mouffe's call for an endlessly renewing democratic project, aligning his literary publicness with agonistic ends. And following the Bakhtinian idea that dialogue necessarily expresses “a wide range of moral, cognitive, aesthetic and affective qualities, designed to provoke active responses and express broader perspectives and world-views,” Wallace's literary publicness acknowledges the importance of affect, and the contingency of individual identity.¹²⁵ Wallace situates reading as the central task of his literary publicness, in part because, as an activity, it captures this notion of contingent response. But he also hopes that focussing on reading will highlight the public sphere's need for shared points of reference in an era when it is overwhelmed by information. As Wallace outlines in his essay on conservative talk radio, “Host,” acknowledging the contingency of individual views must not simply lead to “a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which ‘the truth’ is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda” – while “in some respects all this variety is probably good, productive of difference and dialogue and so on, [...] it can also be confusing for the average citizen,” and instantiate an inert public

¹²⁴ Ibid, 30.

¹²⁵ Gardiner, “Wild Publics,” 36.

sphere.¹²⁶ If “it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin,” as Wallace claims, then his literary publicness might also highlight the need for a new, civically minded literary canon – if we are reading the same things, he seems to suggest, then at least we can argue about the same things.¹²⁷ Indeed, this is an apposite idea to bear in mind alongside how Wallace’s own work is considered in the public sphere, as the questions of how to read Wallace’s writing, and whether it should even be read at all, are increasingly being asked in public debates about canonisation and canonicity.

On Reading DFW

Wallace’s orientation towards a Bakhtinian view of the novel as something “understood more as a process that never achieves a resolution,” is clearly important to understanding the politics of his use of form, but it is also notably literalised in the story of *The Pale King*’s publication.¹²⁸ Wallace died before the novel was completed, and the text was compiled, ordered, and edited by Michael Pietsch. Given Wallace’s view of meaningful truth as something dependent on context, we might view the construction of *The Pale King*’s contributions to debates as at least partly a result of Pietsch’s creative labour, as well as of Wallace’s. We might think of *The Pale King*, then, as representing a peculiarly dialogic process of composition. But just as in *Purity* Franzen grappled with the knowledge that his model of literary publicness would be threatened by circulation within the public sphere, Wallace’s attempt at creating a literary publicness founded on dialogism is complicated by how his writing is considered. Indeed, as David Hering suggests, Wallace’s attempts at dialogism are arguably most “threatened by [his]

¹²⁶ David Foster Wallace, “Host,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2005), 284.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹²⁸ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), 44.

increasing fame, and his emergence into the public sphere as a writer with a particular and idiosyncratic register.”¹²⁹ If this was the case while Wallace was alive and writing, events since his death have undeniably complicated matters even further.

The internet’s role in mediating how literature is considered in the public sphere in the twenty-first century cannot be overstated, particularly in Wallace’s case. More than any of the other authors I have included in this thesis, online forums have structured popular conversations about Wallace. As Kelly writes, “Wallace was the first major writer to live and die in the internet age [...] and his growing reputation gained vital cultural traction owing to that brand new medium,” initially via a listserv, and the fan website *The Howling Fantods*.¹³⁰ This trend only increased after Wallace’s death in 2008. After the memorials came the canonisation – as Max noted in response to the release of the 2015 Wallace biopic *The End of the Tour*, “fewer people know DFW as a writer than as a public figure, and that figure is a sort of laical saint, a professor of gentle, sustaining wisdom to whom we can turn in moments of confusion.”¹³¹ This process is encapsulated by the response to a video version of Wallace’s Kenyon College commencement speech, which he delivered in 2005. The video’s makers edited Wallace’s lengthy speech down to five minutes, and compiled a series of filmed scenes of the situations that Wallace describes, for which his address acts as the soundtrack. The video gained over 4.2 million views in just over a week, and surely perpetuated the sagely image of the posthumous

¹²⁹ Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 8.

¹³⁰ Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline,” *Irish Journal of American Studies*, no. 2 (2010), <http://ijas.iaas.ie>.

¹³¹ D. T. Max, “Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped as a Secular Saint,” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/09/david-foster-wallace-worshipped-secular-saint/>.

Wallace, one completely abstracted from his writing.¹³² As Lorentzen has it, Wallace's entry "into the cultural maelstrom [...] has flattened him."¹³³

Yet Wallace's reception since this time is perhaps best summed up less by virality than by another, more recent, internet phenomenon – the 'Milkshake Duck.' This phrase, a runner up in Oxford Dictionaries' words of 2017, refers to "a person or character on social media that appears to be endearing at first, but is found to have an unappealing back story."¹³⁴ A selection of headlines from the past few years, much like those that I highlighted at the start of this chapter reporting Wallace's prescience, tell their own story: "Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace," "Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me," and "Enough David Foster Wallace, Already! We Need to Read Beyond Our Bubbles."¹³⁵ Mark McGurl's claim that any description of Wallace's work "seems insufficient without some account also of his readership, that social body to which his works are directed and in which they seek completion," is given a new spin by these pieces.¹³⁶ Their authors all address important issues to do with gender, canonicity, and cultural capital, but are open to varying degrees to the charge that their criticism is more to do with how literature circulates in the public sphere than it is to do with Wallace

¹³² Judith Grey, "Here's How An 8-Year-Old David Foster Wallace Speech Suddenly Became A Viral Video Hit," *Business Insider*, May 14 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/>.

¹³³ Christian Lorentzen, "The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace," *Vulture*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.vulture.com/2015/06/rewriting-of-david-foster-wallace.html/>. See also Robert Chodat, *The Matter of High Words: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Postwar Sage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 237-303.

¹³⁴ "'Youthquake' declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries," *BBC News*, December 15, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42361859/>.

¹³⁵ Molly Fischer, "Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace," *The Cut*, August 12, 2015, <https://www.thecut.com/>; Deidre Coyle, "Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me," *Electric Lit*, April 17, 2017, <https://electricliterature.com/>; Jessa Crispin, "Enough David Foster Wallace, Already! We Need to Read Beyond our Bubbles," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

¹³⁶ Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 29.

himself (“this conversation is not about David Foster Wallace at all, of course,” one admits).¹³⁷

Acknowledging the “litany of seriously inappropriate and dangerous behaviour” that Wallace is known to have enacted during his life, Hayes-Brady also asks whether “we need to excuse the behavior in order to read the work.”¹³⁸ Once again, although surely not in the way that he intended, reading Wallace becomes an act of valuation: “We as scholars of contemporary writing get to decide what we think is important despite and because of all its flaws.”¹³⁹ For my part, I agree that any conversation about Wallace’s impact on literary culture must retain a central place for the work itself.¹⁴⁰ In fact, in Wallace’s case, attention to his writing might even serve to settle some such disputes (or at least to nuance them). Tackling the important and increasingly discussed issue of gender in his work, for example, Holland demonstrates how, while Wallace’s “insight into gender contained its own considerable blindnesses,” it is undeniable that “he consistently struggled, in his fiction and nonfiction, to expose beastly assertions of power over women, and to avoid solipsistic assertions of authorial power over readers,” while simultaneously “exposing the limits – inherent in the roles of self and author – of all past, present, and future attempts to do so, including his own.”¹⁴¹

For Amy Hungerford, however, whose essay “On Not Reading DFW” details her decision to refuse to read any of Wallace’s work, arguments like Holland’s miss the

¹³⁷ Crispin, “Enough David Foster Wallace.”

¹³⁸ Clare Hayes-Brady, “David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady,” interview by Steve Paulson, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 10, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ It should be noted that this is also the end to which some of Wallace’s critics are working – “I would like him to become just another writer,” Kristen Roupenian says, “imbued with no moral authority beyond what is contained in his words on the page” (Kristen Roupenian, “This Should Not Be A Love Story: Reading DT Max’s Biography Of David Foster Wallace,” *Thought Catalog*, September 12, 2012, <https://thoughtcatalog.com/kristen-roupenian/>).

¹⁴¹ Holland, “‘By Hirsute Author’,” 11.

broader point to be made about gender and contemporary literary production. For Hungerford, the biographical details of Wallace's often misogynistic behaviour, and the criticism about his work that she has read, combine to convince her that she need not engage with the author's oeuvre. Hungerford's piece is a well-composed defence of her decision, but precisely because of her refusal it cannot be taken as an effective critique of Wallace's work. Not that Hungerford intends her piece to be this – rather, it functions as a provocative but eloquent elucidation of “a professional decision about resource allocation,” and “developments in the cultural conditions under which literature is made now.”¹⁴² Hungerford has plenty to say about literature's circulation in particular public spheres, particularly the professionalized realm of academic criticism. She poses an important question: “Is it ever acceptable, as a professional matter, to refuse the culture's rising call to attend to a literary work?”¹⁴³ Yet the question seems answerable in the affirmative easily enough, especially given, as she later points out, that “as a culture and as a profession [...] we are daily embracing the decision not to read” any number of works.¹⁴⁴

Ironically, of course, Hungerford's concerns about abundance, refusal, overproduction, and uncertainty, “problem[s] for every person on earth who has an internet connection,” are the very same problems that Wallace explores in *The Pale King*.¹⁴⁵ She points to Wallace's commencement address as evidence that he understands the power of choosing what to think about, but also seems to fault him (or, rather, the cultural processes that perpetuate his canonisation) for not appreciating the broader forces at work in our decision-making, for not questioning the possibility of such

¹⁴² Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 142; 160.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

autonomy in the first place. Yet as I have shown in this chapter, *The Pale King* works to nuance such a view, in great depth and with reference to a number of contemporary constraints on agency. If Hungerford were to read *The Pale King*, she might even find herself connecting with Wallace's depictions of reading – her essay likewise reminds us that “we do not read alone,” and that, “happily, readers will talk.”¹⁴⁶ When we talk about our experiences of reading, we might even think of ourselves as participating in exactly the kind of recuperative discourse that Wallace's final novel sought to explore. Whether we succeed or not is a matter of perspective. This is just my opinion.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 167.

Conclusion: Modelling Citizens

In an essay ruminating on the internet's often contradictory effects on public life ("more public shamelessness yet more public shaming; a threat to privacy side by side with a growth in anonymous communication"), Benjamin Kunkel acknowledges the difficulty of trying to pin down the relationship between the internet and the public sphere.¹ "The temptation," he claims, "is to throw up your hands and just say that, thanks to the internet, the public sphere contains more of everything: more exposure, privacy, publicity, anonymity, truth, lies, opinion, information, pornography, culture, advertising – though probably not more art."² I am uncertain about the veracity of Kunkel's final claim here, that the internet has not led to an increase in art's circulation in the public sphere (for one thing, it is unclear what qualifies as 'art' in this context). But in this thesis, I have been less interested in this claim than in its inverse: the idea that, thanks to the internet, art contains more of the public sphere. While future research may be able to expand the scope of inquiry to include aesthetic forms other than novels, and stage a comparison of the public sphere's treatment in artworks of different periods, in this thesis I have been able to show that a range of contemporary authors critically engage not only with how their work circulates in the public sphere, but also with the concept of the public sphere itself.

The contemporary novels that I have surveyed can be broadly grouped as responses to the internet's effects on public life, but they identify diverse (sometimes even conflicting) pressures on the public sphere, and their suggested solutions vary accordingly. A central part of this thesis's original contribution to literary studies, then,

¹ Benjamin Kunkel, "Drawn and Quartered on the Internet," *n+1*, Autumn 2008, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-7/essays/drawn-and-quartered-on-the-internet/>.

² *Ibid.*

has been its identification of one key locus of the relationship between the internet and contemporary fiction. The authors whose work I have addressed find an entry point for critical consideration of the internet in the concept of the public sphere – for them, it provides a stable node in the technology’s nebulous network of effects on contemporary life. By detailing this shared interest, I have demonstrated that there are trends in how Anglophone authors write about the internet that extend beyond description and analysis of the use of technology itself – these writers are also interested in the internet’s complex effects on social structures and modes of political engagement. Yet as I have noted, if an interest in the internet’s effects on the public sphere unites these authors, their perspectives on those effects are by no means unitary. Each chapter of this dissertation has presented a different answer to the same question: how might literature help to refigure a public sphere under threat? I have situated these responses at different points along a continuum of discursive agency, from a view of the public sphere in which writers maintain authoritative sway over publics at one end, to a model in which the agency of readers is paramount at the other.

I have showed how Jonathan Franzen locates the public sphere’s primary problem in the transformation of journalism – with fewer and fewer universally trusted voices and sources in the public sphere, he suggests, citizens are faced with a crisis of authority. His solution is to reaffirm the authority of the author figure, but his appeals to his own personal authority falter alongside his simultaneous critique of celebrity authorship. For Dave Eggers, the internet’s most significant threat to the public sphere lies in how the platforms that internet users most commonly engage with are rewriting the norms of public discussion. Because of this, his model of writerly authority rests on an author’s association with ethical institutions, which can underwrite their interventions in the public sphere. For Zadie Smith, however, focussing on the

authority of writers creates an unhelpful hierarchy, and blaming institutions for refiguring the public sphere leaves too much room to dismiss the agency of individuals. The public sphere, in Smith's view, must take seriously the concept of power – her response is to reaffirm the importance of discursive parity between writers and readers. David Foster Wallace concludes this spectrum of discursive agency. While he highlights a similar problem to Franzen, namely the public sphere's saturation with information of questionable reliability and importance, the authors' solutions sit at opposite ends of this continuum – for Wallace, the internet's abundance of information produces a discursive environment in which reading processes must take centre stage.

By articulating their responses to the contemporary public sphere's problems through literary forms, styles, voices, processes, and ideas, these authors all model modes of being in public that emerge from, or are inextricably linked to, literature. I have referred to these modes as different forms of *literary publicness*. Bringing the concepts of literature and the public sphere into dialogue is by no means without precedent – as I have shown, there is a rich history of criticism detailing the relationship between the two categories. But despite this wealth of academic inquiry, as I also mentioned in my introduction, the role of literature and culture has remained a “lacuna in the theory of the public sphere.”³ By naming and outlining four models of literary publicness, I have helped to fill this gap – I have detailed an important role that literature plays in the public sphere (namely the modelling of discursive norms, ideals, practices, and values), and clarified how novels circulate in the political public sphere both as argumentative contributions, and as objects of discursive consideration.

³ Jostein Gripsrud et al., “Editors’ Introduction,” in *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader*, eds. Gripsrud et. al (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), “Editors’ Introduction,” xxi.

In my examination of the strategies that these authors use to model modes of literary publicness, I have tried to situate literary form (and readers' experiences of it) as central to our understanding of the public sphere's relationship with literature, following from Rita Felski's belief that "any 'textual politics' worth its weight will have to work its way through the particularities of aesthetic experience rather than bypassing them."⁴ Indeed, the authors that I have addressed all broadcast a similar belief, and foreground how the particular formal affordances of literature can help to model ideal behaviours for democratic citizens. To identify these behaviours, however – be they association with ethical institutions or acceptance of agonistic debate as democratically productive – we must read these authors' texts critically. Indeed, my notion of literary publicness relies upon a particular mode of academic engagement with texts – the features that I have highlighted emerge from close reading, and the reconstruction of rich intellectual, cultural, and sociological contexts. Yet as Felski points out, this is not the only way in which we read. In her *Uses of Literature*, Felski calls on scholars to "engage seriously with ordinary motives for reading – such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape – that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship."⁵ Future research might well be able to nuance the notion of literary publicness by attending more fully to how "the use of the term 'reading' in literary studies [can] encompass quite disparate activities."⁶ Indeed, doing so would also help to expand critical theory's conception of the public sphere itself – as Michael Warner has noted, "activities of reading that do not fit the ideology of reading as silent, private, replicable decoding – curling up, mumbling, fantasizing,

⁴ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 11. For another explication of the links between aesthetic experience and politics, see Thomas Docherty, *Aesthetic Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 14.

⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

gesticulating, ventriloquizing, writing marginalia, and so on – [...] find no counterparts in public agency.”⁷

What would literary publicness look like if it were to make room for such diverse modes of reading? Although it has not been possible to answer this question in this thesis, I have been able to introduce the concept of literary publicness and lay the groundwork for future interventions of this kind. Indeed, it is my hope that the question of literature’s role in the public sphere will be taken up further and more frequently in literary studies. If the (admittedly small) public that this thesis addresses have been convinced of anything, I hope it is of the importance of the public as a category and idea – both to democracy and to literature. A functional public sphere underwrites democratic action, and substantive public discourse faces myriad existential threats in the internet age. As William Davies notes, “unless [...] institutions can rediscover aspects of the original liberal impulse” that gave rise to the idea and ideal of the public sphere (“to keep different domains of power separate, and put the disinterested pursuit of knowledge before the pursuit of profit”) then “no quantity of facts will be sufficient to resist” the decline of the public.⁸ The novels that I have read in this thesis, however, do attempt to provide one form of such resistance, recognising their implication in this struggle – after all, “one thing that [the] diverse professions and authorities [most present in the public sphere] have in common is that they trade primarily in words and symbols.”⁹ If “the infrastructure of fact has been undermined in part by a combination of technology and market forces,” then perhaps it is no wonder that fiction writers are increasingly looking to the infrastructure of their own forms to provide an alternative.¹⁰

⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 123.

⁸ William Davies, “Why We Stopped Trusting Elites,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/29/why-we-stopped-trusting-elites-the-new-populism>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Further to their modelling of particular modes of literary publicness, these novels ask us to be mindful of how our own use of words and symbols will contribute to, or detract from, public life. Franzen, Eggers, Smith, and Wallace remind us in their work that we cannot avoid the public sphere in the internet age – for readers and writers alike, it is a fundamental part of our political lives, and a concept that we should be discussing with each other as much as possible.

Bibliography

List of Works Consulted

Adams, Tim. "Facebook's Week of Shame: The Cambridge Analytica Fallout." *The Guardian*. March 24, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/24/facebook-week-of-shame-data-breach-observer-revelations-zuckerberg-silence>.

Allen, David S. *Democracy, Inc.: The Press and Law in the Corporate Rationalization of the Public Sphere*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Alter, Robert. *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Altes, Liesbeth Korthals. *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

Anderson, Amanda. "The Liberal Aesthetic." In *Theory After 'Theory,'* edited by Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, 249-262. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.

Araya, Jorge. "Why the Whiteness? Race in *The Pale King*." In *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, edited by Philip Coleman, 238-251. Ipswich: Salem Press, 2015.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 1951. Reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 2004.

- Aronowitz, Stanley. "Is a Democracy Possible?: The Decline of the Public in American Debate." In *The Phantom Public Sphere*, edited by Bruce Robbins, 75-92. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Asen, Robert. "Introduction: Neoliberalism and the Public Sphere." *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 171-175.
- Asen, Robert. "Neoliberalism, the Public Sphere, and a Public Good." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 4 (2017): 329-349.
- Atwood, Margaret. "When Privacy Is Theft." *The New York Review of Books*. November 21, 2013. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/11/21/eggers-circle-when-privacy-is-theft/>.
- Azarian, Bobby. "How the Fear of Death Makes People More Right-Wing." *Aeon*. November 17, 2016. <https://aeon.co/ideas/how-the-fear-of-death-makes-people-more-right-wing/>.
- Baker, Keith Michael. "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 181-211. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Banfield, Ann. "From 'Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction.'" In *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, edited by Michael McKeon, 515-536. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Baron, Naomi S. *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

- Baskin, Jon. "Jonathan Franzen Withdraws." *The Nation*. October 8, 2015.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/politics-as-pathology/>.
- BBC News. "'Youthquake' declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries." *BBC News*. December 15, 2017. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42361859/>.
- Bell, Emily and Taylor Owen. "The Platform Press: How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism." *Columbia Journalism Review*. March 29, 2017.
https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/platform-press-how-silicon-valley-reengineered-journalism.php/.
- Benhabib, Seyla. "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 73-98. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Bennett, Paula Bernat. *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Berman, Art. *Preface to Modernism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Biggs, Joanna. "Whomph!" *London Review of Books*. December 1, 2016.
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n23/joanna-biggs/whomph>.
- Birkerts, Sven. *Changing the Subject: Art and Attention in the Internet Age*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015.
- Bissell, Tom. "Everything About Everything: David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest' at 20." *The New York Times*. February 1, 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/books/review/everything-about-everything-david-foster-wallaces-infinite-jest-at-20/>.

- Blinderman, Ilia. "David Foster Wallace Talks About Literature (and More) in an Internet Chatroom: Read the 1996 Transcript." *Open Culture*. January 28, 2014. <http://www.openculture.com/2014/01/david-foster-wallace-talks-about-literature-and-more-in-an-internet-chatroom-read-the-1996-transcript/>.
- Boggs, Carl. *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*. New York: Guilford Press, 2000.
- Bohman, James. "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy." *Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (2004): 131-155.
- Bolger, Robert K., and Scott Korb, eds. *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Boswell, Marshall, ed. *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Boswell, Marshall. "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*." In *David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing': New Essays on the Novels*, edited by Marshall Boswell, 209-226. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Boswell, Marshall, and Stephen J. Burn, eds. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods." In *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 74-111. Edited by Randal Johnson. Translated by Richard Nice. 1977. Reprint, Cambridge: Polity, 1993.

Boxall, Peter. *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Boxall, Peter. *The Value of the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Brenkman, John. "Mass Media: From Collective Experience to the Culture of Privatization." *Social Text* 1 (1979): 94-109.

Bromwich, Jonah Engel. "'Cat Person' in The New Yorker: A Discussion with the Author." *The New York Times*. December 11, 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/books/cat-person-new-yorker.html>.

Brooks, Ryan M. "Conflict Before Compromise: A Response to Rachel Greenwald Smith." *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose and Thought* 4 (May 2015).
<http://theaccountmagazine.com/?article=forum-on-compromise-aesthetics>.

Brown, Wendy. *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2015.

Burbules, Nicholas C. and Suzanne Rice. "Dialogue across Difference: Continuing the Conversation." *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (1991): 393-416.

Burger, Thomas. "Translator's Note." In Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, xv. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. 1962. Reprint, Cambridge: Polity, 1989.

- Burn, Stephen J. *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. London: Continuum, 2009.
- Burn, Stephen J. "Second-Generation Postmoderns." In *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, edited by Brian McHale and Len Platt, 450-464. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Butsch, Richard, ed. *Media and Public Spheres*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Calhoun, Craig. "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 1-50. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Carbajal, Alberto Fernández. "On Being Queer and Postcolonial: Reading Zadie Smith's *NW* Through Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 1 (2016): 76-91.
- Carlson, Matt. *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read, and Remember*. London: Atlantic Books, 2011.
- Carter, David, and Kay Ferres. "The Public Life of Literature." In *Culture in Australia: Policies, Publics and Programs*, edited by David Carter and Tony Bennett, 140-60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. 2nd ed. London: Wiley, 2000.

- Chotiner, Isaac. "Jonathan Franzen on Fame, Fascism, and Why He Won't Write a Book About Race." *Slate*. July 31, 2016.
http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/interrogation/2016/07/a_conversation_with_novelist_jonathan_franzen.html.
- Ciccoricco, David. *Reading Network Fiction*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007.
- Clare, Ralph, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Clare, Ralph. *Fictions Inc.: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014.
- Cohen, Joshua. *Book of Numbers*. London: Vintage, 2015.
- Cohen, Joshua. "No One Hates Him More." *London Review of Books*. November 7, 2013. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n21/joshua-cohen/no-one-hates-him-more>.
- Cohen, Joshua. "Joshua Cohen: Book of Numbers." By Michael Silverblatt. *KCRW*, podcast audio. March 10, 2016. <http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/joshua-cohen-book-of-numbers>.
- Cohen, Noam. "The Libertarian Logic of Peter Thiel." *Wired*. December 27, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/the-libertarian-logic-of-peter-thiel>.
- Cohen, Samuel S., and Lee Konstantinou, eds. *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Coyle, Deidre. "Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me." *Electric Lit*. April 17, 2017. <https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me-7889a9dc6f03/>.

- Crispin, Jessa. "Enough David Foster Wallace, Already! We Need to Read Beyond Our Bubbles." *The Guardian*. April 21, 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/apr/21/>
- Croteau, David and William Hoynes. *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Newbury Park: Pine Forge Press, 2006.
- Cuddy-Keane, Melba. *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Dahlberg, Lincoln. "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7, no. 1 (2001). <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2001.tb00137.x/full>.
- Dahlberg, Lincoln. "The Internet and Discursive Exclusion: From Deliberative to Agonistic Public Sphere Theory." In *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, edited by Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, 128-147. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Dahlgren, Peter. *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy, and the Media*. London: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Davies, William. "Why We Stopped Trusting Elites." *The Guardian*. November 29, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/29/why-we-stopped-trusting-elites-the-new-populism>.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

- Dawson, Paul. *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013.
- Dean, Jodi. "Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere." *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 95-112.
- Dentith, Simon. *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1995.
- Dickens, Charles. "Charles Dickens on Administrative Reform." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. October 4, 1855. Available at *The National Library of Australia* website: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/12980779/>.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. 1881. Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Dinnen, Zara. *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Dixon, William and David Wilson. *A History of Homo Economicus: The Nature of the Moral in Economic Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Docherty, Thomas. *Aesthetic Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Doctorow, Cory. *Information Doesn't Want to Be Free: Laws for the Internet Age*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2014.
- Doty, Jeffrey S. *Shakespeare, Popularity and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

- Downey, John. "Participation and/or Deliberation? The Internet as a Tool for Achieving Radical Democratic Aims." In *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, edited by Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, 108-127. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Dulk, Allard den. *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Function of Criticism*. 1984. Reprint, London: Verso, 2000.
- Eberly, Rosa A. *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Eggers, Dave. "Behind the Cover Story: Dave Eggers on Imagining the Future World of Over-Sharing." By Claire Gutierrez. *The 6th Floor*. September 28, 2013. <https://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/28/behind-the-cover-story-dave-eggers-on-imagining-the-future-world-of-over-sharing/>.
- Eggers, Dave. "A Brief Q&A with Dave Eggers About His New Novel, 'The Circle.'" By McSweeney's. *McSweeney's*. September 27, 2013. <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-brief-q-a-with-dave-eggers-about-his-new-novel-the-circle/>.
- Eggers, Dave. *The Circle*. London: Penguin, 2013.
- Eggers, Dave. "Dave Eggers: 'I Always Picture Trump Hiding Under a Table.'" By Paul Laity. *The Guardian*. June 22, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/22/dave-eggers-interview-circle-lifters>.

Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. 2000. Reprint, London: Picador, 2001.

Eggers, Dave. *The Monk of Mokha*. London: Penguin, 2018.

Eggers, Dave. "The Right to a Life Offline." In Margaret Atwood, Bill McKibben, Anne Enright, James Bridle, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Josh Cohen, Olivia Laing and Dave Eggers. "Human Rights for the 21st Century: by Margaret Atwood, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Dave Eggers and More." *The Guardian*. December 8, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/08/universal-declaration-human-rights-turns-70>.

Eggers, Dave. *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006.

Eggers, Dave. *Zeitoun*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2009.

Eley, Geoff. "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 289-339. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.

Elstub, Stephen and Peter McLaverty. "Introduction: Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy." In *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases*, edited by Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty, 1-17. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Emerson, Lori. *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

English, James F. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

- Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Ferree, Myra Marx, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht. "Four Models of the Public Sphere in Modern Democracies." *Theory and Society* 31, no. 3 (June 2002): 289-324.
- Figlerowicz, Marta. "The Novel of Infinite Storage." *Poetics Today* 39, no. 1 (2018): 201-19.
- Fischer, Molly. "Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace." *The Cut*. August 12, 2015. <https://www.thecut.com/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html/>.
- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.
- Foer, Franklin. *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech*. London: Penguin, 2017.
- Forster, E. M. *Howard's End*. 1910. Reprint, London: Penguin, 2012.
- Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. London: 4th Estate, 2002.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "The Essay in Dark Times." In *The End of the End of the Earth*, 1-22. London: 4th Estate, 2018.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "I Just Called to Say I Love You." In *Farther Away*, 141-160. London: 4th Estate, 2013.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "Imperial Bedroom." In *How to Be Alone*, 39-54. London: 4th Estate, 2010.

Franzen, Jonathan. "Jonathan Franzen's 10 Rules for Novelists." *Literary Hub*.

November 15, 2018. <https://lithub.com/jonathan-franzens-10-rules-for-novelists/>.

Franzen, Jonathan. "Jonathan Franzen Interview: 'There is No Way to Make Myself Not Male.'" By Emma Brockes. *The Guardian*. August 21, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/aug/21/jonathan-franzen-purity-interview>.

Franzen, Jonathan. "Jonathan Franzen on Freedom." By John Mullan. *The Guardian Books Podcast*, podcast audio. December 4, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2015/dec/04/jonathan-franzen-on-freedom-books-podcast>.

Franzen, Jonathan. "Jonathan Franzen Reads From Purity, Paperback Sponsored By Adidas." *YouTube*, video, 3:25. Posted by "Late Night with Seth Meyers,"

August 6, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28M4UqEdCHM>.

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Kraus Project*. London: 4th Estate, 2013.

Franzen, Jonathan. "Pain Won't Kill You." In *Farther Away*, 3-14. London: 4th Estate, 2013.

Franzen, Jonathan. *Purity*. London: 4th Estate, 2015.

Franzen, Jonathan. "Start the Week." By Tom Sutcliffe. *BBC Radio 4*, radio

broadcast. October 5, 2015. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06fk9ph/>.

Franzen, Jonathan, "A Word About This Book." In *How To Be Alone*, 3-6. London: 4th Estate, 2010.

- Franzen, Jonathan. "Why Bother?" In *How To Be Alone*, 55-97. London: 4th Estate, 2010.
- Fraser, Nancy. *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 109-42. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962.
- Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage Publications, 2014.
- Gallagher, Susan VanZaten and M. D. Walhout, eds. *Literature and the Renewal of the Public Sphere*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.
- Galow, Timothy W. *Understanding Dave Eggers*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014.
- Garber, Megan. "Could the Internet Age See Another David Foster Wallace." *The Atlantic*. August 11, 2015.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-the-end-of-the-tour/400928/>.
- Gardiner, Michael. "Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on Dialogue, Everyday Life and the Public Sphere." *Sociological Review* 52, no.1 (2004): 28-48.

- Genç, Kaya. "The Embassy of Gossip: Zadie Smith's First-Person Plural." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. March 1, 2014.
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/embassy-gossip-zadie-smiths-first-person-plural/>.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. 1987. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gessen, Keith. "Eggers, Teen Idol." *n+1*. Summer 2004.
<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-1/essays/eggers-teen-idol/>.
- Giles, Paul. "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 327-344.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Goode, Luke. *Jürgen Habermas: Democracy and the Public Sphere*. London: Pluto Press, 2005.
- Grady, Constance. "The Uproar Over the New Yorker Short Story 'Cat Person,' explained." *Vox*. December 12, 2017.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/12/12/16762062/cat-person-explained-new-yorker-kristen-roupenian-short-story>.
- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Grey, Judith. "Here's How An 8-Year-Old David Foster Wallace Speech Suddenly Became A Viral Video Hit." *Business Insider*. May 14, 2013.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/david-foster-wallace-graduation-speech-goes-viral-2013-5/>.

Gripsrud, Jostein, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander, and Graham Murdock. "Editors' Introduction." In *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader*, edited by Jostein Gripsrud, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander, and Graham Murdock, xiii-xxviii.. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010.

Guidry, John A., and Mark Q. Sawyer. "Contentious Pluralism: The Public Sphere and Democracy." *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003): 273-289.

Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. 1992. Reprint, Cambridge: Polity, 1996.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Jürgen Habermas: 'For God's sake, spare us governing philosophers!'" By Borja Hermoso. *El País*. May 25, 2018.
https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/05/07/inenglish/1525683618_145760.html.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research." *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 411-426.

Habermas, Jürgen. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)." Translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox. *New German Critique* 1, no. 3, (October 1974): 49-55.

Habermas, Jürgen. "A Rare Interview With Jürgen Habermas." By Stuart Jeffries. *Financial Times Magazine*. April 30, 2010.
<https://www.ft.com/content/eda3bcd8-5327-11df-813e-00144feab49a>.

- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. 1962. Reprint, Cambridge: Polity, 1989.
- Halasz, Alexandra. *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*. 1997. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hale, Benjamin. "Hate Expectations." *Dissent*. October 23, 2015.
https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/jonathan-franzen-purity-dickens-internet-hater/.
- Hale, Dorothy J. "On Beauty as Beautiful?: The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith." *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (2012): 814-844.
- Hamilton, Caroline D. *One Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing and Publicity*. London: Continuum, 2010.
- Hammond, Adam. *Literature in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Hands, Joss. "Between Agonistic and Deliberative Politics: Towards a Radical E-Democracy." In *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, edited by Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, 89-107. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. London: Penguin, 2004.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

- Hayes-Brady, Clare. "David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady." By Steve Paulson. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. September 10, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/>.
- Hayes-Brady, Clare. "'Palely Loitering': On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*." In *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, edited by Ralph Clare, 142-158. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Hayes-Brady, Clare. *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.
- Hering, David, ed. *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010.
- Hering, David. *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Hidalga, Jesús Blanco. *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Hirschkop, Ken. *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Hitchens, Christopher. *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*. London: Verso, 2000.

- Holland, Mary K. "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58, no. 1 (2016): 64-77.
- Hubble, Nick. "Common People: Class, Gender and Social Change in the London Fiction of Virginia Woolf, John Sommerfield and Zadie Smith." In *London in Contemporary British Fiction: The City Beyond the City*, edited by Nick Hubble and Philip Tew, 195-210. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Hungerford, Amy. *Making Literature Now*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Hungerford, Amy. "McSweeney's and the School of Life." *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (2012): 646-680.
- Hutchison, Anthony. "Immaterial World: Precarity and Post-Industrial Labor in George Saunders's 'Sea Oak' and Dave Eggers's 'A Hologram for the King.'" *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 2, no. 1 (2013): 5-21.
- Hutchinson, Colin. "Jonathan Franzen and the Politics of Disengagement." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50, no. 2 (2009): 191-207.
- James, David. "Wounded Realism." *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 1 (2013): 204-214.
- James, David and Urmila Seshagiri. "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution." *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 87-100.
- James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*. 1934. Reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.

Jameson, Frederic. "On Negt and Kluge." In *The Phantom Public Sphere*, edited by Bruce Robbins, 42-74. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993.

Jarrett, Kylie. "'Let's Express Our Friendship by Sending Each Other Funny Links Instead of Actually Talking': Gifts, Commodities, and Social Reproduction in Facebook." In *Networked Affect*, edited by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit, 203-220. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015.

Kakutani, Michiko. "Obama's Secret to Surviving the White House Years: Books." *The New York Times*. January 16, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/books/obamas-secret-to-surviving-the-white-house-years-books.html>.

Kakutani, Michiko. "Review: 'Purity,' Jonathan Franzen's Most Intimate Novel Yet." *The New York Times*. August 24, 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/books/review-in-purity-jonathan-franzen-hits-a-new-octave.html>.

Karppinen, Kari. "Against Naïve Pluralism in Media Politics: On the Implications of the Radical-Pluralist Approach to the Public Sphere." *Media, Culture, and Society* 29, no. 3 (2007): 495-508.

Keane, John. "Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere." In *Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practice*, edited by Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk, 70-89. London: Sage Publications, 2000.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 2 (2017).

- Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas." In *David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing': New Essays on the Novels*, edited by Marshall Boswell, 3-22. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline." *Irish Journal of American Studies Online*, no. 2 (2010). <http://http://ijas.iaas.ie/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/>.
- Kelly, Adam. "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace." *Post45*. October 17, 2014. <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/>.
- Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. 1958. Reprint, London: Penguin, 2006.
- Khazan, Olga. "A Viral Short Story for the #MeToo Moment." *The Atlantic*. December 11, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/12/a-viral-short-story-for-the-metoo-moment/548009/>.
- Kiesling, Lydia. "Flamed but Not Forgotten: On Jonathan Franzen's 'Purity.'" *The Millions*. August 27, 2015. <https://themillions.com/2015/08/flamed-but-not-forgotten-on-jonathan-franzens-purity.html>.
- Knezevic, Borislav. *Figures of Finance Capitalism: Writing, Class and Capital in Mid-Victorian Narratives*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2004
- Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

- Konstantinou, Lee. "Lewis Hyde's Double Economy." *ASAP/Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016): 123-149.
- Kreilkamp, Ivan. *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Kunkel, Benjamin. "Drawn and Quartered on the Internet." *n+1*. Autumn 2008. <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-7/essays/drawn-and-quartered-on-the-internet/>.
- Lake, Peter, and Steven Pincus. "Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England." In *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, edited by Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, 1-30. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- Lanchester, John. "You Are the Product." *London Review of Books*. August 17, 2017. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n16/john-lanchester/you-are-the-product/>.
- Landow, George P. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. 3rd ed. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Lang, Anouk, ed. *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.
- Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- LeClair, Tom. "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollman, and David Foster Wallace." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38, no. 1 (1996): 12-37.

- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. 1*. Translated by John Moore. 1947.
Reprint, London: Verso, 1992.
- Lefebvre, Henri. "Tenth Prelude: Renewal, Youth, Repetition." In *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes September 1959-May 1961*, 157-167. Translated by John Moore. 1962. Reprint, London, Verso: 2011.
- Leland, Andrew. "An Experiment in Anxiety." *The Believer Logger*. October 15, 2015. <http://logger.believermag.com/post/131233676834/an-experiment-in-anxiety>.
- Leoni, Elisabeth. "Google and 826 Valencia invite you to a 'planet ruled by love.'" *The Keyword*. August 25, 2017. <https://www.blog.google/topics/google-org/google-and-826-valencia-invite-you-planet-ruled-love/>.
- Levy, Steven. "Crypto Rebels." *Wired*. February 2, 1993.
<https://www.wired.com/1993/02/crypto-rebels/>.
- Liddle, Dallas. *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.
- Lipsky, David. *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. New York: Broadway Books, 2010.
- Litt, Toby. "The Reader and Technology." *Granta*. April 10, 2012.
<https://granta.com/The-Reader-and-Technology>.
- Lorentzen, Christian. "Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama." *Vulture*.
January 11, 2017. <http://www.vulture.com/2017/01/considering-the-novel-in-the-age-of-obama.html>.

- Lorentzen, Christian. "The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace." *Vulture*. June 30, 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2015/06/rewriting-of-david-foster-wallace.html/>.
- Luo, Michael. "The Twenty-Five Most-Read New Yorker Stories of 2017." *The New Yorker*. December 19, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/the-twenty-five-most-read-new-yorker-stories-of-2017>.
- Max, D. T. "In the D.F.W. Archives: An Unfinished Story About the Internet." *The New Yorker*. October 11, 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/in-the-d-f-w-archives-an-unfinished-story-about-the-internet/>.
- Max, D. T. "Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped as a Secular Saint." *The Guardian*. October 9, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/09/david-foster-wallace-worshipped-secular-saint/>.
- McCann, Andrew. *Cultural Politics in the 1790s: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998.
- McCarthy, Tom. "David Foster Wallace: The Last Audit." *The New York Times*. April 14, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/books/review/book-review-the-pale-king-by-david-foster-wallace.html>.
- McGurl, Mark. "Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon." *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2016): 447-471.
- McGurl, Mark. "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27-54.

- McHale, Brian. "The Pale King, Or, The White Visitation." In *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, edited by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn, 191-210. London: Palgrave, 2013.
- McKeon, Michael. *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.
- McKeon, Michael. "Subjectivity, Character, Development." In *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, edited by Michael McKeon, 485-492. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- McMillan, Robert. "Google Serves 25 Percent of North American Internet Traffic." *Wired*. July 22, 2013. <https://www.wired.com/2013/07/google-internet-traffic/>.
- Meek, James. "From Wooden to Plastic." *London Review of Books*. September 24, 2015. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/james-meek/from-wooden-to-plastic>.
- Miklós, Sükösd, and Jakubowicz Karol, eds. *Media, Nationalism and European Identities*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011.
- Miller, Laura. "The New Yorker's 'Cat Person' Story Is Great. Too Bad the Internet Turned It Into a Piping-Hot Thinkpiece." *Slate*. December 11, 2017. <https://slate.com/culture/2017/12/too-bad-twitter-turned-the-new-yorker-s-cat-person-story-into-a-piping-hot-thinkpiece.html>.
- Mirowski, Philip. *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

- Morozov, Evgeny. "Only Disconnect." *The New Yorker*. October 28, 2013.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/28/only-disconnect-2>.
- Morozov, Evgeny. "The Taming of Tech Criticism." *The Baffler*. March, 2015.
<https://thebaffler.com/salvos/taming-tech-criticism>.
- Morrison, Jago, and Susan Watkins, eds. *Scandalous Fictions: The Twentieth-Century Novel in the Public Sphere*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Murray, Simone. *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.
- Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2017.
- Nash, Kate, ed. *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity, 2014.
- Naughton, John. "The Evolution of the Internet: From Military Experiment to General Purpose Technology." *Journal of Cyber Policy* 1, no. 1 (2016): 5-28.
- Negt, Oskar, and Alexander Kluge. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff. 1972. Reprint, London: Verso, 2016.
- Neyfakh, Leon. "Jonathan Franzen: Michiko Kakutani Is 'The Stupidest Person in New York City.'" *Observer*. April 29, 2008.
<http://observer.com/2008/04/jonathan-franzen-michiko-kakutani-is-the-stupidest-person-in-new-york-city>.

Nissenbaum, Helen Fay. *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Offenhartz, Jake. "Our Lives on the Internet as Prophesied by David Foster Wallace." *Book Riot*. August 18, 2015. <https://bookriot.com/2015/08/18/our-lives-on-the-internet-as-prophesied-by-david-foster-wallace/>.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1949. Reprint, London: Penguin, 2013.

Orwell, George. *Politics and the English Language*. 1945. Reprint, London: Penguin, 2013.

Parker, Hershel. *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994.

Parks, Tim. "Reading: The Struggle." *New York Review Daily*. June 10, 2014. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/10/reading-struggle/>.

Pearson, John H. *The Prefaces of Henry James: Framing the Modern Reader*. State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Penguin Press. "Feel Free, Zadie's new collection of essays, is coming 2/6." *Facebook*. December 28, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/zadiesmithauthor/photos/a.650707088424124.1073741828.558367447658089/895344697293694/?type=3&theater>.

Pfister, Damien Smith and Misti Yang. "Five Theses on Technoliberalism and the Networked Public Sphere." *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 247-262.

Pincus, Steven. "The State and Civil Society in Early Modern England: Capitalism, Causation and Habermas's Bourgeois Public Sphere." In *The Politics of the*

- Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, edited by Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, 213-31. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- Piper, Andrew. *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Plato. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Reginald Hackforth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952.
- Pressman, Jessica. "The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First Century Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48, no. 4 (2009): 465-472.
- Pressman, Jessica. *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Reagle, Joseph M. *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015.
- Roupenian, Kristen. "Cat Person." *The New Yorker*. December 11, 2017.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>.
- Roupenian, Kristen. "Kristen Roupenian on the Self-Deceptions of Dating." By Deborah Triesman. *The New Yorker*. December 4, 2017.
<https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/fiction-this-week-kristen-roupenian-2017-12-11>.
- Roupenian, Kristen. "This Should Not Be A Love Story: Reading DT Max's Biography Of David Foster Wallace." *Thought Catalog*. September 12, 2012.
<https://thoughtcatalog.com/kristen-roupenian/>.

- Roupenian, Kristen. "What It Felt Like When 'Cat Person' Went Viral." *The New Yorker*. January 10, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-it-felt-like-when-cat-person-went-viral>.
- Roy, Eleanor Ainge. "'Ignore This': Jonathan Franzen's Top 10 Writing Tips Get Gleefully Trolled on Twitter." *The Guardian*. November 16, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/16/ignore-this-jonathan-franzens-top-10-writing-tips-get-gleefully-trolled-on-twitter>.
- Ryan, Mary P. "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, 259-288. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.
- Said, Edward W. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Salmon, Richard. "Authorship." In *Henry James in Context*, edited by David McWhirter, 105-114. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Salvatore, Armando, Oliver Schmidtke, and Hans-Jörg Trenz, eds. *Rethinking the Public Sphere Through Transnationalizing Processes: Europe and Beyond*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Scholes, Lucy. "Jonathan Franzen's Purity: Is it the Great American novel?." *BBC Culture*. September 1, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150901-jonathan-franzens-purity-is-it-the-great-american-novel>.
- Sedghi, Ami. "Facebook: 10 Years of Social Networking, in Numbers." *The Guardian*. February 4, 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/feb/04/facebook-in-numbers-statistics>.

Sennett, Richard. *Authority*. 1980. Reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1993.

Seshagiri, Urmila. "Biology, Destiny, Purity." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. September 1, 2015. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/biology-destiny-purity>.

Severs, Jeffrey. *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Shapiro, Stephen. "From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King's* Cultural Fix." *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014): 1249-1271.

Shillingsburg, Peter L. *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Siemens, Ray, and Susan Scribman, eds. *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Simanowski, Roberto. *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Sittenfeld, Curtis. "Purity by Jonathan Franzen review – Dazzling, Hilarious and Problematic." *The Guardian*. August 26, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/26/purity-by-jonathan-franzen-review/>.

Sockett, Paul, ed. *The Edge of the Precipice: Why Read Literature in the Digital Age?*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013.

- Sini, Rozina. "Cat Person: The Short Story People are Talking About." *BBC News*. December 11, 2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-42307714>.
- Smith, Rachel Greenwald. *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Smith, Zadie. *The Autograph Man*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Smith, Zadie. "A Conversation Between Authors Zadie Smith, Yaa Gyasi, and Courtney Martin." *YouTube*, video, 22:54, posted by "Obama Foundation." November 19, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4g-_hir2AE.
- Smith, Zadie. "Episode 4: Work." By Lena Dunham. *Women of the Hour*. March 12, 2015. <http://www.acast.com/womenofthehour/episode-4-work>.
- Smith, Zadie. "Fail Better." *The Guardian*. January 13, 2017.
- Smith, Zadie. "Foreword." In *Feel Free: Essays* xi-xii. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018.
- Smith, Zadie. "Generation Why?" In *Feel Free: Essays*, 45-63. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018.
- Smith, Zadie. "George Saunders." *Interview*. February 15, 2017. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/george-saunders>.
- Smith, Zadie. "Getting In and Out." In *Feel Free: Essays*, 212-224. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018.
- Smith, Zadie. "Guardian Books Podcast: Zadie Smith on NW." By John Mullan. *The Guardian Books Podcast*, podcast audio. July 26, 2013.

www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2013/jul/26/zadie-smith-nw-london-podcast/.

Smith, Zadie. "The I Who Is Not Me." In *Feel Free: Essays*, 333-348. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018.

Smith, Zadie. "An Interview with Zadie Smith." By Lisa Sproull. *Cult MTL*. October 26, 2017. <http://www.cultmontreal.com/2017/10/zadie-smith-interview/>.

Smith, Zadie. "The Lazy River." *The New Yorker*. December 18, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/the-lazy-river>.

Smith, Zadie. "LIVE from the NYPL: Zadie Smith." By Paul Holdengräber. *NYPL*, video, 96:13. November 22, 2010. <https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/zadie-smith?nref=90281>.

Smith, Zadie. "Lunch with the FT: Novelist Zadie Smith." By Jan Dalley. *Financial Times*. November 11, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/231416be-a5ac-11e6-8b69-02899e8bd9d1>.

Smith, Zadie. "Man versus Corpse." In *Feel Free: Essays*, 366-380. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018.

Smith, Zadie. "Middlemarch and Everybody." In *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, 28-40. London: Penguin, 2011.

Smith, Zadie. "Novelists Édouard Louis and Zadie Smith on Writing in a Distracting Political Present." By Nathan Taylor Pemberton. *Document*. April 12, 2018. <http://www.documentjournal.com/2018/04/novelists-edouard-louis-and-zadie-smith-on-writing-in-a-distracting-political-present>.

- Smith, Zadie. "Now More Than Ever." *The New Yorker*. July 23, 2018.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/23/now-more-than-ever>.
- Smith, Zadie. *NW*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Smith, Zadie. *On Beauty*. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Smith, Zadie. "The Penguin Podcast." By David Baddiel. *Penguin*, podcast audio.
November 30, 2016.
<https://www.acast.com/thepenguinpodcast/zadiesmithwithdavidbaddiel>.
- Smith, Zadie. "Salon@615-Zadie Smith with Ann Patchett." *YouTube*, video,
1:05:39, posted by "Nashville Public Library." February 14, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSqmHto4DJM>.
- Smith, Zadie. *Swing Time*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016.
- Smith, Zadie. "'Trump is a Great Opportunity for us Writers': Zadie Smith on
Fighting Back." By Tom Gatti. *New Statesman*. December 2, 2016.
<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2016/12/trump-great-opportunity-us-writers-zadie-smith-fighting-back>.
- Smith, Zadie. "White Knuckle Ride." By Simon Hattenstone. *The Guardian*.
December 11, 2000.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/dec/11/fiction.whitbreadbookawards2000>.
- Smith, Zadie. "Zadie Smith | Commencement Speech 2014 | The New School."
YouTube, video, 23:38, posted by "The New School." May 29, 2014.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjdmo6EKn8I>.

Smith, Zadie. "Zadie Smith [English Novelist, Born 1975] Talks With Ian McEwan [English Novelist, Born 1948]." *The Believer*. August 2005.

<http://www.believermag.com/issues/200508/>.

Smith, Zadie. "Zadie Smith: 'I have a very messy and chaotic mind.'" *The Guardian*. January 21, 2018. www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/21/zadie-smith-you-ask-the-questions-self-doubt.

Smith, Zadie. "Zadie Smith on Bad Girls & the Hard Midlife." *Louisiana Channel*, video, 26:14. August 2013. <http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/zadie-smith-bad-girls-hard-midlife>.

Spiotta, Dana. *Stone Arabia*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012.

Srnicek, Nick. "The Challenges of Platform Capitalism: Understanding the Logic of a New Business Model." *Juncture* 23, no. 4 (2017): 254-257.

Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016.

Steven, David. "Zadie Smith: Where Did It All Go Wrong?" *Bookslut*. March, 2004. http://www.bookslut.com/features/2004_03_001702.php.

Sunstein, Cass. *Republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Szalay, Michael. "The Incorporation Artist." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. July 10, 2012. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-incorporation-artist/>.

Taube, Aaron. "How The Greatest Super Bowl Ad Ever – Apple's '1984' – Almost Didn't Make It To Air." *Business Insider*. January 22, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/apple-super-bowl-retrospective-2014-1>.

- Taylor, Georgina. *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers, 1913-1946: Talking Women*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- Tew, Philip, ed. *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Tew, Philip. *Zadie Smith*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Thompson, Lucas. "Wallace and Race." In *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, edited by Ralph Clare, 204-219. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Triadafilopoulos, Triadafilos. "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion: Toward an Aristotelian Conception of the Public Sphere." *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 3 (1999): 741-757.
- Troy, Gil. *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015.
- Tyler, Daniel. "Introduction." In *Dickens's Style*, edited by Daniel Tyler, 1-25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- UGC Hub & Social News. "Franzen's Rules for Writing Mocked on Twitter." *BBC News*. November 16, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-46235212>.
- Useless Press. "PCKWCK." *Useless Press*, October 12, 2015, <http://uselesspress.org/things/pckwck>.
- Vincent, David. *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

- Wallace, David Foster. "David Foster Wallace." By Dave Eggers. *The Believer*.
November 2003.
http://www.believermag.com/issues/200311/?read=interview_wallace
- Wallace, David Foster. "Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report." In *Both Flesh and Not: Essays*, 299-320. London: Penguin, 2013.
- Wallace, David Foster. "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace." By Larry McCaffery. In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, edited by Stephen J. Burn, 21-52. 1993. Reprint, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
- Wallace, David Foster. "Host." In *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, 275-343. London: Abacus, 2005.
- Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. 1996. Reprint, London: Abacus, 1997.
- Wallace, David Foster. *The Pale King*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Walters, Tracey L. ed. *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2005.
- Warren, Andrew. "Wallace and Politics." In *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, edited by Ralph Clare, 173-189. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Weinstein, Philip. *Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

- Weisberg, Jacob. "We Are Hopelessly Hooked." *The New York Review of Books*. February 25, 2016. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/02/25/we-are-hopelessly-hooked/>.
- West, Mark. "'Observacion of these Articles': Surveillance and the 1970s in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 2 (2018): 223-234.
- White, Duncan. "The 5 Impressive Ways David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* Predicted the Future." *The Telegraph*. February 1, 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/the-5-impressive-ways-david-foster-wallaces-infinite-jest-predic/>.
- Wolf, Christine T. "DIY Videos on YouTube: Identity and Possibility in the Age of Algorithms." *First Monday* 21, no. 6 (June 2016).
- Wolosky, Shira. *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Springer, 2010.
- Wood, James. "Human, All Too Inhuman." *New Republic*. July 24, 2000. <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>.
- Wood, James. *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*. London: Pimlico, 2005.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. 1925. Reprint, London: Vintage, 2004.
- Williams, Raymond. "Nineteen Eighty Four in 1984." *Marxism Today*. January, 1984, 12-16. Available at *The Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust* website: http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/84_01_12.pdf.

- Williams, Tony. "Cat Person: A Creative Writing Expert on Why You Should Read the Short Story for the #MeToo Age." *The Conversation*. December 19, 2017. <http://theconversation.com/cat-person-a-creative-writing-expert-on-why-you-should-read-the-short-story-for-the-metoo-age-89401>.
- Wilson, Sloan. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. 1955. Reprint, Philadelphia: De Capo Press, 2002.
- Wired. "The Wired Manifesto." *Wired*. October 1996. *The Wired UK Archive*. <http://archive.gyford.com/1997/wired-uk/2.10/features/manifesto.html>
- Young, Kirsty. "Desert Island Discs." *BBC Radio 4*, radio broadcast. September 22, 2013. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03bg4v7>.