Hybrid Fiction and the Constitution of Subjectivity In Twenty-First Century American Literature

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis studies hybrid fiction to identify characteristics of contemporary American literature in the twenty-first century. Hybrid fiction represents the role of affect in the constitution of human subjectivities. Affect presupposes an interconnection between humans and nonhumans and challenges the distinction between the subject and the object. Hybrid fiction thus portrays humans as relational entities with the potential to affect and be affected by humans and nonhuman others. Moreover, it emphasizes the influence of affect in the relationship between the text and the reader. It uses certain forms, structures, and writing styles are used in hybrid fiction to make the reader an active participant in meaning production. Accordingly, hybrid fiction is committed to hybrid and affective thinking both at the levels of form and content.

The thesis considers the juxtaposition between affect and subjectivity in three aspects: authenticity, literacy, and critique. The first chapter examines narrative subjectivities as a site in which affect reconceptualizes self-authenticity as a form of accountability. The second chapter explores affective forms of literacy in the experience of urban subjects. Lastly, the third chapter explores the connection between forms and the post-critical practice in network subjectivities. By examining the representation of these three subjectivities in connection with authenticity, literacy, and critique, it is possible to see the influence of affective thinking in hybrid fiction as representative of contemporary American literature.

Contents

Introduction

The narrator and unnamed female protagonist of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) finds that being awake and having sensory experiences are unbearable. A simple activity like walking down the street makes her 'cringe'; 'the air hurt, the light hurt, the details of the world seemed garish and hostile.'[1] Her solution is to sleep as much as possible, to go into 'hibernation,' as she calls it. She meets with a psychologist who prescribes a cocktail of hypnotic drugs that will help her sleep and, hopefully, transform her. The narrator's hibernation starts in January 2000 and ends on 1 June 2001 when she wakes up in a position that recalls the seated Buddha in the enlightened state. It appears that she too achieves enlightenment of her own:

> I came to in a cross-legged seated position on the living room floor. Sunlight was needling through the blinds, illuminating crisscrossed planes of yellow dust that blurred and waned as I squinted. I heard a bird chirp.
>
> I was alive.[2]

The narrator's description of her surroundings emphasizes the interconnection of things and herself as a part of them. As the sun shines through, illuminating the dust that appears in a crisscrossed pattern when filtered through the blinds, the illuminated dust also blurs and wanes in response to the movement of her eyes that squint in reaction to the sunlight. She feels alive as she realizes that her presence influences the quality and movement of other things that, in turn, shape her experience of them. In other words, the narrator wakes

[1] Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (London: Vintage, 2018), Kindle ebook, p. 4.
[2] Ibid., p. 275.

up to a revelation about her immanent existence and to an awareness of the affective force among entities whose interconnection mutually contributes to their respective changes.

I begin with Moshfegh's novel to illustrate a primary motif that characterizes a group of contemporary novels that I call hybrid fiction. I argue that hybrid fiction focuses on affect in textual practices to explore the consequences and possibilities that an affective interconnection may bring to human subjectivities, especially how they can be represented in the text and constituted through textual encounters. When entities encounter and connect, affect emerges as a force that has a transformative effect on all entities in the interaction. Affect is thus generally understood as 'the capacities to act and be acted upon'.[3] I choose the term 'hybrid' to describe this group of novels because I contend that hybridity is the operative logic of the affective process. During an affective process, an entity is both a subject and an object. It is simultaneously acting and being acted upon during an encounter. When Moshfegh's narrator wakes up, she becomes aware of such an affective process. She perceives the interrelation among things around her and realizes that she is also a part of it. Her sense of self — the feeling of being alive — is constituted by her presence among these things that can affect and be affected by her.

In this thesis, I will use the concept of hybridity to describe the role of affect in the notions of self-authenticity, literacy, and critique. I will explore the operation of affect in these three areas by examining the representation of narrative, urban, and network subjectivities in hybrid fiction. Through the selected novels, I will argue that hybrid fiction uses these subjectivities to demonstrate the influence of affect in an attempt to

[3] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed.by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-25 (p.1).

reconceptualize self-authenticity, imagine a form of affective literacy, and develop a post-critical sensibility. Moreover, I will discuss how hybrid fiction represents these subjectivities by seeking to forge an affective connection with the reader through a reading mode that emphasizes affective capacity of literary texts. In other words, hybrid fiction encourages a reading practice that regards textual meaning as a product of a mutually affective collaboration between the text and the reader.

My argument about hybrid fiction is part of an ongoing effort to note and describe the characteristics of contemporary American literature produced in the literary climate loosely defined as post-postmodern. Here I also choose the term hybrid to suggest that a decisive periodization cannot characterize these novels. In one regard, I contend that hybrid fiction reflects the affective turn in literary studies today. Moreover, I want to demonstrate, being part of the affective turn, these novels also problematize the use of genres, categories, or periods to describe them. According to Patricia T. Clough, the affective turn indicates 'a shift in thought' in which the notion of affect leads to a reassessment of a wide range of concepts, including subjectivity, representation, embodiment, information, media, and technology.[4] In literary studies, the affective turn entails a rethinking of the significance of textual forms in the process of interpretation and meaning production. However, the focus on textual forms also reveals the continued influence of certain forms and techniques across different periods and categories. For example, Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that the affective turn indicates how postmodernist aesthetics are used in contemporary literature to produce 'impersonal feelings' to undermine the 'affective hypothesis'.[5] According to

[4] Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'Introduction', in *The Affective Turn*, ed. by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-33 (p.2).
[5] Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Postmodernism and the Affective Turn', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 423-446 < DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4008 >, p. 424.

Smith, the affective hypothesis presupposes the act of reading as a kind of emotional investment that expects a return in the form of emotional fulfillment. As a result, literature is often expected to represent or convey personal emotions and to be able to provoke empathy and the feeling of interpersonal connection.[6] Moreover, the affective hypothesis could lead to a disregard of other forms of textual feelings that are inherent in the text but unable to reciprocate personal feelings. However, Smith argues that some contemporary novels foreground these impersonal feelings to challenge assumptions about textual meanings, feelings, and subjectivities implied in the affective hypothesis. According to Smith:

> These works explicitly aim to undermine the personalization of the aesthetic experience by withdrawing from typical ways of producing emotional responses in readers. […] They are interested in feelings that are unsettling insofar as they fall outside existing socio-political codes for what a feeling is understood to be. These impersonal feelings […] are potentially destabilizing insofar as their presence defies the prevailing notion that feelings only exist insofar as they are the property of the individual.[7]

In her argument, Smith locates the production of feelings in the middle space between the text and the reader and characterizes feelings as impersonal and interrelational. Literary works emphasizing impersonal feelings reflect a recommitment to the text as an entity with specific formal, aesthetic, and thematic qualities. These textual qualities can be encountered

[6] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.1.
[7] Ibid., p.20.

and capable of producing feelings and being affected by the reader in a manner that challenges the affective hypothesis.

Smith's argument also demonstrates that literary works that focus on textual forms and affect cannot be decisively characterized as modernist, postmodernist, or post-postmodernist. She contends that postmodernist aesthetics persists in the so-called post-postmodern era, but their function differs from how postmodernist writers would use these techniques in their works. Likewise, I will demonstrate that hybrid fiction as part of the affective turn adopts and combines modernists and postmodernist aesthetics and assumptions for a different end. I will highlight that these works reflect the influences of modernism's commitment to forms and postmodernism's problematization of textual representations. The combined influences allow these texts to explore new possibilities about how we may know, represent, and connect with other things if we are willing to rethink our position as human subjects and consider the contribution of nonhuman entities in our knowledge and experience. That is, hybrid fiction is situated between modernist and postmodernist traditions to reclaim the ability of literature to represent and connect with the reader and the social world in a meaningful and constructive way.

In discussing literature after postmodernism, Andrew Hoberek also highlights the problem of periodization that tends to privilege sociological aspects of literature over its form. He contends that announcing the death of postmodernism might be premature because 'postmodern techniques – even if they no longer play quite the dominant role they once did – have hardly disappeared from contemporary fiction'.[8] Hoberek's observation is

[8] Andrew Hoberek, 'Introduction: After Postmodernism', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53 (2007), 233-247 < DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2007-4007>, p. 236.

echoed in Smith's argument about how postmodernist aesthetics are still relevant as a way to reassess the nature of textual encounter and meaning production. Moreover, both Hoberek and Smith emphasize the significance and persistence of form in their arguments. They describe how certain forms and aesthetics remain relevant because formal qualities reflect the change in our understanding of the relationship between the text and the reader. In Jane Gallop's defense of close reading, she also emphasizes the text and reader relation. Specifically, she criticizes how literary studies risk turning into an immature cultural history study by focusing on periodization and historicization. She argues that close reading and attention to the text itself may be a solution that will safeguard the continued relevance of literary studies as a discipline. However, she sees that close reading does not necessarily reinforce the ahistorical approach. Instead, it can maintain the historical significance of literature without depending too much on socio-cultural and historical practices. As Gallop writes:

> Let us recall that literary studies embraced historicism as part of a rejection of timeless universals. […] It is precisely my opposition to timeless universals that makes me value close reading. I would argue that close reading poses an ongoing threat to easy, reductive generalization, that it is a method for resisting and calling into question our inevitable tendency to bring things together in smug, overarching conclusions. I would argue that close reading may in fact be the best antidote we have to the timeless and the universal.[9]

My discussion of hybrid fiction belongs in this strand of criticism that seeks to sidestep the historical approach through the attention to the text itself. As Gallop also points out, the

[9] Jane Gallop, 'The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading', *Professions*, 1 (2007), 181-186 < DOI: 10.1632/prof.2007.2007.1.181>, p. 185.

renewed emphasis on textual forms also inevitably reaffirms the significance of close reading as a critical factor that makes literary studies a valuable discipline. In this vein, I also see that hybrid fiction encourages a form of close reading to defend the ability of literature to represent and connect with the reader and the world. It is a reading practice that acknowledges the text as an entity that belongs in the world with the reader and whose formal and aesthetic qualities the reader can directly encounter and react.

However, I will extend my argument further by considering how attention to affect also leads us to rethink subjectivity in conjunction with textual encounters and meaning production. My focus on hybridity and subject constitution aims to highlight this crucial implication. Not long after the narrator of *My Year* wakes up, she describes her encounter with a painting. Her description captures how an affective encounter constitutes the subject and places it on a flat ontology mutually inhabited by the subject and the object. Accordingly, this scene challenges the traditional assumption about human subjectivity and meaning production:

> I put my hand out. I touched the frame of the painting. And then I placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just *things*. (emphasis in original)[10]

Upon touching the painting, the narrator's earlier epiphany about her immanent existence with other things is reaffirmed. She claims that '[t]here was no God stalking my soul' because the textural sensation allows her to perceive the material reality of the object that exists outside of her subjective experience and outside its cultural value. However, her

[10] Moshfegh., p. 286.

encounter with the painting also leads the narrator to proclaim, 'That was it. I was free.'[11] What she refers to is the freedom from the burden of having subjective consciousness. She can let things be 'just *things*' without performing the task of a subject and finding meanings behind other objects. Therefore, when the narrator becomes aware of the painting as a thing in itself, she also realizes that her subjectivity is not a prerequisite for meaning and knowledge production. She realizes that she too exists on the same ontological ground with other things. Thus, the scene describes the hybrid nature of affectation as simultaneously a process of individuation and interrelation. Affect is, therefore, a hybrid and ambiguous force in that it confirms the separation among entities precisely when it reinforces their interconnection.

Sarah Ahmed uses the term 'affective economies' to describe such a process by which an affective encounter simultaneously creates and dissolves boundaries among individual bodies and between bodies and the world. According to Ahmed, 'emotions are not simply something "I" or "we" have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the "I" and the "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.'[12] Marielle Macé and Marlon Jones also argue that when reading experiences are understood as an affective encounter, it becomes aesthetic conduct or behavior instead of simply a deciphering activity. According to Macé and Jones: 'Reading is, first of all, an "opportunity" for individuation: encountering books leads us constantly to recognize ourselves, to "refigure" ourselves, that is, to constitute ourselves as subjects and reappropriate our relationship to ourselves through negotiation

[11] Ibid.
[12] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 10.

with other forms' (emphasis in original).[13] Similarly, Richard Kearney's concept of 'carnal hermeneutics' proposes an alternative mode of textual interpretation through sensation. He argues that this form of hermeneutics can mediate the sense of otherness between self and others on the flesh and surface level. It is 'a method of reading between gaps, and discriminating, distinguishing, and differentiating between selves and others – and others in ourselves'.[14] Following these arguments, it becomes clear how reading is a process of individuation in which subjectivities are constituted.

My interest in subjectivities in hybrid fiction through the lens of affect is informed by these insights about how close attention to the textual forms, affect, and surface encounters may contribute to our understanding of subjectivities. Moreover, the focus on affect and form suggests a possibility for an even richer aesthetic experience in textual encounter and meaning production. In *Against Interpretation,* Susan Sontag also argues for such a value in the direct sensory experience of art that should not be impoverished or stifled by our interpretation or criticism. As Sontag writes, transparence or the mode of 'experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are' should be reserved as 'the highest most liberating value in art and in criticism today'.[15] However, as I hope to demonstrate, the transparence of art also helps to constitute subjectivities. With the concept of hybridity, I hope to shed light on how such a constitutive process takes place in our engagement with the text's transparence.

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[13] Marielle Macé and Marlon Jones, 'Ways of Reading, Modes of Being', *New Literary History*, 44 (2013), 213-229 <DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2013.0017>, pp. 218-19.
[14] Richard Kearney, 'What is Carnal Hermeneutics?', *New Literary History*, 46 (2015), 99-124 < DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2015.0009 >, p. 101.
[15] Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), p. 9.

For example, apart from its thematic focus on affect and encounter, *My Year* also formally highlights its transparence. The story is told from the point of view of an unnamed, first-person narrator who is also the story's protagonist. Narrative unreliability becomes apparent by this formal decision and thematically reinforced by the narrator's mental condition at the center of the plot. However, as unreliability becomes a formal and thematic focus of the novel, it also frees the reader from being cautious or suspicious of the text. The reader can fully inhabit the consciousness of the narrator/protagonist and navigate the story-world with an understanding that, at any moment, there could be surprises. The unreliability is made evident because it is not intended for the reader to be careful of and brace for unexpected twists but to be ready and willing to experience them when they finally come across those moments.

To put it another way, narrative unreliability in Moshfegh's novel invites the reader to respond to the text on the surface, to read it 'with the grain' as Timothy Bewes calls it, and experience the freedom from being fully immersed in the text. Reading with the grain, according to Bewes, requires that the text is treated as an intentionless singularity so that its comprehensibility comes from 'our own reading and our moment that speaks to us from the text'.[16] In their argument about 'surface reading', Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus similarly argue that the willingness to 'accept things as they are' can lead to textual immersion as a kind of 'a true openness to all the potentials made available by texts'.[17] Narrative unreliability in *My Year* is emphasized on both formal and thematic levels to

[16] Timothy Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 21 (2010), 1-33 <DOI:10.1215/10407391-2010-007>, p. 28.
[17] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21 <DOI: 10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1>, p. 16.

encourage reading from the surface or with the grain. The reader is made fully aware that the text is unreliable and probably full of pleasant and unpleasant surprises. However, if the reader adopts what Bewes calls the 'generous approach' of reading by giving 'sustained attentiveness to the "singularity" of the text, referring the text not to anything outside the text, but to itself',[18] they might experience a similar feeling described in the painting scene. The reader might discover freedom from being able to have a meaningful encounter with the text without the burden of demystification or meaning production typically imposed on the subject.

The narrator of Moshfegh's novel explains the merit of a surface engagement right from the beginning when she defends her use of hypnotic drugs: 'I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me.'[19] Similarly, I will demonstrate that hybrid fiction also prompts the reader to have a slower but more sensitive and more constructive relationship with the text instead of being alert, suspicious, or constantly looking for hidden textual meanings. Without the need to condemn, to debunk, or to be right, the reading experience may yield an enriched understanding of the world and one's place in it. The reader can follow the narrative, and they will eventually discover that what the text has to say is inextricable from their personal experience of it. Their ability to perceive the meaning of the text is contingent on their acceptance of--and willingness to experience--the text for what it is.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will elaborate on the significance of hybridity in these two aspects: the affective interconnection in the production of meaning in hybrid

[18] Bewes, p. 25.
[19] Moshfegh, p. 17.

fiction and how hybrid fiction and the affective turn contribute to the current conversation about contemporary American literature. The concepts of hybridity and affect can reflect the characteristics of contemporary literature and the enduring legacies of modernism and postmodernism in literary studies today. Hybrid fiction and its attention to affect illuminate the middle space in which the modernist commitment to the importance of forms is still upheld while the postmodernist disillusionment about the limit of representation propels a reassessment of what textual forms can do to make literature relevant in the social world again. Accordingly, my focus on hybrid fiction is essentially an effort to defend literature's ability to represent the world and speak to us about who we are, as long as we recognize that its representational capacity is contingent on the condition of its belonging in the world with us.

Hybridity, Affect, and Subject-Object Relations

The term 'hybrid' was first widely used in the nineteenth century to address issues of race and miscegenation.[20] As a hybrid cross between two species is infertile, it was assumed then that the hybrid offspring from an interracial union could determine whether humans of different races belong to different species. Even though the first widespread usage of the term was in biology, its invocation was heavily charged with racial and cultural prejudices. It was not until the twentieth century that postcolonialists began to use the term hybridity in a more positive and subversive manner. One prominent example is Homi Bhabha's usage of the concept to theorize a possible form of resistance against colonial authority.

[20] Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 9.

Bhabha argues that the exercise of colonial power through discrimination and domination also facilitates the production of hybrids as a form of resistance that:

> is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth.[21]

For Bhabha, the process of hybridization makes possible a mode of resistance beyond the politics of opposition. Hybrids do not reject the alien and dominant force but embrace it as the source of its ambivalence that can turn back to undermine the dominating power. The subversiveness of hybridity thus comes from its liminality and ambiguity. Hybrids do not defy or negate but negotiate antagonistic and contradictory elements to produce '*something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both' (emphasis in original).[22]

Bhabha's interpretation of hybridity as 'the principle of political negotiation'[23] calls to mind the mode of thinking propagated by a school of sociology known as the actor-network theory or ANT. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour also uses the concept of hybridity to explain the modern paradox:

> The word 'modern' designates two sets of entirely different practices. […] The first set of practices, by 'translation', creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by 'purification', creates two

[21] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 157-158.
[22] Ibid., p. 41.
[23] Ibid.

> entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the others.[24]

The paradox of the modern rests in the commitment to purification even though it facilitates the production of hybrids. To be modern is to insist that purification and hybridization are separated processes despite their interrelation. To understand the social world, Latour suggests, we must abandon modern thinking and consider the population of hybrids that the modern paradigm simultaneously rejects and proliferates. In other words, Latour considers the social to be made up of shifting connections among hybrid entities that he calls 'actors'. These actors are a hybrid because they act as mediators that can transform both themselves and others through interrelations. The image of the illuminated, crisscrossed panes of dust particles in *My Year* also captures the nature of actors as mediators. The dust particles are illuminated by the sun shining through the blinds, rendering the illumination in a crisscrossed pattern. The dust blurs and wanes in response to the narrator squinting her eyes and reacting to the brightness of the sunlight. The quality of the dust that the narrator describes results from interactions among various actors affected and transformed through their encounters with one another. Like how the narrator of *My Year* learns to do after her awakening, approaching the social in a nonmodern manner is to trace and describe relations of actor-mediators. The mediation process can reveal that both human and nonhuman entities are equally able to make a difference in the world and themselves through their interconnection. The concept of hybridity in Latour's 'sociology

[24] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans.by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.10-11.

of association'[25] thus carries twofold meanings. On the one hand, it characterizes mediation in the social world. On the other hand, it designates the collapse of the distinction between humans and nonhumans into a hybrid actor.

Viewing ANT through the lens of hybridity also reveals its affinity with the theory of affect, especially in mediation which can be understood as an affective process. Affect refers to the intensity in the body when it encounters other bodies or entities. The intensity is first registered precognitively before being processed into a cognitive emotion. This is the reason affect is regarded as a type of potential or capacity. Before affect is captured by the mind and actualized into a cognitive experience, it is unowned, full of tendencies, and always pointing to future possibilities. Brian Massumi thus characterizes affect as autonomous, incipient, and belonging in the realm of the virtual. Precisely, Massumi locates the virtual realm in the body in the present moment when bodily sensation is still unqualified intensity:

> This requires a reworking of how we think about the body. Something that happens too quickly to have happened, actually, is *virtual*. The body is as immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual, the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies, is a realm of *potential*. […] For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression *will* emerge and be registered consciously. One "wills" it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on sociolinguistic meaning, to enter linear action-

[25] This is the term Latour calls the actor-network theory for the sake of precision although he acknowledges that the original moniker should also be preserved: 'Alas, the historical name is 'actor-network-theory', a name that is so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept. If the author, for instance, of a travel guide is free to propose new comments on the land he has chosen to present, he is certainly not free to change its most common name since the easiest signpost is the best.' See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 9.

> reaction circuits, to become a content of one's life – by dint of inhibition. (emphasis in original)[26]

The autonomy of affect in the virtual state of the body suggests that subjective consciousness is belatedly constituted by the perception of affect in the body. Affect theory thus makes a significant claim about the process of subject constitution. Not only that it collapses the subject and object distinction by claiming that affect is autonomous and not produced by any entity in particular, but it also reverses the surface/depth model of subjectivity. In affect theory, the subject is not the producer of their emotions and experiences from within. Instead, affect theory suggests that those experiences are drawn from the outside and constitute the subject.

In her theorization of affect, Eve Sedgwick uses textural perception to illustrate how an affective encounter negates the importance of the subject in the production of meaning and experience. According to Sedgwick, to perceive texture is to first hypothesize about the affordances of its properties, which indicate that there exists something before the subject. The process of textural perception can then be used to explore the possibilities of non-dualistic thinking in which the notions of agency and passivity or the subject and the object are not mutually exclusive. Specifically, Sedgwick characterizes the perception of texture as an event that produces affect as 'a particular intimacy [that] seems to subsist between textures and emotions'.[27] Affect does not belong to the subject or the object but remains autonomous in the place that is 'beside' both.[28] Similar to Massumi's argument about the

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[26] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 30-31.
[27] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 17.
[28] Ibid., p. 8.

virtual, Sedgwick uses the preposition *beside* to locate affect between the texture and subjective emotion, in the excluded middle that is full of possible hypotheses and potentials.

For both Massumi and Sedgwick, affect is helpful to the extent that it develops a non-dualistic and constructive approach to engaging with the social world. The theory of affect reinstates the significance of process and movement in which affect becomes actualized and qualified into emotion, or happenings become a discursive event. It is the attention to such a transition and movement that allows us to see linkages and connections behind the construction of meaning. As Massumi writes, 'Their passing into actuality is the key. […] It is the edge of virtual, where it leaks into actual, that counts.'[29]

Sedgwick's notion of 'reparative reading' is an example of an approach that focuses on the movement between the virtual and the actual realms, in the in-between space where there could be unknown and unexpected connections that could enrich our understanding about the world and our part in it. In counter to the suspicious impulse of paranoid reading, the reparative mode hopes for and embraces possibilities during the moment of the encounter with the text:

> [T]o read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, […] to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.[30]

[29] Massumi, p. 143.
[30] Sedgwick, p. 146.

Both Bewes's model of reading with the grain and Best and Marcus's notion of surface reading can be characterized as a reparative mode of reading that Sedgwick proposes here. *My Year* also encourages such a reading practice through its overt narrative unreliability. With the full acceptance of the text's unreliability, the reader's subjective experience of the text becomes the primary source of meaning in the novel. Therefore, affect theory is also invaluable because, despite being rooted in flat ontology and non-dualism, it still provides crucial insights into human subjectivities and experiences. Affect, Massumi writes, put humans back 'in the process, to articulate what is unique to their own capacities'.[31] This process, for Sedgwick, can then nurture the reparative impulse that 'wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self'.[32] In other words, the attention to the vital role of an object can offer what is needed to constitute subjectivities. Affect theory becomes a crucial concept in humanities and social studies precisely because it enhances our understanding of what makes us human, the process that constitutes our sense of self, and, ultimately, what we can achieve through our capacities as humans. Rei Terada also writes about the surge of interest in emotion and feeling in academia. For Terada, the phenomenon suggests that 'the idea of emotion has been activated to reinforce notions of subjectivity that could use the help'.[33] The attention to affect as a form of impersonal sensation can provide valuable insights about subjectivities. However, they are the insights that are paradoxically developed from the

[31] Massumi, p. 21.
[32] Sedgwick, p. 149.
[33] See Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 14.

acceptance that the subject, at least in the dualist model, has never existed. As Terada writes, 'we would have no emotions if we *were* subjects.' (emphasis in original)[34]

The destabilization of the subject in Latour's ANT sociology and affect theory also makes these schools of thought foundational to the revival of realism as seen in the emergence of speculative realism.[35] Speculative realism is a recent philosophical theory concerned with flat ontology and the significance of affect and mediation in the production of the real. Specifically, speculative realism rejects the correlationist assumption that reality outside of the human mind is inaccessible. According to Quentin Meillasseux, correlationism presupposes that it is impossible to think of the subject and the object separately:

> Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object 'in itself', in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object.[36]

In refuting the correlationist argument, speculative realism emphasizes 'a robust ontological realism'[37] that is not already formulated as human knowledge. This renewed focus on the non-correlated reality inevitably leads to a surge of interest in the active role

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[34] Terada, p. 4.

[35] Graham Harman explicitly acknowledges the influence of ANT on the development of speculative realism, and especially his theory of object-oriented ontology: 'Our debt to such insights is too deep ever to be repaid.' See Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2017), p. 106.

[36] Quentin Meillasoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

[37] Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 5.

of objects in the production of human knowledge and experience. Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is an example of a speculative-realist theory developed in recognition of the primacy of objects. Harman explains that there are two types of objects: the real and the sensual. On the one hand, real objects exist in themselves and might or might not make a difference in the world. Sensual objects, on the other hand, only exist in relation to others. That humans only have access to sensual objects does not negate the autonomy of the real objects:

> OOO defends the idea that objects – whether real, fictional, natural, artificial, human or non- human – are mutually autonomous and enter into relation only in special cases that need to be explained rather than assumed.[38]

OOO is thus interested in the object when they are still a 'tool-being' that exists in its own 'dark subterranean reality' before it enters human awareness.[39] Harman's argument shares a similarity with ANT in its focus on flat ontology and on the importance of the relations among human and nonhuman objects as a site in which knowledge and experience about the real may be produced. However, OOO significantly breaks with ANT in that it rejects the assumption that all entities are constituted by their relations. Instead, OOO insists on the pre-relational autonomy of both human and nonhuman entities.

The disagreement on the notion of autonomy leads Harman to claim that ANT 'loses all sight of the difference between what a thing is and what it does'.[40] While Latour contends that all entities are contingent on the relations they form with other entities, Harman maintains an essence of objects beyond relations. However, when the

[38] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 12.
[39] Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), p.1.
[40] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 109.

disagreement is considered through the lens of hybridity, there appears to be a third position that combines insights from both perspectives. With hybridity, it is possible to see that relations among entities, whether or not they exist in a pre-relation form, still produce change, movement, and transformation in the world. However, despite the importance of relations, the individual autonomy of these entities still needs to be recognized in order to trace their passage and connection. In other words, even though entities only matter when they connect and interact, we cannot overlook their pre-relation existence if we are to appreciate the significance of their movement and encounter.

To put it another way, the concept of hybridity provides a third perspective that considers the implication of both sides of the argument. The potential of hybridity lies in its ability to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable positions. This aspect of hybridity is notably discussed in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin who uses the term hybrid to describe the quality of language in which a single utterance may contain a mixture of meanings:

> It frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction-and consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings, two accents.[41]

For Bakhtin, the hybrid quality of language contains a subversive potential in that it can undermine the dominance of one discourse over another. An utterance may have a fusion of two contrasting social languages, indicating that no single discourse is pure and singular. All discourses are vulnerable to influences from other discourses. Bakhtin thus emphasizes

[41] Bakhtin, M.M., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 305.

hybridity's creative and provocative energy that inheres in the act of fusion at the moment in which the boundaries are breached yet still endure.

To put it differently, the paradox of hybridity is helpful in that it paves the way for a new kind of criticism that takes advantage of its ambivalence. Edward Soja conceptualizes this critical strategy as 'third-as-Othering':

> In this critical thirding, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from these two opposing categories to open new alternatives.[42]

I invoke the term hybrid in my discussion of contemporary fiction and subjectivity because it does not seek to transcend the subject and object division or eliminate the significance of the subject. The concept of hybridity allows me to discuss the dissolution of the subject and object binary without undermining my focus on subjectivities. Instead, it helps me draw insights about the subject and object distinction by exploring the moment that they cross paths and become hybridized.

Through insights from the concept of hybridity, affect theory, and subject/object relations, it is possible to characterize hybrid fiction as a group of writings that thematically and formally highlight the ambiguity of texts as both a representation of the world and an object in the world. Hybrid fiction operates in the middle ground where texts remain a representation but whose meaning and value are contingent on their relations with other entities such as the reader and other texts. In claiming that hybrid fiction highlights the

[42] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), p. 5.

capacity of literary texts as a representation of the world and an object in the world, I am arguing that texts simultaneously occupy subjective and objective positions. Hybrid fiction draws attention to how human and nonhuman entities are both a subject and an object. It reflects how the new understanding fundamentally changes the relation between the text and the reader. Moreover, as I previously asserted, I also invoke the concept of hybridity to describe this group of contemporary novels because I want to maintain the division between the subject and the object. My goal is to demonstrate that attention to things through affect theory does not necessarily diminish the role of human subjects. Instead, it adds to our understanding of the subjectivities that simultaneously occupy both subjective and objective positions.

This is also the point of departure for my discussion of hybrid fiction in the context of contemporary American literature. The next section will discuss how literature today reflects a commitment to flat ontology and new realism. Contemporary works such as hybrid fiction reflect the situation in which, as Steven Shaviro succinctly puts it, 'all entities of the world are deeply interrelated and mutually dependent even in their separation from one another, and how nonhuman agents, no less than human ones, perform actions and express needs and values.'[43] With this notion of the real in mind, I will also illustrate why we should refrain from conceptualizing contemporary literary works by positing a sharp break between modernism, postmodernism, and what comes after. Instead, a 'thirding' approach is needed to describe contemporary literature such as

[43] Shaviro, p. 5.

hybrid fiction, whose representation of the world also reaffirms their status as being in the world.

Hybridity and Post-Postmodernism

In this section, I will demonstrate that the concept of hybridity can characterize contemporary American novels that may appear to reflect a departure from postmodernism. However, to give a clearer picture of how the logic of hybridity asserts itself in the discourse of American literary history, I will begin by revisiting some of the accounts about how modernism had given way to postmodernism. In one of the most influential writings on the topic, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernism does not indicate the emergence of a new social order but a systemic modification of the old one.[44] Postmodernism is a repositioning of modernism along the line of the progressive development of capitalism that has now arrived at its 'late' stage, where modernization was complete and became pervasive. Therefore, the difference between modernism and postmodernism for Jameson is only a matter of a change in historical progress in economic development. Modernism is preoccupied with accounting for the changes and transformations from the early twentieth century when technological and economic developments took place. Modernists are looking for a unified, coherent form of logic or representation that can capture the experience of disruption and alienation. On the contrary, postmodernism emerges when such changes and transformations have already taken place and become solidified. It is more concerned with looking for a way to represent the change that has happened, 'the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same'.[45]

[44] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. xi.
[45] Ibid., p. vii.

Consequently, postmodernism is predominantly and reflexively occupied with the present and with itself as such a telltale sign. This assumption leads Jameson to famously claim that postmodernism is 'an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place'.[46]

In *Postmodernist Fiction,* Brian McHale uses the logic of 'historical consequentiality'[47] to describe and distinguish between modernist and postmodernist texts. Modernist texts focus on the epistemological aspect of modernity, as seen in their attempt to obtain or produce knowledge about the changes brought about by modernization. Postmodernist texts, however, shift the emphasis from the epistemological to the ontological implications of modernity. These texts are more interested in exploring the ontological condition of both the world and themselves as a text and a form of representation. McHale thus explains the transition from modernism to postmodernism as a change in the literary-historical momentum. He describes it as a shift in dominants: 'different dominants emerge depending on which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it'.[48] Accordingly, it is possible to interrogate the exact text from either an epistemological or ontological perspective. However, he compares the difference between these two views as a change in a pendulum swing. As McHale explains:

> Push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip

[46] Ibid.
[47] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p.5.
[48] Ibid., p.6.

> over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible.[49]

The historical consequentiality that McHale describes is thus a consequence of being preoccupied with one position over another over some time. Postmodernism is a consequence of the exhaustion of epistemological inquiry. Even though McHale's account differs from Jameson's in emphasizing the notion of dominant and consequentiality, the two accounts share a similar assumption. They agree that modernism and postmodernism have more or less the same textual qualities and could be distinguished through a historicizing or contextualizing process. Moreover, both McHale and Jameson draw a similar conclusion that postmodernism is concerned with the problem of being in the present, which explains its reflexivity. Postmodernist texts consider themselves evidence of the impossibility to develop historical consciousness or historical knowledge that could make sense of or grant meaning to the present condition.

David Harvey takes a slightly different approach by characterizing the shift from modernism to postmodernism as a transition from reactive to affirmative attitudes. Modernism registers the changes and disruptions of modernity. Yet, it reacts by being even more committed to finding or formulating an underlying metanarrative that compensates for the sense of uncertainty and alienation brought about by modern conditions. Postmodernism, on the contrary, fully embraces modernity. As Harvey writes,

> It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even define the "eternal and immutable" elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even

[49] Ibid., p. 11.

> wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.[50]

Harvey similarly points to postmodernism's occupation with ontology with the emphasis on 'that is all there is'. His explanation nonetheless suggests that, through the act of affirmation, there could still be, although he does not clarify how, a potentially positive or constructive way to engage with the present even though it may appear to be only a pastiche of meaningless historical fragments.

Linda Hutcheon's characterization of postmodernism as a mode of 'complicitous critique' points to how postmodernist affirmation can be utilized as a form of critical engagement with the world. Unlike the previous accounts of postmodernism, Hutcheon's argument reflects a more constructive aspect of postmodernism, not from a historical perspective but by directly considering its forms. For example, through historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon identifies the use of metafictional forms in postmodernist texts to combine the fictional with the historical and the textual with the worldly. Historiographic metafiction uses postmodernist reflexivity to contest the notion of historical truth. Moreover, by intersecting narrative representation with history, postmodernism also questions the transparency of representation intricately rooted in and even produced by worldly conditions such as ideologies, histories, and cultures. As Hutcheon writes, 'from this perspective what we call "culture" is seen as the effect of representations, not their source'.[51]

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[50] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), p. 44.
[51] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 6-7.

Hutcheon further contends that postmodernism is a form of complicitous critique that is aware of itself as part of the conditions it seeks to question. Yet, it can use those conditions for a critical end: 'Postmodern art openly investigates the critical possibilities open to art without denying that its critique is inevitably in the name of its own contradictory ideology.'[52] What postmodernism can achieve through its complicitous critique is a form of representation that can be 'metafictionally self-reflexive and yet speaking to us powerfully about real political and historical realities'.[53] Postmodern representation is thus more than just a blank pastiche symptomatic of the weakening of historical consciousness. On the contrary, it has a historical impulse that is not simply nostalgic but deeply critical of the past. For Hutcheon, postmodernism reveals the constructed nature of the system of meaning production. Yet, its attention to constructedness does not aim to negate but demonstrate the condition of truth:

> What it does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world—*and* that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist "out there", fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructs in history. This does not make them any the less necessary or desirable. It does, however, as we have seen, condition their "truth" value. […] The point is not exactly that the world is meaningless […] but that any meaning that exists is of our own creation.[54]

The logic thus informs Hutcheon's account of the transition from modernism to postmodernism of complicitous critique. It regards modernism and postmodernism as

[52] Ibid., p. 15.
[53] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.
[54] Ibid., p. 43.

existing in a 'both-neither' relation with each other.[55] Postmodernism is critical of modernist assumptions such as the autonomy of art and its separation from culture. Nonetheless, postmodernism performs such a critique by acknowledging and adopting its tie to modernist traditions. As Hutcheon writes, 'On the one hand, the postmodern obviously was made possible by the self-referentiality, irony, ambiguity, and parody that characterize much of the art of modernism, […] on the other hand, postmodern fiction has come to contest the modernist ideology of artistic autonomy, individual expression, and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life.'[56] Accordingly, Hutcheon's story of the emergence of postmodernism contains a new angle that sets it apart from other accounts that either historicize it as an outcome of cultural and economic development or recognize it as a historical pendulum effect. For Hutcheon, postmodernism has a historical tie to modernism, in its very name, and emerges from the capitalist culture that unquestionably influences it. However, postmodernism accepts and seeks to 'question' these conditions that constitute it. In other words, Hutcheon's account of postmodernism is essentially a story of the 'critical' aftermath of modernism that is critical of but also appropriates modernist techniques as the tools for criticism.

Hutcheon's view of postmodernism as complicitous critique already implies the hybrid sensibility that will become the underlying logic of post-postmodernism. Postmodernism for Hutcheon is valuable for its critical potential. Nonetheless, this is also where the limit of postmodernism lies, and the concept of hybridity becomes fundamental in the development of post-postmodernism. For one thing, the critical potential of postmodernism relies on the notion of 'intent', which implies the existence of an intending

[55] Ibid., p. 46.
[56] Hutcheon, *Politics*, p.15.

subject. When Hutcheon writes that 'postmodernism is both interrogative in mode and "de-doxifying" in intent'[57], the question that arises is whose intent it is? Where does the critical impulse reside? Is it inherent in the qualities of the representation, in the writer's intention, or the reader's interpretation? The primacy of the subject in the act of critique risks undermining the overall argument about the power of representation and its critical function in the world. Moreover, as Hutcheon herself writes, postmodernism 'merely questions'.[58] The shortcoming that begets the so-called 'post-postmodern discontent'[59] is in this kind of unproductivity. Postmodernism provokes, questions, satirizes, and rethinks the past by situating it in a 'critical' relation with the present, but to what end?

The discontent in the purposelessness of postmodernism eventually leads to the emergence of a countermovement such as the postirony that expresses dissatisfaction with postmodernism's empty irony, cynicism, and self-reflexivity. Such discontent is notably expressed in David Foster Wallace's argument about the postmodern naivete that regards irony as both a form of diagnosis and a cure: 'This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. […] But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.'[60] Moreover, the nature of irony makes it an unproductive tool, and the fact that mainstream media have co-opted it also renders it critically ineffective. Accordingly, contemporary writers find that they have to move past irony in order to

[57] Ibid., p. 10.
[58] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 48.
[59] I directly borrowed the phrase from Robert McLaughlin's essay on the issue of postmodernism's self-referentiality. See Robert McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symblokē,* 12 (2004), 53-68 < DOI: 10.1353/sym.2005.0029 >.
[60] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* 13 (1993), 151-193 < https://jsomers.net/DFW_TV.pdf> [accessed 25 February 2021], p. 183.

produce something more constructive and meaningful. As Wallace writes, they might have to risk producing works with a sincere 'agenda of the consciousness behind the text'.[61]

However, Wallace's advice for contemporary American novelists is not a simple return to a pre-irony era. These writers cannot escape the fact that they are producing work in a time that irony is part of mass culture. To be sincere in the way that Wallace suggests requires the reconceptualization of the notion of sincerity itself. New Sincerity thus emerges as an attempt to reintroduce a new form of sincerity that remains vulnerable to the accusation of having a manipulative motive. However, Adam Kelly points out this is the very condition that makes a new form of sincerity possible: 'That sincerity can always be taken for manipulation shows us that sincerity depends not on purity but on trust and faith.'[62] Kelly illustrates that the undecidability of the sincerity of intention is the writer's burden as much as the reader's. The writers themselves are unsure of their sincerity. Lee Konstantinou thus argues that New Sincerity also requires a commitment to 'the ethos of belief in and of itself'.[63] Both the writer and the reader have to become a believer in the sense that they are both 'a tragic victim of postmodernity, someone who desperately seeks grounds for belief while fearing that no such grounds exist'.[64] Post-ironist fiction is produced by the writer who believes that he or she can create fiction that 'foster[s] the

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[61] Larry McCaffery, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace By Larry McCaffery', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993) <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/> [accessed 24 February 2021], para. 93

[62] Adam Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', in *Postmodern | Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp. 197-208 (p. 201).

[63] Lee Konstantinou, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 83-112 (p. 90).

[64] Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), Introduction, location 933. Kindle ebook.

reader's capacity to believe' in the writer's sincerity.[65] However, only the reader can decide whether the writer's intention is sincere. New Sincerity texts, Kelly writes, are thus 'defined by their undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their readers, with questions of sincerity embedded, on a number of levels, into the reader's contingent experience of the text'.[66]

Kelly's definition of New Sincerity as contingent upon 'a highly affective process'[67] also suggests a new kind of critical value that rests in the reader's response to the text. His conclusion echoes Wallace's observation that serious art and literary theory alike tend to forget the fact that it is impossible to separate the subject from the object and that:

> Fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications. We still think in terms of a story "changing" the reader's emotions, celebrations, maybe even her life. We're not keen on the idea of the story sharing its valence with the reader. But the reader's own life "outside" the story changes the story. You could argue that it affects only "her reaction to the story" or "her take on the story." But these things "are" the story. […] Once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but "through" the reader.[68]

It thus appears that the role of the reader is fully reenergized in the movement that seeks to respond to postmodernism's limitation. As Kelly sums up, New Sincerity 'cannot fully lie

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Kelly, p. 206.
[67] 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 (2017), 1-32 <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.224>, p. 25.
[68] McCaffery, para. 66.

in representation'. Instead, it depends on 'what happens off the page, outside representation, depends upon the invocation and response of another'.[69]

New Sincerity or the post-ironic movement may address the reader as the savior who can rescue the value of literature from postmodernism's ironic abyss. However, it appears that the role of the text itself may be overlooked and somehow eclipsed by the issue of authorial intention. For example, the use of metafictional techniques in post-ironist fiction is only emphasized as the intentional choice of the writer that aims to elicit particular affective responses from the reader. However, how such forms and strategies produce affect and, in return, are granted meanings and values through the reader's affective responses, do not appear to be a primary concern of the post-ironist. In the process in which sincerity may be possible again, both the author and the text are proclaimed dead, leaving the reader to make sense of the text on their own. As Wallace writes: 'Once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language and language lives not just in her "through" the reader.'[70] However, in this thesis, I aim to demonstrate that it does not have to be the case, that the reader is not interacting with a dead object when they are reading a text. I intend to develop from the New Sincerity argument by moving away from the problems of the author's intent or anxiety that characterizes the impossibility of sincerity. I want to propose that there is another way to tell the story of post-postmodernism that is more committed to finding a solution, to developing a more constructive approach that is reinforced by the affective force and hybridity in the subject and object relation – the relation that is often forgotten, as Wallace himself observes, in the world of art and literature.

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[69] Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', p. 205.
[70] McCaffery, para. 66.

At this point, it is possible to describe the connection between modernism, postmodernism, and the post-irony branch of post-postmodernism in terms of the relationship between the text and the writer in which textual forms function as the tool that expresses authorial intention. The modern condition is characterized by change and instability. Modernist writers register this condition through formal inventions. They manipulate and experiment with forms to find a way to represent or uncover the unified, underlying reality beneath the flux and chaos of modernity. Similarly, postmodernist writers use textual forms as their tools even though the goal is now to object to the possibility that an underlying logic or unified reality can be accessed, represented, or even exist. Despite the difference in objectives, the assumption about the relationship between textual forms and writers remains unchanged from modernism and postmodernism. There is still an artist as an intentional subject who uses forms for specific agendas, whether it is to reinforce or destabilize the notion of accessible and unified knowledge about truth and reality.

Post-postmodern movements such as New Sincerity acknowledge that formal innovations such as metafictional reflexivity and irony may be unproductive as a critical tool. Yet, the assumption about forms and writers persists. In this strand of post-postmodernism, the emphasis on the constructed nature of representation is projected as something detrimental to the writer, who is now left helpless and insecure about their ability to produce writing that can communicate something meaningful. Thus, the post-irony movement focuses on the writer's struggle to connect with the reader in the absence of a reliable tool to ensure the sincerity of their intention. The assumption that art is a form of intersubjective communication remains even though there seems to be nothing substantial

left to communicate. Yet, for the post-ironist, it is beside the point. The primary purpose of post-ironist or New Sincerity texts is to ensure the insecure writers that they can still connect to and convince the reader to 'believe' in the possibility of sincerity. The whole enterprise, it appears, becomes a secular form of belief without contents. Formal innovations that are proven to be unproductive as critical tools are now used in the service of faith even though it is a form of belief that is an empty gesture. As Konstantinou writes:

> Metafiction removes the foundations for belief in realism. By contrast, postironists attempt to use metafictional form as a way of reconnecting form and content, as a way of strengthening belief. What is paradoxical about this attempt is the emptiness of the proposed "postironic belief." Postironists don't advocate a stance of belief toward some aspect of the world but rather the ethos of belief in and of itself.[71]

Therefore, it seems that the post-irony version of post-postmodernism may not fully succeed in restoring the potential for art to engage with the world constructively even when its practitioners contend that it is still worth keeping faith in art because, as Wallace states, 'we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections'.[72] While the postironists may remind us of and encourage that capacity in us, there is an affective strand of post-postmodernism that seeks to deploy such capacity for a more constructive purpose. This account of post-postmodernism is committed to the importance of textual forms that are decoupled from the artist as an intentional subject. The narrator of Moshfegh's novel is also an art history student and works in an art gallery. Part of the discontent that drives her into hibernation comes from the sense of pointlessness,

[71] Konstantinou, *No Bull*, p. 90
[72] McCaffery, para. 23.

undecidability, and even triviality in the excessive preoccupation with artistic intention, authenticity, and sincerity in the art world. Before she decides to touch the painting, she already tries to connect with it from the artist's perspective. However, in doing so, she finds herself stuck in a loop of unanswerable questions and unprovable hypotheses:

> I got the feeling that if I moved the frames to the side, I'd see the artists watching me […] wondering what I was wondering about them, if I saw their brilliance, or if their lives had been pointless. […] Maybe they lived as real artists knowing all along that there were no pearly gates. Neither creation nor sacrifice could lead a person to heaven. Or maybe not. Maybe, in the morning they were aloof and happy to distract themselves with their brushes and oils, to mix their colors and smoke their pipes and go back to their fresh still life without having to swat away any more flies.[73]

Maybe, or maybe not. However, as the end of the paragraph suggests, the narrator's rumination about the artist eventually leads to a realization that the artist also interacts with objects when they create art. From getting to use brushes and oils to mix colors, the pleasure from this interaction might be the point of any artistic creation after all. It may or may not be true. Yet, the narrator takes from this assumption the possibility that she too may try to interact directly with the artwork as an object and give up the effort to understand the art from the perspective of the artist's life and intention. Hence, she reaches out and touches the painting before discovering that art in its ontological existence, separated from its creator, can still be meaningful and fulfilling when she comes into contact with it.

[73] Moshfegh, pp., 284-85.

This is the kind of assumption behind the strand of post-postmodernism that remains committed to the constructive and even critical potential of textual forms. This strand is still rooted in the modernist preoccupation with uncovering knowledge, yet it maintains the postmodernist disillusionment that such knowledge may not exist outside subjective experiences. Therefore, it seeks to trace relations between the subject and the object on the ontological level. It could then be said that this version of post-postmodernism does not necessarily come after but emerges in the middle space between modernism and postmodernism. This is the story of post-postmodernism that recommits to textual forms and approaches the text as an object. It removes the issue of the intentional artist from the picture to fully explore how the direct encounter between art and its audience, or the reader and the text, may produce a new kind of criticism, knowledge, and meaning.

In a way, this branch of post-postmodernism is not that different from Hutcheon's claim about how historiographic metafiction uses textual forms to help us rethink the issue of truth, authenticity, and transparency in both historical and fictional narratives. It also reflects Hutcheon's observation that the conditions of textuality and worldliness in the twenty-first century have changed and called for a new type of representation that can critically respond to it. The postironists may succeed in moving away from postmodernism's unproductive disillusion, but they appear to be left with nothing except faith and belief as a gesture. Contemporary writings such as hybrid fiction see art and representation as something that is deeply entangled in the real world. These writings use forms to reflect on their entanglement in the changes in the social, economic, and cultural conditions that influence their ability to critique and represent the world. That is, the condition of the twenty-first century indeed changes the worldliness and the textuality, as

Hutcheon observes. That change requires that we rethink the relation between the subject and the object, and words and world, and recognize that we can acquire knowledge and meaning only through our ontological perception and subjective consciousness.

Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden point out that the 'return to form' in literary studies and criticism is a common feature that appears in both sides of the argument about contemporary fiction. Either viewing it as evidence of the enduring legacy of modernism or the continuing influence of postmodernism, 'Both of these approaches hinge upon competing accounts of literary form and its connection to the social world.'[74] On the one hand, scholars and critics such as the Post●45 contend that literature today is still in the postwar period of 'long modernism'. Amy Hungerford is among the Post●45 scholars who see in contemporary literature 'not a departure from modernism's aesthetic but its triumph in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally'.[75] Hungerford points to the overlap between the experimental postmodernist fiction and the writing of minority groups as evidence of the enduring influence of the 'high-culture modernism and its assumptions about reading and about literature' that combines these two sides of postmodernism.[76] In *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl also provides a detailed account of the universities' role, especially the creative writing programs, in institutionalizing modernist traditions that continue to influence literary practices until today. In those writing programs, literature is the product of the systematic process of creative writing called 'the autopoetics' that combines the notions of experience, creativity, and literature as a craft or

[74] Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, 'Introduction', in *Postmodern | Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp. 1-24 (pp.14-15).
[75] Amy Hungerford, 'On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary', *American Literary History*, 44 (2007), 410 – 419 <DOI: 10.1093/alh/ajm044>, p. 418.
[76] Ibid., p. 413.

a form of techne.[77] The ethos of modernism is affirmed in the process of autopoetics that maintains that literature is an artistic expression and literary forms have the 'show, don't tell' or an exhibiting function for the writer. Consequently, McGurl sees the creative writing programs make the modernist cannon of literary practices such as 'a demand for self-conscious attention to technique' and the 'autopoetic thematization of authorship' still persist and continue to define postwar literary fiction today.[78]

On the other hand, literary scholars such as Mary K. Holland consider the emphasis on literary forms and techniques in literature today as proof of the 'belated success' of postmodernism. For Holland, the experimental impulse and penchant for formal innovation associated with postmodernism have transitioned from being the sign of a problem to the evidence of success. According to Holland, 'this innovative portion of postmodern fiction absorbs poststructuralist assumptions about language, wrestles with the problems inherent in those assumptions, and proposes methods of solving those problems from within poststructuralism itself.'[79] That is, she sees the experiment with forms in contemporary fiction not as an attempt to register the problem but as a form of success in finding 'new avenues toward meaning and meaningful human connection through signification and mediation themselves'.[80] Holland's argument also echoes Madhu Dubey's claim about the need to retain the postmodern problematics about the function of form despite the failure of postmodern self-reflexivity to connect to the social world. For Dubey, the recent return to the genre of realism as seen in recent works of some contemporary novelists is not

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[77] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 23.
[78] Ibid., p. 51.
[79] Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 3.
[80] Ibid., p. 2.

enough to indicate that literature has finally reclaimed its representational and critical function. Specifically, she does not see how the shift from postmodernism can happen at the level of form or by simply returning to realism: 'the problem that postmodernism posed for the social novel […] cannot be solved on formal grounds, by reviving narrative realism.'[81] That is, textual form and representation will not cease to be problematic in the way that the revival of the realist genre seems to suggest. Therefore, until a truly new mode of literary representation and critique emerges, the postmodern use of formal reflexivity and innovation remains relevant and crucial, especially for the ethnic novelists who rely on 'the generative aesthetic potential of the postmodern politics of difference' as the source of aesthetic possibility.[82] In her monograph *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, Dubey further elaborates on the 'salience of a periodizing concept of postmodernism for African-American literary and cultural studies'[83] because it can illustrate how aesthetic forms and innovations are often viewed as a militant and subversive tool against racial essentialism even though 'disruptive aesthetic strategies may actually render the romance of race more palatable in postmodern times'.[84] Dubey thus proposes that the challenge today, especially for African-American literature, is to keep the problem of form and referentiality problematic in its representation but avoid the tendency to veer towards 'aesthetic solipsism'[85] that merges politics with aesthetics to the point that we may lose sight of the real.

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[81] Madhu Dubey, 'Post-Postmodern Realism?', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 364-371 <DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4012>, p. 369.
[82] Ibid., p. 367.
[83] Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.7.
[84] Ibid., p. 10.
[85] Ibid., p. 11.

Whether it is proof of long modernism, success of postmodernism, or reflection of the need to keep the problematics of postmodern representation in sight, until a valid alternative is possible, the return to form remains a crucial characteristic that describes contemporary literature. Moreover, the emphasis on form problematizes the attempt to use the term post-postmodernism to designate what comes after postmodernism when it seems impossible to settle the dispute over the legacies of modernism and postmodernism. However, contemporary fiction that I characterize as hybrid belongs in the camp that does not view the commitment to forms as the site of contestation and competition between modernism and postmodernism but seeks to reassess the nature of text and reader relations on formal grounds. For the hybrid strand of post-postmodernism, the reassessment of the importance and function of form is necessary due to the changes in the conditions of textuality and worldliness that Hutcheon points out. In other words, the changes brought about by technological, socio-cultural, and economic conditions of the twenty-first century demand that we rethink the relationship between texts and readers in our commitment to the importance of forms so that literature can maintain its representational and critical values.

Alan Kirby's digimodernism is an example of the hybrid strand of post-postmodernism. Digimodernism describes a new cultural paradigm of the twenty-first century in which digital technologies and textuality converge and bring forth 'the computerization of text' that allows the reader 'to intervene textually, physically to make text, to add visible content or tangibly shape narrative development'.[86] Advanced technologies reconfigure the nature of the text and its relationship with the reader.

[86] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 1.

Nonetheless, Kirby still maintains that this phenomenon is a phase in the historical development of modernity, 'a shift from one phase of its history into another'.[87] In *Postmodernism in Pieces*, Matthew Mullins also highlights the ontological co-dependency between humans and nonhumans in his reconceptualization of postmodernism. Mullins's 'neomaterialist' approach shares a similarity with Kirby's digimodernism in that it views textual practices as a collaborative effort, a gathering, of human and nonhuman actors. However, Mullins's argument departs significantly from Kirby's in that he sees the materialist and relational aspect of contemporary literature as a reflection of a postmodern feature: 'what makes literature postmodern is its preoccupation with the material things and interactions that constitute those seemingly ready-made social categories. The great insight of postmodernism, then, is not that our social categories are somehow artificial or inauthentic, but that they are continuously the products of material processes.'[88] Despite their contradiction in identifying contemporary literature as part of the modernist or postmodernist tradition, Kirby and Mullins nonetheless share a commitment in the 'constructedness' and the 'process' in which human readers and nonhuman texts produce textual meanings and values as mutual collaborators.

In *After Critique,* Mitchum Huehls adopts the term 'exomodern' to describe contemporary fiction that foregrounds such processes and, in effect, becomes a subject and object hybrid that functions simultaneously as a sign and a thing. The term exomodern is invoked to reflect the 'sensitivity to human insignificance' that the original usage of the

[87] Ibid., p. 3.
[88] Matthew Mullins, *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social in U.S. Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 3.

term by Mark McGurl indicates.[89] What exomodernism alludes to is the demystification of the primacy of human subjects and the emphasis on the ontological conditions of texts. For Huehls, the flat ontology in these texts allows them to engage more productively with the logic of neoliberalism that is able to exploit both subjective and objective positions and exacerbates the postmodern division between experimentalism and multiculturalism. Exomodern texts succeed in transcending the neoliberal impasse by focusing on the 'more ontological literary forms comfortable with subject-object doubleness'[90] that may prevent them from being fully co-opted and exploited by neoliberalism. As such, it is possible to discern how these texts may come close to representing a real shift that Dubey calls for. It does not seek to recuperate the representational and critical function of literature on the formal ground but aims to change our understanding of those formal grounds upon which the text and the reader interact.

Metamodernism is an example of a post-postmodern account that situates between modernism and postmodernism, oscillating between the two poles as it 'upcycles' the styles, conventions, and techniques from the past to produce something new that is neither modern or postmodern, and both at the same time. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen define metamodernism as the structure of feeling that dominates Western capitalist society since the beginning of the 2000s that is characterized by the shift towards the Web 2.0 technologies, the proliferation of immaterial and creative labor in network

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[89] Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Contemporary Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 30. For McGurl's original usage of the term, please see 'The New Cultural Geology', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 380-390 <DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4011>.

[90] Ibid., p. 29. For McGurl's usage of the term see, Mark McGurl, The New Cultural Geology', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 380-390 <DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4011>

culture, and the prevalence of neoliberal logic.[91] In other words, metamodernism is the cultural logic of the neoliberal society. In making such a claim, Akker and Vermeulen echo both Kirby and Huehls's arguments and characterize metamodern literature as a response to the prevalence of digital technologies and a new possibility that literary texts may represent and critically engage with the conditions of neoliberalism. The key characteristics of metamodernism include a recommitment to history, affect, and depth, all of which have been destabilized to a certain degree by postmodern theories. However, as the prefix 'meta' suggests, this recommitment is not a return to the premodern but a reconfiguration of how we may develop a new kind of historical awareness, affective intensity, and a profound and meaningful engagement from the surface encounter. I contend that hybrid fiction is mostly aligned with metamodernism both in its commitment to the generative force of the middle ground and in its intention to rethink the way literary practices may remain a relevant and helpful enterprise through which we learn to situate ourselves in the world historically, ontologically, and affectively. That is, despite the focus on flat ontology or human and nonhuman interrelation, hybrid fiction still maintains that, in Wallace's words, fiction should still be about humans and explore 'what it means to be human today'.[92] I set out to investigate the constitution of subjectivity in hybrid fiction because I see that the reconfiguration of textual practices informed by the notion of flat ontology, affect, or the primacy of objects all strengthen the belief that fiction is something that is still deeply human.

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[91] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodizing the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed.by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp.17-59.
[92] McCaffery, para.23.

Thesis Structure and Chapters

Hybrid fiction foregrounds the role of affect in textual representations and in the production of meanings to rethink subjectivities and how they are constituted through textual encounters. My argument in this thesis is structured according to the emphasis on narrative, urban, and network subjectivities, all of which are represented in the selected novels in the context of an affective encounter to highlight the problems and possibilities that ensue from considering subjectivities through the lens of hybridity and affect. In the first chapter, I will examine narrative subjectivities as a product of an encounter between oneself and the other. I will emphasize how the notion of self as a type of narrative presupposes interpersonal communication. I will argue that narrative subjectivities problematize the idea of self-authenticity and objective truth. At the same time, it puts forward a possibility of a new form of authenticity and sincerity in narrative construction. In this chapter, I will be reading Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) and Dana Spiotta's *Innocents and Others* (2016) as novels that characterize the construction of self as an interpersonal encounter through mediated narratives. The novels foreground the notion of self-narrative and also complicate the issue by emphasizing that a narrative is always interpersonal and mediated. However, both Egan and Spiotta also use the intersection between narrative and media technologies to consider self-narrative as an affective encounter and imagine a possibility of an authentic self and sincere communication in the production of self-narratives. My analysis of the two novels will incorporate Alfred N. Whitehead's concept of 'proposition', Paul Ricœur's notion of narrative identity, and Judith Butler's argument about providing an account of oneself. I hope to use these notions to reflect on how *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* respectively rethink the concepts of authenticity and sincerity through the recent conversation about New Sincerity in contemporary fiction. I will argue that the new concept

of self-authenticity that is developed from the framework of New Sincerity can be defined as a form of accountability. Moreover, I will pay attention to how the novels are set in two specific historical moments in media and information technology development. I will demonstrate that the historical positionings are a strategic decision to facilitate affective transmission between the reader and the text that can produce textual meaning. The novels rely on the reader's historical knowledge and immersive experience in media technologies to make sense of the textual representation of narrative subjectivities as they are mediated through other mediums that exist beyond the representational power of the text.

In the second chapter, I will discuss urban subjectivities that are constituted through an affective encounter with and within city space. I will be reading Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999) and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) as novels that use the concept of affect to explore the possibility of a new form of literacy for urban life. I propose that *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* imagine a mode of signification that can be called 'affective literacy' and 'affective gutter'. Both models of literacy are contingent on the intersection between language, space, and materiality. They are an alternative textual practice that is not detached from the conditions of material reality and belonging but derives the power of signification from it. Moreover, both novels place the problem of textual signification and literacy in the context of race and urbanity to explore how the process of racialization is tied to the subject's ability to produce and read the urban space as a type of text. The urban subjects in the two novels learn to write and read texts on the surface and through a direct encounter with the urban space. They create a new model of signification by turning the limitation of their racial and material reality into an opportunity to express their complex relationship with the city space. In addition, both novels seek to

signify with other texts and conventions to represent the experience of urban subjects as they explore and experiment with alternative textual practices. Elements from the genres such as comic books, Afrofuturism, magical realism, and detective fiction are incorporated in the novels. However, in using these genres, the novels also rely on the reader's prior knowledge about genre conventions to engage with the texts. Both *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* thus formally replicate the same process of affective textual signification that they represent on the pages in the reader's reading experience.

In the final chapter, I will examine the post-critical turn in hybrid fiction through network subjectivities that are constituted with a new critical consciousness informed by one's relationality and embeddedness in the network of affective connections. I will be reading Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2011) and Dave Eggers' s *The Circle* (2013) as novels that use formal affordances, especially that of the network form, to reassess the utopian genre as a critical discourse. My analysis of the novels will incorporate the insights from the conjunction between form and critique in the work of post-critical thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Rita Felski. I will also adopt the notion of oppositional agency from Tom Moylan's distinction between critical dystopia and anti-utopia to investigate how the novels characterize network subjectivities in the tradition of these two genres. Moreover, I will look at how *Super Sad* and *The Circle* incorporate the affordance of the network form in using the conventions from critical dystopia and anti-utopia. In doing so, the two novels invite the reader to adopt a new mode of criticism that is thematically suggested in the text in the way they read and grasp the meaning of the text that is itself written as a critical discourse.

Each of the six novels that I will be reading is interconnected in its commitment to exploring a new way to know and engage with the world. As such, the theory of affect provides a valuable theoretical foundation for my examination of these novels. The concept of hybridity is also instrumental in investigating the process in which subjectivities are constituted and represented in these texts as a product of an affective encounter. That is, during an encounter, the entities become both an active subject and a passive object and capable of affecting and being affected by one another. The subject is constituted precisely at the moment that their common ontology with other objects is reaffirmed. Moreover, the concept of hybridity is vital in my discussion about contemporary literature after postmodernism and how hybrid fiction fits into the current development of literature today. I want to suggest through hybrid fiction that affect and hybridity can describe a version of post-postmodernism that is committed to the primacy of literary forms and the process in which texts and readers become a collaborator in producing affect that can be mobilized to produce meaning and value of texts.

To conclude, I hope that my reading of hybrid fiction can demonstrate that the attention to affect and flat ontology does not necessarily result in the 'death of the subject'[93] whose consciousness was once believed to be the only source of knowledge about reality *as we know it*. After recognizing human finitude, to echo the title of Meillassoux's seminal text on speculative realism, it is possible to see that human subjectivity is more vibrant than what we could have learned solely from an anthropocentric perspective. The finitude of humans paradoxically places humans in the realm of the boundlessness in which they can

[93] Here I directly refer to the title of Rei Terada's monograph *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'*.

be constituted and reconstituted through movements and encounters with other entities in the world. What separates hybrid fiction from other contemporary novels is the commitment to illustrating such richness of human lives and experiences. The commitment is reflected both on the pages and in the way hybrid fiction formally builds an affective connection with the reader. Hybrid fiction may be written to explore the limitations and potentials of humans from the recognition of the equal importance of objects. However, the term hybrid also reminds us that it is in the middle space inhabited by the subject and object hybrids that our subjectivities are constituted as an assemblage of various entities that have moved and crossed paths with one another.

Chapter One

Narrative Subjectivities in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* and Dana Spiotta's *Innocents and Others*

In *Process and Reality,* Alfred North Whitehead introduces the concept of 'proposition' to illustrate the process by which the subject experiences and formulates knowledge about the world. A proposition is a speculation or a 'theory' that the subject has about the target entity.[1] The subject apprehends the target entity's physical data through direct contact with it. The physical data will then be combined with the conceptual data about the target entity that the subject develops from experiences. The conceptual data functions as a broad framework that anticipates the nature of the entity. A proposition is generated from a combination of such physical and conceptual data about the target entity. Even though the physical data that is obtained directly from the target entity makes it possible to determine whether a proposition is true or false, Whitehead emphasizes that the main function of a proposition is to be a 'lure for feeling' for the apprehending subject to entertain a possibility about the target entity. Therefore, a proposition should not be judged for its truthfulness or falsehood. Instead, as a lure for feeling, a proposition should be interesting for the subject to want to entertain its possibility. As Whitehead writes, 'But in the real world it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true.'[2] Moreover, Whitehead sees that even a false proposition still has an important function in that it introduces new potentialities into the world. That is, the primary role of propositions is to appeal to the

[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, ed.by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p.184.
[2] Ibid., p. 259

subject to conceive new ideas and possibilities, to 'pave the way along which the world advances into novelty. Error is the price which we pay for progress.'[3] In the concept of the proposition, an error, a misjudgment, or even a lie could play a crucial part in producing new knowledge about the world.

This chapter will argue that the concept of the proposition can describe the model of authenticity suggested in the representation of narrative subjectivities in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) and Dana Spiotta's *Innocents and Others* (2016). Both novels explore the connection between narration and subjectivity to problematize the ideal of authenticity that presupposes the existence of a true and immutable self at the core of a person. The emphasis on narration reveals the ambiguity and relationality in the process of self-formation. Such ambiguity destabilizes the notion of a true self and calls for a reassessment of the ideal of self-authenticity. I will use Paul Ricœur's notion of narrative identity, Adriana Cavarero's concept of the necessary other, and Judith Butler's argument about the scene of address to discuss how Egan and Spiotta question the viability of the ideal of authenticity in the self that is figured through narrative mediation. Both authors suggest a new mode of authenticity that is not contingent on the true self but grounded in one's interconnection and embeddedness in the social world. I will propose that in the two novels, the model of New Sincerity is used as a foundation for self-authenticity that acknowledges the ambiguity and relationality of the self and embraces those conditions for its possibility. The kind of authenticity developed from the New Sincerity model, I argue, can be understood through the concept of the proposition. It refers to the potentiality of a person that requires an intersubjective collaboration to achieve its actuality. Specifically,

[3] Ibid., p. 187.

it is a mode of authenticity that relies on the other's presence and contribution in the form of trust in one's potential to be a certain kind of self. Self-authenticity in this model can be realized through one's ability to be accountable to the other by fulfilling the expectation that the other trustfully has in them. In other words, it is a form of authenticity based on trust and accountability. In the final section, I will discuss how both texts also adopt the propositional model of authenticity into their own narrative. Through what I characterize as propositional narrative, I will demonstrate that the reader's engagement with the novels can be understood as an encounter in which the text functions as a proposition that attracts the reader to apprehend and contribute to the construction of its meaning. In other words, my reading of *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* proposes that the novels suggest a relational model of authenticity in both the practice of the self and literary engagement.

Self, Narration, and the Problems of Authenticity

Authenticity in the practice of the self refers to the ability to realize and express the true essence of one's self. According to Somogy Varga, an authentic person 'acts on impulses and ideals that are not only hers (as bearing her authorship), but that are also expressions of who she really is'.[4] Implicit in the ideal of authenticity is an assumption that the self has an inner core separated from the outer layer and that the inner self represents the true essence of a person. In contrast, the outer self lacks depth and meaning on its own. With this assumption, Charles Guigon contends that authenticity requires a two-step process of self-reflection and self-expression:

> The project of becoming authentic asks us to get in touch with the real self we have within, a task that is achieved primarily through introspection, self-reflection or

[4] Somogy Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 2.

> meditation. […] Second, this idea calls on us to express that unique constellation of inner traits in our actions in the external world. […] The assumption is that it is only by expressing our true selves that we can achieve self-realization and self-fulfillment as authentic human beings.[5]

As an ethical ideal, authenticity demands that one knows one's true inner self and that the public self must be expressed in a manner that does not violate the integrity of the true self inside. For this reason, Lionel Trilling regards authenticity as 'a strenuous moral experience, […] a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, […] and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life'.[6] In Trilling's view, authenticity reinforces the insular model of the self by prioritizing the need to look inward for self-knowledge while rejecting external factors that may play a part in self-formation.

Look at Me and *Innocents and Others* problematize such an ideal of authenticity by foregrounding how both the processes of self-reflection and self-expression rely on the mechanics of narrative figuration in which factual and imaginative elements are blended together to create narrative coherence and unity. With narrative figuration being a vital tool to construct and express the self, the novels point to the impossibility of the core self that contains an absolute truth about the person. Instead, it is suggested in both novels that the self is as much a product of creative imagination as it is comprised of historical facts about the person. Consequently, the ideal of authenticity that is predicated on the idea of the true self might be impossible to fulfill. The representation of narrative subjectivities in the

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[5] Charles Guigon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.3-4.
[6] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.11.

novels thus questions the viability of the concept of self-authenticity. Here I will suggest narrative subjectivities that question self-authenticity can be understood through the notion of narrative identity that Ricœur proposes.

In his argument about narrative identity, Ricœur uses the process of narrative figuration to explain how the self is formulated as an answer to the question 'who'. For Ricœur, such a question characterizes the self as an active agent. The self that performs an action is inevitably entangled in variable factors that could affect the self, including the reason, result, and consequence of the action. Therefore, Ricœur argues that the identity of the subject that answers the question 'who' has to use the mechanics of narrative emplotment to mediate those variables into a coherent, consistent, and meaningful story of the self. However, he also emphasizes that narrative emplotment is a process that necessarily combines fact and fiction - with the fictional elements being used to create self-knowledge that fits into one's 'self-constancy' or an uninterrupted sense of self over time. As Ricœur writes, 'the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.'[7] That is, to answer the question 'who' requires a practice of narration that brings together disparate elements into a narrative unity. By combining fact and fiction, a narrative identity can achieve a sense of consistency and continuity that corresponds to the sense of self that one has developed throughout one's lifetime.

Ricœur's notion of narrative identity contradicts the idea of the true self in several aspects. His argument reveals that self-knowledge does not necessarily contain absolute

[7] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative Volume.3*, trans. By Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 246.

truth about the person. Instead, it is formulated through a combination of imaginative and fictional elements required to mediate changes and interruptions into a unified and continuous narrative about one's life. Moreover, the mechanics of narrative emplotment itself presupposes a temporal progression. By definition, a narratively mediated self cannot be an immutable but a dynamic entity that shifts and changes over time. In short, the notion of narrative identity fundamentally rejects the assumption of the self as having an absolute core and questions the viability of authenticity as an ethical model for the practice of the self.

In this section, I will discuss how *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* thematically highlight the implications of narrative identity for the concept of self-authenticity in different ways. In the characterization of Charlotte Swenson, the protagonist of *Look at Me*, Egan portrays the impossibility of self-authenticity through a split between the inner and outer selves that becomes so vast that the surface/depth model of the self is no longer applicable. Through Charlotte, Egan introduces an inverted model of the self in which narrative figuration becomes an indispensable tool to constitute a sense of self. Through the character Jelly in *Innocents and Others*, Spiotta similarly pays attention to the unbridgeable division of the self that relies on narrative figuration to formulate and express a self. At the same time, Spiotta also uses the novel's protagonist, Meadow Mori, to reflect on how the blending of fact and fiction becomes a way to obtain self-knowledge as a form of narrative figuration. Moreover, Spiotta also considers the role of mediums in the production and reception of self-narratives in these two characters, which further highlights the problem of authenticity as an ethical ideal for the self.

Inverted Surface/Depth Model in *Look at Me*

In *Look at Me,* Egan imagines the scenario in which the surface/depth model of the self as the foundation of self-authenticity becomes unattainable and suggests that narrative figuration can be a solution that mediates the irreparable disjunction of the self. The protagonist Charlotte is portrayed as a character for whom the inner and outer split of the self is an actual lived experience. The novel introduces Charlotte as a model who is recovering from an operation to reconstruct her face that is damaged in a car accident. After the surgery in which 'eighty titanium screws were implanted in the crushed bones […] to connect and hold them together'[8], Charlotte's face becomes a literal prosthesis, an artificial part of her body. However, the novel portrays how Charlotte also experiences other disconnections between herself and the new face. First, the face that is put together by mechanical parts reminds her of Rockford, the hometown she never identifies with because it is 'a city known for its drills, transmissions, joints, saws, watertight seals, adjustable door bumpers, spark plugs, gaskets, […] invisible things that no one in the world would ever know or care about'.[9] Charlotte claims to have her first moment of self-realization from identifying with Rockford: 'A place revered among mechanics for its universal joint was not a place where I could remain. This was clear to me at age twelve: my first clear notion of myself. I was *not* Rockford.'[10] The new face thus represents an alienation in that it epitomizes Rockford by being 'full of titanium bolts and screws invented here'.[11] Yet, for Charlotte, the new face also represents an existential threat; it does not look like her, and it reminds her that she never knows what she looks like: 'I'd held up pictures of myself beside

[8] Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (London: Corsair, 2001), p. 5.
[9] Ibid., p. 12.
[10] Ibid., pp.12-13.
[11] Ibid., p.13.

my reflection and tried to compare them. But my sole discovery was that in addition to not knowing what I looked like now, I had never known.'[12] With the new face, Charlotte realizes that she has lost the memory of her appearance, which means she has also lost the ability to find the surface layer that truly represents and corresponds to the true self inside.

Charlotte is doomed to inauthenticity if authenticity requires a faithful correspondence between one's inner and outer selves. She is physically, mentally, and existentially disconnected from her outward appearance. Moreover, by not remembering what she previously looks like, the disjunction becomes irreparable. In other words, Charlotte's new face becomes a simulacrum or a copy without an original. In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Jean Baudrillard describes the hyperreal as a phenomenon in the era of simulation in which there is no longer a reference to an origin or reality. The hyperreal liquidates all references and substitutes the signs for the real: 'Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself. […] A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary.'[13] Charlotte's new face has no relation to reality and exists solely in the hyperreal. Her mirror reflection is a simulacra image that, in Baudrillard's words, 'didn't conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination'.[14] Consequently, Charlotte comes to realize that her real self can no longer be expressed authentically; she only has a simulacra image that reflects nothing about herself. With this recognition, Charlotte reverses the surface/depth model by constructing a new self to match the outward

[12] Ibid., p.40.
[13] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans.by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp.2-3.
[14] Ibid., p. 5.

appearance. In the scene when Charlotte looks at the new face for the first time, she then says to herself: 'This is your Charlotte, and you must take good care of her so she'll grow up to be a beautiful girl, and live an extraordinary life.'[15] Without the inability to uphold the ideal of authenticity, she can accept the new face as a tabula rasa. As a simulacrum without an original reference, the new face can refer to another Charlotte whose life will be extraordinary. Accordingly, after recovery, Charlotte's initial plan is to relaunch her modeling career as she pitches the idea to her agent: 'Pretend I'm a new girl. […] *No one recognizes me*.'[16]

By characterizing Charlotte as a model, Egan also highlights the influence of the image culture imbued with the idea that a simulacrum is all that matters. In a scene of self-reflection, Charlotte recalls a lesson she has learned from her modeling career:

> As a model, of course, I'd carried my face like a sign, holding it out a foot or so in front of me – not out of pride or vanity, God knew; those had been stamped out long ago, or at any rate, disjoined from my physical appearance. No, out of sheer practicality: here's what I am. Calling card, handshake, *précis,* call it what you like; it was what I had to offer to the world where I had spent my life. (emphasis in original)[17]

Being in the fashion industry Charlotte is conditioned to abandon her ego and self-pride as a matter of practicality. Modeling demands that she constantly changes her appearance to the point that it disjoins from her sense of self. Rather than making her more recognizable, Charlotte contends that being a model produces an opposite effect: 'People who've known

[15] Egan., p. 35.
[16] Ibid., p. 46.
[17] Ibid., pp.29-30.

me for years stare at me like they've never seen me before.'[18] However, she also admits that she is 'trying to view it a unique opportunity to start over'.[19] Not having a recognizable self, she always has a chance to begin again as a new person. Charlotte's reflection about her modeling career thus suggests that she has subscribed to the inverted surface/depth model even before the accident. From her perspective as a model, appearance takes precedence over the inner self; it is what she has 'to offer to the world'. Even if there is a true self, it no longer serves a practical function for Charlotte.

Having a new face as a simulacrum only reinforces the inversion of the surface/depth model that she has experienced from being a model. However, the novel further portrays that, in realizing that she has lost the ability to express her real self and be an authentic person, Charlotte embraces narrative figuration in the formation of a self that does not have to adhere to the ideal of authenticity. With the new face as an empty vessel, she can fill it with stories and make up a new self as a beautiful girl with an extraordinary life. That is, her inability to be authentic also allows Charlotte to make use of what Adam Kelly characterizes as her 'postmodern consciousness', which he describes as a 'detached awareness, even in the moment of action, of being the subject of future narration and/or technologized representation'.[20] Her awareness as a narrativized self is also manifest in the mirror scene in which Charlotte sees the self behind the new face as a subject of her narration. The first-person Charlotte functions as a narrator who will tell the story of the person that the new face belongs to. In his reading of the novel, Kelly also argues that the postmodern consciousness reflects Charlotte's inability to express herself: 'narration here

[18] Ibid., p. 186.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Adam Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 391-422 <DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4009>, p. 403.

functions for Charlotte less as an organic representation of her experience than as a displacement of her identity onto a notion of the subject defined from without.'[21] However, I want to extend from Kelly's argument and suggest that Charlotte's postmodern consciousness may reflect the displacement of her identity; narrative construction becomes indispensable to her. It is the only way for Charlotte to link the simulacra face to a self, even though it could only be an inauthentic, narratively figured self.

In the novel, Egan further explores the tension between narrative figuration and self-authenticity by incorporating Charlotte's inverted model of the self in autobiographical writing. When a tech startup asks Charlotte to write her life story for their online platform called Ordinary/Extraordinary People, she recruits Irene Maitlock, a fake reporter later revealed to be an academic in cultural studies, to write the story for her. The collaboration with Irene reinforces the impossibility of authenticity for Charlotte. Their work process relies on narrative figuration in which historical and fictional narratives intertwine to produce a coherent story about Charlotte's life. Charlotte explains to Irene that in their workflow, 'I'd give you the raw material and the rest would be up to you; you could tell it any way you want, you could make it up.'[22] The final product will be a life story that, to use Ricœur's words, 'borrows from history as much as fiction making the life story a fictive history or, if you prefer, an historical fiction'.[23] Irene thus describes Charlotte's autobiography as an unholy hybrid creature created from the fusion of Charlotte's voice with hers: 'words tumbled from her in a voice that wasn't her own or Charlotte's but a

[21] Ibid., pp.405-06.
[22] Ibid., p. 263.
[23] Paul Ricœur, 'Narrative Identity', trans. by Mark S. Muldoon, *Philosophy Today*, 35 (1991), 73-81 <DOI: 10.5840/philtoday199135136>, p. 73.

hybrid, an unholy creature that was Irene's creation, too.'[24] In other words, Irene and Charlotte's writing is a hybrid of Charlotte's facts and Irene's creative imagination. Hybridity is needed to make sense of Charlotte's life story as a fictive history or historical fiction.

After portraying Charlotte's life story as a fictionalized narrative based on real events, Egan introduces another complication in the concept of authenticity. Thomas Keene, the owner of the online platform, comments to Charlotte that her story written by Irene is 'too much like you for you to have written it'.[25] In Thomas's comment, the hybrid narrative unexpectedly renders an authentic style. However, he can correctly guess that such authenticity must imply that Charlotte has a ghostwriter, which he claims to have no issue with. Therefore, Thomas's problem with Charlotte's story is not that it lacks authenticity but that it does not correspond to his idea of an authentic autobiographical narrative. In the scene when he finally meets with Charlotte and Irene together, he explains his understanding of authenticity to them:

> Remember, authenticity is the beginning and the end of this product. Start with the ambulance, the siren, the rain, wheeling her in … 'We don't know if she's going to make it, nurse.' That kind of thing. I'm not saying make anything up – […] I'm saying *find* the drama, *find* the beauty, *find* the tension and give it to us. (emphasis in original)[26]

By asking that they include a fictional nurse, Thomas may appear to contradict his own demand for authenticity as 'the beginning and the end of this product'. However, he

[24] Egan., p. 302.
[25] Ibid., p.303.
[26] Ibid., p. 316.

contends that the fictional element may represent the kind of truth that can only come from the story's drama, beauty, and tension. In a statement that echoes Ricœur's argument, Thomas claims that he 'want[s] shit happens for a reason', from using fictional elements to find 'connections' and the 'buried logic' within the story.[27] At this point, it is possible to see that Thomas does not conform to the traditional model of 'authenticity' that presupposes truth in oneself. Instead, authenticity in a self-narrative is tied to its sense-making. That is, a narrative should make sense not only to the subject but also to the audience. In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Bernard Williams distinguishes between a historical narrative such as autobiographical writing and a chronicle. He points to how narrative emplotment is used to select and make sense of how certain events are connected. According to Williams, a narrative will entail 'a selection of elements from a suitably comprehensive chronicle'.[28] Some historical facts could be left out, while some fictional elements might be added. Making sense becomes a subjective interpretation, which problematizes the notions of truth and truthfulness in a narrative. This leads Williams to conclude that we should not expect to find truth but truthfulness in historical narrative, but

> we must demand that interpretations of the past should tell us the truth, in the sense that they should not lie or mislead, what we need them for is not to tell us something called "the truth about the past." We need them to be truthful, and to make sense of the past – to us.[29]

[27] Ibid., p. 317.
[28] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 239.
[29] Ibid., p. 258.

Through Williams' argument, it becomes possible to see how Thomas links narrative fabulation to authenticity. Authenticity for him is an ability to make sense of the self and manifest its truthfulness to the audience.

However, with the sense-making ability and truthfulness introduced as a criterion of her authentic life story, Charlotte also finds that she has to rely on rhetorical styles, tropes, and genre conventions to write a story that makes sense. In Kelly's analysis of Charlotte's postmodern consciousness, he also explains that the influence from other texts represents 'the invasive materiality of writing [that] increasingly plays for Charlotte the role of a posthuman prosthesis'.[30] From here, I want to suggest that the trope of the prosthesis that Kelly proposes is not only resonated in Charlotte's simulacrum face but also intensified when Charlotte agrees to sell her identity to Thomas who uses 3D animation technology to recreate her appearance and broadcast her life as a reality TV show. The animated figure represents a prosthesis that is twice removed from reality. It is modeled after the new face that has no connection to her original appearance. This leads Charlotte to claim at the end of the novel that the division between herself and Charlotte Swenson has become unbridgeable: 'I had undergone a kind of fission, and the two resulting parts of me reviled each other.'[31] The prostheses in the form of a new face and a fictional life narrative result in Charlotte's self-perception being 'gapingly fraudulent'.[32] With these prostheses at both physical and textual levels, she has lost the ability to connect with herself, making her eventually decide to sell her identity.

[30] Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', p. 406.
[31] Egan., p.512.
[32] Ibid., p. 511.

At the level of form, Egan also represents the prostheses by using a different typeface for the text that intrudes the characters' consciousness and disrupts the narrative continuity and unity of the novel itself. Moreover, Egan replicates the condition of narrative disruption and textual intrusion at the structure level by alternating Charlotte's first-person narrative with the third-person narrative about a constellation of people from Rockford who are loosely connected to Charlotte. What is resonant at the formal and structural levels is the thematic concern about the ability of a narrative to confer authenticity, unity, continuity of the self. Witnessing the process in which narrative tropes and genres influence her life story before being adapted into a film and eventually turned into reality TV, Charlotte recognizes that she has moved further and further away from any kind of true self that she may have. The need for a narrative to 'make sense' and express truthfulness for others leads her to understand that authenticity as self-truth is impossible. It cannot be expressed without such truth being interpreted, twisted, or falsified in some way. That is, she comes to recognize that authenticity is unattainable and impractical in the social world. This revelation leads her to contend that the 'public life' causes an irreparable split in herself.[33] A public life demands that she moves away from the truth and produces a narrative about her life that makes sense for others. The decision to sell her identity is her last effort to preserve the feeling of being true to herself, which, in her understanding, can only be done if she disappears from the public life completely:

> Life can't be sustained under the pressure of so many eyes. Even as we try to reveal the mystery of ourselves, to catch it unaware, expose its pulse and flinch and peristalsis, the truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, coiled

[33] Ibid., p. 510.

> privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light.[34]

The ending of *Look at Me* thus makes a significant claim about the unattainability of self-authenticity. As Charlotte expresses in the above passage, even in the attempt 'to reveal the mystery of ourselves', she finds that the truth nonetheless evades her. On the one hand, the paragraph suggests that there might be such a thing as the true self. On the other hand, it points to the fact that such a true self cannot be known: 'It cannot be seen as one might wish to show it.' Once the self comes into contact with others, it becomes twisted by the process of narrative figuration and pressed by an expectation from the other who demands that the narrative makes sense. The novel thus ends with Charlotte's decision not to reveal her new name or tell the reader anything about her life after she sells her identity: 'as for myself, I'd rather not say very much.'[35] The moment she tells a story about her life, she realizes that she will give up her authentic self.

Medium and Narrative Figuration in *Innocents and Others*

The problem of truth and authenticity in self-narrative is also a central theme of *Innocents and Others*. Like *Look at Me*, Spiotta's novel highlights how the fusion of fact and fiction confers coherence and meaning on a narrative. However, Spiotta also considers the role of mediums in narration to complicate further the notion of authenticity in self-truth, self-expression, and the representation of one's life story. In the novel, she thus juxtaposes four types of medium – telephone, documentary film, online blog, and prose fiction – to explore

[34] Ibid., p.514.
[35] Ibid.

how each of these mediums may differently complicate, distort or enhance the process of narrative figuration in the practice of the self.

Innocents and Others begins with Meadow's online essay about how she begins her career as a filmmaker. The essay serves two functions in the novel: it introduces the concept of narratively-figured self as a key motif and provides an example of how a medium plays a significant part in the production and reception of a narrative. According to Ricœur, a narratively figured self is formulated through the mechanics of narrative emplotment and interpretation. Implicit in the process of narrative figuration is a temporally dynamic self which he calls '*ipse*'. For Ricœur, *ipse* is 'self-sameness' or 'self-constancy' that 'rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text'.[36] As a narrative composition, *ipse* contains both historical fact and imaginative fiction that are combined to mediate changes that occur in life into a sense of self-sameness that the subject has developed through their lifetime. In other words, *ipse* is a version of self that 'makes sense'. It relies on the mechanics of narrative emplotment to track changes and progressions in one's life and interpret those events into a consistent story about the self that persists over time. That is, Ricœur argues that self-knowledge is interpretative, narratively mediated, and contingent on both historical and fictional elements to produce a coherent plot:

> Narrative mediation underlines this remarkable aspect about knowledge of the self as being an interpretation. […] What the narrative interpretation properly provides is precisely "the figure-able" character of the individual which has for its result,

[36] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, p.246.

> that the self, narratively interpreted, is itself a figured self – a self which figures itself as this or that.[37]

Ricœur's argument about narrative identity suggests that self-knowledge is not predicated on truth or facticity alone. Instead, the narrative mechanism produces a self as a creative figuration. Williams's argument about narrative and sense-making also corresponds to Ricœur's thesis in this regard. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that narrative identity does not have to be factual as long as it makes sense of the self in a 'truthful' way.

In Meadow's 'How I Began' online essay, published on the *Women and Film* website, she cites a brief affair with Orson Welles as the starting point in her filmmaking career. According to Meadow, she has to lie to her parents about joining a film collective in upstate New York so that she can live with Orson in his house. To make the lie convincing, she buys filming equipment which she will eventually use to shoot films in upstate New York after Orson dies. Meadow frames her story in this way to suggest to the reader that a fabrication through narrative may be an approach towards self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. In her case, she does not know how she wants to pursue a career in filmmaking until she makes it up and becomes convinced by the lie herself. In the essay, she also makes a manifesto-like statement about her view on narrative fabulation:

> A lie of invention, a lie about yourself, should not be called a lie. It needs a different word. It is maybe a fabule, a kind of wish-story, something almost true, a mist of the possible where nothing was yet there. With elements both stolen and invented

[37] Ricœur, 'Narrative Identity', p.80.

> – which is to say, invented. And it has to feel more like dream than lie as you speak it. […] I made it up on the spot and I already wanted to do it.[38]

The lie about one's self, Meadow contends, should feel like a dream. There are both invented and wishful elements in the lie, which suggests that a story one makes up somehow reflects a more profound truth about oneself in the form of a personal desire – a wish. It is the 'almost true' quality about the self, about how one imagines oneself doing or becoming something. That is, it is the truth that reflects how the subject figures themselves in a certain way. Fabulation is merely a process of figuration that allows the subject to see itself as being this or that. Meadow's essay thus introduces a key motif in the novel in that the truth about oneself, obtained through narration, may use fictional elements to figure or 'make sense' of the self for both the subject and the audience.

Apart from her statement about the necessary fabule-like quality of one's life story, Meadow also uses the essay itself to restate the idea. Spiotta represents Meadow's essay in an online blog format and includes the reader's comment section at the end to show how Meadow manipulates the form and medium of the essay to reaffirm her conviction about narrative fabulation. One of the readers from the comment section suggests that Meadow is not entirely truthful in her story: 'People, I am calling BS on this whole essay. Welles famously lived and died on Stanley Avenue in Hollywood, not Brentwood. Everybody knows that. Even the death date is off. She is pulling your chain.'[39] The comment points to basic facts about Welles's life that can be easily verified on the internet and accuses Meadow of being manipulative. However, considering that Meadow lies about verifiable and straightforward facts in the essay, it is possible to conclude that she uses the essay as

[38] Dana Spiotta, *Innocents and Others* (London: Picador, 2016), pp.16-17.
[39] Ibid., p. 32.

an example of a 'wish story, something almost true' that contains 'elements both stolen and invented' about one's self. She wants it to be evident that she lies and invites the reader to consider how her lie expresses the truth. In the novel, Spiotta includes another online essay written by Carrie, Meadow's best friend from high school who also becomes a successful film director. Spiotta uses Carrie's essay as an annotation of Meadow's in that it exposes and explains Meadow's lies. In Carrie's essay, it thus becomes clear that Meadow intends to manipulate the reader and that she sees the manipulation as a way to communicate the truth:

> Meadow was creating what she called a fabule, a wish-story about herself, half dream and half fact. I know Meadow, and I alone seem able to read her perfectly. Meadow is playful, and she tells her own truth in her own way – you just have to yield to her version of the world to see how it all fits together, surrender to her possibilities. In a sense, she is the lover of Welles. Welles the great confidence artist, the prevaricator, the big fake who tells you he is manipulating you and that makes the magic all the more magical. Sleight of hand, she is all of that.[40]

In Carrie's explanation, Meadow lies about her affair with Welles and makes up simple facts about him as a homage to Welles and to get her message across. With Welles as her idol, Meadow sees no difference between being an artist and a con artist. Being an artist is also 'partly a confidence game. And partly magic'.[41] Meadow lies to manipulate the reader's confidence and expectation from the genre of the essay. Because it is a 'How I Began' story, an autobiographical piece, the reader expects authenticity and honesty from the writer. Meadow plays with the reader's expectation by lying to them. Yet, as Carrie

[40] Ibid., p.218.
[41] Ibid., p. 219.

points out, her lies express some truth about her love for Welles and how he inspires her career as an artist. For this reason, Carrie concludes that the essay is about how Meadow 'tells her own truth in her own way'.

By making the internet the medium for both Meadow's and Carrie's essays, Spiotta further problematizes the problems of confidence and manipulation in creative and artistic activities. In the novel, she characterizes most of the online comments about Meadow's essay as sensational and argumentative. Most readers focus on her affair with Welles and argue about how she betrays feminist values and sleeps her way to success. In other words, almost no one, apart from the reader in the last comment, cares to verify those facts about Welles but takes the story at its face value. Here Spiotta highlights a significant implication of the internet as a medium. The real-time interaction of the internet may render obsolete Meadow's view about narrative fabulation as a means to tell the truth. As illustrated in the comments, the truth becomes secondary to the affect and sensation that the story provokes among interactive readers. As such, the idea that a manipulative act can express some kind of truth might no longer be viable in the world of the internet in which the distinction between truths and lies is not a primary concern.

With Meadow's essay introducing the role of the medium in shaping the production and reception of a narrative, Spiotta explores these issues more fully in the characterization of Jelly whose life story is mediated through three kinds of medium: telephone, documentary, and prose narrative of the novel itself. Similar to Charlotte in *Look at Me*, Jelly is a character that represents a disjunction between the inner and outer selves – how the outward appearance does not reflect how she perceives her true self. Jelly is partially blind and slightly chubby, a physical trait that gives her the nickname Jelly after jelly

doughnut. Spiotta explains in an interview that she bases the character Jelly after Whitney Walton, a woman from Louisiana known among famous men in Hollywood in the 1980s as Miranda Grosvenor, a mysterious woman who would randomly call and seduce them with her charm and wit.[42] Similarly, Jelly also invents Nicole as a persona to call and flirt with successful men in Hollywood. In the novel, Jelly finally meets Jack, a film composer, and develops an intimate relationship with him. She stops calling other men after meeting Jack. When Jack asks to see her picture and meet her in person, Jelly experiences an irreconcilable conflict between how she perceives herself and her appearance:

> She did not feel like a forty-one-year-old woman, did not feel like being this heavy, invisible, unremarkable creature. She felt young and taut, a person who could beguile and a person who loved and understood men. That was the truth, and the rest was not of import to either of them.[43]

It is suggested in the passage that Jelly contends that 'the truth' about herself as a young, beguiling, and understanding woman does not project outwardly. Moreover, for Jelly, what she calls 'the rest' or other aspects about her is inconsequential and irrelevant to these inner truths that she can express on the phone. At least, it remains irrelevant until the moment that those men ask for her pictures. When pressed by their request, she decides to send them a picture of another woman named Lynn. The narrator describes that Lynn's body is a fantasy to Jelly that she visualizes through a similar kind of postmodern consciousness that Kelly prescribes to Charlotte: 'In all of Jelly's fantasies she looked exactly like Lynn,

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[42] The Center for Fiction, *Dana Spiotta and George Saunders at The Center for Fiction*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 December 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q4_u58feU8> [accessed 1 May 2020]. For a detailed Walton/Grosvenor's story please see Bryan Burrough, 'The Miranda Obsession', *Vanity Fair*, 15 December 1999 <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1999/12/miranda-catfish-movie-199912> [accessed 12 April 2021].

[43] Spiotta, p. 83.

not even a better version of Jelly. She watched her fantasy as if it were a movie; she could see the man – Mark – undress the perfect girl, and Jelly could feel him lose his breath.'[44] Jelly experiences a displacement in her subjectivity in this fantasy as she views her own self from a disembodied perspective of a narrator describing how Lynn's body pleases the man. That Jelly can only see herself from this perspective paradoxically reaffirms that 'the rest' of other aspects of hers is 'not of import'. She realizes these thoughts are mere fantasies and wishful thinking that are, in her own admission, 'impossible to fulfill'. When Mark, a man she describes in the fantasy, wants to see her, she thus sends him the picture of another girl because 'she was never dumb enough to believe that Mark could love her as she actually was'.[45]

Disembodiment thus emerges as a crucial element for Jelly's self-figuration and explains why she prefers to use the telephone. She sees that the phone facilitates a disembodied experience that allows people to know each other from the inside:

> The phone was built for this. It had no visual component, no tactile component, no person with hopeful or embarrassed face to read, no scent wafting, no acid collection in the mouth. Just vibrations, long and short waves, and to clutch at them with your own thoughts was just wrong. A distinct resistance to potential. A lack of love, really. Because what is love, if not listening, as uninflected – as uncontained – as possible.[46]

This paragraph restates Jelly's view that embodiment obstructs how one can be known and loved. The telephone removes all the person's physical traits except for their voice that

[44] Ibid., p. 150.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., p.47.

functions as a lure to invite the listener to accept them in a precognitive and affective manner. Jelly thus sees the potential in the telephone to express the self that she figures herself to be. She is freed from the constraint of her body and able to build a relationship grounded on this version of self that she perceives as true.

Jelly's relationship with Jack serves as an example of how a narratively figured self can be part of a genuine relationship due to the facilitation of the medium such as the telephone. However, Jelly's relationship with Jack ends when he asks to see her in person, which is the scenario in which Jelly's narratively figured self has to be measured against the ideal of authenticity. When Jack asks to see her, Nicole becomes a lie and Jelly a con artist. In this way, Spiotta also introduces a crucial element in the concept of narrative identity: the presence of the other who performs the task of addressing the subject to account for themselves. Overall, *Innocents and Others* is thematically centralized on a narrative construction that the self is potentially manipulative and can divide people, as the novel's title suggests, into the innocent and the non-innocent other. Jelly understands this implication fully that, without the telephone, she will inevitably become a liar to Jack.

However, apart from the telephone conversation with Jack, the reader also learns about the character Jelly as a subject of a documentary film directed by Meadow. In this rendition of Jelly's life, Spiotta invites the reader to consider the power of film narrative that can shape and influence the interpretation of a life story. Meadow's documentary about Jelly, called *Inward Operator*, is presented in the novel from Carrie's point of view. Unlike the reader, Carrie does not know anything about Jelly before watching the film. Her point of view is thus significant in that it illustrates how film as a medium may distort the narrative about one's life and affect the way the person may be perceived by the other.

Moreover, being a filmmaker herself, Carrie is able to comment on the editing and directing decisions that Meadow makes, which can reveal to the reader the extent of manipulation that a film narrative can achieve. The narrator describes Carrie as she is watching the film by pointing out how she is aware that the whole narrative is mediated from Meadow's perspective:

> Meadow's camera moves slowly toward an artfully lit Rolodex. No shots of this woman. Soon, Carrie thought, she will have to show her.
>
> The film cuts to the talking heads of the men. Three middle-aged guys, all successful in the entertainment business. All talking about this girl who called them, Nicole. Each one describes his phone connection in sequence, showing how Nicole used a kind of formula on the men. Through the manipulating of the men and the repetition of her technique, Nicole starts to emerge as a con artist.[47]

The emphasis on 'Meadow's camera' in Carrie's perception is a reminder that the film has a perspective that is not neutral but subjective. Meadow decides to reveal Jelly in the film at a specific time and to include three men talking about her in a way that suggests a pattern in Jelly's conversation with them. Moreover, there is an intentional ambiguity in the narrator's description. In saying 'through the manipulating of the men and the repetition of her technique, Nicole starts to emerge as a con artist', it is not entirely clear who the possessive pronoun 'her' refers to. The description could refer to Jelly/Nicole's manipulation and technique she used on those men in the past. Yet, it is also possible to read the description as ascribing the manipulation and repetition of the technique to Meadow. In this scene in the film, Meadow also manipulates the men by presenting them

[47] Ibid., pp.192-93.

as talking heads in succession to suggest a repetition of Jelly's lies. Moreover, by emphasizing that they are all successful men in the entertainment business, Meadow infers a pattern to Jelly's choice of men. As a result of Meadow's editing of the film, which is shown to be a process in which she 'makes sense' of Jelly's phone calls and relationships with a certain kind of men for the audience, Jelly/Nicole 'emerge[s] as a con artist'. To reaffirm such interpretation about Jelly, Meadow also arranges to have her meet Jack for the first time and film it as a closure to Jelly's narrative. This ending effectively shapes the film into a narrative about Jelly's confidence game that is eventually exposed and facing the consequences. Accordingly, Carrie is described to have felt 'cringing' when she watches Jack and Jelly's meeting in the film. She wonders, 'Why would Meadow do this to these people? Why would they go along with it?'[48] Carrie realizes that the meeting between Jelly and Jack in the film's ending will pass a final judgment on Jelly. That is, Meadow is able to use the film narrative to make sense of Jelly as a con artist.

Apart from the film, another version of Jelly's life story is presented to the reader in her characterization in the prose narrative of the novel itself. In this version, Jelly's story is most comprehensible in terms of its temporal span. Her story in the novel spans over five decades, from the 1970s when she first becomes a telephone enthusiast to the 2010s after Meadow's film characterizes her as a con artist. The reader learns about Jelly from the prose version more than what she reveals in a telephone conversation or the film. For example, in the prose narrative, there is an extended story about her relationship with Oz, a blind phone phreaker who introduces her to the wonder of telephone technology. The reader also finds out that even after the film ends with Jack's rejection of her when they

[48] Ibid., p.198.

meet for the first time, the two finally reconcile and build a new relationship. More importantly, in the prose version, the reader learns about the effect that Meadow's film has on Jelly. She accuses Meadow of being a con artist herself, someone who plays with the trust and confidence of other people: 'I am not stupid, although I was naïve to believe you. You had all the power, and you knew exactly what would happen.'[49] Jelly's accusation effectively bridges the gap between the artist and the con artist and reaffirms Meadow's own conviction about artmaking being a confidence game. As Jelly's conversations with men and Meadow's essay and films demonstrate, the two kinds of artists share a commonality in that they can manipulate others through narrative. The manipulability and ambiguity of narrative form are further reinforced in the representation of Jelly's story in the prose form. The comprehensiveness of Jelly's story in the prose narrative functions as a reminder of the inherent ambiguity and ambivalence of any narrative that is adopted as a tool to make sense of things. It reveals how other versions of her story cannot fully portray her. Williams thus warns in his argument about truth and truthfulness that we should be mindful of 'the extent to which the formation of a story can be governed by considerations that have anything to do with truth and truthfulness'.[50] Jelly's life story that is presented in various mediums reveals the process in which only some facts are selected, and creative imagination is used to construct a narrative. Facts could be left out, gaps are filled in, and editing renders a narrative sequence in a suggestive manner.

However, even though the prose form may have an advantage in portraying Jelly most comprehensively, Spiotta adds a final complication by breaking her prose narrative

[49] Ibid., p. 242.
[50] Williams, p. 246.

into fragments and recombining them in the thread structure of the novel. Jelly's life story in the prose form is broken up, rearranged in a non-chronological order, and intertwined with other narratives, effectively creating a thread of different narratives.[51] Her story in the prose form, despite its most comprehensibility, lacks unity and continuity, making it difficult for the reader to make sense of it. However, the thread structure is significant in that it demands that the reader trust in the eventual unity and comprehensibility of Spiotta's novel as an extended prose form. In other words, Spiotta is also playing a confidence game with the reader and asks that they trust in the form and genre of the text they are reading, that the novel will eventually render itself a unified story and not just a collage of narrative fragments. The thread structure of *Innocents and Others*, therefore, reiterates the central theme of the novel about the interpretative figuration and manipulation of the narrative form that reminds the reader to question whether it is appropriate that a narrative, including that of the self, should be measured against the ideals of truth and authenticity.

New Sincerity and the Confidence Game

I have so far discussed how *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* use the process of narrative figuration and the function of mediums to problematize the possibility of a true self as an underpinning feature of the ideal of authenticity. Despite the novels' implicit suggestion that self-authenticity may be unattainable, I contend that they also consider a new mode of authenticity based on the model of New Sincerity. While both novels highlight how the presence of the other may be a threat to the concept of self-truth and authenticity, the relationship with the other is also represented as a foundation of a new

[51] Thread narrative is the phrase Spiotta uses to describe the structure of her novel. See *Dana Spiotta and George Saunders at The Center for Fiction*.

kind of authenticity. This section will elaborate on how the two novels use New Sincerity as a condition for self-authenticity based on one's relationality and accountability for the other.

According to Trilling, sincerity is an ideal that sees the act of being true to the self as a means to be true to others. Sincerity, for Trilling, is 'a congruence between avowal and actual feeling'.[52] Such a congruence warrants that one cannot be false to others. Sincerity as 'the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self', Trilling explains, is a characteristic of Western culture for hundreds of years before being replaced by the ideal of authenticity that supposes the act of being true to the self as an end in itself.[53] However, in the two novels, sincerity becomes a replacement for authenticity. It substitutes the inability to be an authentic self. As previously discussed, the unbridgeable disconnection between the inner and outer selves that Charlotte and Jelly experience makes them struggle to be an authentic person. Both characters resort to making up a story about themselves to exploit or overcome the profound disconnection within the self. However, in making up lies about their lives, both Charlotte and Jelly claim sincerity as a justification. In *Look at Me*, Charlotte proclaims that she is 'the biggest liar of them all', and she does not 'pretend to be anything else'. Moreover, she explains that she makes her lies so blatant to avoid 'pseudo-earnestness'.[54] Following Charlotte's reasoning, it seems that, to be sincere, she has to admit to her inability to be authentic. The lie comes to represent her sincerity because it truthfully expresses her inauthenticity to others. In *Innocents and Others*, Jelly similarly uses sincerity to justify her Nicole persona: 'Making things up was

[52] Trilling, p. 2.
[53] Ibid., pp.5-6.
[54] Egan, p. 95.

okay because it was all about feelings, real feelings and real longing.'[55] In Jelly's view, Nicole might not be authentic, but Nicole is an expression of her sincerity. As Nicole, she is being true to herself, and therefore she cannot be false to others. Nicole is an expression of her self-truth, her 'real feelings and real longing'.

Through the characters of Charlotte and Jelly, it becomes possible to see how sincerity may come to substitute for lack of authenticity. Unlike authenticity that considers truth to oneself as an end in itself, sincerity regards the act of being true to oneself as a means to form an honest relationship with others. However, in Trilling's account of sincerity, he also explains that the ideal of sincerity could risk being compromised because there are elements of theatricality and performance implicit in the ideal:

> Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic.[56]

Trilling explains here why authenticity has come to replace sincerity as an ethical ideal in the practice of the self. Sincerity is a roleplay to satisfy others. We 'play the role' of who we are, a role that does not necessarily represent our authentic selves. Authenticity thus emerges as an ethical ideal that replaces sincerity. However, for Charlotte and Jelly, authenticity is unattainable. Accordingly, both characters choose to uphold the ideal of

[55] Spiotta, p. 98.
[56] Trilling, pp.10-11.

sincerity in their self-conduct. Deception and performance become an expression of self-truth. Charlotte has turned inauthenticity into a form of honesty by admitting to her inability to be an authentic person. For her, attempting authenticity would only be a form of 'pseudo-earnestness', which, in her view, is worse than her sincere inauthenticity. Similarly, Jelly also shows traits of sincere inauthenticity when she creates a Nicole persona to express her 'real' feelings and desires. She lies so she can be honest.

When Irene presses Charlotte about her conviction to be sincerely dishonest, Charlotte retorts by asking Irene to consider whether pure honesty is possible:

> Can you look at me and swear that everything you've said is absolutely true, that none of it is bullshit? There's no agenda hidden underneath, no ulterior motives – everything is exactly the way you've described it?[57]

Charlotte's question is significant because it introduces personal motives as another problem of the ideal of authenticity that values truth and honesty. Her conviction to avoid being pseudo-earnest is in part informed by the recognition of the impossibility of pure honesty. She realizes that there is always a hidden personal agenda behind every self-conduct. Consequently, she perceives lies as a form of honesty and intends to never lie about lying. Moreover, Charlotte's remark reflects a vital tenet of the New Sincerity model that explains her rejection of authenticity for sincerity. Kelly argues that sincerity is an inherently impure concept because there is always a motivation for being sincere: 'sincerity is unavoidably contaminated from the beginning by the anticipation of the effect it will

[57] Ibid., p.96.

have upon the other.'[58] The potential contamination by personal motivation is also reflected in Trilling's characterization of sincerity when he mentions its role-playing and performative aspect. However, the model of New Sincerity, Kelly explains, seeks to overcome this issue by recognizing that the impurity is not a risk but a foundation of the concept of sincerity itself: 'Yet this threat should not be understood as the deprivation of sincerity but as its very possibility. That sincerity depends not on purity but on trust and faith.'[59] Precisely, New Sincerity presupposes that the subject can never be sure of the intention or motive behind the act of sincerity and needs to rely on the other to trust and have faith that the subject is truly sincere. Kelly thus concludes that New Sincerity depends on 'a blind response from the other to legitimate it'.[60] For this reason, New Sincerity becomes the model that fundamentally reconceptualizes the relation between the self and the other. It deprioritizes the ideal of being true to oneself as a fundamental aspect of one's sincerity and replaces it instead with the other's confidence that one is sincere.

Even though Charlotte's remark reflects the concern of New Sincerity regarding the purity of intention, Charlotte does not rely on the other's trust to reaffirm her sincerity. Instead, she chooses to tell blatant lies to demonstrate her honesty even though it risks destroying her relationship with other people. Moreover, the novel's ending suggests that Charlotte sees the other as a direct threat to self-truth and resolves to disappear from public

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[58] Adam Kelly, 'Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace', *Post45*, 17 October 2014. <https://post45.org/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/> [accessed 15 June 2020] (para 20 of 24).
[59] Adam Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', in *Postmodern | Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp. 197-208 (p. 201).
[60] Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-146 (p. 144).

life altogether. Her reservation about the other originates from when she confesses to her ex-fiancé Hansen about an affair. The confession is her attempt to be both authentic and sincere. She describes Hansen's response to her confession as 'the innocence leav[ing] him like a spirit leaving a corpse'.[61] She has destroyed his innocence even though she is not certain whether it is her honesty or dishonesty that kills it: 'my betrayal, or the telling? Which was the poison?'[62] After Hansen, Charlotte thus vows to 'mean what I said as I said it', to be sincere even about her dishonesty. However, she refuses to adopt the model of New Sincerity, to require others to have faith and be confident in her, because she contends that it designates a form of a double life. As she contemplates about the relationship with Hansen: 'Still I wondered […] whether we might both have been better off if I'd seal my lips and led a double life, like everyone else.'[63] If she lets him continue to trust her and chose not to confess, she would have led a double life and possibly be 'better off'. However, this passage suggests that Charlotte sees that it is inherently dishonest, a form of pseudo-earnestness, to abuse the faith of others knowingly.

Besides Charlotte, Egan also problematizes the reliance on faith from the other in the character Aziz, a middle eastern terrorist gifted at mimicry and impersonation. Aziz is in the car with Charlotte when it crashes on the way to Rockford. Ending up in Rockford by accident, Aziz takes up the name Michael West and gets a job as a math teacher in a local school. In the novel, Aziz contends that his success in adopting serial identities and changing his persona is not due to his 'light skin and chameleon face, his ease with

[61] Egan., p. 105.
[62] Ibid., p.106.
[63] Ibid.

languages and ability to germinate documents'.[64] Instead, he claims that faith from the other is a secret to his success:

> He owed it to faith: other people's faith, which in most cases was so powerful that the most gigantic assumption – you were the person you claimed to be – was one they accepted at the outset.
>
> Faith. Of all things.[65]

In the characters Charlotte and Aziz, Egan thus questions the fundamental aspect of the model of New Sincerity by portraying how faith can be exploited. For Charlotte, she cares so much about not wanting to be 'pseudo-earnest' that she refuses to ask for people's trust altogether and becomes committed instead to being dishonest. Aziz, on the contrary, understands the potential of faith and succeeds in living a double life that Charlotte has been trying to avoid.

In *Innocents and Others,* Spiotta also highlights the problem of New Sincerity that relies on faith by suggesting that faith is indistinguishable from the other's confidence in the scheme of con artists. The narrator describes that Jelly considers trust and faith as the vital component in her relationship with men she talks on the phone with: 'What she liked was the connection she felt with them – and that's what it was, a genuine connection between two strangers when they buy something. They trust you: it moves from transactional to faith.'[66] She also characterizes her relationship with Jack as a form of mutual trust: 'he trusted her and she trusted him.'[67] Jelly sees trust as a reaffirmation of the

[64] Ibid., p. 296.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Spiotta, p. 98.
[67] Ibid., p. 87.

self that one presents to the other. She trusts in Jack's trust in her, which allows her to be the person she claims to be. However, the novel problematizes the function of trust in interpersonal relationships by suggesting that, in the broader context, it can be perceived as a form of manipulation that is not different from how con artists exploit the other's confidence in their scheme. When Jelly's story is portrayed in the film, she is thus vulnerable to being perceived as a con artist. Such judgment about her character is directly expressed by Jack who sees himself as the victim of Jelly's scheme. Seeing Jelly for the first time in the film, Jack announces that 'it was all a trick': 'I can't have feelings for her if there is no her. How can I know if any of it – of her – was real? I trusted her.'[68] Jack's comment in the film reflects the problem of betrayal that Charlotte has raised in *Look at Me*. Trust remains conditional in that it is still expected to be fulfilled and risks being betrayed. Even though New Sincerity claims that blind trust is needed to fulfill its possibility, it is nonetheless predicated on the expectation of fulfillment. That is, it is still the trust that is grounded on the belief in the existence of the truth. In this way, sincerity based on trust cannot entirely escape the ideal of authenticity. In the next section, I will suggest that both novels also use the model of New Sincerity as a starting point to consider how a new kind of authenticity that is relational and not grounded in the idea of having a true self might be possible. In this model of authenticity, trust from the other could be more than an affirmation but a constitutive condition of one's true self.

New Authenticity and the Necessary Other

The kind of authenticity suggested in *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* is developed from the model of New Sincerity in which the other plays a crucial role in providing

[68] Ibid., p. 198.

affirmation of one's sincerity. However, this kind of authenticity relies on more than trust and faith from the other. Instead, the other is a constitutive element that provides a condition for the subject to express authenticity in the form of accountability. The other in this model can be described in Cavarero's concept of 'the necessary other' whose presence demands the subject to account for themselves. My analysis in this section will also incorporate Butler's argument about the scene of address in producing an account of one's self. From the notions of the necessary other and the scene of address, I will discuss how *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* go beyond the New Sincerity model and introduce an alternative model of self-authenticity grounded in one's relationality and accountability for the other. It is the kind of authenticity that can be understood through Whitehead's model proposition in that it requires the other to constitute it. While Whitehead suggests that a proposition can be either true or false, he emphasizes that its primary concern is in the ability to appeal to the apprehending subject. Similarly, authenticity in this model can be either true or false, but that is not the point. What matters is that one has to fulfill the expectation that one uses to attract the other to trust and believe in them. In this way, it can be said that the traditional conception of how being true to oneself is a means to achieve sincerity for others is reversed. Both *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* suggest that sincerity in the model of New Sincerity can be a means to achieve authenticity. That is, being true to others becomes the means to being true to oneself.

In *Relating Narratives,* Cavarero uses the term 'the necessary other' to explain how self-narratability is contingent on the presence of the other. The other can be either real or imaginary: 'To tell one's own story is to distance oneself from oneself, to double oneself,

to make of oneself an other.'[69] As one tells the story to oneself, one has to imagine another person to perceive the self as a narratable subject. Charlotte's postmodern consciousness is an example of the necessity of the other as she divides herself into the first-person 'I' who functions as the other who tells the story of the third-person 'she'. The necessary other in Cavarero's model is the one who narrates the story of the self, which reinforces the notion of necessity in that one cannot be a unique subject without the narration produced from the other. What Cavarero called the 'unique existent' is, therefore, the result of one's exposure and relationality that allows the other to recognize and narrate one's own life story: 'In other words, the identity of the self, crystalized in the story, is totally constituted by the relations of her appearance to others in the world.'[70] In his introduction to Cavarero's monograph, Paul A. Kottman also clarifies the necessity of the other and one's uniqueness, explaining that:

> It is this sense of being narratable – quite apart from the content of the narration itself – and the accompanying sense that others are also narratable selves with unique stories, which is essential to the self, and which makes it possible to speak of a unique being that is not simply a 'subject'.[71]

In other words, the necessary other invokes a desire to hear one's story being narrated as a confirmation of one's unique existence. The story is 'essential to the self' because it produces a sense of self-uniqueness. Moreover, in exposure with the other, the desire is mutual and reciprocal. As one recognizes the uniqueness of the other as a narratable being,

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[69] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans.by Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 1997), p.84.
[70] Ibid., p. 36.
[71] Paul A. Kottman, 'Translator's Introduction', in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.xvi.

the same sense of uniqueness is reciprocated. The desire for recognition and uniqueness is thus fundamental to the narratable self. This leads Cavarero to conclude that the content of the narrative is not as important as the act of narration. What constitutes the self as a narratable being is not the text but the narration itself: 'the narratable self is an exposed uniqueness that awaits her narration. The text of this narration, far from producing all the reality of the self, is nothing but the marginal consequence, or symptom, that follows that desire.'[72]

In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler further develops from the concept of the necessary other to illustrate how the subject 'I' is constituted in a scene of address where they are called upon to account for themselves as an agent to an action. The subject uses the narrative form to constitute the self as a causal agency and persuade the other to apprehend the agency of the subject as such:

> The narrative must then establish that the self either was or was not the cause of that suffering, and so supply a persuasive medium through which to understand the causal agency of the self.[73]

However, Butler explains that when constructing a persuasive account about oneself, the subject inevitably internalizes the existing social norms and conventions that the subject is born into. Self-narrative thus always in the middle. As Butler explains, self-narrative 'begins *in media res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know'.[74] Butler's conclusion thus reflects Ricœur's argument

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[72] Cavarero, p. 86.
[73] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p.12.
[74] Ibid., p. 39.

that one's life story is either a fictive historical account or a historical fiction. The subject is never an end in itself but entangled in various factors and conditions that constitute the subject, the conditions that exist before and may even persist after the subject. In any self-story, the subject 'I' always begins in the middle of a larger story and needs to resort to fabulation to make sense of things the subject cannot know. In formulating a response to the query by the other, the subject is thus given an opportunity to reflect on who they are not only in relation to the addressor but also to these various external conditions. In this way, the scene of address can be said to constitute the 'I' as both a reflexive and relational subject.

Butler emphasizes that we should suspend judgment to avoid committing 'ethical violence' against the other who may fail to provide a satisfactory and coherent narrative about themselves because there are elements that exceed their ability to account for. Accordingly, Butler suggests that 'in giving the account, I establish a relationship to the one to whom my account is addressed and whether both parties to the interlocution are sustained and altered by the scene of address.'[75] In other words, Butler identifies the subject's ethical responsibility in the transference in which both the 'I' and the 'you' are acting and being acted on in some way in the scene of address. In telling and hearing a story, we have an inevitable ethical responsibility for one another because the story is bound to have a mutual effect. Understanding that the self is always opaque, *in media res*, our relationality and transference can become a condition of our mutual ethical obligation

[75] Ibid., p.50.

based on an acceptance of the state of opacity that may result in the failure to achieve self-mastery and narrative coherence:

> If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require. […] The purpose here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to point out that our "incoherence" establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us.[76]

Butler's argument illustrates the necessity of the other as the condition of our ethics. We depend on the other to suspend judgment, accept and forgive our failure to provide a coherent and complete account of ourselves.

In *Look at Me*, the desire to hear one's coherent life story from the other is reflected in the relationship between Moose and his niece, Charlotte Hausen, a 16-year-old daughter of Charlotte senior's best friend from Rockford. Moose is once a promising young historian, but his rising academic career takes a downturn after he endangers his students in a potentially deadly experiment. He is also characterized as obsessed with the history of Rockford and a mysterious vision he claims to have discovered many years ago. For Moose, these two things can account for how he is constituted as a person he is, why his life takes such a turn, and what he can do in the future. That is, Moose is trying to construct a coherent narrative about himself, with a clear structure of having a beginning that is tied to Rockford history, the vision as a catalyst in the middle, and an ending that will hopefully

[76] Ibid., p.64.

tie everything together. Moose's obsession is thus an attempt to produce a justifiable response to what he has done to his life that makes him fail to live up to the potential of a promising young man he was once perceived to be. In this way, it is possible to understand that the other in Moose's scene of address is first and foremost the expectation and disappointment from his family, colleagues, and himself. These people constitute a band of the others who demand a coherent account of what he has done. However, Moose finally sees an opportunity to give a satisfying self-account to his niece Charlotte. He sees her as the person to pass the vision to. Through his niece, he may have a chance to achieve closure and have a narrative about his life that makes sense after all.

Moose's attempt to produce a coherent and unified self-account ultimately fails when his niece refuses to accept his vision. Her refusal, moreover, is expressed as a rejection of Moose's personhood. The young Charlotte does not want his vision because, as she says to him, 'I don't want to be like you.'[77] Her negation prompts Moose to rethink his own life at an existential level, driving him to retrace the journey that led him to the vision many years ago. Moose's road trip from Rockford to Chicago is a trip where he experiences a hallucinatory split between himself and 'Moose-the-boy' whom Moose conjures up as the other to ask 'a question he could answer only with the greatest expenditure of energy. [...] What had happened to him?'[78] The young Moose becomes the presence of the other that he has to give an account to. The narrative closure and unity that Moose is hoping to have are not in the future but, he realizes, requires that he return to the beginning to figure out how he has come to be the person he is. The trip also makes him

[77] Egan, p. 153.
[78] Ibid., p. 476.

revisit the vision, what it means, and whether it is not just 'a metaphor for something within Moose. […] That the vision was not the cause of his isolation, as he had always supposed but merely an expression of it'.[79] Suspecting that the vision is the *cause* of his isolation leads him to realize that he can constitute another kind of subjectivity that is not contingent on narrative clarity and continuity. Instead, it can be predicated on his relationality, the trust and belief he can instill in the other, and his ability to affect the other. The awareness of his relationality is described in the novel as 'a tiny silver thread, a thread no bigger than a hair whose contents was plain strength, a will that endured within him and had survived all these years, albeit slenderly'.[80] The thread confers strength, will, and endurance. That is, his relationality, implied in the thread that binds him, can give him the strength and ability to develop a will and follow through with it.

When his wife Priscilla comes to pick him up after he experiences a breakdown during the road trip to Chicago, the narrator describes that he sees that 'She was sad, he had made her sad. Again'.[81] That he knows that this is not the first time he has done this to her allows Moose to accept his relational subjectivity and to take responsibility for it. He can be strong enough, willful enough, and enduring enough to do good things for others. With this acceptance, Moose is able to reconnect with Priscilla with a conviction that he will make her happy. Instead of narrative closure, her happiness is a validation of his authentic self that is encapsulated in the image of the thread. He promises his wife that he would take her to Hawaii because the promise will bind him to her. He will be able to refigure himself again as a person who fulfills the promises he makes to others: 'Moose

[79] Ibid., p. 490.
[80] Ibid., p. 497.
[81] Ibid., p. 505.

recognized that in speaking it aloud to Priscilla he would make it real. There would be no possibility of retreat.'[82] Moreover, on making the promise, the narrator describes that Moose sees that 'faith returned to his wife like a soul reanimating a corpse.'[83] The faith from the other that he can be the person that he figures himself to be through the act of making a promise is the form of new authenticity that *Look at Me* suggests. Moose understands that he can constitute an authentic self through promise-making. In doing so, he lets himself be bound to the other, and the bind is 'that single strand of strength' for him.[84] He needs the other's trust and faith to affirm the person he tries to refigure himself to be. At the same time, he knows that it cannot stop there. He is obligated to make good on the trust that he inspires, to fulfill the expectation from the other, to be accountable to them.

Meadow's subjectivity in *Innocents and Others* is also constituted in a scene of address in which, like Moose, she is called upon to account for her action, to answer to what she has done and the person she has become. In Meadow's case, the address from the other demands her accountability as an artist whose arts have a profound and unexpected effect on others. In the novel, Meadow is portrayed as an artist whose career as a filmmaker has shaped an artistic persona that she tries to cultivate. Her films primarily function as a representation of her hardship and sacrifice as a particular kind of artist. For Meadow, the actual film is thus subordinate to the creative and inventive process: 'The making of the film as the art, and the film itself as merely an artifact of that artistic act, not the art itself.'[85] With this view, filmmaking becomes a deeply personal affair; it is not for the film's subject

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p. 506.
[84] Ibid., p.497.
[85] Spiotta, p.66.

or the audience but the filmmaker. As Meadow reflects on her devotion in the filming process: 'But she knew somewhere, that where you arrived wasn't as important as how you got there. If it was hard earned, that mattered.'[86] Meadow's representation in the novel is therefore reflective of a modernist artist. Her view on artistic creation also corresponds to what Trilling calls the paradox of modern art. According to Trilling, the modernist preoccupation with impersonality paradoxically pushes the artist to be more concerned with the problems of self and self-awareness which causes their impersonal persona to dissolve:

> For all their intention of impersonality, they figure in our minds exactly as persons, as personalities, […] asking, each one of them, what his own self is and whether or not he is being true to it, drawing us to the emulation of their self-scrutiny.[87]

In Trilling's view, modernism promotes the virtue of authenticity paradoxically through the emphasis on the impersonality of the artist. As Kelly's explanation points out, in the modernist paradigm, 'any demonstrable privileging of a public self […] became associated with bad faith or an artificial dishonesty'.[88] However, self-exploration nonetheless appears to be the key motif of modernist artists. In Meadow's case, this paradox causes her to be previously blind to the fact that her art is ultimately self-serving. She subscribes to the doctrine of impersonality and considers her films an expression of artistic invention and ingenuity that has nothing to do with her personally. However, even though she is blind to the narcissistic agenda, she cannot escape the consequences of her narcissism. The films that she makes will inevitably end up causing pain and damage to others.

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[86] Ibid., p.77.
[87] Trilling, p. 8.
[88] Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', p.199.

In the novel, Meadow is finally addressed to account for her action as an artist when she receives a call from Jelly who accuses her of being reckless with her power as an artist: 'You played me and then when you saw what you had, you put the film out there. […] What good did it do? What was it for?'[89] Jelly's question functions as the scene of address for Meadow as it prompts her to have to account for her art – 'what good did it do?' The question sets in motion an attempt to construct an account about her life, which is described in the novel as a kind of self-conversion:

> A damascene moment, a conversion. But if she was honest, she saw it was a number of moments – significant events, one building on the other. All of them converting her, spinning her toward her new life. It wasn't a downward spiral, although it felt that way at the time; it was an inward spiral, a seashell spiral, a *spira mirabilis*, as if she were drawing the events to her, moving her closer to who she really was.[90]

In this passage, it is possible to understand Meadow's conversion experience as a reconfiguration of the self through narrative mediation, as 'a number of moments […] one building on another'. Jelly's accusation prompts Meadow to have to tell a story of who she is. The process of narrative mediation is portrayed as an inward movement that moves her closer to obtain self-knowledge, to 'who she really was'.

However, the kind of self that Meadow comes to realize from self-reflection turns out to be the kind that she describes as destructive: 'a person who not only didn't make the world better, but a person who made some lives worse.'[91] This revelation thus brings another damascene moment to Meadow. This time, it involves making amends and figuring

[89] Spiotta, p.243.
[90] Ibid., p.241.
[91] Ibid., p. 247.

herself as a good person, which entails being good to others. However, in trying to do so, Meadow encounters another problem of sincerity: 'To use another person's need to make you feel as if you are good, even to use another person to remind you of your own luck and privilege – this is shameful.'[92] The shame Meadow feels about her attempt to do good things reflects the impurity of sincerity. Her struggle in the second damascene involves guilt because she recognizes her selfish agenda. Eventually, Meadow concludes to herself that she does not have to be inherently good. She might not know whether she *is* a good person, but she can *do* good things for others: 'How to be good? Maybe she would never be a good person. But she could do good things. […] Was it possible to be truly humble? No, but she could tread lightly, quietly.'[93] Meadow's realization reflects the model of New Sincerity in which the purity of intention may be ambiguous, but it should not deter one from trying to be sincerely good. Meadow is content with doing 'whatever small good she could think of' despite the question of true humility and selflessness in her action. Her new sincerity comes from the fact that she does not let the ambiguity of her motivation stop her. She could still try to 'tread lightly' and find a way to be sincerely good.

Meadow's discovery of the new sincerity circles back to resolve the issue that drives her to account for herself in the first place – that is the problem of how to create art that is authentic to the artist but also true to the other. This is how the novel puts forward the concept of new authenticity that is informed by the model of New Sincerity. In Aaron Colton's reading of the novel, he suggests that *Innocents and Others* represent the novel after authenticity in that it 'refashion[s] authenticity into an antidote to postmodern culture'

[92] Ibid., p. 252.
[93] Ibid., pp.257-58.

by paradoxically using the forms and techniques of postmodernism.[94] The overt self-reflexivity in Meadow's art that previously characterizes her work as narcissistic becomes the condition of her new authenticity that Colton explains. In the novel's penultimate chapter called 'Kino-Glaz', which is a reference to a film theory in the tradition of realism that compares cameras to human eyes and regards films as a form of documentation free from the artist's artifice,[95] the narrator describes how Meadow has found an inspiration to make films in the kino-glaz tradition in which the film is meant 'to make us feel the infinite, find a form to express the infinite'.[96] For Meadow, the concept of being infinite is the feeling of being part of a larger landscape in which she feels 'small but also connected'.[97] The film that she imagines making again after she learns to account for herself as an artist is the one that will show a person in what she calls the 'glimpse of the sublime' or the state of being part of the interconnected infinity.[98] That is, despite the self-awareness imbued in her through postmodern reflexivity, the kino-glaz tradition connotes the kind of self that is humble and relational. However, when she finds inspiration to make a kino-glaz film, she also realizes that such an attempt is impossible. By definition, a capture of an image either by a film camera or a human eye will always be tainted by interpretation and subjective consciousness. Meadow thus contemplates to herself about the impossibility but also the inspiration to make such a film:

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[94] Aaron Colton, 'Dana Spiotta and the Novel after Authenticity', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 75 (2019), 29-51 <<DOI: 10.1353/arq.2019.0019>, p. 32.
[95] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Dziga Vertov", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 Feb. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dziga-Vertov.> [Accessed 2 May 2021].
[96] Ibid., p.269.
[97] Ibid., p.270.
[98] Ibid.

> Can an image convey something unnameable, impossible, invisible? What is an image if not inflected by a consciousness, a noticing? Something quieter and simpler: a person with an open face – any person, any face – sitting alone. How plain could an image be, how humble? Something to make her refutation or resistance give way. She imagined making this film, but also knew and hoped that everything would change in the doing. Change her vision, and change her, again.[99]

The film that Meadow visualizes suggests a new kind of authenticity in artistic creation made possible by the condition of New Sincerity that she discovers earlier in her attempt to figure herself as a good person. That is, it is the film that accepts the impossibility of what it tries to achieve but still attempts to make it happen with a keen sense of humility. As Colton suggests, postmodern reflexivity in Spiotta's novel is both the condition of narcissism and humility. In her new film project, Meadow's humility is figured in the novel as something like a new authenticity. Meadow realizes that it is impossible to make a film in which her presence as an artist will be eliminated. The film will always represent an image that reflects her noticing – her conscious interpretation of the event which she used to do through the editing process of her previous films. However, this time, she will recognize her part in it instead of making the same mistake with Jelly in thinking that she has no power to control the film's narrative. In other words, she is ready to accept accountability for her action as an artist. Moreover, she also acknowledges that she will also be affected by the process of making this film. It will change her as much as it will change others, including the subject and audience of her film. However, this film will be different from what she has done before because she will recognize the consequence and

[99] Ibid.

implications of her artistic creation and influence as an artist. Meadow's ending in the novel thus suggests that her future career as a filmmaker will require a similar kind of effort that she makes in trying to be sincerely good in her life – that is, she will have to 'tread lightly, quietly'. In short, Meadow's authenticity as an artist will not demand that she becomes an impersonal persona but a person who has much at stake in making her art yet willing to let all that happen affect her and is ready to account for her creation as an artist.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated in this chapter that *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* use the representation of narrative subjectivities to highlight the inadequacy of the ideal of authenticity in the practice of the self. I discussed how the novels problematize authenticity by emphasizing the inverted model of the self in *Look at Me* and the use of mediums to create and express a narratively figured self in *Innocents and Others*. I also suggested that the novels represented a new kind of authenticity that develops from the model of New Sincerity. This mode of authenticity relies on the trust and belief from the other as its constitutive condition. It is formulated through one's relation with and accountability for the other. Moreover, I proposed that the new authenticity can be understood through the concept of the proposition. To bring my discussion to a close, I will look at the intersection between the new authenticity and the concept of the proposition in the novels' form and structure. In other words, I contend that it is possible to characterize Egan's and Spiotta's novels as a propositional narrative that produces an authentic yet relational meaning through their relationality and accountability for the reader.

To an extent, the two novels can be characterized as New Sincerity fiction. Applying the model of New Sincerity to literary texts, Kelly explains that New Sincerity

texts are characteristically ambiguous in that there is a reader who is figured as the necessary other in the writer's consciousness. The figure of the reader testifies to the inherent impurity of the writer's intention and motivation in producing the text. However, Kelly also explains that 'the reader is consistently imagined to represent a future beyond what the writer can anticipate, and thus to offer the only possible relief from solipsistic self-consciousness.'[100] That is, the reader may affirm the undecidability of the text in terms of the sincerity of intention. Still, they can relieve the burden of ambiguity from the writer. The reader can be the one to decide the writer's sincerity. This leads Kelly to argue that the writer-reader relation presupposed in New Sincerity writing is 'a highly affective process'.[101] In one instance, he uses Eve Sedgwick's model of reparative reading as an example of such an affective process in which the reader engages with the text's performativity on a personal level – what it does to each individual reader– instead of whether it is true. The 'ethical energy' of New Sincerity writing derives from the shift from epistemology to affect, from the concern about truth to performance.[102] This shift makes it possible for the reader to relieve the burden of sincerity from the writer. They can use affect generated from the reading experience to decide what the text means to them and the extent of its sincerity.

The emphasis on affect in New Sincerity fiction can be understood more fully in Egan and Spiotta's novels that use the model of New Sincerity as a foundation of the new concept of authenticity as a form of proposition and accountability. Affect is mutual and

[100] Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel-Nicolson-Roberts', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5 (2017), 1-32 <DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.224>, p. 25.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., p. 10.

reciprocal. In an affective relation, both parties are bound to affect and be affected by the other. This is how both novels develop their concept of authenticity that requires one's ability to attract trust and belief from the other like a proposition and to fulfill the trust they inspire with full accountability. The trust that one instigates is affective in that it binds one to the other; it affects the subject to follow through with the belief the other has in them as much as it affects the other who places trust and faith in the subject. The duality of trust and fulfillment in authenticity is most fundamentally grounded in the 'highly affective process' that Kelly argues to be the foundation of New Sincerity.

The form and structure of *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* contain the dual function of trust and fulfillment. They ask that the reader trust in the integrity of the novels as a unified narrative and proceed to adequately respond to the expectation from the reader. The meeting of the two Charlottes in the first chapter in *Look at Me* functions as a promise to the reader. The novel promises that the suggested connection between the two characters in the beginning will be followed through. As the story progresses, the reader begins to see a link between the two Charlottes. The connection is manifest in the narrative structure that alternates between the first-person account of Charlotte senior and the third-person narrative that follows Charlotte junior and a few other characters in Rockford. The novel's structure hints at a deeper meaning of the initial meeting between the two characters while implicitly indicating the circumstance and possibility of their reunion. The character Aziz/Michael West is also revealed to be the same person in Charlotte's life story and emerges as a key connection between the two characters. It is not until the final chapter that the two Charlottes meet again on Charlotte senior's movie set about her life and accident. Their conversation on the set reveals many connections they share, except for

Michael West, whose name is brought up and lingers as a final word of their conversation. The reader never knows whether the two Charlottes finally make a connection between Michael West in Rockford with Z from New York. His name and identity linger and suspend mid-sentence as an unresolved closure to the narrative. Yet, the reader is aware of the deeper connection between the two Charlottes in the final chapter. The text from Irene's writing about Charlotte's life and the third-person narrative of Moose's road trip intersect with Charlotte senior's first-person narrative narration about the movie set. The intersection of various narratives functions as a form of accountability for the reader who has been attracted to follow the novel's alternating narrative structure throughout. Rather than conferring a sense of discontinuity, the intertextual element in the final chapter provides narrative closure and unity for the reader, fulfilling their expectation even though the novel does not offer any closure at the level of content.

The thread structure of *Innocents and Others* serves a similar function of being a lure that attracts the reader to trust in the novel's integrity as an extended prose form. However, unlike *Look at Me* and the opening meeting of the two Charlottes, it does not offer any hint connecting different strands of narratives. Meadow's 2014 essay that opens the novel is immediately followed by Jelly's telephone conversation with Jack in the 1980s without any suggestion about how these characters from different timelines will cross paths. It is not until halfway through the novel that the reader learns about Jelly being the subject of Meadow's film. Structuring the story in this way, Spiotta asks the reader to trust in the form of the novel, that these stories will somehow come together as a coherent story. These narrative strands whose connection is not made clear until near the end become the condition of the new sincerity anchored in the trust between the text and the reader. In other

words, the thread structure offers a proposition about the novel. It invites the reader to rearrange and reconstruct these textual fragments into a narrative that makes sense. At the same time, the reader needs to trust that the novels will fulfill either its obligation as a novel form, and the attempt at piecing different narrative strands together will eventually arrive at a coherent narrative unity.

Moreover, similar to *Look at Me*, the final chapter of Spiotta's novel also offers a version of accountability to the reader. However, instead of providing accountability in narrative closure, Spiotta chooses to introduce a whole new character at the ending of the novel to reinforce the inherent ambiguity and undecidability of narrative form. The final chapter follows Sarah, an inmate who is supposed to be the subject of Meadow's film before the project is aborted due to Sarah's indifference in her confession. Her shamelessness and affectlessness about her crime are reasons that drive Meadow to quit her career in making films centered on the theme of confession. Sarah's blatant and 'weird lack of affect' kind of confession leaves no room for Meadow to make sense of it as a film. Moreover, it becomes an experience that 'shook Meadow completely.'[103]

The feeling that shakes Meadow to the core is attributable to the discovery of the limit of narration to make sense and experience the world. Meadow can no longer rely on film narrative as a tool to make sense of things after Sarah's confession, which eventually causes her to reassess her career as a filmmaker. In the final chapter, the reader is allowed to inhabit Sarah's consciousness. The reader has a chance to hear the complete version of Sarah's confession about leaving her young daughter to die in a house fire, the confession

[103] Spiotta, p. 243.

that Meadow refuses to listen or to make a film about. The reader also learns that Sarah attempts to make sense of her crime before giving up the effort to do so: ‘But then Sarah began to strip back the reasons, the story of why she thought she did what she did. Because even if it were true, it only served the self that she wanted to discard. She must simply contemplate what she did.’[104] For Sarah, the confession that makes sense could only serve her ego. To be forgiven, she must resist the need to address and account for herself, that she simply ‘contemplates’ what she did, accept it, and let go. The novel's final passage describes Sarah’s experience of what she calls ‘the Prisoner’s Cinema’, which mirrors Meadow’s vision of the new film that can ‘convey something unnameable, impossible, invisible.’ Sarah’s Prisoner’s Cinema is a hallucination. It comprises visions of vibrant colors and patterns that ‘took her through the limits of who she was and what she had done, and for this she felt gratitude, and with this, at last consolation’.[105] Her cinema is not a traditional narrative of any kind. It does not interpret, nor does it have any meaning. Being lost in the hallucination, Sarah transcends her ego. She no longer needs to account for herself or what she had done to experience a sense of existence. The ending of *Innocents and Others* thus offers a glimpse of the possibility of an authentic existence that is decoupled from the need to narrate and make sense of the self.

Reflecting the thematic concern about the unattainability of self-authenticity, *Look at Me* and *Innocents and Others* suggest that the novel's authenticity as a long prose narrative also requires a collaboration between the text and the reader to arrive at an authentic meaning. To an extent, both novels ask for the reader’s trust in the integrity of its

[104] Ibid., p. 273.
[105] Ibid., p. 275.

form as a novel, that the use of the alternating or thread structures will nonetheless resolve into a unified and coherent narrative. Their endings also attempt to produce a narrative closure as a response to the trust from the reader. However, as I discussed above, both novels create an ending that imagines the reader as the necessary other. Egan leaves the issue between the two Charlottes explicitly unresolved, knowing that the resolution is already offered to the reader at the level of form. The reader knows that Michael West and Aziz are the same person and a crucial link between both Charlottes. Spiotta ends the novel with a short chapter on Sarah Mill as a final thread that the reader could weave into the knotted narrative that centers on the issue of self-truth, trust, and confession.

Nevertheless, the two novels also make a significant claim about the narrative form in their ending. Despite the reader's closure upon reaching the end of the novels, a narrative cannot be used to completely acquire or make sense of the truth. There will always be an excess that escapes narration. Even though she does not disclose any information about Charlotte senior's new identity, the final Afterlife chapter in *Look at Me* Egan lets the reader learn that Charlotte does not entirely abandon the effort to connect with herself by calling her old voicemail to hear her voice. Yet, this attempt to reach into herself will not be portrayed as a narrative in the afterlife. Sarah in *Innocents and Others* finally experience consolation in the manner that transcends the mechanics of narration. Even though the reader is imagined as the necessary other, in the end, there is still knowledge that escapes them. In this way, both novels make a final appeal to the reader as a propositional narrative, asking that they embrace the novel in all of its possibilities and take from it what they will. A narrative can only tell so much. Other forms of knowledge are still possible without

having to rely on narrative figuration. What the reader will make of such an ending that leaves so much unresolved and unknowable, only the reader can decide.

Chapter Two

Urban Subjectivities in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*

'Cities may be seen as roiling maelstroms of affect.'

— Nigel Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling'

Describing cities as 'roiling maelstroms of affect,' Nigel Thrift suggests that they are not only [1]a static and immutable space but also a taking-place of an event. That event is the movement of affect that appears to have a wild and volatile nature ofas a 'roiling maelstrom'. The affective movement seems to leave only chaos, confusion, and destruction in its wake. While Thrift's description characterizes the city space as affectively vivacious and potentially chaotic, in this chapter, I will explore how affect can also be the source of the city's livelihood[2]. As Thrift explains, affect could be 'actively engineered with the result that it is becoming something more akin to the networks of pipes and cables that are of such importance in providing the basic mechanics and root textures of urban life'.[1] In short, he contends that affect is 'a vital element of cities'[2] that constitutes the city itself.

I focus on affect in city space to explore its constitutive power and the challenge it produces on urban life. The first chapter discussed affect as a framework that describes self-authenticity as one's affective relation and accountability to others. Here I will consider affect as a productive force that constitutes the city and subjectivity of urban dwellers. At the same time, as Thrift's description implies, affect is potentially volatile and

[1] Nigel Thrift, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,' *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 86 (2004), 57-78 <DOI: 10.1111/j.0435-3684.2004.00154.x> p. 58.
[2] Ibid., p.1.

may complicate the attempt to render both the city and urban subjectivity legible. Therefore, in this chapter, I will also explore the intersection between affect and new epistemology in the representation of urban life. I choose Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999) and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) as the primary texts because they rely on tropes of reading and writing to represent urban life as a racialized experience. The novels also demonstrate the affective relation between city space and urban subjectivities and how both only become legible through an affective mode of knowing.

I will divide the chapter into two parts. First, I will discuss the notion of 'affective literacy' in *The Intuitionist*. Whitehead's novel uses various book tropes and the practice of textual signifying in the African-American literary tradition to characterize urban space and subjectivities as a type of text that requires affective literacy or the ability to read and write texts that produce affective meaning. Then I will discuss an affective mode of reading that I term 'affective gutter' in *Fortress.* I invoke the term 'gutter' from comic books whose structure and tropes heavily influence the novel. While reading comics, the reader has to bridge the gutter, or the empty space between panels, to find coherence in the story. Affective gutter thus refers to the practice of reading that is comparable to a type of spatial navigation that aims to trace and make connections between independent entities. In other words, the gutter is a type of virtual space in which meaning is not yet actualized but charged with affective potentials that the reader can use to make sense of the panel connection.

In one respect, I pair the two novels together because they both emphasize race in portraying the affective constitution of cities and urban subjectivities. However, I am

interested in how *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* consider the problem of legibility of the affectively-constituted urban life and how they explore alternative ways to portray and make sense of urban experiences. Moreover, I will discuss how affective literacy and affective gutter apply to the experience of reading the novels. I hope to demonstrate how *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* represent contemporary American hybrid fiction by using their forms, genres, and styles to reflect on the affective textual practice that they ~~are~~ represent~~ing~~. Similar to how the city space is understood both as a place and a taking-place of an event, the textual space of the novels is also a representation and an actualization of how meaning may be affectively produced and comprehended.

Affective Literacy in *The Intuitionist*

Affective literacy describes the ability to perceive and gain knowledge about affective constitution and relation of different entities. At first glance, the term may appear to be an oxymoron. On the one hand, it refers to the theory of affect, which is a materialist mode of knowing. On the other hand, the notion of literacy seeks knowledge in textual representations. Affect presupposes that the body, or the materiality of things, can form a mutually transformative relation with other bodies that it encounters. Each gains knowledge about one another from such contact. At the same time, literacy, or the ability to read and write, assumes the importance of textual representation in providing knowledge about reality. Using the term affective literacy, I intend to emphasize a possible convergence of the two modes as a method of knowledge acquisition that Whitehead's and Lethem's novels suggest as an alternative way to experience and make sense of urban life.

The difference between materialist and representational views of knowledge is also reflected in how the city can be characterized. From the materialist perspective, the city is

a type of body with affective potentiality. This approach to the city is already established in 'affective urbanism,' a field of study that focuses on urban space's affective composition and characteristics. Ben Anderson and Adam Holden argue that affective urbanism regards cities as a body that is 'made up of multiple, differentiated affects, feelings, and emotions; that is, affects as impersonal movements that constitute what a body can do'.[3] In this regard, affective urbanism echoes Thrift's remark about affect being the source of cities' livelihood[3]. However, affective urbanism also extends Thrift's argument by emphasizing the materiality of cities. It does not only view the city as a place that affect traverses and transforms. Instead, the urban space is itself an affective body that can affect and be affected by other bodies with which it interacts.

In his argument about affective mapping, Jonathan Flatley also describes how one relies on the affective potential of space to create a physical and a social map of a place. An affective map is a picture that 'we all carry around with us on which are recorded affective values of the various sites and situations that constitute our social worlds'.[4] Describing the process of affective mapping, Flatley also distinguishes it from the typical cognitive process used to acquire knowledge about a place. However, he sees that cognitive and affective approaches are complementary because they both negotiate 'the gap' between one's subjective experience and the external environment, albeit in a different way. Cognitive mapping helps one make sense of and move through the world in the present. Affective mapping, on the contrary, is concerned with one's position and belonging in a

[3] Ben Anderson and Adam Holden, 'Affective Urbanism and the Event of Hope', *Space and Culture*, 11 (2008), 142-159 <DOI: 0.1177/1206331208315934>, p. 145.
[4] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 78.

place over some time; it 'represents the historicity of one's affective experience'.[5] In other words, both affective urbanism and affective mapping propose a way to gain additional knowledge about urban space and subjectivities that a traditional mode of knowledge acquisition may be unable to deliver.

On the contrary, when assuming that there could be a type of literacy used to gain knowledge about the city, urban space becomes a type of text. For example, Michel de Certeau once describes cities as 'the most immoderest of human texts' produced by city walkers and only become legible from an elevated vantage point.[6] The nexus between cities and texts is also central in the study of ~~a~~the relationship between race and urbanity. In her monograph *Signs and Cities*, Madhu Dubey examines the juxtaposition between print literacy and urban modernity. She argues that the proliferation of the book tropes and scenes of literacy acquisition in African-American literature testifies to the twinned crises of racial representation in printed mediums [4]on the one hand and the problem of urban communities that have become increasingly abstract and unknowable on the other[5]. Tropes of books, Dubey writes, are 'perfect vehicles' for the attempt at~~[6]to~~ 'frontally tackling the difficulties of imaging racial community within contemporary urban conditions'.[7] For Dubey, print readership and racial communities are also urban-like because they constitute an 'imagined community' across space and time.[8] Therefore, the text-like quality of urban life may be helpful in imagining an alternative to racial representation and racial community in the context of modern urbanity. Liam Kennedy also

[5] Ibid., p. 4.
[6] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans.by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 92.
[7] Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.6.
[8] Ibid., p. 3.

similarly argues about the relation between representation and urbanity, writing that: 'The making of urban space requires critical consideration of the conditions and effects of the signifying practices, discourses, and images which give it legible form.'[9] For Kennedy, one can obtain knowledge about urban space by focusing on 'the workings of representation in the production of space as simultaneously real, symbolic and imaginary'.[10] The city becomes legible if we pay attention to how it is represented and signifieds. Both Dubey and Kennedy foreground textual practices as a means to understand urban conditions. Textual signification is applied to urban space and communities, with the assumption that they will become comprehensible if approached as a text.

However, the view of city space as a type of text does not necessarily contradict the notion of the city as a body or the assumption that urban life is an affective, embodied experience. As I hope tThe term affective literacy can demonstrate that, the two approaches are reconcilable and complementary. As de Certeau also suggests in his description, the production of urban texts is directly tied to the bodies of city walkers. [7]'They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city: they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it.'[11] His description characterizes the body of city walkers as the urban text. If the city space is comparable to a text, such text is made up of bodies of walkers. However, de Certeau emphasizes that those city walkers cannot read the text they produce because of the limit in vantage point. The city appears vast and incomprehensible, like a material object separated from those down below. He proceeds to ask whether 'the immense

[9] Liam Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.9.
[10] Ibid.
[11] de Certeau, p. 93.

texturology spread out before one's eyes [is] anything more than a representation, an optical artifact'.[12] Through my reading of *The Intuitionist*, I will argue that the city can be considered as both a representation and a material entity. Consequently, the legibility of city space relies on both materialist and representational views of the city. In other words, the urban text ~~that is~~ made by the day-to-day embodied and lived experience of city dwellers requires affective literacy.

Literacy is a central motif of Whitehead's debut novel. The story is set sometime in the mid-twentieth-century in the post-civil rights era and 'in a city with an increasing vocal colored population'.[13] This city remains unnamed throughout the novel. The reader only knows that it is 'not a Southern city, it is not an old money city or a new money city but the most famous city in the world'.[14] The city is also a mystery to the novel's protagonist, Lila Mae Watson, who moves from the south to begin her career as an elevator inspector. She sees the city skyline as 'a row of broken teeth, an angry serration gnawing at the atmosphere' and wishes that it will look 'uniform, doubtless, regimented' from afar.[15] Her wish expresses the desire to tame the untamable beast of racism that Lila Mae's father warns. Just like the city appearing to her like a beast, white people, even in the north, could also 'turn rabid at any second'.[16] Although 'the times are changing', and that even the city's new municipal building is named after Fanny Briggs, '~~'~~a slave who taught herself how to read,'[17] Lila Mae finds that she still has to construct the map of the city according to the intensity of affective responses her presence provokes: 'Lila Mae has pinpointed a spot as

[12] Ibid.
[13] Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p.12.
[14] Ibid., p. 12.
[15] Ibid., p. 17.
[16] Ibid., p. 23.
[17] Ibid.

the locus of metropolitan disaffection. A zero point. […] With the zero-point as reference, she can predict just how much suspicion, curiosity and anger she will rouse in her cases.'[18] Precisely, her 'cases' are that she is an African-American woman in a profession dominated by white men. In fact, Lila Mae is the first of her race *and* gender to become an elevator inspector. Therefore, she also finds that, like in the city, her position in the guild is 'precarious'. For this reason, she trains herself to keep a low profile in the guild and blend into the environment in the city: 'Her position is precarious everywhere she goes in this city, for that matter, but she's trained dread to keep invisible in its ubiquity, like fire hydrants and gum trod into black sidewalk spackle.'[19]

Apart from her race and gender, Lila Mae's struggle to assimilate in the guild is also due to the fact that she is an intuitionist, an elevator inspector who uses Intuitionism in her~~their~~[8] work. Contrary to Empiricism that relies on empirical data, the principle of Intuitionism suggests that it is possible to communicate directly with the elevator by interpreting sensory information such as vibration and sound. Each inspector has different ways to visualize and analyze the intuited data: 'Everyone has their own set of genies. Depends on how your brain works.'[20] For Lila Mae, the data appears in geometric forms that she can interpret into the health and safety data of the elevator she inspects. For this reason, intuitionists like her are sometimes called 'voodoo inspectors' or 'witch doctors' and are the minority group in the guild. Being an African-American woman and an intuitionist, Lila Mae is thus 'three times cursed' in elevator inspection and in the city.[21]

[18] Ibid., p. 4.
[19] Ibid., p. 24.
[20] Ibid., p. 6.
[21] Ibid., p. 20.

The novel opens with the news of a clash of an elevator in the Fanny Briggs Memorial building that Lila Mae has recently inspected. She believes that the accident is a setup to defame her and discredit Intuitionism. Lila Mae is determined to find the truth about the accident. To defend Intuitionism, she also sets out to find the missing blueprint of the 'black box' or the perfect elevator that James Fulton, the founder of Intuitionism, designs after his principle. The black box assumes a mythical status among elevator inspectors. If discovered, it is believed to bring the end of Empiricism and the end of modern cities as we know it. The black box will transform vertical transportation. Urban high-rises and skyscrapers will have to be destroyed and rebuilt according to the new elevation technology. Both empiricists and intuitionists rush to find the black box blueprint because the first to discover will hold the key to what Fulton calls 'the city to come'.

The indeterminate setting of the novel and the characterization of Lila Mae as an anxious yet determined and somewhat successful woman in the city reflects the novel's central themes of literacy, ambiguity, and knowledge acquisition of urban life, especially for marginalized subjects. Lila Mae's anxiety leads her to adopt an alternative method of learning and belonging, both for her life in the city and her career. Whitehead employs many tropes in African American literature to portray the problems of literacy and epistemology not only in Lila Mae's struggle but throughout the novel. First, he uses the trope of passing in the character Fulton, who passes for a white man. Fulton writes the *Theoretical Elevators*, a text that becomes the foundational text of Intuitionism, as a joke to undermine the power of vision heralded by his white, empiricist peers. In other words, Intuitionism is conceived to project the critical power of racial passing and challenge the notion of racial differences. Moreover, Michele Elam suggests that the trope of passing is

also present at the level of genre. Elam argues that the novel itself participates in the act of passing. It passes for being detective fiction when, in fact, it criticizes the genre's assumption about knowledge. In the case of *The Intuitionist*, 'The detective novel's epistemological requirement – that the world can be known – dissolves into science fiction's conceit – that worlds can be imagined.' Elam then concludes that the genre passing of the novel is 'the call to surrender generic expectations and commitments, to reconsider and remake acts of interpretation'.[22]

In addition, Whitehead uses the trope of passing in connection with the trickster trope in African-American vernacular culture. Fulton's passing identity and his writing as a joke characterize him as a trickster comparable to the mythical figure Esu. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Esu 'embodies the ambiguity of figurative language' and represents the interpretative process attuned to Black literary texts' double-voice quality. [23] Alison Russell also suggests that Whitehead is himself a trickster in that he writes the novel with so much ambiguity that 'makes interpretation a problematic enterprise - for readers as well as for Lila Mae'.[24] However, Russell further argues that the trickster trope and the novel's ambiguity can challenge the primacy of textual authority or factual authenticity in favor of 'the felt connection afforded by a story worth telling'.[25] Both the passing and trickster tropes create ambiguity. The reader must recalibrate their expectations when reading the text and pay attention instead to how the story seeks to connect with them by using ambiguity to elicit their active interpretation of the text.

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[22] Michele Elam, 'Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead', *African American Review*, 41 (2007), 749-768 <DOI: 10.2307/25426988 >, p. 763.
[23] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 21.
[24] Alison Russell, 'Racalibrating the Past: Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 49 (2007), 46-60 <DOI: 10.3200/CRIT.49.1.46-60>, p. 48.
[25] Ibid., p. 60.

Racial uplift is another trope in African American literary tradition that Whitehead uses to foreground the issues of literacy and knowability. On ~~the~~ one level, it is possible to interpret the novel's emphasis on elevation technology and its role in creating urban space as an allegory to racial uplift. However, Linda Selzer argues that Whitehead's novel reflects 'a deeply ambivalent stance toward uplift' by suggesting that the prescription to uplift ideology may limit one's ability to learn and be part of a community.[26] From the beginning, Whitehead portrays Lila Mae's alienation from other black folks who work in the basement garage of the guild building. Her successful uplift makes her aware of herself as a 'dicty college woman' to colored men underground. Her alienation also makes her internalize racist assumptions of which~~that~~ she is also a victim ~~of~~; she 'prays she will make it safe past them'.[27] Lila Mae feels threatened by the presence of other black people who are now unlike her. Her uplift, symbolized in the fact that she is working upstairs while they work down below, brings~~makes~~ her ~~feel~~ a deep sense of disconnection from the black community and drives her to adopt a racist attitude towards other black people.

The ending of the novel also demonstrates the precarity of uplift ideology. The novel ends with Lila Mae's isolation in a small room where she tries to write the third volume of *Theoretical Elevators* in Fulton's voice. She believes that she is working towards realizing the city to come with~~to~~ which she truly belongs. Her position at the end of the novel, Selzer writes, 'leaves her increasingly isolated from black community, progressively alienated from her own body, and even more in thrall to the seductionve ~~attractions~~ of uplift'.[28] The ending portrays Lila Mae being cut off from both the outside

[26] Linda Selzer, 'Instruments More Perfect than Bodies: Romancing Uplift in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*', *African American Review*, 43 (2009), 681 – 698 <DOI: 10.1353/afa.2009.0059>, p. 681.
[27] Whitehead, p. 18.
[28] Selzer, p. 682.

world and herself to fulfill the uplift prophecy. She disappears from the public and assumes another person's voice so that the 'second elevation' will finally happen and bring forth the new world.

In a way, an elevator crash in the Fanny Briggs Building is also a critique of the uplift ideology that elevation technology symbolizes. However, the novel portrays the crash as an extraordinary event in that it is a 'total freefall' which is 'a physical impossibility'.[29] Accordingly, Lila Mae rejects this conclusion and becomes determined to find the cause of the accident. In one regard, her rejection of the freefall can be read as a refusal to accept the shortcoming of the uplift ideology for racialized minorities. However, the novel later reveals that the accident is indeed a total freefall, thus calling into question everything Lila Mae has learned or believed. In the novel, Lila Mae discovers the truth about the freefall at the same time that she finds out about Fulton's passing identity. This knowledge drives her to develop a new literacy to decipher Fulton's text about Intuitionism and change her perception about the city and her own racial subjectivity.

Several analyses of the novel connect the elevator freefall and the discovery of Fulton's passing identity with an opportunity to develop a new literacy. Lauren Berlant's analysis of the novel's representation of the historical present is an example that demonstrates how the elevator crash encapsulates a moment of crisis as 'the phenomenon of affective disruption'.[30] Such a moment provides an opportunity to perceive the historical present, or the happening of a historical event as a collectively felt experience in the present that has not yet been transformed into knowledge. Apart from portraying the historical

[29] Whitehead, p. 35.
[30] Lauren Berlant, 'Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event', *American Literary History*, 39 (2008), 845-860 <DOI: 10.1093/alh/ajn039>, p. 846.

present through the crisis such as the elevator crash, Berlant also argues that *The Intuitionist* tracks 'the building of an intuitive sense of the historical present in scenes of ongoing trauma or crisis ordinariness'.[31] Lila Mae's anxiety about her 'precarious' position in the city and in her career renders her ordinary life an ongoing traumatic experience that Berlant describes. Being embedded in the historical present, Lila Mae struggles to make sense of her place and the space she inhabits. Her use of the zero point to map the city is an example of how she turns to affective sensorium to obtain knowledge about city space. In other words, Berlant's suggestion that the historical present is an affective moment is also manifest in the novel as the need to find an affective mode of knowing to comprehend it.

In Spencer Morrison's argument, the elevator crash characterizes *The Intuitionist* as a novel in the tradition of infrastructuralism that examines the connection between infrastructure and political power. He argues that the elevator accident makes it possible to perceive a new vision about how infrastructure can be designed to reflect a more inclusive and embodied version of political agency. 'Amid what the novel portrays as a city of failing infrastructure, tropes of elevator ruin enable reimagined political configurations wroth through sensory recalibrations.'[32] Spencer thus follows in the same trope by interpreting the accident as an opportunity to reinvent or reimagine an alternative mode of sensing the world. Mitchum Huehls also similarly suggests that the supposed impossibility of the total freefall makes 'characters and readers alike struggle to determine the meaningful significance of these things, but, in each case, the things refuse to participate in the

[31] Ibid.
[32] Spencer Morrison, 'Elevator Fiction: Robert Coover, Colson Whitehead, and the Sense of Infrastructure', *Arizona Quarterly*, 73 (2017), 101-125 <DOI: 10.1353/arq.2017.0017>, p. 117.

symbolic exchange of representation and figuration'.[33] Lila Mae cannot help but interpret the fall as an attempt to sabotage her reputation and Intuitionism because she subscribes to the traditional mode of signification. According to Huehls, she is compelled to factor race into her rationale, thinking that it must signify something. 'Lila Mae can't read what she doesn't already know how to read, and yet the world is filled with objects, like falling elevators, that are illegible and opaque to representation.'[34] However, while it might be appealing to assume that the novel favors Intuitionism to Empiricism as a mode of knowledge acquisition that is not dependent on rationality and representation, the total freefall of the elevator demands a third option, a completely new mode of literacy that falls in-between. As Huehls also writes, there is a limitation in both approaches: 'Intuitionism, as much as Empiricism, merely tells us what we already think we know.'[35] The limitation is the subject themselves. Lila Mae cannot read what she does not already know how to read. For this reason, she can never predict the free fall. No mode of reading can account for such an accident.

Thus, the novel suggests that the new literacy has to go beyond the limit of rationality or even affectivity. N. Katherine Hayles writes that errors such as the elevator freefall 'tear open a rip in the temporal fabric of the historical present, through which a better and more utopian future may be glimpsed'.[36] For Hayles, the error enables an alternative mode of imagining a utopian possibility that would have been beyond the wildest dream. Hayles' reading also extends from Ramón Saldívar's analysis of the novel's

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[33] Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 110.
[34] Ibid., p. 114.
[35] Ibid., p. 113.
[36] N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of Cognitive Unconscious* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 192.

postrace aesthetic. In his argument, postrace aesthetics uses the framework of speculative realism to imagine the possibility of a postracial world. Saldívar explains that speculative realism is 'a critical realism that would posit the knowability of phenomena […] to construct the possibility of a weird kind of realism that posits the speculative possibility that we may be able to imagine the conditions under which the thing in itself and its phenomenal form might coincide.'[37] When the framework of speculative realism is used in literary aesthetics that imagines the postrace phenomenon, it becomes 'a symbolic way' that hybridizes the reality of racial politics with 'the heart's fantastic aspirations' for social and racial justice.[38] That is, while postrace may not be real, it nonetheless functions like a total freefall that enables one to imagine one's ~~the~~ wildest dream.

Pilar Martinez Benedi suggests that the convergence of race and speculative realism in imagining a new mode of cognition that Hayles and Saldívar's arguments put forth~~suggest~~ might find its affinity with the condition of neuro diversity that enables us to 'recognize how much "nonhumanness" the human incorporates'.[39] While Huehls writes that both Intuitionism and Empiricism fail to adopt a non-anthropological viewpoint, Benedi's neuro-diversity reading suggests that Intuitionism may be comparable to a form of neuro diversity. It is 'an atypical cognitive style' that allows both Lila Mae and the reader to visualize a materialist approach to gaining knowledge, one 'that relies on a different dynamics[9] of communication: direct, unmediated […], horizontal'.[40] In other

[37] Ramón Saldívar, 'The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative', *Narrative*, 21 (2013), 1-18 <DOI: 10.1353/nar.2013.0000>, p. 14.
[38] Ibid., p.15.
[39] Pilar Martinez Benedi, 'Where Racial Meets Neuro Diversity: Pondering "Who's We" in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 60 (2019), 179-190 <https://doi.org/10/1080/00111619.2018.1531819>, p. 180.
[40] Ibid., p. 188.

words, Benedi's analysis extends from the previous arguments about new literacy. While she may allude to the theory of affect in her reading of Intuitionism as a non-representational mode of thinking, she does not completely abandon cognitive function. Instead, she makes room for a third possible alternative such as neuro-diversity in her interpretation. I also follow this path in examining affective literacy in the novel. I suggest that the new affective literacy is still rooted in the textual and signifying tradition. I contend that Whitehead returns to the tropes of the book in African-American literary tradition and adopts the practice of 'signifyin' to imagine a new literacy that is affective yet deeply connected to textual conventions.

According to Gates, 'signifyin(g)' is a form of 'repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference' that is foundational of Black vernacular culture.[41] The practice is highly reflexive of its history and tradition yet suggestive of new possibilities and changes. In *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead uses signifyin' tropes such as the Talking Book or the double voice in the signifyin-(g) tradition to encourage the use of affective literacy for both the protagonist Lila Mae and the reader of his novel. From the first page, the novel portrays how literacy, or the ability to read, write and decipher texts, is significant to Lila Mae's subject formation. She is introduced in the opening scene while decoding previous inspectors' initials in an inspection record. The elevator that she last~~s~~ inspects is also named after Fanny Briggs, a slave who becomes famous for her self-taught literacy. Later, the reader learns that Lila Mae becomes an elevator inspector and an intuitionist through engagement with texts. She first discovers elevator~~discovers the elevator~~ technology by learning to read a text about elevators with her father. Then at the Institute for Vertical

[41] Gates, p. xxiv.

Transport, where she receives her formal training, Lila Mae discovers James Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators*. Her reading of his work then converts her to Intuitionism.

However, the scenes of literacy in the novel are represented as a visceral or spiritual moment. When Lila Mae first listens to Fanny Briggs's story on the radio, the narrator describes her in a state of heightened sensitivity. She is sitting on her mother's lap, leaning towards 'the brown mesh of the radio speaker,' and feeling the actress's voice as 'iron and strong'. What Lila Mae hears from the speaker is not only Fanny Briggs's story but also the quality of the sound as 'tiny particles of darkness pressed beyond the cracked, wheaty mesh of the speaker'.[42] In the scene in which she learns to read with her father, she also sits on his lap and feels 'the words in his chest against her back'.[43] ~~Not only that~~ Lila Mae not only experiences literacy through an intimate relationship with her parents, but she also perceives the language as something visceral that can either be pressed through the speaker or felt in the chest of another human being. Moreover, when her father teaches her how to read, Lila Mae learns from distinguishing the text's physical quality, such as its position. She notices the 'white space' as a signal of the end of the word before she comes to associate those words with any meaning. While Whitehead invokes the trope of literacy commonly found in the African-American literary tradition, he only does so signifyingly by suggesting that literacy can be learned affectively through attention to the physical and visceral quality of the language.

Apart from suggesting that literacy is tied to an affective experience, the novel also adds further complication by presenting texts in a broken and fragmented form to

[42] Whitehead, p. 12.
[43] Ibid., p. 119.

emphasize their physical quality. The two texts responsible for Lila Mae's career as an elevator inspector are presented in fragments. The letters in the text that she reads with her father are far apart, scattering around and not grouped together. The fragmented quality leads her to invent a new method of reading for herself. In her attempt to make sense of the text, she decides that 'starting one place was the same as starting any other place.'[44] She then begins reading by connecting words she knows in random order. Excerpts from Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators* are also inserted in the novel as textual fragments that scatter and interrupt the main narrative throughout. Its fragmentation also echoes how Fulton's text is also a mystery to people in the story-world, including Lila Mae. Presented as disconnected fragments, this fictional writing requires active input from the reader of the novel in the same way that Lila Mae and other characters struggle to make sense of the text. Both the reader and the characters need to find a starting point and put the text together in a meaningful order.

The use of textual fragmentation in the novel reflects its motif of affective literacy. On ~~the~~ one level, the novel suggests that intuition is, to an extent, a form of affective literacy. To intuit is to interpret the information by using one's personal instinct instead of objective reasoning. The fragmentation of text turns the act of reading into the practice of intuiting textual meanings. Since the text is scattered and incomplete, the reader has to guess and fill in the missing gap to make sense of the message. Moreover, the working of intuition and textual interpretation is also presented in the novel as an entry into the world of affective entities. For example, an intuitionist elevator inspector communicates with the elevator as an object that exists and operates outside the realm of human's understanding

[44] Ibid., p. 119.

and reasoning. From the perspective of intuitionism, the elevator is simultaneously a passive technological object and a communicating subject capable of connecting and conversing with humans. The fragmented text reveals the similarity between the text and the elevator from the intuitionist point of view. Broken texts become an almost passive body that cannot properly signify. Yet, they retain an ability to produce meaning by forming an affective relationship with the reader. Moreover, textual fragments also reaffirm the notion that textual meaning is not fixed, definite, or conclusive. Instead, it relies heavily on the act of reading and interpreting from the reader. At the same time, the meaning can differ according to the personal circumstances of each reader. Therefore, a piece of text, either whole or fragmented, will always have numerous and various versions of interpretation.

Moreover, the trope of broken text is a binding motif that drives the novel's plot. Fulton's writing about the Black Box and the unfinished manuscript of the third volume of *Theoretical Elevators* are broken into fragments. In a way, Lila Mae's detective-like mission partly entails the need to track down and piece his broken text together. As a~~the~~ novel that passes for being a detective story, Intuitionist uses the broken text ~~functions~~ as a bait that promises true knowledge when discovered in whole. However, even though Lila Mae finally finds all of his lost writing, she also learns of Fulton's identity. With this knowledge, she contends that she needs to learn to read his text in a new way by factoring in the significance of race in her interpretation. Although she possesses both his writing in whole and the knowledge about his identity, it only leads to more mysteries and ambiguities. At this point, it appears that the novel questions the possibility that complete knowledge is obtainable. Moreover, the novel ends with Lila Mae making fake Fulton's

manuscript, claiming that 'she's just filling in the interstitial parts that Fulton didn't have time to finish up. […] They just need a little something to make them hang together. Seamlessly'.[45] With this ending, the question of textual ambiguity is exacerbated by the problem of textual authenticity. Not only that the text is ambiguous, but it also might not even be authentic. However, as Lila Mae sees it, her writing of the text is not that different from her reading of it – she is filling in the missing gap that will bind broken texts into a seamlessly coherent story. Therefore, the questions of ambiguity and authenticity seem to be trumped by the importance of comprehensibility that will grant what Russell describes as 'the felt connection afforded by a story worth telling'.[46]

Not only is~~that~~ the broken text ~~is~~ present in the novel's structure as textual intrusion and in the novel's theme about textual authenticity and ambiguity, but Whitehead also constructs a narrative that is essentially broken. He uses free indirect speech to disrupt the continuity of the story. The third-person narrator constantly interrupts their narration by offering a counterargument about Lila Mae. For example, the narrator describes that '[Lila Mae] has never thought of herself as an imposing person (that's how little self-perception she has)'.[47] The observation of Lila Mae's lack of self-awareness, which the narrator repeats throughout the novel, complements the novel's theme about knowledge acquisition. However, the free indirect speech also undermines the ability of the novel to tell a complete and coherent story. The narrator's intrusion suggests that some information is blind to Lila Mae and even to the reader had the narrator not intruded and offered it to the reader. Moreover, the free indirect speech adds more ambiguity and confusion in that it is

[45] Ibid., p. 254.
[46] Russell, p. 60.
[47] Whitehead, p. 187.

impossible to determine the reliability of the narrator and their input. Thus, the novel becomes a broken text at the levels of structure and theme and its form as a prose narrative.

The use of fragmented texts also makes *The Intuitionist* part of the African-American literary tradition. The free indirect speech, for example, is part of the trope of the 'Speakerly Text' that, according to Gates, manipulates narrative voices to represent the double-voiced characteristic of black vernacular tradition that uses written texts as a medium for black voice.[48] The play with rhetorical strategies and language use in black texts that render them ambiguous and highly interpretative is the reason Gates uses the trickster figure to develop a theory of criticism for African American literature. At the heart of Gates's theory is the practice of textual signification. The double-voiced, the Speakerly Text, or the Talking Book all point to how a piece of text can 'signify' by repeating and revising previous traditions. In this way, it is possible to understand Whitehead's novel as a fragmented text by examining its participation in the signifying practice. *The Intuitionist* signifies with other black texts by using tropes such as passing and social uplift. The novel itself is a composite of different genres and traditions. The most obvious example is Lila Mae's investigation of the elevator accident that turns the novel into a detective story. However, when considering Fulton's writing about Intuitionism and the perfect elevator, the influence from the utopia genre and Afrofuturism becomes discernible.

Moreover, as Sandra Liggins argues, the description of the urban environment and the spectral presence of Fulton also gives the novel a gothic tone that aims 'to terrify, to reflect the threats and anxiety that individuals and societies often confront'.[49] The passing

[48] Gates, p. xxv.
[49] Sandra Liggins, 'The Urban Gothic Vision of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999)', *African American Review*, 40 (2006), 359-369 (p. 359).

identity of Fulton, Lila Mae's northward migration, and their penetration into the world of white people through the means of reading and writing, also recalls the tropes of the great migration and racial uplift in earlier slave narratives. The signification to various genres and traditions essentially makes *The Intuitionist* a pastiche of different styles of writing. The novel is a composite of generic fragments without its own core identity. Accordingly, the novel itself is indeterminate and fragmented as the broken text intrinsic in its content and form.

However, the novel's participation in the 'signifyin(g)' tradition also makes the novel's concept of affective literacy rooted in the textual tradition. As I previously discussed, many readings of the novel suggest that Whitehead seeks to introduce a new mode of affective epistemoglogy through the freefall accident. To an extent, the use of the broken text suggests an affective mode of reading and writing, in which the missing gaps need to be intuited and filled in. Yet, as Huehls argues, Whitehead is as critical of the affective practice of intuitionism as empiricism. The novel's signifying relation with other African American tropes and how Whitehead is himself a trickster in the way he plays with genre conventions suggest that he seeks ~~to find~~ a middle ground on which textual signification and affective epistemology may converge. The attempt to find a middle ground is ultimately part of the signifying tradition. It is reflected in the figure of Esu in Gates's argument. Esu, the trickster God, embodies multiplicity, fluidity, and indeterminacy. As Gates asserts, 'Esu, in other words, represents power in terms of the agency of the will. But his ultimate power, of which even the will is a derivative, is the power of sheer plurality or multiplicity; the myths that account for his capacity to reproduce

himself ad infinitum figure the plurality of meanings.'[50] Affective literacy is itself a trickster method. It is fluid and ambiguous, neither affective nor cognitive. This method, in Gates's words, 'puts everything up for grabs'.[51] Just like the signifyin–(g) practice, affective literacy also embraces everything that may factor in the process of meaning production. To signify, it requires that one recognizes texts, in Gates's word, 'on its own terms, formal terms, beyond its surface or literal, thematic "meaning" of their own'.[52] In a way, affective literacy is a method that is best suited to discern the signifying process in the text because it is open to all possibilities. Gates's theory of signification also proposes that the reader is as open-minded in their encounter with the text. Gates further explains in detail the process of meaning production:

> The text, in other words, is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on one hand and understanding on the other. […] The relationship between truth and understanding yields our sense of meaning.[53]

Gates's remark above reveals that textual meaning comes from a corroboration between texts and the reader. Textual meaning is a combination of the text's 'message' and the reader's 'understanding'. How the understanding yields the meaning to the text surpasses the boundary between affect and cognition, materiality and representation. In this collaboration, the reader needs affective literacy, the ability to read, write, and feel the text.

[50] Gates, Jr., p. 42.
[51] Ibid., p. xxxi
[52] Ibid, p.xii
[53] Ibid., p.29.

In a way, affective literacy is akin to the concept of the textual ecological system in Rachel Greenwald Smith's argument that the text and the reader are equal members in the ecosystem of meaning production. Smith invokes the term ecological to express the co-presence of human and nonhuman entities in the system in which humans are situated.[54] Likewise, even in the realm of textual representation, the material reality of the text exists, and thus it requires more than just literacy to make sense of it. Whitehead's emphasis on textual fragmentation and indeterminacy testifies to the need for a mode of affective literacy that can account for all the elements present in the ecosystem. Moreover, when the notion of the ecosystem is applied in the tradition of black signifying, it becomes clear how such a method is adopted to express black culture. Blackness exists in an ecological system with other things that come before. It is established through the connection with the ancestors or what comes before. The production of black art, as Toni Morrison explains, is essentially a 'continuum' with other Black or African-American art. As the practice of signifyin(g) implies, all traditions are interconnected and speaking to one another as repetition or revision, or in Gates's term, in the 'chain of black signifiers'.[55]

Therefore, the practice of signifying is a communal activity and an acknowledgment that nothing exists or becomes meaningful in isolation. Everything works together as a connected part in a network, an ecological system, or a community. Community is an essential part of black identity, and it comes to define 'blackness' in art. Whitehead participates in this tradition by imagining affective literacy as a communal method of meaning production. He advocates for the communal aspect of the reading and

[54] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in a Neoliberal Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 24.
[55] Gates, p.181.

writing process that considers both affective and representational aspects of a text. To achieve this, Whitehead emphasizes ~~on~~ textual indeterminacy through the use of the trope of fragmented texts. Affective literacy in the novel requires the vision of the 'village' that Morrison refers to in her essay about rootedness and the black community. It takes more than one person or one aspect to make sense of things. Whitehead uses Lila Mae's many shortcomings to reflect on the failure to ~~do~~ adopt the village value and her ignorance of the significance of collective action. His criticism of uplift also recalls Morrison's warning of the danger in being self-reliant and possessing no consciousness of historical connection. In Morrison's argument, she essentially links the village value to textual practices and declares that 'The point of the books is that it is our job. […] If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything.'[56] The community behind the production of a book is then the working of a network of people and things – a network in which texts and readers need to collaborate to make a piece of writing meaningful. When Morrison asserts that her writing will not be about anything if it is not about the reader or 'you', she gives her reader the authority to impart meaning into her writing, personalize and contextualize it according to their understanding and experience of the text. As Whitehead also demonstrates in *The Intuitionist*, texts are neither a signifier nor a signified but a hybrid of both – they are representational and affective, and it takes a village to come together to make them meaningful.

[56] Morrison, Toni, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. by Caroline C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 56-64 (p.64).

Apart from the use of textual fragmentation and the adoption of the signifyin(g) practice, the novel also centralizes Lila Mae's adjustment to the city as a circumstance that demands affective literacy. The city in the novel is an object of mystery to both the reader and Lila Mae. For the reader, the city setting of the novel is highly ambiguous. There is no information about its name or location or even when the story takes place. The reader has to guess from the clues, such as references to popular culture and technologies. The ambiguity surrounding the city's identity suggests the ontological turn in the novel's treatment of the city. The city, in its indeterminacy, becomes a 'thing.' Without the reader's imaginative interpretation, the city remains a 'thing-in-itself' that does not necessarily produce any specific meaning or value. Only when the reader actively applies their knowledge about American culture and New York City that Whitehead's fictional city has an identity and becomes meaningful. In this case, I use the term 'thing' after Bill Brown's understanding of the term as 'a word that tends, […] to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable'.[57] The act of 'hovering over the threshold' in Brown's definition corresponds to my observation that the city in *The Intuitionist* exists as a threshold of the subject and object that requires affective literacy to comprehend~~make sense of~~. Whitehead only writes that the story happens in 'the most famous city in the world'. Described as such, the city functions as both a subject that is meaningful and legible (as the most famous city in the world) and as an object whose legibility is entirely dependent on the reader (whose imagination and interpretation will determine what should be the most famous city

[57] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22 <DOI: 10.1086/449030> pp.4-5.

in the world). The duality makes it possible for the city to be simultaneously nameable and unnameable, figurable and unfigurable, identifiable and unidentifiable.

A similar process of collaboration that grants meaning to the city also happens in the relation between Lila Mae and the city space. Not long after she first arrives in the city, the narrator describes ~~that~~ Lila Mae sitting~~sits~~ in her room brooding over the subway map that she has to decode. She finds that the subway system is inferior to vertical transportation and 'aesthetically weak, not to mention just plain atavistic, this horizontal maundering about.'[58] In this scene, when she reads the map in the confines of her room, Lila Mae makes two mistakes. First, she thinks that it is possible to read and understand city space without first-hand experience. No matter how much she tries to decipher the subway map, she is still doing it by sitting at home instead of going out and using the subway. Secondly, Lila Mae approaches the city space with a bias against one of the most efficient ways to comprehend the city – by becoming a city walker. As de Certeau suggests, walking in the city, or the atavistic 'horizontal maundering about,' produces the urban space itself: 'the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered'.[59] Walking produces the space that the walkers traverse. 'It is a spatial acting-out of the place,'[60] de Certeau further explains. Lila Mae's refusal to leave her oom and walk around the city does not only prevent her from ~~not only~~ learning about the space, but the city also ceases to exist as a meaningful object without Lila Mae's active participation as a city walker. Moreover, de Certeau also argues that, the walker's subjectivity is constituted 'in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a *here* and a *there*' (emphasis in original).[61]

[58] Whitehead, p. 171.
[59] de Certeau, p.97.
[60] Ibid., p. 98.
[61] Ibid., p.99.

Therefore, Lila Mae's urban subjectivity can only be constructed as she walks and produces the city space. Her failure to fully know the city and become the city girl results from her insistence on treating the city as a signifying and decodable text that exists and can be known prior to her contribution as an inhabitant of the city. This explains why Lila Mae is often frustrated by the city's illegibility and why she sees it as a wild and untamable beast that she wishes she could control.

However, Lila Mae fails to recognize that she has already been taming the beast whenever she walks in the city. That is, she is actively constructing a legible and accessible city space for herself. The zero-point map is an example of how she can make the urban space legible by encountering it firsthand. Lila Mae's accumulative experiences from walking in the city allow her to locate the most lively and bustling point. Moreover, the zero point helps her map the city according to how her race and gender affect other people and vice versa. It becomes a reference in which her racialized and gendered body is least affective, and in which~~that~~ she is least affected by how other people perceive her. Therefore, upon walking the streets of the city, Lila Mae does not only remap the city space according to her personal affective experience; she also has her subjectivity constituted according to her race and gender..

Yet, despite her attempt to map the city and make it known to her, there are also several instances in the novel where the city refuses to be known. The most telling example is when the city appears to be multiplying. To Lila Mae, the city is constantly shifting according to the day of the week ('the city is different on weekday afternoons'[62]) or the

[62] Ibid.

race of its dwellers (there is a hidden 'colored city'[63] buried deep underneath the city surface). Lila Mae finds that there always seems to be 'a secret scofflaw city within the known city,'[64] which leads her to perceive it as 'an endless city'.[65] In one respect, the city can multiply into endless variations because of the movement of affect in the city, which transforms it into a relational entity in Bruno Latour's argument about 'relational ontology'.[66] As a relational-ontological space, the city is made up of a 'plurality of relations' that has no essences but 'attains meaning through its numerous – and changeable – relations to other entities'.[67] Lila Mae's zero-point is an example of this relation. The city changes according to its affective relation to Lila Mae. The city is endless because it is not simply defined and restricted by its built environment. It evolves and expands along with its associations with other human and non-human entities.

In his collection of essays, *The Colossus of New York*, Whitehead also describes New York City's multiplication along with the people that live in it: 'There are eight million naked cities in this naked city – they dispute and disagree. The New York City you live in is not my New York City; how could it be? This place multiplies when you're not looking.'[68] The nakedness of New York City testifies to the notion of the non-essential, relational city in the ontological sense. Whitehead also invokes the concept of the city's nakedness in *The Intuitionist* by stripping the city of any specific details and inviting the reader to give meanings and significance to an otherwise indeterminate city. The reader's

[63] Ibid, p.166.
[64] Ibid, p.163.
[65] Ibid, p.197.
[66] Anders Blok and Torben Elgaard Jensen, *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p.49.
[67] Ibid, p.3.
[68] Colson Whitehead, *The Colossus of New York* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p.6.

attempt to make sense of the city thus parallels Lila Mae's struggle to tame and map the city that manifests itself to her endlessly.

There is another city in *The Intuitionist* that seems even more ambiguous for both the reader and the characters in the novel. It is the 'city to come' in Fulton's writing. The meaning of this city, which does not exist and may not even come to exist in a built form, lies exclusively in the collaborative relationship between the text and the reader. The city to come only exists in the reader's interpretation of the text. In the novel, this city is once interpreted as the new kind of city enabled by the black box or the new elevation technology. However, after Lila Mae discovers the truth about Fulton's passing identity, she comes to interpret the city to come in a racial sense. It is now a utopian dream and a metaphor about the improved situation of the oppressed race that will be uplifted in this new city. In other words, the city in Fulton's writing only transmits meaning to the people who have read about it and imagined its possibility.

The city to come also demonstrates how Whitehead uses the convention of Afrofuturism to connect racial experience with affective literacy. Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators* expresses a vision of the future of African-Americans in the new city enabled by the new elevation technology. It is essentially an Afrofuturistic text; it imagines a new city enabled by the technology invented by African Americans to ~~and will~~ be inhabited by African Americans who will be uplifted both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Considering Afrofuturism as a form of black resistance, Ytasha L. Womack asserts that:

> imagination, hope and the expectation for transformative change is a through line that undergirds most Afrofuturistic art, literature, music, and criticism. It is the collective weighted belief that anchors the aesthetic. It is the prism through which

> some create their way of life. It's a view of the world. Where there is no vision, the people perish.[69]

Fulton's writing about the city is afrofuturistic because he emphasizes the importance of hope, imagination, and vision. To demonstrate the relationship between the city and racial experience through the genre of Afrofuturism, Whitehead needs to portray the city in its ambiguous relationality to acknowledge the equal significance of both the material and the imaginary city in the urban experience of African Americans.

The indeterminacy of the city testifies to the need for affective literacy to make sense of things. Moreover, a~~A~~s Sean Grattan argues, Lila Mae's solitude and affective relationship with the city has a utopian potential in suggesting a new form of collective experience not only with other humans but with other things. With reference to Jane Bennett's argument about the affective potential of things in *Vibrant Matter*, he also writes that the city to come 'is a utopia that allows for a more capacious understanding of what kinds of bodies vibrantly matter'.[70] The city's ambiguity presents an opportunity for a new community in which humans and things co-exist. That is, to echo Smith's argument, the ambiguous city represents an ecosystem in which all entities need to be embraced to find its compressibility. Moreover, the indeterminate city is also one of the elements that make the novel as a whole a pastiche of fragmented and ambiguous elements, a hybrid that lacks meaning when torn apart. Not only the city but the novel itself is ambiguous and impossible

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[69] Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Laurence Hill Books, 2013), p.42.

[70] Sean Grattan, 'I Think We're Alone Now: Solitude and the Utopian Subject in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*', *Cultural Critiqu*e, 96 (2017), 126 – 153 < DOI: 10.5749/culturalcritique.96.2017.0126>, p. 133. For Bennett's original text, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

to be categorized. Essentially, Whitehead writes a trickster novel, a shapeshifter in genres, forms, and contents. The novel's ambiguity resists the division of texts and things, humans and nonhumans, and asks that affective literacy is adopted. Most importantly, with affective literacy, the novel also asks that the reader become a trickster themselves and play with all the possibilities that the novel has to offer.

Affective Gutter in *The Fortress of Solitude*

Lethem's 2003 novel has many connections with comic books. The title itself is a direct reference to Superman's secret sanctuary. The protagonist, Dylan Ebdus, is also a comic book fan. Growing up, Dylan uses comics to fill the void left by his absent mother, Rachel, who also introduces comic books to him. Moreover, Lethem uses magical realism to incorporate comic book elements in the story, such as a magical ring that grants superhero power to fly or become invisible. Lethem also uses the superhero trope to explore the possibility of postracial identities. Dylan, the only 'white boy' on his street, finds and shares the ring's secret with Mingus Rude, his mixed-race friend~~,~~, and neighbor. Together they use the ring to create a superhero persona, Aeroman, that becomes a shared identity between the two boys with different racial backgrounds. David Coughlan writes that Lethem uses comic books both literally and figuratively as a medium that forms unlikely relationships: 'Comics seem to offer a world without a discriminating gender or racial bias, providing grounds for a more egalitarian community.'[71] The friendship between Dylan and Mingus is also formed through comic books. Mingus will read comics with Dylan to distract him from the absence of his mother. They have a system in which New comics

[71] David Coughlan, 'Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* and *Omega: The Unknown, Comic Book Series*', *College Literature*, 38 (2011), 194 – 218 <DOI: 10.1353/lit.2011.0028>, p. 196.

arrived at newsstands on Tuesdays. Mingus Rude would have an armload, bought or stolen'. Twice a week they will read comics together, 'shoulders hunched to protect the flimsy covers from the wind, puzzling out the last dram, the last square inch of information, the credits, the letters page, the copyright, the Sea-Monkeys ads, *the insult that made a man out of Mac'*.[72] Comics become a fortress for the two boys. It has its system, secrets, rituals, and a whole new universe to explore.

Coughlan's reading of *Fortress* also points out that Lethem incorporates the comic book systems such as the gutter and panel relations and its serial nature into the form and structure of his novel. He argues that Lethem uses serialization and panel relations in comics to 'warn[s] against absolute repetition' that threatens to abolish the possibility of sequential growth and development.[73] Exact repetition, Couglan explains, 'rejects the meaningful spacings, differences, repetitions, and deferrals which define not only comics as a medium but, as Lethem describes, characterize and are the condition for social and personal relations'.[74] My discussion will extend from Coughlan's argument by further examining the novel's use of the gutter, or the space between panels in comics, to imagine an affective mode of experiencing and gaining knowledge about the world. Here I use the term 'affective gutter' to describe the ability to track the affective movement, navigate, connect, and interpret fragmented and ambiguous elements into a comprehensive understanding of the world. According to Scott McCloud, the gutter in comic books relies on the reader's ability to infer wholeness from parts and achieve 'closure'. Closure,

[72] Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 65-66.
[73] Coughlan., p. 208.
[74] Ibid., p. 213.

McCloud explains, is the 'phenomenon of observing the part but perceiving the whole'.[75] Without the reader's ability to find closure, comics, with their fragmented structure, will struggle to achieve cohesion and comprehensibility. Accordingly, McCloud concludes that comics is a collaborative medium 'where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion.'[76]

My reading of *Fortress* will argue that affect plays a vital part in an attempt to achieve closure and find meaningful sequences and connections among panels. The gutter is comparable to the virtual space in Brian Massumi's argument about affect and movement. Like a virtual space as 'the seeping edge' between the potential and the actual,[77] the gutter is full of possibilities awaiting transformation into the realm of the actual through the reader's ability to bridge the gap. Thierry Groensteen's analysis of the gutter and panel relations in comics also reflects the virtual quality of the gutter. According to Groensteen, the gutter is 'a forced virtual' or 'the interior screen on which every reader projects the missing image (or images)'.[78] The gutter is not an empty space. It is filled with potentialities that the previous sequences and panels have conditioned. However, how the reader will turn these potential meanings into an actual meaning in their reading of the comics is entirely up to them.

Moreover, Groensteen suggests that the gutter is needed to render each panel an independent entity in its own right, in 'a complete and compact form'.[79] With the gutter,

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[75] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), p. 63.
[76] Ibid., p. 65.
[77] Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 43.
[78] Theirry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. By Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 114.
[79] Ibid., p. 113.

Groensteen suggests, the panel becomes a ‘polysemic image’ with open meaning that can be inferred into a meaningful sequence through the gutter linkage that forms a semantic relation among panels. In the following, I will demonstrate how Lethem uses the gutter-panel relation to imagine an affective mode of navigating and gaining knowledge about the city space. First, he uses graffiti art to introduce the complexities of racialized experiences in the city. With graffiti Lethem also outlines a new mode of reading and writing that can render the city space legible. Then, he uses the movement across the gutter, from one panel to another, to represent the movement in the grid-like space of the city, which ~~that~~ is comparable to the panel structure of comic books. In other words, Lethem represents the city like a comic book which~~that~~ requires a mode of reading that is attentive not only to the presence of the gutter but also the sensitivity to affect in the virtual and empty space that may yield meaning outside a typical textual representation.

The novel begins with the section called ‘Underberg’ written in the third-person point of view and centered on Dylan’s experiences growing up on Dean Street in a Brooklyn neighborhood called Gowanus. The story starts when Dylan’s family first moved to Dean Street in the 1970s when he was only five years old. The Ebduses are one of the first white families who settled in the neighborhood at the start of Gowanus’s gentrification. Isabel Vendle, an old white woman who owns most of the properties in the area, visualizes that the presence of white families will transform her streets. The gentrification officially starts with Isabel changing the name of the neighborhood to Boerum Hill: ‘So, *Boerum Hill*, though there wasn’t any hill. Isabel Vendle wrote it and so

it was made and so they would come to live in the new place which was inked into reality by her hand.'[80]

'Inked into reality' is a key phrase that effectively illustrates the juxtaposition between textual practices, racial experiences, and urban subjectivity in the novel. There is certainly a disparity between Boerum Hill imagined by Isabel and Gowanus that is the lived reality of the neighborhood residents. Boerum Hill comes into existence and replaces Gowanus only via the print medium. 'Isabel Vendle's Boerum Hill was declared "The City's Best-Kept Secret," *New York Magazine*, September 12, 1971.'[81] Boerum Hill receives validation from the magazine while Gowanus remains the place 'without a name'. However, Gowanus's reality as the city ghetto, whose existence is denied in print media, is what Dylan experiences throughout his childhood. Dylan's characterization in the novel pivots around one fact about him: he is the only white kid in the predominantly black and Hispanic Gowanus neighborhood. Growing up there, Dylan has seen poverty, decay, racial tension, and violence, all of which he is also a victim ~~of~~ of. Dylan is labeled a 'white boy' and often finds himself the target of 'yoking.' Yoking is a form of racist bullying founded on the assumption that white people have more money than black people. The yoking victim is therefore always white while the perpetrator is black. When being yoked, one will be 'nicely asked' for money: 'Hey, you got a dollar you could lend me?'[82] However, this seemingly friendly and innocent question is veiled by the threat of physical assaults such as headlocking. Yoking, in other words, is a manifestation of the racial and economic disparity that will be exacerbated by gentrification. Dylan's progressive mother Rachel

[80] Lethem, p.7.
[81] Ibid., p.135.
[82] Ibid., p.86.

always tells him to respect the racial significance of the neighborhood and reminds him that 'if someone asks you say you live in Gowanus.'[83] His presence on the street already signifies a gradual disappearance of Gowanus and the emergence of the gentrified Boerum Hill in its place. While Dylan may be yoked by black kids growing up, he does not know then that he will be part of the process that exacerbates racial inequality in which he is certainly not the victimized one.

Dylan's traumatizing childhood, defined by his white identity and later by his mother's departure, becomes more tolerable through his friendship with Mingus Rude. The Underberg section then focuses almost entirely on how the two boys become close friends and separate as adults. I contend that the role of Mingus in the novel and Dylan's life is to introduce an alternative form of textual production and interpretation to both Dylan and the reader. For example, while Gowanus is not recognized in print media, its existence is affirmed by another kind of text: graffiti arts and tags. It is Mingus who teaches Dylan to read and create tags. He teaches Dylan to spot and read seemingly illegible scribbles on the city space that mark~~s~~ the parameter and affirm~~s~~ the existence of Gowanus[10]. When Dylan later visits the neighborhood as an adult ~~later~~, he describes that 'I saw meanings encoded everywhere on these streets, like the DMD and FMD tags still visible where they'd been sprayed twenty years before.'[84] Despite the city being fully gentrified by then, the adult Dylan claims he can still 'see Gowanus glinting under the veneer'.[85]

Dylan's ability to see Gowanus owes to his friendship with Mingus, without whom Dylan would not acquire the kind of literacy he needs to perceive another city that exists

[83] Ibid., p.53.
[84] Ibid., p. 429.
[85] Ibid.

underneath the shiny surface of the newly gentrified city. Moreover, Mingus teaches Dylan to use graffiti and tagging to turn the city space itself into a publication medium. Victoria Carrington argues that graffiti 'provides evidence of an alternative city and alternative textual practices. It is loud: it screams from the walls "I am here and I want you to know." It screams "I don't respect your boundaries—textual or spatial"'.[86] Carrington's argument also suggests that graffiti is an unsanctioned textual artifact that 'opens the way to examining the articulation of identity and textual production in contested spaces'.[87] Graffiti defies boundaries by carving out its own space for expression. Moreover, as Carrington writes, it is pivotal in forming and expressing oneself in the urban space with racial and economic inequality. For Dylan and Mingus, graffiti does not merely cross textual or spatial boundaries but also defies racial boundaries. As the reader will later learn, the two boys will come to share the tag name DOSE, making the author of the DOSE tag neither black nor white but both. DOSE represents not a disparity or inequality but 'a team, a united front, a brand name, an idea'.[88]

Graffiti represents an alternative mode of textual practice that requires a new literacy. Similar to the affective literacy in *The Intuitionist*, graffiti and tagging turn the city surface into an affective textual space that defies traditional representation. Graffiti does not signify or produce meaning in a conventional way. As Dylan himself learns, a tag is simply what people write and does not have meaning. It is 'visual noise'; 'a reply, a call to those who heard, like a dog's bark understood across fences.'[89] What matters is that one

[86] Victoria Carrington, 'I write, therefore I am: Texts in the City,' *Visual Communication*, 8(2009), 409-425 <DOI: 10.1177/1470357209343356>, p. 417-18.
[87] Ibid., p.410.
[88] Lethem, p. 138.
[89] Ibid., p.72.

makes tags. The proliferation of one's tag is also a form of amplification. The more one tags, the louder the noise and the more chance one is heard and recognized. The significance of tags does not hinge on what it means but how often it appears and affects other people. Accordingly, graffiti and tagging also need to have a loud, bold, and unconventional design as well as an impressive size or an appearance in unexpected locations. These qualities intend to invoke affective responses from the city walkers because they primarily express affect, feelings, and sensations instead of traditional meaning.

The relationship between Dylan and Mingus also operates on the affective level, like the tag that they co-produce. DOSE will become one of the secrets and identities that the two boys share. Their childhood secrets lead the adult Dylan to later remember Mingus as 'the rejected idol of my entire youth, my best friend, my lover.'[90] However, their intimacy also exemplifies the racial tension and violent encounter among racialized bodies that Dylan experiences growing in Gowanus. The racialization of Dylan's identity always happens in a highly sensualized and affective manner. For example, Dylan's whiteness is most emphasized when he is yoked. The act of yoking itself is a literal cl~~r~~ash of white and black bodies. In a yoking episode, bodies are tangled in a headlock that contains 'a ghost of fondness' – it has 'a polyrhythm of fear and reassurance, a seduction'.[91] During a yoking episode, there are both violence and fondness, fear and seduction – it is a racialized ritual that is contradictory, confusing, and even challenges the racial divide that the act of yoking represents. It is only through being yoked – having his white body entangled with black ones – that Dylan grows into being 'a white boy', learning his role, becoming visible on

[90] Ibid., p. 443.
[91] Ibid, pp. 84-85.

the street crowded with black faces. In other words, Dylan grows up and learns to make sense of race ~~by~~ in an affective way. For Dylan, race is real in so far as it produces affective charges through physical encounters. This is the reason that when he first meets Mingus, Dylan 'felt himself permeated by some ray of attention, moved so that he felt an uncanny warmth in the half of his chest that was turned toward Mingus. He wanted to put his hand in Mingus's Rude's crispy-looking hair'.[92] The feeling that permeates Dylan is most intense when he looks at Mingus's hair, which is racially distinctive from Dylan's own 'waterfall of girlish hair' that stands out 'among the Afros'.[93] Hair has also been a primary racial marker for Dylan since before Mingus becomes his friend. As a young boy, he learns to read racial differences through how different hairs make him feel. He is first drawn to the two white girls on Dean Street because they have 'gauzy, sky-pink hair streaming like it had never been cut'.[94] Later he is also struck by Mingus's hair that cannot be more different from his. The moment he wants to run his hand through Mingus's hair is thus the moment Dylan teaches himself to discern racial differences through an affective sensation.

Dylan's childhood in the pre-gentrified Gowanus endows him with a sense of authenticity and expertise in the inner-city culture. Even though he claims authenticity from being in the neighborhood before the gentrification, Dylan nonetheless benefits from the process he identifies himself against. [11]As Matt Gobey argues, 'Dylan is a synecdoche for a class of urban dwellers that expresses its authentic identity through the consumption of lifestyles associated with a geographic locale that has been symbolically configured as

[92] Ibid., p.55-56.
[93] Ibid, p.19.
[94] Ibid., p.1.

authentic.'[95] Dylan's adulthood is defined by such an authentic identity that he associates with the neighborhood before gentrification. He also develops his writing career around black music and culture. However, despite claiming authenticity, Dylan fails to have a successful career and adult life in general. In fact, his characterization throughout the novel is grounded in the connection between the failure to produce texts. As a boy, he cannot write his original tag and share Mingus's DOSE~~ose~~ tag. As a music journalist, he specializes in soul and R&B. He writes liner notes about R&B and Soul bands that are not well received and unlikely to be widely published. The movie script he intends to write about an R&B group, The Prisonaires, is unfinished. I contend that Lethem uses Dylan's failing writing career to reflect on his inability to fully adopt a non-signifying, affective way of writing, reading, and understanding texts. Even though Dylan learns to perceive racial differences affectively, he cannot fully appropriate the nonsignifying textual practice such as graffiti writing or tagging. The racial gap between Dylan and Mingus, for example, is not merely encoded in their skin colors but inherent in the way the two boys use two different systems of signification. One of the significant moments in the novel that foreshadows their inevitable separation is in a conversation they have as ~~a~~ young boys:

> "That's my tag," said Mingus when he caught Dylan studying the cloud of visual noise.
>
> […]
>
> "What's it mean?"
>
> "It's my tag, Dose[12]. It's what I write."[96]

[95] Matt Godbey, 'Gentrification, Authenticity, and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*', *Arizona Quarterly*, 64 (2008), 131-151 <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2008.0006>, p. 136.
[96] Ibid., p.72.

In this exchange, Dylan expects that the tag will signify or represent something meaningful about Mingus's life. Yet, as Mingus replies to him, Dose [13]does not mean but simply *is*. It is his tag. It is what he does. Throughout the novel, Dylan repeatedly fails to grasp the nonrepresentational mode of thinking. His lifelong yearning for and failure to be recognized for his authentic experiences on Dean Street as an authentic inner-city kid is rooted in his expectation that his childhood, specifically his relationship with Mingus, must signify something authentic about the neighborhood and his life. He fails to recognize that Dean Street, Mingus, and his self are separate entities whose interrelation is affective rather than representative. They simply are and become what they are through the process of mutual affectation. The novel then seems to suggest that Dylan's failure as a writer is symptomatic of his inability to adopt an affective approach to the act of reading and writing and in inhabiting the city space with his own racialized body.

While Dylan is characterized as failing to make sense of his Gowanus childhood in a nonrepresentational way, the novel nonetheless seeks to tell his story in an affective manner by exploring the many relations between one's subjectivity and the city space. Implied in the novel's title, *Fortress* alludes to the connection between space and subjectivity. More specifically, the novel tells a story about how one's subjectivity is tied to a place until it becomes a fortress that isolates a person. In the most literal sense, the fortress of solitude may refer to a heavily guarded place like a prison designed to lock people in individual cells. Primarily, the novel uses the prison motif to distinguish between black and white experiences in the neighborhood. Devika Sharma argues that the connection between race and imprisonment in *Fortress* characterizes it as a 'neo-slave narrative' that 'designates a literature concerned with isolation and confinement as

racialized experiences'.[97] Indeed, the main black characters in the novel, including Mingus, Dylan's childhood nemesis Robert Woolfolk, and Mingus's grandfather Barrett Rude, Sr., are isolated or imprisoned at one point in the story, suggesting that imprisonment is almost exclusively a racialized experience. However, Sharman also argues that Lethem uses the prison motif more figuratively by representing the color prison or how 'the notion of color being a form of confinement'.[98] The confinement of the color prison partly conditions Dylan's inability to appropriate the nonrepresentational mode of signification of Black urban culture. As Sharman writes, the novel uses the theme of representation and appropriation to project this racial division and confinement: 'The novel reads like a literary test site for various ways of representing African American characters. […] It thus seems as if Lethem explicitly tests his own way of representing black and white while simultaneously allowing his reader to recognize the challenges.'[99]

The prison motif is also used to describe the city in Dylan's memory. The landmark of Gowanus itself is also an incarceration facility~~place~~ called Brooklyn House of Detention. Its dominant presence in the neighborhood projects a sense of inevitability to the people of color who live there. It is also an edifice that keeps the ghost of the ghetto Gowanus lurking in the shadow of the gentrified Boerum Hill. Moreover, the haunting and lingering presence of Gowanus and the detention center are symbolic of how the neighborhood becomes a fortress that imprisons Dylan. He finds himself trapped in his Gowanus childhood no matter how long and how far he has been away from the place. As his girlfriend, Abby,

[97] Devika Sharma, 'The Color of Prison: Shared Legacies in Walter Mosley's *The Man in My Basement* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*', *Callaloo*, 37 (2014), 662-675 <DOI: 10.1353/cal.2014.0097>, p. 662.
[98] Ibid., p. 663.
[99] Ibid., p. 673.

once confronts him: 'Your childhood is some privileged sanctuary you live in all the time.'[100] The fortress imagery is also connected with Dylan's father, Abraham, a secluded film-painting artist. Abraham often works alone in his attic studio and rarely goes out onto the street. The narrator comments early in the novel that: 'In truth, Superman in his 'Fortress of Solitude' reminded you all too much of Abraham in his high studio, brooding over nothing.'[101] The same reference to Superman's sanctuary is then adopted by Dylan, who remarks that he, like Abraham, also has his Fortress of Solitude designed to keep the compilation and collection of childhood memories, 'of my lost friends, life's real actors'.[102]

The recurring image of the fortress in the novel has another significant implication. It represents a 'striated space' or the space that is 'necessarily delimited, closed on at least one side.'[103] Since a young age, Dylan has always perceived space in the logic of striae. 'There were two worlds' for Dylan. The first world is indoor and divided according to the contrasting personalities of his parents. There is the peaceful space of his father's upstairs studio and the chaotic space downstairs that is always filled with noises and activities of his mother. As he grows up, Dylan is pushed onto Dean Street – the second world. Similar to the indoor space of his house, the outside world of Dean Street is also divided into slates and zones. Dylan learns this spatial system from his early childhood experiences on Dean Street:

> They walk in front of Marilla's gate – her share of the irregular slate path was her zone – marked. This was Dylan's first knowledge of the system that organized the space of the block. He would never step into Marilla's house, though he didn't

[100] Lethem, p. 319.
[101] Ibid, p. 66.
[102] Ibid., p.501.
[103] Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 475.

> know that now. The slate was her parlor. He had his own, though he hadn't marked it yet.[104]

Dylan's movement on Dean Street is limited to his ability to hear his mother Rachel calling him in. He cannot move further than that. However, being out on the street, Dylan finds that Dean Street itself is part of a much larger system of zones and grids. It is a block – a fortress of a sort – Nevins and Bonds Streets bracket that. The world beyond Dean Street is unknown to the young Dylan.

Dylan's knowledge of the spatialization system, both indoor and outdoor, is described as occurring to him before he even learns to cognize it. For example, his later knowledge that he should avoid the Brooklyn House of Detention on Atlantic is intuitive – it is a kind of 'knowledge you couldn't have guessed you already had'.[105] That is, Dylan first learns about the system of zones as affective knowledge. He learns it from how his body moves from one point to another and how each position affects how he conceives and expresses himself. Being upstairs with his father, for example, Dylan is left alone. His father leaves his solitude 'unbruised' – the solitude that when he is downstairs 'his mother burst[14][s] like a grape'.[106] Dylan is completely exposed and overwhelmed by Rachel's highly affective presence. 'She was too full for the house […] too full for Dylan who instead worked Rachel's margins, dodging her main force to dip sidelong into what he could make sense of.'[107] The force of Rachel leaves Dylan's subjectivity entirely vulnerable to affectation. He has to adjust his position and bodily movement around her while he can afford to remain static and fixed in his father's presence.

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[104] Lethem, p.5.
[105] Ibid., p.77.
[106] Ibid., p.11.
[107] Ibid., p.12.

Likewise, Dylan also obtains the affective knowledge of the city's zones system before developing a cognitive comprehension of the system itself. For example, having to go to Bergen Street, he decides that he cannot trust the place because 'he could feel the sidewalk tilt there'.[108] The distrust, which translates into the feeling of walking on a tilting surface, is a projection of anxiety for being a 'white boy' that can leave him vulnerable to being yoked. Dylan thus knows about the racialization of the space before it becomes~~is~~ cognitive awareness~~knowledge~~. The queasy and distrustful feeling that Bergen Street causes is later translated into knowledge about racial tension when he runs into Robert Woolfolk, a black kid in the neighborhood who is also Dylan's perpetual tormentor. Seeing Dylan, Robert makes it clear to him that if he 'comes around here' again, he will be yoked. Robert's threat, however, provides relief to Dylan's previously indescribable feeling of distrust. The threat gives Dylan a sense of affirmation and reassurance about who he is and the role he has to play in this neighborhood. Dylan is then described to feel 'grateful for the implied sense of pooled information. He and Robert could move forward together from this point into whatever was required'.[109] The pooled information that Robert shares with Dylan is that there are racial differences in the neighborhood, and each race has a role to play. Dylan now learns that outside of Dean Street, in~~to~~ a different zone, he is known as the 'white boy' who has to play the role of a yoking victim for other black kids.

Dylan's knowledge of the city as a striated space is partly the legacy of his parents on the one hand and of the process of urbanization on the other. Modern urban planning divides the city space into blocks and neighborhoods. Each area is predominantly occupied by one race or another. The uneven racial distribution across the city space creates racial

[108] Ibid., p.36.
[109] Ibid., p.37.

tension and reinforces the racialization of one's subjectivity. The encounter between Dylan and Robert is an excellent example of how Dylan embraces his whiteness and learns to differentiate himself from Robert. This process of racialization can only take place in a striated space such as the modern urban space like Gowanus. Urban planning creates zones, which can cause a change in one's perception of self when one moves from one zone to the next. The further Dylan moves from Dean Street to a more predominantly black neighborhood, the more ~~t~~he learns of racial differences that his presence provokes. However, such knowledge of racial disparity occurs to him first and foremost as a noncognitive, unexplainable feeling of unease before it is translated into knowledge about racial tension and his own racialized identity.

Dylan's perception of the city through the logic of striae has constantly been challenged by his mother who introduces him to the smooth space. Deleuze and Guattari explain~~s~~ that, unlike striated space, the smooth space has 'the points [that] are subordinated to the trajectories.'[110] Instead of emphasizing the occupation of a single point, the smooth space focuses more on the act of traversing the space. It is thus compared to the kind of space that is produced nomadically. The occupant of the smooth space does not necessarily occupy a single position; they move around. 'It is a space constructed by local operations involving changes in direction.'[111] More importantly, Deleuze and Guattari contend that the smooth space is affective. It is filled with 'intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities'.[112] One's traverse across such space is bound to be affected by these forces.

[110] Deleuze and Guattari, p.478.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid., p.479.

Dylan is first acquainted with the smooth space through the way Rachel transforms the house downstairs into a place filled with noises, voices, music, and physical contact~~s~~. Rachel's presence itself is highly sensuous and affective. She also represents a type of 'force' that has influenced Dylan's life even after she has left him. Abraham's nude paintings of Rachel, which~~that~~ can be seen even from the street, serve as an analogy for Rachel's forceful, affective presence that cannot be avoided. Her ultimate transformation into the 'running crab' – the nickname she signs in the postcards sent to Dylan – also symbolizes the kind of nomadic movement she wants Dylan to learn. Instead of moving in the upward/forward direction like most animals, crabs move sideways. They create a line of movement that traverses space in an atypical manner. Any traditional boundaries are bound to be crossed by the crab's movement. Therefore, it is Rachel, the running crab, who interrupts Dylan's usual movement of up and down directions indoors and sends him out into Dean Street. It is also with Rachel that he learns to defy the system of zones in the city and ~~learn to~~ venture out. Again~~a~~ and again, Rachel pushes Dylan from his comfortable position and urges him to explore the space, both physical and racial, nomadically. She drives him out to play with other kids on the streets. She sends him to a public school to mingle with other black kids. Rachel's decision to move her family to a predominantly black neighborhood such as Gowanus is also one attempt to transform the striated space into the smooth one. If there are boundaries, Rachel will cross. If there are fortresses, she will escape. Therefore, it is not surprising that she chooses to leave the confinement of motherhood and family life and literally runs sideways from Brooklyn to the Midwest.

The fact that Mingus moves to Dean Street right after Rachel has gone thus bears a significant implication in that it sets the stage for Mingus to step into Rachel's place and

continue the work that she has started. For example, Rachel introduces Dylan to comic books while Mingus turns it into a passionate hobby for Dylan. Rachel smokes weed and gets high in Dylan's presence, but it is Mingus with whom Dylan picks up weed smoking as a habit. Rachel and Mingus also share several traits and characteristics. Both are wild, affective, and sensuous. Rachel is described by the narrator as being full of 'unpredictability and unrest,'[113] while Mingus is 'an exploding bomb of possibilities'.[114] At the same time, both Rachel and Mingus introduce Dylan to the world of secrets, nicknames, and doubleness. There are secrets and names that Dylan shares with his mother that he cannot tell anyone else. Likewise, Dylan and Mingus have nicknames and secrets such as the magical ring, the shared identity of DOSE and Aeroman. In fact, their friendship is only secured when they share secrets. As the narrator describes the moment after Dylan and Mingus help each other masturbate: 'Dylan was flushed with understanding: he and Mingus were restored. They had secrets again […] absolute secrets from anyone. […] Dylan could trust Mingus, they were again sole and extraordinary.'[115]

Therefore, it is inevitable that Mingus will be the one who takes over Rachel's job in creating and guiding Dylan through the smooth space of the city. He does so primarily by introducing Dylan to graffiti and tagging. One of the first few trips out of Dean Street that Dylan makes is to follow the trail of tags with Mingus. 'Mingus showed the way,'[116] the narrator begins. The two kids walk to the Brooklyn Bridge. On the bridge, heading towards Manhattan, Dylan finally understands that Mingus wants him to see two giant tags painted on a Manhattan tower. The tag is only visible if you are on the Brooklyn side. 'The

[113] Lethem, p.10.
[114] Ibid., p.56.
[115] Ibid., p.211.
[116] Ibid., p.78.

painted names had conquered the bridge, pinned it to the secret street, claimed it for Brooklyn. […] Tags and their invisible authors, […] the hidden lore.'[117] The walk to the bridge is a significant moment for Dylan in that it is the first time he acquires new literacy to help him read and understand the city space. Therefore, the two boys are portrayed during their walk as a detective, following clues, trying to gain hidden knowledge about the city. 'Dylan Ebdus and Mingus Rude in the spring of 1975, walking home along Dean Street studying marker tags in black and purple ink on mailboxes and lampposts, DMD and FMD, DINE II and SCAR 56, trying to break the code, mouthing syllables to themselves.'[118] After learning about tags, Dylan's perception of the urban space ~~has~~ completely change~~d~~s. Now he sees tags everywhere and learns that tag authors disregard the zoning system. Instead, they place their tags across the city with the desire to be recognized and acknowledged. The proliferation of tags that Dylan sees is evidence of how the city can be transformed into a smooth space. As Deleuze and Guattari explain:

> In striated space, one closes off a surface and "allocates" it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks; in the smooth, one "distributes" oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings.[119]

Tagging is a form of self-distribution in a smooth space. That is why the frequency, proliferation, and quantity of one's tag take precedence over the quality. Dylan is allowed to copy Mingus's tag because 'the black kid gets to see his tag spread father, in search of bragging points for ubiquity, that bottom-line standard for a graffiti writer's success. […] Graffiti writers compete like viruses, by raw proliferation'.[120] In the case of Dylan and

[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 481.
[120] Lethem, p. 138.

Mingus, the smoothing out of the city zones and grids through tagging also serves to smooth out their racial differences. By sharing the same tag name and working as a team to spread the tag, Dylan and Mingus can dismiss the reality of race and merge their identitiesy.

Mingus and Rachel also have another commonality. Despite the significant influence they have on Dylan, neither of them is the narrative's focal point. The absencse of their point of view in the story echoes their absences from Dylan's life. Moreover, the departure of Rachel and the gradual disappearance of Mingus ultimately represents the failure of racial integration that Dylan and Mingus try to achieve through their shared tag. Rachel's departure also signifies the failure of her ideal vision for racial integration that drives her family to settle in the inner city in the first place. After she leaves, it is up to Dylan and Abraham to face the reality of economic disparity and racial segregation that Rachel fails to acknowledge, which becomes part of the reason that drives her out of town.

Mingus's absence from Dylan's life happens more gradually. Mingus and Dylan start to grow apart when they learn to racialize their identities. Mingus comes to embrace his blackness and black identity. On the other hand, Dylan cannot fully assimilate no matter[15] how much he tries to appropriate black and street culture. He is always the 'white boy' to other kids. The inevitable doom of Mingus and Dylan's friendship is acutely captured in the scene in which a white woman offers to walk Dylan home when she sees him standing with Mingus and a group of black kids. This is the moment that Dylan is reminded of the unbridgeable racial disparity between him and Mingus, leading him to resent his own whiteness:

> That's my best friend, Dylan wanted to tell the blond woman, who the longer he didn't reply to her offer was more and more squinting at Dylan like she might have

> miscalculated, like he might be a thing spoiled by the company she'd found him in […] and that's what he wanted to be to her, spoiled, stained with blackness.[121]

The reality of racial inequality that prevents Dylan from being 'stained with blackness' and later separates him from Mingus is projected most forcefully in his access to education. Dylan first attends the prestigious Stuyvesant School that only accepts students with high achievement before going to Camden, the most expensive private university in the country. The education system is an example of how race has been institutionalized and incorporated into the social structure. The inherent racism in the system will inevitably separate him from Mingus, no matter what Dylan tries to do. As Dylan's white friend, Arthur, explains to him: 'If you don't get to Stuyvesant or at least Bronx Science you're dead. That's how the test works, highest scores get into Stuyvesant, next highest to Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech's a last resort. Sarah J. Hale or John Jay, those places are practically like prison.'[122] What Arthur is advising is not different in principle from the random white woman who offers to walk Dylan home. Sarah J. Hale is for black kids. According to Dylan's teacher, going to that school is like going 'straight to the Brooklyn House of Detention'.[123] The school system remains~~is still~~ economically and racially segregated even though it is not legally so. Dylan experiences this segregation first hand through the gradually increasing absence of Mingus from his life as they attend separate schools. Mingus indeed goes to Sarah J.Hale and eventually ends up in prison as the system ~~has~~ prescribe~~d~~s for him.

[121] Ibid., p.124-125.
[122] Ibid., p.126.
[123] Ibid., p.202.

Both Rachel and Mingus assert their presence in the novel and Dylan's life as an affective force despite their absences and failure to overcome systematic racialization and segregation. On the one hand, the minimal narrative focalization on these two characters is intended to reflect their relative absence from ~~the life of~~ Dylan's life. On the other hand, the novel uses their absence to introduce the affective mode of being present. In Rachel's case, her physical presence is substituted by the postcards signed by her alias name, the Running Crab. Her messages ~~on the postcards~~ are always cryptic, incoherent, and formatted unconventionally. For example, on one of the postcards, she writes:

> If the mets had to trade seaver
>
> for a red
>
> they should have shipped him
>
> to cuba for this guy
>
> better fit for che stadium
>
> so saith commissioner crab[124]

The postcard message does not have a sensible, coherent meaning. It functions only to assert Rachel's affective presence back into the family. It is a scribble, not unlike graffiti writing, that expresses affect instead of meaning. The writing on the postcard makes Abraham and Dylan feel her presence instead of giving them any cognitive rationale for~~[16]of~~ her departure. This explains why Abraham experiences a strange physical sensation when he touches the postcards:

> Abraham handled the stack of postcards just as he had the slices of burned toast,
>
> loosely, nearly dropping them, and frowning as though they had ruined something

[124] Ibid., p.169.

> or were ruined themselves. He stared at his fingers after he'd scattered them on the breakfast table. Perhaps the postcards had left a scent or a smudge of something on his fingertips.[125]

The imaginary scent or smudge on his fingers is not dissimilar to the tilting ground that Dylan feels when he steps out of Dean Street. These feelings neither exist nor make sense, but they are real insofar as they are felt. They are created by the intense affect that one experiences through an encounter with something that is affectively charged, such as the postcards sent by the runaway wife or the tilting streets full of strangers.

Rachel thus manages to carve out and reside in an alternative space in Abraham and Dylan's lives the same way that tag authors change the city space into a canvas on which they declare their presence. The scribbles on the city wall do not make any more sense than Rachel's cryptic messages. Yet both are highly affective texts. The authors produce these texts to announce their presence by transmitting affect and sensation to the people who encounter the texts.

Mingus's absence is also substituted by a trail of affects that he leaves behind. With Mingus hardly around, Dylan begins to be more observant of the presence of the tag DOSE[~~17~~]~~ose~~ on the city surface and physically engages with those tags to confirm Mingus's presence: 'Dylan would covertly push a forefinger against the metal, wondering if he could measure in the tackiness of the ink the tag's vintage. If his finger stuck slightly Dylan imagined he'd followed Mingus by minutes to the spot, barely missed catching him in the act.'[126] In this instance, Mingus's tag literally affects Dylan through physical

[125] Ibid., p.87.
[126] Ibid., p.117.

sensations. Dylan uses the feeling on his finger to make sense of the tag and to estimate his proximity to Mingus's body.

The illegible yet affective texts produced by Rachel and Mingus require an alternative reading method similar to reading comics. Reading comic books, the reader has to use their imagination to link separate panels and make sense of the story as a whole. According to McCloud, 'No matter how dissimilar one image may be to another, there is a kind of alchemy at work in the space between panels which can help us find meaning or resonance in even the most jarring of combinations.'[127] The alchemy to which ~~that~~ McCloud refers ~~to~~ is comparable to the process of affectation. As McCloud further explains, 'Such transitions may not make "sense" in any traditional way, but still a relationship of some sort will inevitably develop.'[128] Affect makes it possible to feel the presence of something before it becomes legible. A relationship between disparate entities such as whiteness and blackness can still be developed at the level of affect. Dylan and Mingus's friendship is an example of such a relationship that requires an affective connection to sustain. The bond between Dylan and his mother is also preserved because, despite her absence, she still continues to transmit affect onto him either via the postcards or simply by the fact that Dylan has to live in the space she envisions for him. As the narrator tells us, 'Rachel went omitted, unnamed, but both knew that to speak of this place was to speak of her, however little they wished to. Possibly Dylan and Abraham only remained in Gowanus for Rachel, holding down her spot.'[129] The absence of Rachel and Mingus in Dylan's life leaves an empty space similar to the gutter that needs to be

[127] McCloud, p.73.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Lethem, p.143-144.

experienced through affect. Rachel and Mingus thus remain a dominant influence for Dylan because their presence is always affectively felt.

That empty space – the gutter – is directly referred to in the novel as 'the middle space'. As the adult Dylan tells the reader, the middle space is 'a nonexistent space' similar to a utopia. It exists only as a dream or a tiny moment in time stretched out into infinity:

> It was the same space the communists and gays and painters of celluloid imagined they'd found in Gowanus, […] a space the width of a dwindled summer, a place where Mingus Rude always grooved fat spaldeen pitches, born homeruns. […] A middle space opened and closed like a glance, you'd miss it if you blinked.[130]

The image of the fortress that appears throughout the novel also directs our attention to the middle space between each fortress across which ~~that~~ only affect can traverse ~~across~~. As the novel suggests, affect is capable of filling in the middle space of the gutter and later transforms it into the smooth space in which there will be neither a fortress nor a gutter.

The novel itself is also written in a manner that requires the reader to apply a similar affective approach. First of all, the structure of the novel is comparable to the layout of comic books. Each of the three sections functions as an individual panel. Each section or panel is independent to the extent that they tell the story from different viewpoints and from different times in Dylan's life. The reader has to infer the connection between these sections. The gap between the Underberg and Prisonaires sections, for example, includes the missing 20 years in the storyline and the shift from the third-person narrative voice to Dylan's first-person perspective. The only connection between these two parts is the liner note that Dylan writes as a music journalist. The novel asks that the reader create a story

[130] Ibid., p. 510.

of what happens in the missing 20 years of Dylan's life to make sense of how he transforms from being a lonely white boy in Brooklyn to a 36 years-old music journalist who struggles to move on from the past.

The writing style in each section is also different. The Underberg section is written with meticulous and extensive details. It covers the period of approximately 10 years, between the 1970s and 1980s, and follows ~~the~~ Dylan's growth and progress as he moves from one school year to the next. Each year in school also represents a panel that contains different stages in Dylan's emotional and intellectual maturity developed parallel with the gentrification in his neighborhood. The third-person point of view serves two functions in the Underberg section. It gives the reader a more comprehensive overview of the racial relations and life in the city by including other events and actions that happen outside Dylan's knowledge. This, in turn, reflects Dylan's innocence and ignorance about what is happening in the city and how those events have affected his understanding of himself and the city. The elaborate~~d~~ third-person narration of Dylan's childhood is used to portray the process of affectation that constitutes his subjectivity and New York City that he comes to know and remember later in his adult life. The recollections and memories of the city are then captured in the final part of the book, in which Dylan gives a first-person account of his disorientation and alienation from both the city and his subjectivity that he thinks he knows. On the one hand, the sense of estrangement and confusion that Dylan experiences throughout his adulthood may be understood as an effect of the process of gentrification on his~~the~~ personal growth and development. The gentrified New York City is no longer the same city he knew and grew up in. Being alienated from his own childhood memories, Dylan subsequently questions his own subjectivity and identity.

On the other hand, Dylan's alienation as an adult returning to New York may also come from the fact that he has been absent from the city for almost two decades. Unlike his childhood self, Dylan does not have an opportunity to develop an affective relationship with the space he remembers. In a sense, New York City ceases to exist the second Dylan leaves it. The city he returns to is a conjecture of a new affective relation that the adult Dylan has forged with it. It is a complicated relationship in which the memories of the past affectation are fused with the active working of affect in the present moment. The use of the first-person point of view becomes helpful in this regard. It allows the reader to see the influence of past affective experiences in shaping new affective encounters. At the same time, it reveals the unbridgeable gap between the city Dylan encounters in the past and the city he comes back to. This gap that causes Dylan's feeling of estrangement testifies to the nature of affect that is capable of constantly changing and transforming any bodies that it moves through.

The short intermission chapter also plays a significant role. It features a liner note that Dylan writes about the music career of Mingus's father, Barrett Rude, Jr. The piece functions as a gutter – the space between the two panels – in which the reader is required to infer its significance as the connector between the two main sections. Underberg ends with Dylan at eighteen and ~~who is~~about to leav~~eing~~ New York City. Then the novel resumes his story in the Prionaires section almost 20 years later as a middle-aged man[18]. What happens in the two-decade gap is only given to the reader as thirteen-page writing of a failing music critic about an unsuccessful blues singer. With this limited material as an interlude, the reader is reintroduced to Dylan, now an adult, in the novel's final section. The change of viewpoints, coupled with the two-decade absence of his life, effectively

gives the reader a similar feeling of estrangement towards the character whose life they have followed in an extensively detailed 300-page long narrative in the previous section. Dylan thus becomes to the reader what New York City appears to him in his adulthood – familiar yet estrangeding. The reader is asked to combine their earlier recollection of Dylan's childhood that they have read with their fresh encounter with the adult Dylan in the novel's final section.

The structure of the novel and the different writing styles in each section urges the reader to adjust their way of reading and understanding the story in the same way that Dylan himself has to change the way he views and understands the city when he returns as an adult. In this way, the novel becomes comparable to the city. While Dylan needs to actively use his own imagination to bridge the 20-year gap between the city in his childhood and the present, the reader is similarly asked to be an active participant in constructing the complete story that is missing 20 years of the protagonist's life missing from it.

Apart from the structure and the style of writing, Lethem also borrows from comic books the use of iconography. He creates a prose narrative that is essentially 'sight-based'. According to McCloud, comics are a sight-based medium because 'the idea that a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer is vital to the art of comics'.[131] However, the use of icons in *Fortress* happens when the narrator switches from the characters' proper names to using general pronouns, nicknames, tags, and secret identities. For example, Abraham and Barrett Rude Jr. are sometimes referred to simply as the 'father' while Dylan sometimes becomes Mole-boy. Mingus is also referred to as DOSE by in the

[131] McCloud, p.121.

only two chapters that exclusively focus~~es~~ on him. The characters also often refer to one another by nicknames or secret names such as 'Vendlemachine' for Isabel Vendle, 'Dillinger' for Dylan, 'The Collector' for Abraham, and 'Running Crab' for Rachel. The use of pronouns and secret names serves to shift the viewpoint from which the characters are represented to the reader. These names work like images in comic books, as Groensteen suggests, in that they are both 'something that we inevitably grasp from a specific angle and from a specific distance'.[132] When Abraham is referred to as the 'father' instead of his name, the narrative presents him to the reader from a different angle. In moments like this, the reader is made to feel estranged from the characters and experiences the gap or the discontinuity, for example, between Abraham as a person and the father to which ~~that~~ he is sometimes referred ~~to~~.

According to McCloud, comic books also create 'closure' or complete and coherent meanings only with the reader being a partner in crime:

> The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well.[133]

Likewise, Lethem also actively invites his readers to join him in creating meanings out of the void by using their imagination to bridge the gaps, visualize the invisible, and feel the affective sensation. It might not be too far-fetched to consider *Fortress* as a comic book in the guise of a prose novel. There are superheroes, villains, magical rings, and supernatural powers. Yet what explicitly links the novel to comic books is its insistence on harvesting

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[132] Thierry Groensteen, 'The Monstrator, the Recitant and the Shadow of the Narrator,' *European Comic Art*, 3 (2010), 1-21 <DOI: 10.3828/eca.2010.2>, p. 2.
[133] McCloud, p.92.

the power from readers' imagination and affective reading experience to create a meaningful story no longer confined by any form of fortress or boundary that might divide the reader from the text.

Conclusion

When viewed through the lens of affect, the city becomes a body. It can transact affective sensation with its dwellers, who construct their subjectivities through the affective connections with the city space. Both *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* use many textual tropes to represent affective movements in urban space. They essentially compare the interaction between affective bodies to the act of reading and writing texts. In this chapter, I developed the terms affective literacy and affective gutter to discuss how *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* imagine a new kind of literacy that is attentive to the role of affect in urban experiences.

Affective literacy demonstrates how texts can be understood as both a sign and a thing. According to Huehls, a 'sign-thing duality' such as this 'behave[s] as signs to link themselves forward to other things in the world, which might in turn link themselves forward by functioning as signs as well'. [134] Accordingly, it requires a mode of reading and writing that is mindful of the text's ability to signify as well as its material reality. In *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead uses the rivalry between Empiricism and Intuitionism as an analogy of the mutual exclusivity between a sign and a thing. The elevator's total freefall is an event that challenges the limitations of both approaches. Neither approach can account for a freak accident like a total freefall. With the elevator clash, the novel thus introduces a third alternative, affective literacy, as a mode of thinking that is attentive to how an entity or an event behaves as a sign-thing duality.

[134] Huehls, p. 26.

Whitehead adopts the signifyin(g) tradition of African American literature to imagine what affective literacy may look like. The practice of signifyin(g) simultaneously repeats and revises other texts. In other words, it treats the text as a sign-thing duality. The text is simultaneously an inert object that can be picked up and repeated and a subject that can revise – communicate something new in the repetition. In my discussion, I proposed that the novel uses many instances of textual fragments and various tropes of books to demonstrate the duality of the text and the process of textual signifyin(g). To comprehend these fragments as a cohesive whole, it is not enough to treat them as a text or a thing but both. The fact that the text can be fragmented testifies to its material reality that exceeds its representational capacity. Consequently, the reader and the characters in the novel alike need to adopt a new literacy to make sense of broken texts. Moreover, as I discussed, Whitehead uses the trickster trope to demonstrate the ambiguity and fluidity of textual practices. The character such as Fulton, to the novel as a whole, and even Whitehead himself all behave like a trickster that challenges the reader to be more open and creative in their reading of the text. In a way, the sign-thing duality is also a trickster. It is a hybrid that resists easy categorization. It promotes an understanding of the world that is fuller, richer, and filled with more possibilities. Only with such a view, the novel suggests, that the 'city to come' may be possible.

Similar to affective literacy, affective gutter in *Fortress* proposes a mode of reading and writing that acknowledges the hybrid quality of texts. In part, the term affective gutter echoes the novel's use of comics conventions in its form, themes, and writing style. The image of the gutter primarily refers to the empty space between panels that demands the reader's creative input to infer its meaning and connect the panels into a cohesive whole.

Moreover, the panel in comics is one of the many imageries in the novel, including the fortress, the city block, the prison, that express spatial division. I invoked the concept of the gutter to suggest a mode of reading akin to a type of navigation or movement that can transcend the division and bridge disparate parts into a whole. I discussed that the gutter space is comparable to a virtual space ~~that is~~ filled with affective potentialities. In filling in the gutter, the reader transforms some of those possible meanings into an actual meaning that can make sense of the connection between panels. In *Fortress*, Lethem uses urban conditions as an analogy of how affective gutter can be applied. First, he compares the urban system with comic books to analogize how the city space can transform into a type of text. He also uses alternative texts such as graffiti to illustrate the materiality of texts that requires an affective gutter reading. Moreover, graffiti texts become another analogy of the signifying ability of a passive object such as the city space.

With the concept of the gutter, the act of reading becomes a movement and navigation in space. I proposed that affective gutter can transform a striated space, such as the textual space in comic books or the urban system, into a 'smooth space'. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a smooth space is 'infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation'.[135] Most importantly, it is 'the space of affects [that is] *haptic* rather than [being] optical perception' (emphasis in original).[136] Smooth space is directionless, open, and can be experienced through the affective forces as one traverses through such space. The urban space, which Deleuze and Guattari also call 'the

[135] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 476.
[136] Ibid., p.479.

striated space par excellence',[137] can be transformed into smooth space if one acknowledges the movement of affect within it. Once it becomes a smooth space, the urban dwellers will have more freedom to occupy and manipulate the city space, whichthat is no longer restrained by the rigidity of forms and structures such as zones, grids, or panels. Instead, the city can shift and change according to the affective movements and contacts of its dwellers.

In one regard, *The Intuitionist* and *Fortress* can be considered a striated narrative through their use of fragment and gutter tropes. There are sections, chapters, and shifts in points of view and writing styles that transform the novels into pastiche fragments. However, these elements invite the reader to actively and affectively transform the textual space of the novels into a smooth one. They ask that the reader learn to play with new possibilities, to become a trickster themselves, or, in the case of *Fortress*, a superhero endowed with special abilities. As with the power to fly or become invisible, or the ability to invent a second elevation for the city to come, the reader can adopt an affective mode of experiencing the world to find meaning at the limit of their imagination.

[137] Ibid., p.481.

Chapter Three
Network Subjectivities in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* and Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

In this final chapter, I will examine the influence of hybridity and affect in critical practice. Previously, I discussed the role of affect in the conception of self-authenticity as a form of accountability and explored how affect is part of alternative literacy that is attentive to the duality of the text as both a sign and a thing. Here, I am interested in examining how affect theory plays a part in the recent post-critical turn in contemporary literature and criticism. Accordingly, I will be investigating the connection between affect and post-critique in the representation of network subjectivities in a neoliberal society. Network structure and neoliberal conditions are crucial elements in the post-critical turn. A network form expresses connectivity and relationality that become essential to post-critical practice that seeks to transcend the rigidity and inclination for suspicion of traditional criticism. Neoliberalism also creates a circular impasse in which the conventional mode of critique becomes ineffective. In a neoliberal society, it is no longer sufficient to defend one side and debunk the other because neoliberal ideology can exploit either side of an argument. For this reason, there is a need to find an alternative mode of critique that acknowledges the encompassing power of neoliberalism while trying to engage with it critically.

The novels that I select for the discussion in this chapter are Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2011) and Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013). Both texts thematically explore social conditions and lived experiences in a neoliberal society. Specifically, the novels highlight how neoliberalism and advanced information technologies facilitate the emergence of a control society in which, Gilles Deleuze argues,

'Individuals have become "dividuals," and masses, samples, data, markets, or "banks."'[1] Both *Super Sad* and *The Circle* are concerned with the conditions of human subjectivities in such a society. They share a common motif in exploring how the marriage between neoliberalism and information technologies creates what Shoshana Zuboff calls the system of 'surveillance capitalism' in which human experiences become 'free raw material for translation into behavioral data' in the system of surveillance capitalism.[2] Both writers also use Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's model of 'Empire' to imagine the kind of power and control that corporations have in societies of control. According to Hardt and Negri, the rise of Empire reflects the decline of sovereign power and the rise of 'a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule'(emphasis in original).[3] Empire thus represents a 'new global form of sovereignty'. The two novels focus on each side of the equation that contributes to the emergence of Empire. On the one hand, *Super Sad* focuses on the decline of national sovereignty, emphasizing the U.S. on the verge of collapsing. On the other hand, *The Circle* pays attention to how a corporation comes to wield the new global power in place of nation-states.

However, what the two novels have in common is their emphasis on the kind of subjectivities that emerge as an outcome of the new form of social control. Previous studies of both *Super Sad* and *The Circle* focus precisely on how the novels imagine conditions and characteristics of the new subjectivities. As Gregory Rutledge proposes in his reading of *Super Sad*, the novel essentially asks, 'how would we, modern and technologically

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[1] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (1992), 3-7 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>, p.5.
[2] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), p. 5.
[3] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.xii.

sophisticated people […] everywhere, have allowed such a complete take-over of ourselves and the world to happen?'[4] Annie McClanahan also argues that Shteyngart's novel introduces new subject formations or 'modes of characterization' in concomitance with credit scoring and the financial system.[5] In his reading of *The Circle,* Garfield Benjamin also writes that Eggers imagines how surveillance capitalism has 'gamified' human behavior and social structures, resulting in 'the self-perpetuation of gamified surveillance as a new political system'.[6]

With the focus on human subjectivities under a new form of control, many critics characterize the novels as dystopian narratives. Some studies focus on how they portray a dystopia in which advanced information technologies become an apparatus of surveillance and control in a neoliberal society and a serious threat to democracy.[7] Some studies also discuss how Shteyngart and Eggers depict the decline of the US hegemony and the traditional form of sovereign power due to the rise of powerful corporations.[8] In addition, several studies focus on the posthuman turn in the novels' representation of information technologies as an extension of human bodies, which also become characteristic of a

[4] Gregory Rutledge, 'Shteyngart's *Super Sad True* (th)" The Äppärät, a "Work [ing] of Art" in an Internet Age of Digital Reproduction', *College Literature*, 47 (2020), 366-397 < DOI: 10.1353/lit.2020.0017>, pp. 370-371.
[5] Annie McClanahan, 'Bad Credit: The Character of Credit Scoring', *Representations*, 126 (2014), 31-57 <DOI: 10.1525/rep.2014.126.1.31>, p. 41.
[6] Garfield Benjamin, 'Playing at Control: Writing Surveillance in/for Gamified Society', *Surveillance & Society*, 17 (2019), 699-713 < https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i5.13204>, p. 707.
[7] See Simon Willmetts, 'Digital Dystopia: Surveillance, Autonomy, and Social Justice', *American Quarterly*, 70 (2018); Betiel Wasihun, 'Surveillance and Shame in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*', *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, 6 (2018); Jennifer Gouck, 'The Viewer Society: "New Panopticism", Surveillance, and the Body in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*', *Irish Journal of American Studies*, 7 (2018); Kathrin Maurer and Christian F. Rostbøll, 'Demoxie: Reflections on Digital Democracy in Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*', *First Monday*, 25 (2020).
[8] See Ross Bullen, "Act Two for America": Narcissism, Money, and the Death of American Literature in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 48 (2018); Bülent Diken, 'The Despostic Imperative: From *Hiero* to *The Circle*', *Cultural Politics*, 15 (2019).

neoliberal subject.[9] While I will touch on some of these issues, my primary goal is to consider how the novels are written as a critical discourse. Specifically, I am interested in examining how Shteyngart and Eggers adopt and reassess the genres of utopia and dystopia as a mode of critique for the new kind of human subjectivities they represent in the novels. I will argue that both writers emphasize the affordances of form, especially that of the network, in critical dystopia and anti-utopia genres. Accordingly, they produce a post-critical narrative that departs from the politics of suspicion and moves toward an alternative mode of critique that can respond to neoliberal hegemony more constructively and effectively.

In the following, I will provide an overview of the intersection of form and critique by discussing the connection between the post-critical turn and new formalism. Then I will examine the novels' use of the genres of utopia and dystopia to represent network subjectivities. Mainly, I will illustrate how the novels use the network form to characterize a new kind of subjectivity in line with their adoption and reassessment of utopian and dystopian conventions. In *Super Sad*, I will consider the use of the immigrant trope in connection with the genre of critical dystopia. I will argue that the novel endows in these immigrant characters 'a new form of political opposition', which, according to Tom Moylan, is a type of political agency often depicted in a critical dystopian narrative. The main characteristic of such a political agency is its ability to form a network of diverse alliances.[10] Shteyngart characterizes his main characters as a second-generation immigrant

[9] See Raymond Malewitz, '"Some new dimension devoid of hip and bone": Remediated Bodies and Digital Posthumanism in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*', *Arizona Quarterly*, 71 (2015) and Marina Ludwigs, The Posthuman Turn in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*', *Anthropoetics*, 21 (2015).
[10] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), p. 190.

who is experiencing the immanent collapse of the US as a sovereign nation. In doing so, he can illustrate how these characters develop a new oppositional consciousness to critically respond to their social circumstances and redefine their agency as an immigrant subject.

In *The Circle,* I will examine its anti-utopian characteristics. Specifically, I contend that Eggers's novel seeks to expose the limitation and danger of the utopian rhetoric in the neoliberal era by representing network subjectivity as a schizophrenic condition. My analysis will be based on the concept of 'networked individualism' that Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman develop to describe a social system in which people increasingly connect as individuals rather than part of a group.[11] I will look at how the notion of networked individualism is represented as a utopian ideal and characterizes network subjectivity as a type of schizophrenia or the condition in which one constantly experiences the paradox of being connected yet isolated in a neoliberal network society.

Throughout the chapter, I will also explore how the novels utilize the network form to produce a post-critical narrative that relies on what Caroline Levine calls the 'affordances of forms' or the latent potentials and limitations inherent in different kinds of form.[12] I will discuss Shteyngart's use of the network form in *Super Sad* in two types of self-writing, namely the diary and the correspondence. I will suggest that, with the diary and epistolary forms of writing, Shteyngart positions the text of *Super Sad* and its main characters as a dynamic and ambivalent network node. As a network node, texts and

[11] Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked Individualism: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), p. 6.
[12] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.

humans constantly undergo transformations in meanings and senses of selves as they move through multiple networks and form relations with various other nodes and entities in different contexts. Then I will analyze how *The Circle* uses the affordance of juxtaposing forms to critique the use of utopian rhetoric to promote and justify the totalitarian power of neoliberalism. Mainly, I will examine the intersection of the narrative form, the network form, and the form of the circle and consider how the tension among these forms does not only render the novel's use of the utopian genre ineffective but also demonstrates a deeply anti-utopian sensibility at the heart of the novel.

The effectiveness of *Super Sad* and *The Circle* as a literary representation and a critical discourse of neoliberalism relies on the reader's ability to navigate and make sense of the forms and patterns. Both novels do not seek to contest neoliberalism on the ideological ground. Instead, their criticism focuses on the function of forms, especially the network form, that allows neoliberalism to become an all-encompassing ideology. At the same time, they use formal affordances to imagine an alternative way to engage with neoliberalism critically. In a way, the post-critical narrative of *Super Sad* and *The Circle* is still a product of utopian imagination. Despite its aversion to traditional critique such as utopian rhetoric, the post-critical turn is still committed to and remains driven by a utopian impulse to imagine how things could be better and otherwise. In seeking to produce a post-critical narrative by reassessing the rhetoric of utopia, the two novels thus affirm Moylan's argument that 'it has become necessary to destroy utopia in order to save it'.[13]

[13] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and Utopian Imagination*, Ralahine Classics Edition, ed.by Rafaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 45.

Form and Critique

Network is a dominant form of neoliberalism. Neoliberal thinking holds that human well-being hinges on the entrepreneurial freedom to participate and trade in the market. Thus, the network structure is privileged in neoliberal society as it facilitates the market flow and connectivity among individual market actors. Moreover, with the advancement of communication and information technologies, the network form emerges as a primary mode of organization behind the conduct of most human activities. Consequently, critical discourses in the neoliberal era appear to pay more attention to forms, especially the network form.

Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker argue that the omnipresence of the network form in the neoliberal world makes it difficult to look outside the network, imagine other possibilities, and think critically about it. They develop a concept called the 'political ontology of networks'[14] as a framework to identify a set of protocols that operates within a network and to imagine a 'non-protocological' approach that can provide a counter-perspective and critical insight about the network.[15] Writing that 'it also takes networks to understand networks', Galloway and Thacker suggest that one must think with the network logic and find the 'exploits' within its protocols to produce a counter-discourse. Protolocological exploits can instigate 'an activation of a political consciousness that is capable of the critiquing of protocological control as it is capable of fostering the transformative elements of protocol'.[16] Resistance to the network form relies on finding

[14] Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 58.
[15] Ibid., p. 81.
[16] Ibid., p. 100.

and manipulating its protocol for critical and transformative ends. It is, in short, an act of resistance that comes from within the network itself.

Galloway and Thacker's concept of protocological exploit is an example of the intersection between form and critique that informs the current post-critical thinking. They propose that a constructive act of critique should be rooted in the understanding of and the ability to manipulate the logic of the dominating form. Levine's argument about formal affordances similarly stresses the significance of forms in critical thinking:

> If forms always contain and confine, and if it is impossible to imagine societies without forms, then the most strategic political action will not come from revealing or exposing illusion, but rather from a careful, nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience.[17]

Levine's remark directly challenges traditional critique as she deprioritizes the act of 'revealing and exposing illusion' that typically characterizes a standard critical practice. Instead, she prioritizes the need to understand how the social is arranged and governed in a particular form and pattern. In making this argument, Levine also echoes Bruno Latour's view about the new critical sensibility that does not succumb to 'critical barbarity'.[18] Specifically, Latour uses the term critical barbarity to describe how critics tend to dismiss 'any crossover between the two lists of objects'[19] so that they can use one side against the other to expose whichever side the opposition takes and win any argument. For Latour, traditional critique does not consider the reality of 'how many participants are gathered in

[17] Levine, p. 18.
[18] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 225-248 <DOI:10.1086/421123>, p.241.
[19] Ibid.

a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence' (emphasis in original).[20] However, critics with the new critical sensibility will pay attention to the reality in which things cross over. They will trace and describe the convergence of different entities in the production of social realities to produce a critical discourse that adds more knowledge about the world rather than subtracting from it. As Latour writes, 'The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles.'[21] When critics trace and assemble different factors that intersect to produce more knowledge of the world, the act of critique will no longer be impoverishing but become constructive again.

The post-critical thinking that privileges the operation of forms also influences literary criticism. Rita Felski expresses concern about how the suspicious impulse of traditional critique has become an unchallenged mode of reading that dismisses 'the many possible ways of trying to figure out what something means and why it matters'.[22] She then suggests alternatives to critical reading that can engage with texts without establishing or finding a fixed and underlying meaning. According to Felski, such alternatives can be imagined through 'a greater receptivity to the multifarious and many-shaded moods of texts'.[23] She proposes 'post-critical reading' as a reading mode that 'casts texts and readers as cocreators of meaning'.[24] Specifically, Felski's concept of post-critical reading emphasizes the importance of forms in the reading process:

> In the act of reading, we encounter fresh ways of organizing perception, different patterns and models, rhythms of rapprochement and distancing, relaxation and

[20] Ibid., p. 246.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.10.
[23] Ibid., p.12.
[24] Ibid., p.173.

> suspense, movement and hesitation. We give forms to our existence through the diverse ways in which we inhabit, inflect, and appropriate the artistic forms we encounter.[25]

Felski's argument thus resonates with the formalist approach. She sees that attention to forms can shed light on the relationship between the text and the reader as a mutual collaborator. This assumption can then expand our understanding of the role of literature and literary studies in today's world. As Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker write:

> We can no longer assume that a stance of negativity and opposition is sufficient to justify the aesthetic or social importance of literature or our practice as critics. […] The current moment in literary and cultural studies […] thus involves a broad interest in exploring new models and practices of reading that are less beholden to suspicion and scepticism, more willing to avow the creative, innovative, world-making aspects of literature and criticism.[26]

In Anker and Felski's view, the post-critical turn can introduce new perspectives about literature's ability to create and affect the social world. When literary practice is free from suspicious reading, it can consider other factors involved in producing textual meaning and value. Literary criticism could be more concerned with the multiplicity of truth and meaning and how literature may affect social realities, which leads Anker and Felski to claim that the post-critical turn reaffirms the 'world-making' potential to both literature and criticism.

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[25] Ibid., p. 176.
[26] Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, 'Introduction', in *Critique and Post-critique*, ed. by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 1-28 (p. 20).

In his account of exomodern literature, Mitchum Huehls also describes the form of literature that resonates with the post-critical sensibility and the formalist approach to criticism. Huehls's argument directly connects Latour's notion of critical barbarity and what he calls a 'neoliberal circle'.[27] The term describes the phenomenon in which neoliberalism becomes so pervasive that it can benefit from either side of an argument. Moreover, Huehls uses the subject and object division to demonstrate a neoliberal circle, writing that:

> The neoliberal circle vacillates between subjective and objective representations of the individual, playing each against the other, even as we experience those positions as irreconcilable. But as far as neoliberalism is concerned, both positions buttress its laissez-faire engagement with the world. It wins either way.[28]

The circularity of neoliberalism makes it impossible to use traditional critique against it – 'it wins either way'. Exomodern literature then emerges as a group of literary works that seek to overcome the impasse of the neoliberal circle by emphasizing a more ontological understanding of the hybrid and interconnected nature of any position. Huehls thus defines exomodern literature as 'literary forms that are neither reflexive nor recursive, that favor networks over oppositions, and that successfully produce meaning without conventional forms of reference'.[29] With the emphasis on 'networks over oppositions,' this group of literary works can produce a constructive critical discourse and literary representation of

[27] Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.4.
[28] Ibid., p. 10.
[29] Ibid., p. 32.

neoliberal conditions without subscribing to polarizing politics that neoliberalism reinforces and exploits.

Put differently, Felski's post-critical view and in Huehls's exomodern fiction consider literary works as actors in the actor-network theory or ANT. From ANT perspective, the knowledge about the social world can only be uncovered by following and describing traces of associations among different human and nonhuman actors. Latour, one of the most prominent ANT theorists, thus writes that a constructive engagement with the social world is to 'deploy actors as networks of mediations'[30] or to identify as many actors as possible that are assembled in the production of the social.

In his discussion, Latour also uses ANT logic and the concept of assemblage to describe what he calls a 'good text':

> A good ANT account is a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something and don't just sit there. Instead of simply transporting effects without transforming them, each of the points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation.[31]

A good textual account does not offer a passive representation of the social. It does not 'just sit there' and wait to be interpreted. Instead, a good text creates a new 'translation' or a new meaning as they contact other entities such as a reader, a new circumstance, or another text. As the text moves through different contexts, textual meaning will always be fluid and changing. In other words, a text can be understood as an actor in a networked

[30] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 136.
[31] Ibid., p. 128.

relation. Similarly, the post-critical text such as exomodern fiction seeks to produce meaning as a good text in Latour's understanding. It is committed to portraying and tracing networked connections and relationships that it represents or critically engages with. Moreover, by claiming texts and readers as 'cocreators of meanings', or that exomodern fiction does not rely on 'conventional forms of references,' both Felski and Huehls foreground the significance of networked associations that contributes to the fluidity and ambivalence of textual meaning. Texts will always produce a 'new translation' or a new meaning as they move and encounter different reader-actors in different networks and contexts.

The post-critical turn in literary criticism, as demonstrated by Felski's argument and Huehls' account of exomodern fiction, is an example of Galloway and Thacker's earlier argument about how the network 'has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as resistance to it'.[32] Huehls considers exomodern fiction to be an effective mode of representation and critique because it exploits the network protocols to respond to the dominance of the network logic in neoliberal society. However, exomodern fiction, or the post-critical turn in general, also risks being accused of capitulating to neoliberal hegemony. Huehls himself notes that exomodern texts are vulnerable to the accusation of complicity and capitulation because it formally mirrors the structure of neoliberalism.[33]

Rachel Greenwald Smith's concept of 'compromise aesthetics' attempts to make a case for the value of the post-critical thinking that privileges networks, relations, and

[32] Galloway and Thacker, p. 4.
[33] Huehls, p. 158.

alliances while acknowledging the risk of capitulation. Smith argues that, for critical discourse and literary representation to become relevant and effective, they need to recognize their entanglement in the condition they set out to critique and represent. That is, they have to be willing and able to 'compromise'. According to Smith, 'Compromise aesthetics […] celebrate works in which the constructed nature of the individual is highlighted but where that constructed individual nevertheless remains the vessel of enormous emotional energy.'[34] Smith's remark suggests that compromise aesthetics *compromises* by adopting the neoliberal view of human subjects as an entrepreneur or a form of capital with exploitable values. As Smith further explains, 'the appeal to actually existing personal and emotional value is in pronounced agreement with the neoliberal model of the entrepreneur, who is envisioned as both an artificial construct and intensely important, both mutable and unique, both the result of a process of production and a site specific and undeniable value.'[35] The personal and emotional value of the subject, Smith argues, is the animating force behind the production of meaning and value in the neoliberal context. Only when the subject views themselves as 'the vessel of enormous emotional energy' can they enter into a networked relation with the text and invest themselves as one of the 'cocreators of meanings'. In other words, only when the subject fully becomes a neoliberal subject, who can provide emotional and personal input into the process of meaning production, critique and representation can then become effective and relevant again.

[34] Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics' in *Postmodern | Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed.by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp. 181-196 (p. 188).
[35] Ibid.

Network Subjectivities and the Genre (s) of Utopia

Super Sad and *The Circle* demonstrate the intersection between form and criticism through a reassessment of the utopia genre as a mode of critique. Both novels use the network form to examine how a utopian narrative is used as a critical discourse. However, the novels adopt two different stances towards the genre of utopia according to their different approaches to the network form. I propose that while *Super Sad* is written as a critical dystopia to demonstrate the power of network connections in producing an effective criticism, *The Circle* projects an anti-utopian position in its narrative that criticizes the rigidity, exclusivity, and enclosure aspects of the network. These contrasting positions are then demonstrated in the way the novels represent network subjectivities. As I will demonstrate later, *Super Sad* follows the convention of critical dystopia and portrays network subjectivities as a new oppositional agency. Moreover, the novel ends with these network subjects being in an ambivalent yet hopeful position. Such an ending thus further reflects a critical dystopia's tendency to use ambiguity to imagine a utopian possibility. On the contrary, *The Circle* expresses its anti-utopian attitude in the way it represents network subjectivities as a schizophrenic condition. Specifically, the novel imagines how a seemingly utopian social system such as networked individualism can produce a sinister outcome in the form of a network subject being cut loose and drifting aimlessly in a social network.

According to Latour, there is a 'specific *double movement*' embedded in the notion of the network. He cautions that, with the word the network, 'we must be careful not to confuse what circulates *once everything is in place* with the *setups* involving the

heterogeneous set of elements that allow circulation to occur' (emphasis in original).[36] For Latour, it is crucial to distinguish between and understand these two senses of the network as 'complementary phenomena'. On the one hand, the network refers to how heterogeneous elements can come together and constitute an entity. However, their connections can be diverse, discontinuous, and unpredictable. The only way one can gain knowledge about the network is by tracing the trail of links. On the other hand, the network is a stable, continuous, and wholesome structure in which diverse entities circulate and connect. We can only appreciate the network in this sense only by paying attention to the heterogeneous connections within it. Therefore, Latour suggests a more specific definition that attends to both aspects of the network form. In Latour's definition, the network becomes 'a *series of associations* revealed thanks to a trial […] that makes it possible to understand through what series of small *discontinuities* it is appropriate to pass in order to obtain a certain *continuity* of action' (emphasis in original).[37]

Utopia contains a similar double meaning to the network. It can be understood as either a 'method' or a 'goal'. On the one hand, utopia is a form of thought experiment. Ruth Levitas refers to utopia in this sense as 'the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society'. She defines it as a hermeneutic method that 'facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures'.[38] Utopia as a method matches Latour's earlier suggestion about tracing the network and exploring a variety of elements that pass

[36] Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans.by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp.31-32.
[37] Ibid., p. 33.
[38] Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. xi.

through and interconnect with one another. Utopia is also a trial of thought that attempts to find and trace associations that make up possible futures. That explains why Levitas refers to utopia as 'holistic thinking' or 'democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures.' In other words, utopia as a method is a network method. It imagines a future by trying to understand what elements and factors need to be connected. It is a trial of thought that aims to discover possible associations that can make a better future possible.

On the other hand, utopia can also be perceived as a fixed idea about a perfect society. It is an approach to utopia analogous to thinking about the network as a wholesome structure. Characterizing utopia in this manner glosses over the complexity of utopia as a hermeneutic mode of thinking and simply viewing it as a goal that could and should be realized. Moreover, linking utopia with perfection reinforces the idea of utopia as a static and unchallengeable ideal. Any derivation from the utopian plan is obstructive to the effort to realize it. Accordingly, utopia can come across as a totalitarian concept and beget anti-utopian criticism. According to Lucy Sargisson:

> Anti-utopianism articulates deep fears. […] Lurking at the root of these fears is a set of associations between utopianism and perfection. […] Exponents of this view believe that utopianism is, at some essential and definitional level, perfection seeking, authoritarian and intolerant of dissent.[39]

Conflating utopia with perfection, anti-utopian critics see the concept as inherently oppressive and possibly violent in its intolerance of dissident opinions. Sargisson thus also warns that 'it is important to distinguish between utopias that function as catalysts for

[39] Lucy Sargisson, *Fool's Gold?: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 24.

change […] and those that function as blueprints for a perfect society'.[40] Thinking of utopia as a mandate is a narrow interpretation that does not only mischaracterize the concept but undermines its critical potential as a never-ending process of desiring and striving to achieve a better future that can never arrive. When understood as such, utopia becomes an anti-perfection concept. As Moylan explains about the mechanism of utopia as a method:

> [U]topian hope pulls us forward by challenging us with figures of new social possibilities: possibilities that, once approached, will themselves yield to more far-reaching visions at the moving horizon of our, necessarily collective, efforts to create a better society out of what is available.[41]

Here Moylan explains the inherent paradox of utopia. Its 'perfection seeking' quality cannot be confused with perfection. The act of looking for perfection is a negation of the existence of perfection itself. The moment that utopia is realized, a better vision will be inevitably conceived, and the utopian effort continues.

Historically, the genre of dystopia used to be associated with anti-utopianism.[42] However, just as anti-utopian criticism tends to gloss over the complexity of utopia, it would be remiss to conflate dystopia with anti-utopia. Dystopia, according to Moylan, is 'a contested continuum between utopian and anti-utopian positions'.[43] To label dystopia as anti-utopian is to ignore the nuances of the genre. Some dystopias express an affinity with utopia as a method. Instead of imagining positive possibilities, these dystopias find a solution for a better future even in the worst scenario. For this reason, the genre of dystopia

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[40] Ibid., p. 30.
[41] Tom Moylan, 'To Stand with Dreamers: on the Use Value of Utopia', *The Irish Review*, 24 (2006), 1-19 <DOI: 10.2307/29736293>, p. 5.
[42] Moylan provides a comprehensive historical survey on this topic in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*.
[43] Moylan, *Scraps*, p. 188.

can be divided into two subgenres according to their affinity with utopianism, namely 'critical dystopia' and 'anti-utopian dystopia'. Critical dystopia is a pessimistic portrayal of an imaginary society that still contains utopian sensibility. According to Lyman Tower Sargent's definition, cited in Moylan, critical dystopia is a type of utopian texts that portray:

> a non-existent society […] that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopia enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia.[44]

Despite portraying a dystopic scenario, critical dystopia expresses a hopeful possibility. There are elements, 'at least one eutopia enclave', that maintain a utopian hope for a better society. In contrast, an anti-utopian dystopia portrays a dire situation and expresses a mistrust of utopian positivity. It 'refuses all utopian hope and effort'[45] as a possible measure of mitigation. These dystopias, Moylan writes, 'look quizzically, sceptically, critically not only at the present society but also at the means needed to transform it'.[46] Accordingly, it is vital to distinguish between these two kinds of dystopia because they serve different purposes. A critical dystopia is a critiquing tool that follows the principle of the utopian method. However, rather than imagining a more optimistic scenario, it uses a dystopian circumstance to offer a critique as a warning and a possible solution that will eventually

[44] Lyman Tower Sargent, "U.S. Eutopias in the 1980s and 1990s." Lecture at the Comparative Thematic Network Project (COTEPRA) conference, Centro Interdispartimentale di Ricerca Sull' utopa, University of Bologna, Rimini, Italy, 9 July 2000, cited in Moylan, *Scraps,* p. 195.
[45] Moylan, *Scraps,* p. 139.
[46] Ibid., p. 133.

lead to a better society. The purpose of anti-utopia, on the contrary, is to criticize the utopian discourse itself, especially its totalitarian tendency.

As a textual representation, critical dystopia and anti-utopian dystopia can also be distinguished at the formal level. According to Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, the dystopian form, in general, is 'built around the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance'.[47] A dystopian narrative begins amid a nightmarish scenario in which a counter-narrative emerges as a sign of resistance. Moylan explains that in a typical dystopian narrative:

> [T]he protagonist (and the reader) is always already in the world in question, unreflectively immersed in the society. But the counter-narrative develops as the "dystopian citizen" moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation that is followed by growing awareness and then action that leads to a climatic event that does or does not challenge or change the society.[48]

The competing narrative structure is crucial in the distinction between critical dystopia and anti-utopia. How the narrative conflict is resolved, whether it 'does or does not challenge or change the society,' marks a difference between the two dystopian subgenres. As Moylan further suggests:

> [T]he potential of a dystopian text to achieve an epical, or open, expression lies in the way it negotiates the clash of the official narrative and the oppositional counter-

[47] Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, 'Introduction: Dystopia and Histories', in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed.by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.1-12 (p. 5).
[48] Moylan, *Scraps*, p. 148.

> narrative and eventually is realized in a utopian or anti-utopian stance within its own healthy negativity.[49]

The negotiation between the narrative clash can determine whether the text 'holds out hope' that a solution to the narrative conflict is possible. A critical dystopia will offer an 'open' circumstance, suggesting a way to move forward, whereas an anti-utopia will remain pessimistic about the negativity. The two possible solutions to the narrative conflict that Moylan describes here powerfully resonates with the double movement found in the notions of the network and utopianism as outlined earlier. Critical dystopia tends to resolve the narrative tension through flexibility and openness. The tension between the two narratives does not result in an impasse. Instead, critical dystopia sees the hegemonic narrative and the counter-narrative as complementary and imagines a scenario for the third option that incorporates aspects from both sides of the argument. Anti-utopian dystopia, on the other hand, views the two narratives as incompatible and uncompromising. It is also inclined to portray the outcome of the narrative tension by favoring one narrative over another.

The difference between *Super Sad* and *The Circle* as a critical dystopia and an anti-utopian dystopia is discernible in their use of the parallel narrative structure. Both novels represent network subjectivities as a solution to the conflict between hegemonic and oppositional narratives. However, their interpretation of the network differs and thus reflects their respective critical dystopian and anti-utopian stands. In other words, the understanding of the network either as a fixed structure or a dynamic process informs the novels' solution to the narrative conflict and reflects their utopian affinity or animosity.

[49] Ibid., p.152.

Accordingly, I contend that Jan Van Djik's 'network approach' is a useful tool to examine network subjectivities in the novels' use of utopian subgenres. According to Van Djik, the network is an open system where individual, closed units are connected. The network approach pays attention to these connections; it 'stresses the importance of the relations as compared to the units that are linked'.[50] Furthermore, the approach prioritizes *how* the units are linked to *what* the units are. Van Djik sees that connection, not what is connected, can lead to substantive changes and transformations in the system. As he further explains:

> As soon as these closed units are forced, for one reason or another, to interact with their environment and to link themselves to other units in a network, they create an open system. In an open system, complete determination is lost and replaced by chance and random events. That allows change and new opportunities.[51]

Changes and new opportunities are possible only through open linkages and interactions between entities. Therefore, it is essential to consider how entities are connected and trace them if one wishes to understand and imagine a better society. This is the point of departure from which I will discuss the difference in how *Super Sad* and *The Circle* represent their network subjectivities. In the following, I will demonstrate how the network approach characterizes network subjectivities in *Super Sad* as what Moylan calls a 'new form of oppositional agency'. The narrative tension in critical dystopia produces Van Djik's open system in the form of a middle space from which a new agency emerges. For Moylan:

> [T]he critical dystopias resist both hegemonic and oppositional orthodoxies […] They consequently inscribe a space for a new form of political opposition, one

[50] Jan Van Djik, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*, 2nd Edition (London: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 28.
[51] Ibid., p. 30.

> fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity but wisely and cannily organized in a fully democratic alliance politics that can talk back in a larger though diverse collective voice.[52]

This type of oppositional agency is characteristically hybrid and heterogeneous. It is constituted through relations and alliances. Moreover, it does not entirely negate the hegemony, nor does it fully capitulate to the oppositional order. Instead, it challenges both 'hegemonic formulations as well as oppositional habits' to find a middle ground. The middle space operates as an open system in which flexible connections make 'chances and randomness' happen and, consequently, create new opportunities. Accordingly, it is possible to use Van Djik's network approach to characterize *Super Sad* and *The Circle* as respectively a critical dystopia and an anti-utopia. His approach can determine whether their network subjectivities represent a new form of oppositional agency. The network approach can identify whether these subjects are defeated by or resist the tension between the hegemonic narrative and the counter-narrative and whether they embody a utopian sensibility by forming relations and alliances and carving out a middle, hybrid space can claim as their own.

Network Subjectivities as Oppositional Agency in *Super Sad True Love Story*

Super Sad is a speculative dystopian novel that centers on a second-generation immigrant couple – Lenny Abramov, a 39-year-old Jewish-Russian man who works as a salesman of life-extension technology, and Eunice Park, a 24-year-old Korean-American woman from a middle-class Christian family. The novel follows the development of their relationship since they first meet in Italy, where Eunice spends her gap year, and Lenny recruits new

[52] Moylan, *Scraps*, p. 190.

European clients. Shteyngart structures the story by alternating between Lenny's diaries and Eunice's online correspondence with her family and friends on a Facebook-like platform called GlobalTeens. The novel opens with Lenny's diary, describing the US plagued by social, economic, and foreign crises. The reader learns that the country has become a hyper-surveillance and narcissistic network society where almost everyone uses a highly advanced, smartphone-like device called the äppärät to conduct most social activities and day-to-day affairs. The device, whose latest model is called RateMe Plus, can access, share, and compare the user's health and financial data with others. In addition, the äppärät can generate ratings and rankings of individual users in wide-ranging categories from credit score to level of attractiveness. People become obsessed with improving their popularity in social networks to gain a sense of self-worth and self-affirmation. Consequently, Shteyngart's dystopia is also driven by excessive consumption that has become a means for people to improve their status and social ranking.

The novel also imagines how the US becomes an authoritarian state run by a corrupted bipartisan group called the American Restoration Authority, or the ARA. The group is liquidating the country to foreign governments and big corporations to pay off billions of dollars that it borrows from the Central Bank of China. There is a nationwide protest against the government's authoritarian control and failure that causes severe economic and political crises and unprecedented levels of inequality and oppression. When Lenny returns to the US, he also discovers that being American has lost its privilege even on American soil. Landing at the JFK airport, he sees national guards, armored carriers, and military vehicles everywhere. Lenny describes the feeling of insecurity about his

American identity: 'I took out my U.S. passport and held it in my hand, fingering its embossed golden eagle, still hoping it meant something.'[53]

The struggle of second-generation immigrants such as Lenny and Eunice to uphold their American identity against the backdrop of the US on the verge of collapsing is a critical element that characterizes the novel as a dystopian narrative. Nonetheless, the development of their new subjectivity also represents the utopian sensibility that characterizes Shteyngart's novel as a critical dystopia. The impending loss of American sovereignty, coupled with the general sense of insecurity from being part of a hyper-network society, propels Lenny and Eunice to reassess their immigrant subjectivity and respond to the crises. Both characters eventually develop a new subjectivity that is grounded in their relationality and embeddedness in a network of alliances. In other words, their new subjectivity reflects the new oppositional agency that is characteristic of a critical dystopia.

When using ANT's concept of the actor to consider the new political agency, it also becomes clear how the new oppositional agency could function as the 'eutopian conclave' that Sargent ascribes to a critical dystopia. Latour defines actors as 'what is made to act by many others'.[54] An actor does not have a fundamental core. Its agency derives from its ability to affect and be affected by other entities. Moreover, actors are not limited to humans. They can be 'concrete or abstract, artificial, structural, anything – as long as they can be shown to make a difference'.[55] Accordingly, ANT contends that everything is made up of relations. In other words, it considers actors as relational entities without a

[53] Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (London: Granta, 2010), p. 40.
[54] Latour, *Reassembling*, p. 46.
[55] Gerard de Vries, *Bruno Latour* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 90.

fundamental essence that can completely distinguish them from others. Like an actor, Moylan's oppositional agency is also constituted by its relations and alliances. Its strength relies on the diversity and multiplicity of ties and associations that it can cultivate. The more connected it is, the stronger its ability to 'talk back' to its social world. For Moylan, the utopian optimism in critical dystopia rests in this kind of agency that can critically engage with the world by embracing their relationality as an actor in the network.

ANT's concept of actors can describe Lenny and Eunice as a network subject with the alliance-based oppositional agency. Their potential as a network actor is reflected in their characterization as a second-generation immigrant who has to produce a new immigrant identity that no longer follows the hyphenation model. At the start of the novel, both characters experience tension with their parents. They see themselves being a native citizen in the country where their parents still feel alienated. In Lenny's words, they are both 'the offspring of difficult parents from abroad'.[56] Here, the novel seems to follow the typical trope of the generational conflict of immigrant experiences. Yet, as the US is on the verge of collapsing, Lenny and Eunice find that their immigrant subjectivity has to transcend the conflict between their ethnic heritage and national identity. They need to find a way to forge a new immigrant identity to survive in such a difficult situation. In his reading of the novel, Brian Trapp similarly argues that their struggle to overcome the consent and descent tension, or the 'elements of identities that we choose and those that we inherit'[57] is no longer applicable in Lenny and Eunice's cases. With the US facing existential crises, the two characters find that 'there is no longer a national identity worth

[56] Shteyngart., p.126.
[57] Brian Trapp, 'Super Sad True Melting Pot: Reimagining the Melting Pot in a Transnational World in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*', *MELUS*, 41 (2016), 55-75 <DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlw044>, p 56.

consenting to'.[58] Accordingly, Trapp characterizes *Super Sad* as an inverted diasporic American immigrant narrative that aims to express the 'nostalgia for a lost *American* homeland' (emphasis in original).[59]

The Rupture is the pivotal event that drives Lenny and Eunice to form a new immigrant subjectivity beyond the consent and descent conflict. The Rupture refers to a mysterious missile attack on a New York ferry that kills all passengers on board. Watching the ferry sink down into the harbor, Lenny describes that he experiences a feeling of disillusionment about his life as an American:

> [A]s the John F. Kennedy reared up, split into two, disintegrated into the warm waters, as the first part of our lives, the false part, came to an end, the question we had forgotten to ask for so many years was finally shouted by one husky voice, stage left: "*But why?*" (emphasis in original)[60]

Asking 'But why?', Lenny questions his struggle to assimilate and build a life as an American. Watching the ferry sinking, he realizes that the battle is futile. Being a second-generation immigrant is the 'false' part of his life that has now come to an end. Symbolized by the sinking ferry named after one of the most beloved presidents in history but also assassinated, the US is doomed and collapsing in front of Lenny's eyes. Witnessing the Rupture makes him finally denounce his American identity and reclaim the bond with his parents: 'Who was I? […] But basically – at the end of the busted rainbow, at the end of

[58] Ibid., p. 69.
[59] Ibid., p. 56.
[60] Shteyngart, p. 246.

the day, at the end of the empire – little more than my parents' son.'[61] Without America, Lenny seeks to re-establish a bond with his Russian heritage and with his foreign parents.

Similarly, Eunice reacts to the Rupture by seeking comfort in her Korean root. In a message she writes to herself, Eunice expresses a new-found sense of self-affirmation in light of the loss of her American homeland:

> America might be gone completely soon, but I was never really an American. It was all pretending. I was always a Korean girl from a Korean family with a Korean way of doing things, and I'm proud of what that means. It means that, unlike so many people around me, I know who I am.[62]

Eunice echoes Lenny's lament in that she also sees her American identity as a false part, a pretense. She is always a Korean girl as Lenny is his parents' son. While both characters choose to identify with their descent identity in the aftermath of the Rupture, I contend that their decision does not limit their agency even after they decide to abandon their American identity. Instead, by reclaiming their ethnic heritage, the two characters can explore more options for their survival in the post-Rupture US. Trapp explains that, in denouncing their American identity, Lenny and Eunice 'have declined to assimilate and have chosen their ethnic identity over their American one, passing up even the multicultural hyphen that would tether them to two identities'.[63] Yet, I see that, by embracing their ethnic roots, Lenny and Eunice can be part of a larger collective, which gives them more opportunities

[61] Ibid., p. 292.
[62] Ibid., p.294.
[63] Trapp, p. 69.

to take meaningful actions against the crisis they are facing. They can use the reestablished bond with their family to guide their actions and decisions.

However, the reclamation of their respective heritage roots also explains why both characters begin to drift apart in the post-Rupture. The mutual recognition that they both belong to a larger collective allows them to see themselves responsible for greater happiness beyond the personal happiness of their relationship. Lenny describes that Eunice's grief after the Rupture makes him realizes for the first time that Eunice is 'not completely ahistorical'.[64] She is a relational being with an ability to mourn the loss of her historical ties. Experiencing post-Rupture distress, Eunice becomes a woman with more substance and no longer simply 'a nano-sized woman […] who existed as easily on an apparat screen as on the street'.[65] Now, she is a full historical being representing 'a place so deep […] somewhere across the seas, and from a time when our nations were barely formed'.[66] However, when Lenny finally sees Eunice as a historical being, he rejects her. She comes to represent another network of connections of which he is an outsider. Therefore, after witnessing Eunice's episode, Lenny feels a strong desire to be among his close friends and family. Accordingly, he feels even more alienated from Eunice: 'I want to connect with my parents and to Vishnu and Grace, I want to mourn Noah with them. But all I have is Eunice and my Wall of Books.'[67] Eunice becomes a resentment that cannot offer solace and comfort because she does not belong with him.

[64] Shteyngart, p. 259.
[65] Ibid., p. 19.
[66] Ibid., p. 259.
[67] Ibid., p. 268.

However, while Lenny rejects Eunice because her historicity alienates her, Eunice also decides to leave him not long after that. She feels driven by the newly found recognition of her embedded subjectivity to do something for the greater good. Her decision to leave Lenny for his boss Joshie is collateral to her recognition of 'something powerful in being able to let go and focus on something that's completely outside of yourself'.[68]Accordingly, she has to claim both 'common unhappiness' and 'common responsibility', which is translated into getting with Joshie who is more suited to help her family survive in the post-Rupture America.

Lenny and Eunice's decision to reclaim the familial bond also reflects their critical response to the neoliberal value that has subsumed them. The revelation after the Rupture that they are still their parents' children and part of the ethnic heritage of their families indicates the formation of the alliance-based oppositional agency that will later allow them to challenge the neoliberal order. I contend that Lenny and Eunice also turn to their family and identify themselves with an ethnic group as a means to ground themselves in a symbolic order that neoliberalism has destabilized. That is, I see that Shteyngart further problematizes the descent and consent conflict by placing both characters in a neoliberal network society where the loss of American national identity is symptomatic of the dominance of neoliberal value.

In other words, the novel is also written in the genre that Sheri-Marie Harrison calls 'neoliberal novels of migrancy' or a type of immigrant fiction that explores the experiences of immigrant subjects who also become a form of capital. For Harrison, these novels

[68] Ibid., pp.295-96.

explore a circumstance in which immigrants are free from the symbolic order that endows an ethnic or national identity. Instead, they can choose and create new identities as they freely move across an open, networked space of neoliberal society. Immigrants from older generations such as Lenny and Eunice's parents may only experience the conflict between the need to assimilate and the desire to preserve their ethnic roots. However, unlike their parents, Lenny and Eunice are also a neoliberal subject. According to Harrison, these subjects are 'a form of capital committed to endless movement across borders and commits to enrichment in various spaces'.[69] Therefore, the strained relationship with their parents is not simply a typical intergenerational conflict but the tension between the traditional immigrant subjects that are still firmly attached to their symbolic identities and the neoliberal immigrant subjects who are pressured to create new imaginary identities in order to enrich and increase their values in the social world that functions as a market.

Put differently, *Super Sad* uses the immigrant trope to highlight the 'decline of symbolic efficiency' in a neoliberal network society. The novel's dystopian setting is premised on the demise of the US and portrays a society in which advanced information technologies create what Jodi Dean calls 'communicative capitalism'. According to Dean, communicative capitalism is a new ideological formation in which democracy and networked communication technologies have converged. These technologies make excessive consumption and surveillance an essential apparatus of social life. However, the same technologies can seemingly promote democratic ideals such as freedom, inclusion, and equal access. This convergence creates 'a new setting of complete openness and

[69] Sheri-Marie Harrison, 'The Neoliberal Novel of Migrancy' in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, eds. By Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp.201-219 (p.218).

freedom – no authority tells the subject what to do, what to desire, how to structure its choices'. [70] People are free to become whoever they want through consumption and communication. However, the intersection between democratic values and network technologies ultimately results in the emergence of a society where the symbolic mode of identification such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender has lost its purchase. Instead, there are only imaginary identities produced through communication and consumption. As Dean further explains, in place of symbolic identifications are

> imaginary injunctions to develop our creative potential and cultivate our individuality, injunctions supported by capitalism's provision of the ever new experiences and accessories we use to perform this self-fashioning. […] Neoliberal subjects are expected to, enjoined to, have a good time, have it all, be happy, fit, and fulfilled.[71]

The imperative to enjoy life, be happy, healthy, and fulfilled is the cause of anxiety that Lenny and Eunice experience throughout the novel. The injunction of communicative capitalism leads Lenny's boss, Joshie, to contend that 'There will be plenty of time to ponder and write and act out later. Right now you've got to *sell to live*' (emphasis in original).[72] In other words, Joshie instructs Lenny to 'sell' a version of self that fits the social standard and expectation. To sell himself effectively, Lenny is told to learn to gauge his position against his competitors, 'Learn to rank people quicker.'[73] To socialize in the dystopian world of *Super Sad* is to 'FAC' or to'form a community'. However, this version

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[70] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp. 3-4.
[71] Jodi Dean, 'Enjoying Neoliberalism', *Cultural Politics*, 4 (2008), 47-72 <DOI: 10.2752/175174308X266398> ,p. 62.
[72] Shteyngart, p. 65.
[73] Ibid.

of a community only entails engaging with one another in a kind of market transaction that involves preparing and presenting oneself to be rated and ranked and hopefully sold to the attracted buyer.

Super Sad captures the decline of symbolic efficiency through its focus on how network technologies facilitate the transformation of humans into market capital. The novel also uses the collapse of the US to illustrate how neoliberalism can affect the relationship between the state and its citizens. Neoliberal ideology dictates that both the state and the citizen become market actors. The state is no longer obligated to provide social security but merely facilitate the transaction in which social services are a product in the market. Consequently, citizenship becomes an identitarian category that loses its symbolic efficiency. Moreover, Wendy Brown warns that 'when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good'.[74] The market logic will destabilize the state-citizen relationship to the point where it might be impossible to imagine what it means to fulfill civic duties or play the part of a good citizen. Eva Cherniavsky also raises a similar concern about the condition of citizenship in a neoliberal era. She questions the legitimacy of citizenship when the state becomes 'the non-representing bodies of government that have effectively cut themselves loose from any commitment to a general interest.' [75] In this scenario, the citizen becomes an 'entrepreneur citizen' who is 'designed to look after herself through responsible self-management and optimization of life prospects […] who

[74] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demo: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p.39.
[75] Eva Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship: Political Culture after Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pp. 2-3.

forges her own conditions of self-realization'.[76] Lenny and Eunice's anxiety as an immigrant subject is also a projection of how the neoliberal order destabilizes their national identity. As the US government cannot fulfill its responsibility as a sovereign nation-state, Lenny and Eunice can no longer perform the role of a good American citizen.

However, as the post-Rupture reclamation of their ethnic heritage demonstrates, both characters successfully regain the symbolic efficiency of their identity by insisting on grounding themselves in their ethnic roots. Moreover, the novel's ending implies that both characters also eventually become transnational subjects with even more relations that will strengthen their subjectivity and ability to survive in the neoliberal world. Eunice moves to London and later settles in Scotland while Lenny relocates to Canada before spending his final years in Italy. Trapp points out the significance of the novel's transnational ending in his argument, writing that 'Shteyngart, in effect, stages a speculative American diaspora. […] Without a nation, the next best thing is someplace with the best opportunity. They can leave America because the future is no longer exclusively there.'[77] Positing the possibility of an 'American diaspora', *Super Sad*'s ending demonstrates the epical, open quality of its narrative, representing a utopian sensibility in such a bleak dystopian scenario of the novel. As Moylan elaborates:

> The epical narrative will look to a more fundamental engagement with the contradictions of the moment and open up a range of alternative social possibilities. […] In an epical text, therefore, "choice" shapes the agential relations and the ending in "new and better" ways, ones not readily predicted.[78]

[76] Ibid.
[77] Trapp, p. 71.
[78] Moylan, p. 151.

The unpredictability allows critical dystopian texts such as *Super Sad* to end on a hopeful note. Even though Lenny and Eunice end up being separated and become 'ex-American citizens', their future remains unpredictable and hopeful. Because of the unpredictability, what is 'new and better' will always be possible for them.

Network Subjectivities as Schizophrenic Networked Individuals in *The Circle*

This section will demonstrate that *The Circle* is an anti-utopian narrative that depicts narrative subjectivities as a type of schizophrenia. I will argue that the novel uses the utopia genre conventions to interpret the network form in a stricter sense as a fixed and static system of connection. With such an interpretation of the network, the novel represents network subjects as schizophrenic individuals from a network society that disregards the importance of relations and relationality.

Eggers's novel begins with its protagonist Mae Holland's first day of employment at a giant tech company called the Circle. In the opening chapter, Eggers describes Mae's induction day in a typical utopian narrative in which Mae assumes the role of the visitor being guided through the Circle campus. The campus appears to her like a utopia and prompts her to realize the inferiority of 'anywhere else':

> Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. And it was natural that it was so, Mae thought. Who else but utopians could make utopia?[79]

[79] Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 30.

Unlike Lenny and Eunice, who are placed in a dire situation that pushes them to rethink their subjectivities, Mae's story begins in a utopia where she is surrounded by 'utopians' and will be living in a society run by the 'best systems'. Her challenge is to reconstitute her subjectivity to fit in the new place she perceives as a utopia. With Mae's induction, the novel thus begins its anti-utopian criticism by exploring how the authoritarian nature of utopia, especially its belief in the perfectability of human beings and a version of ideal humans, influences Mae's character development as she strives to fit in and become a utopian herself. Throughout the novel, Eggers represents Mae as a victim of a repressive and coercive utopian ideology. The exchange between Mae and her friend Annie in the opening chapter provides a first clue as to how Mae will be subjected to the authoritarian control of the company:

> '[…] This is what you're tasked with doing the first day: getting to know the place, the people, getting acclimated. You know how when you put new wood floors into your house –"
>
> "No, I don't"
>
> "Well, when you do, you first have to let them sit there for ten days, to get the wood acclimated. Then you do the installation."
>
> "So in this analogy, I'm the wood?"
>
> "You are the wood."
>
> "And then I'll be installed."
>
> "Yes, we will then install you. We'll hammer you with ten thousand tiny nails. You'll love it."[80]

[80] Eggers, p. 16.

The novel's plot is then arranged in linear order as it follows Mae's experiences being 'acclimated,' 'hammered,' and finally 'installed' into the Circle. From a wide-eyed, awestruck new employee to an uncritical advocator and the poster child of the company's vision and ideology, Mae has been molded to the point that she is no longer recognizable as a sympathetic, or even realistic, human being.

On the one hand, the novel's representation of network subjectivities is tied to the Circle's vision of a perfect human being. On the other hand, the story also focuses on how the company can use the utopian rhetoric to veil its authoritarian goal. The Circle wants to build a hyper-surveillance network system in which all human activities, both online and offline, will be channeled through the Circle's network. In the network society envisioned by the Circle, every human being will be connected, locatable, and identifiable. People will be willing to surrender their right to privacy in exchange for a transparent and accountable society. They will subject themselves to various forms of surveillance such as voluntary self-tracking and corporate surveillance for the sake of efficiency and convenience. The Circle's vision of human perfectibility rests on the total transparency and accessibility of all knowledge and information in the world.

In other words, the Circle promotes the idea that humans have a knowable and irreducible core to validate its tyrannical vision. This assumption about humans is reflected in the ideology of Ty Gospodinov, the company's founder who invents TruYou, the operating system that launches the Company's success. TruYou allows any online transactions to be conducted with only one account tied to the user's real identity. TruYou account is 'unbendable and unmaskable' just like one's personal identity that is supposed to be singular and true. TruYou becomes an enormous success after Ty hires Tom Stenton,

'the world-striding CEO and self-described *Capitalist Prime*,'[81] to capitalize and monetize TruYou. He also hires Eamon Bailey to be the face of the company. Bailey is the most accessible and likable among the 'Three Wise Men' as the three men are known. Bailey, the narrator tells us, has 'a way of speaking that was both lyrical and grounded, giving his audiences wonderful turns of phrase one moment and plainspoken common sense the next'.[82] The story of the Three Wise Men working behind the success of TruYou is an allegory of the novel's anti-utopian narrative about the danger of utopianism. The Three Wise Men represent the marriage of technology, capitalism, and the power of rhetoric in propagating and profiting from the utopian ideal of human's perfectibility and essentialism.

Therefore, *The Circle's* anti-utopian message questions the belief in human perfectability and how the concept of perfection is repressive and manipulatable for profitable ends. The novel undermines the idea of human perfectability through its portrayal of a network society that functions like Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman's concept of a social system called 'networked individualism. The term designates the way in which 'people become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups'.[83] People connect and communicate with one another as individuals in a network because the advanced communication technologies turn individual users into 'the autonomous center just as she is reaching out from her computer'.[84] Networked individualism is also founded on the belief in human perfectibility that Eggers's novel critiques. As Rainie and Wellman explain, networked individualism views humans as having 'a networked self, a core being

[81] Eggers, p. 23.
[82] Ibid., p. 24.
[83] Rainie and Wellman, p. 6.
[84] Ibid., p. 7.

that emphasizes different identities as they connect with each milieu.'[85] At the same time, being a networked individual provides more options to solve problems and fulfill social needs: 'It offers more freedom […] more room to maneuverer and more capacity to act on their own'.[86] Rainie and Wellman's explanation of networked individualism is reminiscent of Bailey's vision of a completely transparent network society in which 'we can solve any problem […] because we won't be dragged down by all our weaknesses, our petty secrets, our hoarding of information and knowledge'.[87] It is possible to describe the Circle's ultimate goal, the completion of the networked circle, as a vision inspired by the idea of networked individualism.

I contend that *The Circle*'s anti-utopian narrative seeks to portray how the ideal of networked individualism can produce a schizophrenic subject. The image of a person being an 'autonomous center' of a machine in the networked individualism system invites a comparison with Jean Baudrillard's description of a highly advanced network society in which humans see themselves 'at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his universe of origin.'[88] However, according to Baudrillard, how humans will transform into a brain connected to a machine as an isolated, free-floating unit is not only obscene but also schizophrenic. He writes that:

> Then with communication and information, with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with their continual connections, we are now in a new form of

[85] Ibid., p. 15.
[86] Ibid., p. 9.
[87] Eggers, p. 291-292.
[88] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 128.

> schizophrenia. No more hysteria, no more projective paranoia, properly speaking, but this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore.[89]

Baudrillard's warning is the underlying message that the novel seeks to express in its representation of network subjectivities. Such a warning is most evident in the Book II section of the novel that follows Mae's progression after she agrees to wear a surveillance camera on her body and broadcast her life live to the audience around the globe. In addition, as the novel progresses, Mae's workstation at the Circle also expands and has multiple screens installed all around her. Mae's feeling about being surrounded by various screens while communicating and connecting with people worldwide also invokes an image not dissimilar to Baudrillard's description of a man being surrounded and enthralled by machines. 'Now she was communicating with clients all over the planet, commanding six screens, training a new group of newbies, and altogether feeling more needed, more valued, and more intellectually stimulated than she ever thought possible.'[90]

Mae's feeling of empowerment and control at her workstation is also similar to the description of networked individuals. As Rainie and Wellman suggest, 'networked individuals have new powers to create media and project their voices to more extended audiences that become part of their social worlds.'[91] However, as networked individualism encourages looser social ties in exchange for having 'more extended audiences,' networked

[89] Ibid., p. 132.
[90] Eggers, p. 242.
[91] Rainie and Wellman, p. 13.

individuals risk feeling overly exhausted and insecure. In fact, Rainie and Wellman identify exhaustion as one of the negative aspects of networked individualism. They claim that the system is 'both socially liberating and socially taxing'[92] because having more social ties from having a more extensive network also requires more time and effort to sustain them. They also use the word 'work' to describe social interactions of networked individuals and how 'the technology that promises to connect people also threatens to overload them with extra work'.[93]

It is not surprising that the dissolution of work and play in the networked environment is also a proud achievement of the Circle. The company collapses the boundary between work and home by introducing the 'HomeTown' project. HomeTown is an on-campus accommodation facility for employees who want to *work* overtime. Mae uses the HomeTown facility when she feels pressured to increase her 'PartiRank', indicating the individual's participation in the Circle's social network. Mae has to stay on campus because she needs to 'work' till late so that her PartiRank goes up. By the end of her first night at HomeTown, she feels 'a profound sense of accomplishment and possibility that was accompanied, by a near-complete sense of exhaustion'.[94] That the feeling of accomplishment and exhaustion become associated with social activities is indicative of how work life and social life become inseparable. Baudrillard describes that combination of feelings as the 'ecstasy of communication' that abolishes any division of spaces and merges everything into 'a single dimension of information'.[95] For Baudrillard, this is the promiscuity of the communication network in which 'an extermination of interstitial and

[92] Ibid., p. 9.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Eggers, p. 191.
[95] Baudrillard, p. 131.

protective spaces' has finally taken place. The novel's use of the circle symbol also effectively illustrates this extermination of spatial distinction. As Bailey says to Mae, the circle is the symbol of perfection because of its all-inclusiveness. Yet, without alternative spaces to escape to, one feels ultimately trapped, as Mae's exhaustion demonstrates.

Apart from exhaustion, networked individuals also experience disembeddedness, insecurity, and uncertainty about who they are. Networked individualism hinges on the belief that everyone has 'a core being'. Networked individuals can move through different ties and groups and present different sides of themselves in each scenario because they have a firm purchase on who they essentially are. In their argument about networked individualism, Rainie and Wellman use the story of Peter and Trudy as a case study of two successful networked individuals. Peter and Trudy can adapt in multiple environments because 'they are still Peter and Trudy wherever they participate.'[96] Rainie and Wellman's argument again invokes Baudrillard's use of the concept of 'sovereignty' when he describes how humans are isolated in orbit as a microsatellite, as a node in the network. Baudrillard suggests that individuals in the network era exist in 'remote sovereignty' and 'far from their origin' because they can no longer rely on their embedded identity in a group to sustain their sense of self. Rainie and Wellman's argument needs to be rooted in human essentialism because being in a network also means being, in their own words, 'less likely to have one sure-fire "home" community'.[97] Networked individuals risk feeling insecure and unsure about who they are because they do not have a strong sense of belonging in a community. Without the belief in the core self, they will risk feeling lost. As they move through multiple relations and social ties in the network, these networked individuals are

[96] Rainie and Wellman, p. 15.
[97] Ibid., p. 12.

less sure of their place. In other words, they are experiencing the decline of symbolic efficiency in the network society. However, while in *Super Sad,* the loss of symbolic order propels its characters to reclaim their symbolic ties, *The Circle* portrays how it can transform the network subject into 'a whatever being'. Borrowing the term from Giorgio Agamben[98], Dean explains that whatever beings 'neither attack nor resist; they are neither inside nor outside'.[99] It is a form of singularity that does not belong anywhere and only moves through the network. This condition of un-belonging creates a sense of self-disintegration in that the self cannot identify with or feel alienated from anything.

A whatever being is, in other words, the schizophrenic stage of Mae's transformation in the novel. A schizophrenic 'can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence'.[100] Mae's camera that broadcasts her life 24/7 essentially turns her into a screen. She ultimately becomes a whatever being in the sense that she is 'open to everything in spite of himself'.[101] Therefore, unlike *Super Sad,* in which Lenny and Eunice achieve self-realization in the end, Mae is stuck in the network as a free-floating, isolated subject, constantly exhausted and completely insecure, a human-machine that circuits through the network and never belongs to anything.

So far, I have discussed how *Super Sad* and *The Circle* are written in critical dystopia and anti-utopia genres, respectively. In *Super Sad*, Shteyngart imagines network

[98] For the original conception of the term 'whatever being', see Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans.by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
[99] Ibid., p. 83.
[100] Baudrillard, p. 133.
[101] Ibid.

subjectivities as a type of agency that uses social ties and relations to respond to the crises in their social world. Accordingly, the novel becomes a critical dystopian narrative that, despite its negative speculation of human society in the future, offers a hopeful solution. In *The Circle*, Eggers takes an opposite stand and portrays the limitation of the utopian discourse as a tool to respond to an intrusive and expansive network society. Being an anti-utopian novel, *The Circle* also demonstrates that it is utopianism itself that exacerbates the conditions of the subjects in the network society. It can create network subjectivities as a kind of schizophrenic whose purpose of existence is only to be enthralled by the ecstasy of networked communication. In the next section, I will explore the distinction between critical dystopia and anti-utopia by considering how the two novels use formal affordances to reassess the utopian genre as a new post-critical narrative.

Network Affordance and Textual Form in *Super Sad True Love Story*

Network form has many, and at times contradictory, affordances. As previously discussed, a network is both a fixed structure of connection and circulation and a dynamic configuration of interconnected and heterogeneous elements. Levine argues that a crucial affordance of the network form is in its ability to shed light on other types of forms: 'As a form that first and foremost affords connectedness, the network provides a way to understand how many other formal elements […] link up in larger formations.'[102] Consequently, attention to the operation of the network form can bring more clarity to how the social world is constituted by the pattern and arrangement in various forms.

In this section, I will discuss the use of network affordances in *Super Sad*. I will argue that the novel uses network affordances to imagine how a prose narrative can be part

[102] Levine, p. 113.

of various relations and contexts, resulting in an inherently ambiguous textual meaning. Moreover, I will demonstrate that the ambiguity and relationality of the novel's narrative is also the locus of its post-critical sensibility. It explains how the novel's speculative and dystopia narrative function functions as a (post-) critical representation of human society. To illustrate this point, I will first discuss the role of textual production in constituting Lenny and Eunice's network subjectivities. Then, I will examine how Shteyngart formally situates the text in *Super Sad* as a node in the network whose meaning is highly contingent upon its movement through various networks of relations with new readers and new contexts.

Super Sad tells the story of Lenny and Eunice in the first-person voice through diaries and personal correspondence, respectively. Both diaries and written communication are a form of self-writing. According to Michel Foucault, self-writing is a practice of self-improvement or 'a training of the self by oneself'.[103] He explains that: 'Writing constitutes an essential stage […] namely, the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing […] is an agent of transformation of truth into *ēthos*.'[104] Self-writing is an exercise by which the subject can reflect on relations, discourses, and circumstances and accept them into one's *ēthos* or a sense of self, personal value, and worldview.

Foucault divides self-writing into two modes: the *hupomnēmata* and the correspondence. *Hupomnēmata* refers to individual notebooks containing records of things that one reads or hears about and one's thought about it. The notebook will allow one to

[103] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed.by Paul Rabinow, trans by. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 208.
[104] Ibid., p. 209.

revisit those texts or thoughts for the shaping of the self. It is 'the practice of the self [that] involves reading. […] a way of gathering in the reading that was done and of collecting one's thoughts about it'.[105] In other words, the *hupomnēmata* notebook is the record of one's exposure to other texts and discourses. It functions as a space in which those discourses are reflected on and used to shape oneself. In his account of *hupomnēmata,* Foucault recognizes one's self as a crystallized composite of diverse relations and discourses, and this mode of self-writing is the tool that produces such a composite. 'It is a matter of unifying these heterogeneous fragments through their subjectivation in the exercise of personal writing.'[106] Writing in a personal notebook is a process of self-constitution through a reflection on one's relation to other texts and discourses.

Lenny's diaries are an example of *hupomnēmata* writing. They contain fragments of other texts and discourses that help him reflect on and reshape his subjectivity. When he tries to make sense of his relationship with the much younger and prettier Eunice, he thinks of himself as Laptev, a character from Chekhov's novella *Three Years.* On reading the novella, Lenny writes: 'I was hoping to find some tips on how to further seduce Eunice and to overcome the beauty gap between us.'[107] After rereading Chekhov's text, Lenny finds more than a tip to win Eunice over. He achieves a degree of self-understanding, his *ēthos*: 'much like Laptev, I truly was that "honorable, good man who loved her"'.[108] Lenny discovers from reading *Three Years* that he can identify with Laptev more than his love for a younger woman. Like Laptev, he is also a good and honorable man.

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[105] Ibid., p. 211.
[106] Ibid., p. 213.
[107] Shteyngart, p. 34.
[108] Ibid.

At first glance, personal correspondence may not seem to reflect the subject's engagement with other texts and discourses. However, Foucault argues that letter writing is a more self-reflective practice than personal diaries. Personal communication is a complex form of self-introspection and examination produced through the gaze of the other. According to Foucault, epistolary writing is 'a matter of bringing into congruence the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself when one measures one's everyday actions according to the rules of a technique of living'.[109] Writing a letter, one needs to consider the targeted audience of the message and one's relation with that person, which will determine how one's self will be presented in the text. The correspondent self is thus the product of a self-reflexive gaze that one imagines through the gaze of the other. Penny Summerfield refers to the process of how one gains access to oneself by addressing self to another as 'the paradox of correspondence'.[110] The paradox is evidence of one's embeddedness in social relations and one's susceptibility to the influences of other people. Letter writing, for Summerfield, then functions as a self-examination activity beyond self-reflection. It provides an occasion to reflect on one's belonging in a larger collective or 'an imaginative space in which to explore new possibilities for seeing and being in the world'.[111]

Therefore, while some critics write that *Super Sad* denies Eunice agency by only presenting her epistolary selves and allows Lenny to be more self-reflective through diary writing, her correspondence illustrates that Eunice may be a more relational and complex

[109] Foucault, p. 221.
[110] Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 38.
[111]Ibid., pp. 39-40.

character than the form of the novel lets on.[112] By writing letters to her mother, sister, best friend, and the men she develops a relationship with, Eunice has a chance to explore the possibilities of who she can be. She gets to explore, choose, and accept more than one version of herself. Eunice's letters also demonstrate her reflexivity and ability to adapt and adjust to the situation. In Eunice's case, Shteyngart shows the potential of the epistolary form in providing a critical reflection of the social environment. Elizabeth Kovach also comments that in updating the epistolary novel to the 'e-mail novel', *Super Sad* 'does not move against the grain' but 'stands in symmetry with the contexts that it aims to critique'.[113] Eunice reflects the complicitous yet critical role of the e-pistolary form by using social media, which is part of the social problem, as a tool for her survival. She uses online messages and emails to form connections and alliances, especially with Joshie. Her relationship with Joshie is developed through the manipulation of personal correspondence. She uses certain writing styles and language to present herself in her messages to Joshie in a certain way to make him help her. Her flexibility and willingness to compromise and form alliances with diverse people is evidence of the novel's utopian sensibility. This is the reason that Chelsea Oei Kern describes Eunice as 'a figure who leverages the reading and writing of unauthorized political feelings and solidarities to form counter-political feelings – to talk about politics without talking about them and thus to affiliate with different political collectives'.[114] In Eunice's case, personal correspondence

[112] See Willmetts, Simon, 'Digital Dystopia: Surveillance, Autonomy, and Social Justice', *American Quarterly*, 70 (2018) <DOI: 10.1353/aq.2018.0017>.
[113] Elizabeth Kovach, 'Epistolary Novels and Networks: Registering Formal Shifts between Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741) and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010)', *The Epistolary Renaissance*, 62 (2018), 261-276 < DOI: 10.1515/9783110584813-015>, pp. 274-75.
[114] Chelsea Oei Kern, 'Big Data and the Practice of Reading in *Super Sad True Love Story*', *Arizona Quarterly*, 76 (2020), 81-105 < DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0019>, p. 100.

proves to be not only evidence of one's belonging in a collective but a practice that will help one to achieve a greater self-understanding that is no less effective than writing diaries.

The novel introduces another twist to letter writing. It includes a letter that Eunice writes to herself to further complicate the paradox of correspondence. In a letter addressed to herself, Eunice fully internalizes the gaze of the other and transforms it into a self-gaze. In doing so, she can maintain enough distance for self-reflection. Moreover, when Eunice learns to look at herself from the other's perspective, she also acknowledges her embeddedness in a larger social group. That is, she expresses an understanding that there is something else greater than her. Accordingly, Eunice's letter to herself can be said to represent the most self-reflexive and the most relational piece of writing in the novel. In the letter, she begins by writing, 'I'm writing this for me. One day I want to look back at this day and make peace with what I'm about to do.'[115] Addressing herself in this way, Eunice uses the letter like a *hupomnēmata* notebook to record her thoughts and ideas for future reflection.

In the letter, she also describes watching Joshie concentrate on painting and comments on his ability to be 'completely outside yourself.' That moment teaches her a crucial lesson about Joshie – he is a man with a lot of privilege, and 'he knows what to do with it'.[116] Here, Eunice arrives at the intersection between self-privilege and self-abandonment. She learns that they are not exclusive. She can accept her position in the world, with privileges and all, while still using it to see herself as part of the world and strive to achieve a greater good. Therefore, later in the letter, Eunice expresses such an

[115] Shteyngart, p. 294.
[116] Ibid., p. 295.

acknowledgment by reflecting on her commonality and shared responsibility. This acknowledgment of her ultimate relationality is also a powerful personal revelation for Eunice. It frees her from self-hatred. She understands that she is not solely responsible for who she has become. Her family and others all have a part in constituting her subjectivity. In the final part of the letter, she thus writes:

> All I wanted to do was have my parents take complete responsibility for how fucked up I am. I wanted them to admit that they did wrong. But that doesn't matter to me now.
>
> Common unhappiness, as the doctor said, but also common responsibility.
>
> I can't just be an abused little girl anymore. I have to be stronger than my father, stronger than Sally, stronger than Mommy.[117]

Despite shifting the blame to her parents, it does not alienate Eunice from her family. Instead, it is a liberation from the burden of self-hatred. Even though she finally accepts that her parents abuse her, she does not resent them. Because the revelation brings relief, she can let go of the abuse, contending that it does not matter. Moreover, the fact that the action of others, which in this case is the abuse from her parents, constitutes who she is brings another revelation that she is ultimately a relational subject. As her writing indicates, the discovery of self-relationality makes her feel stronger as a person. She is ready to take on more responsibility greater than her happiness, which explains her decision to leave Lenny as a sacrifice of personal happiness for the happiness of a larger collective, that is, her family.

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[117] Ibid., p.296.

Eunice leaves Lenny not long after she writes the letter to herself. Leaving him is the only way she can secure her family's future in the new America after the Rupture. She finds the strength from remaining true to her Korean root and family values. She chooses to survive in the new America as a Korean woman with a greater understanding of her self-embeddedness in a larger social sphere. She allows herself to move with the tides of social forces and adapt to the new relations that the waves may lead her to. Her decision might appear to be a capitulation or a surrender. Yet, it is also an act of resistance. Eunice's resistance comes from her reconciliation with the fact that she is, in her own words, 'a recycling bin sometimes, with all these things passing through me from one person to another, love, hate, seduction, attraction, repulsion, all of it'.[118] Yet all these passing affects constitute her very self, the fact that she only comes to realize through the act of self-writing. In realizing so, Eunice ultimately demonstrates her oppositional agency, whose strength comes from being part of a larger collective – being an actant in a network of relations. As she concludes in her letter: 'I have to be stronger.'[119]

Moreover, by writing the letter, she claims the power of language back for herself and utilizes it to achieve self-reflection. According to Moylan, the reappropriation of language is also an important aspect of how dystopian subjects develop oppositional agency:

> [C]ontrol over the means of language, over representation and interpellation, is a crucial weapon and strategy in dystopian resistance.

[118] Ibid., p.296.
[119] Ibid.

> An important result of the reappropriation of language by the dystopian misfits and revels is the reconstitution of empowering memory. […] [B]y regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and "speak back" to hegemonic power.[120]

Eunice's letter is her attempt at reconstructing 'empowering memory' about who she is. She feels empowered by recalling and reclaiming her Korean root, saying that she is 'always a Korean girl'. She then uses that fact about herself to be an alternative mode of resistance. She can speak back to the hegemony, insisting that she will be 'stronger' than the abused girl she used to be. Even though she will let herself be part of the hegemonic group, it also allows her to take on common unhappiness and common responsibility.

The use of self-writing demonstrates how textual production plays a vital part in the constitution of subjectivity and the development of critical awareness. However, *Super Sad* also formally illustrates the fluidity of textual meaning as it forms new relations with readers in different contexts. Accordingly, it is possible to characterize the novel as a node in a network, which allows it to express a utopian sensibility and a post-critical attitude. In the novel's story-world, the text that the reader is reading is called 'The Lenny Abramov Diaries'. It is a compilation of Lenny's and Eunice's texts published in an unspecified time in the future after the events in the story have already unfolded. However, while the reader in the real world understands *Super Sad* as a dystopian text, the exact text presents evidence of hope and the possibility for a better future. In other words, the same content that expresses a dystopia in the reader's world is a utopian text in the story-world of the novel. In the notes Lenny writes for the publication of 'The Lenny Abramov Diaries', he explains

[120] Moylan, p. 149.

that: 'when I wrote these diaries so many decades ago, it never occurred to me that *any* text would *ever* find a new generation of readers' (emphasis in original).[121] That 'The Lenny Abramov Diaries' manages to be published and read so many years after society has become postliterate is a testament to the fact that there is still hope even in the most antagonistic condition. Moreover, the fact that the exact text can be either a dystopian to a utopian narrative given a change of context demonstrates how texual meaning is highly contingent and relational.

Super Sad demonstrates the fluidity and relationality of texts on several levels. First, by presenting Lenny and Eunice's voices through diaries and online messages, the novel highlights how personal writing can become a historical document containing insight into the social world in which the text was produced. Their diaries and letters become proof of the characters' inevitable relation and entanglement with their social circumstances. However, the fact that their writing also becomes a public document that is published, studied, and even adapted into a movie further proves the ultimate relationality and fluidity of both the text and the writer as they continue to exist and evolve with time.

On another level, the fact that the novel ends with how personal texts can go on to have multiple and transnational public presences (The Lenny Abramov Diaries is published both in Beijing and New York while there are movie adaptations of the text in China and Italy) reaffirms another critical dystopian characteristic of the novel – its open and epical ending. Moylan uses the categories of epic and myth to distinguish between the two dystopian modes. Epical narrative, for Moylan, is associated with openness, ambiguity, and fluidity, while the mythic narrative is more inclined towards depicting enclosure,

[121] Shteyngart, p. 325.

predictability, and stasis. Moylan writes that: 'In an epical text […] "choice" shapes the agential relations and the ending in "new and better" ways, ones not readily predicted. […] In a mythological text, there is no clear sequence of narrative choices.'[122] Moreover, in refusing to have closure, 'the epical narrative will look to a more fundamental engagement with the contradictions of the moment and open up a range of alternative social possibilities.'[123] The ending of *Super Sad* is epical and open to the extent that it demonstrates such 'a range of alternative social possibilities' for the text's meaning and the survival of its characters.

Moreover, Shteyngart highlights textual fluidity and relationality *Super Sad* by using the traditions of dystopian and speculative fiction to produce a new kind of realist novel grounded in the reader's affective response to the text. According to Sargisson, three key conventions are characteristic of utopian writing: play and excess, the presence of a visitor, and the tactic of estrangement.[124] According to Sargisson:

> Excess permits radical creativity. Utopians imagine and desire radically different worlds but they often work with a light touch. They fool around with reality […] And they poke fun, evoking satire and using jokes and wit as strategic weapons to show "it doesn't have to be like this!"[125]

Super Sad explicitly uses humor to produce a cognitive estrangement and invite an affective engagement from the reader. It is written as a satire and parody – precisely for its tendency to 'poke fun' – to create both the elements of estrangement and urgency that allow

[122] Ibid., p. 151.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Sargisson, p. 16.
[125] Ibid.

the reader to engage with the text more critically. Michael Shaup also reflects on this aspect of *Super Sad*, writing that:

> The biggest risk for any dystopian novel with a political edge is that it can easily become humourless and didactic; Shteyngart deftly avoids this trap by employing his disarming and absurd sense of humor […] Combined with the near-future setting, the effect is a novel more immediate – thus more frightening, at least for contemporary reader.[126]

For Shaup, the novel's humor builds the connection between the reader and the story-world. The reader can only get the 'jokes' as long as they are familiar enough with the context to find them humorous. Ruth Franklin makes a similar point that: 'Shteyngart's often very funny novel derives much of its humor from the fact that the journey from our world to his requires only a minor tweak.'[127] Terrence Rafferty also suggests that jokes in *Super Sad* produce criticism of the reader's social reality: '[T]he jokes, offhanded as they seem, accumulate a certain weight – the volume and suffocating mass of an oppressive, inhospitable culture. Who wants to live – even for a normal, "human," span – inside a joke?'[128] Therefore, it is possible to see how humor in *Super Sad* serves two contradictory but complementary purposes. First, it produces a sense of immediacy through familiarity. Then it causes a cognitive estrangement through the absurdity of the humor. Moreover, humor in *Super Sad* also serves as a critical tool. As Martyna Bryla argues, the use of

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[126] Michael Shaup, '"Super Sad" And Satiric, Two Stories Of Doomed Love', *NPR*, 28 July 2010 < https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128797767> [accessed 6 June 2020].
[127] Ruth Franklin, 'Dechronofication: *Super Sad True Love Story'*, *The New Republic*, 2 September 2010 < https://newrepublic.com/article/77379/gary-shteyngart-review-dechronification> [accessed 6 June 2020].
[128] Terrence Rafferty, 'Gary Shteyngart Gets Serious', *Slate*, 2 August 2010 < <https://slate.com/culture/2010/08/gary-shteyngart-s-super-sad-true-love-story-truly-is-sad.html> [accessed 6 June 2020].

humor also characterizes the novel as part of the trickster tradition that seeks to produce 'an uncomfortable question, a shrewd comment, or a penetrating critique of the status quo'.[129] Similarly, Sarah Kember points out that *Super Sad* uses humor in a parodic and ironic tone to reflect its efficacy as 'forms of critique or agents of change' through its undecidability. Specifically, Kember explains that humor in the novel is used to counter sexism in a manner that is undecideably sexist.[130] The undecidability of the 'humor on humor' strategy that Kember identifies points to the novel's reliance on the reader's affective response to it as a source of its critical power.

Moreover, humor makes Super Sad more critically stimulating and also allows the novel to avoid the didactic, prescriptive, and totalitarian tendencies of utopian and dystopian writings. Humor gives the reader a chance to freely engage with the story in their term since one's sense of humor and how one 'gets the joke' is a personal issue. Humor leaves room for an emotional and critical engagement with the text. Accordingly, it becomes a key factor that makes *Super Sad* a critical dystopia. Through humor, a dystopian story like *Super Sad* can 'name a utopian elsewhere that resists becoming filled in by a determinate content that would compromise or shut down its own most radical gesture to a future that is not yet achieved'.[131]

One of the main devices used in *Super Sad* to produce humor is the manipulation of language. Throughout the novel, Shteyngart emphasizes the importance of language in the shaping of the characters' subjectivities. For example, for Lenny and Eunice, the

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[129] Martyna Bryla, 'Tracking the Transnational Trickster: Gary Shteyngart and His Protagonists', *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 17 (2018), 1-28 < DOI: 10.35360/njes.432>, p. 23.
[130] Sarah Kember, 'Uncloaking Humour: Ironic-Parodic Sexism and Smart Media', *New Formations*, 86 (2015), 113-117 < DOI: 10.3898/NEWF.86.07.2015>, p.116.
[131] Moylan, p. 191.

English language is a marker of their American identity. Their English language ability is also a generational marker that separates them from their parents. Eunice's mother, for example, always apologizes for her 'bad English', which to her is a sign of complete assimilation in the American culture. However, the novel also imagines a society that is on the verge of becoming illiterate. The quality of language in the story is not only inadequate but also vulgar and lacks substance. Social media is a factor in the decline of language in the story. It directly promotes images instead of written words by telling them to 'Switch to Images today! Less words = more fun!!!' As social media becomes prevalent, people struggle to express their thoughts and ideas coherently. They only know how to 'verbal' express themselves through vulgarity. Brand names also reflect the bastardization of language and the vulgarity of American values by having names like 'AssLuxury' or 'JuicyPussy'. In other words, the quality of the English language indicates the decline of America as a culture and a nation. The language that is once regarded to be a marker of American identity is being undermined along with the Americanness it signifies.

Shteyngart uses the decay of the English language to instigate an affective response from the reader. Poor language is one way that *Super Sad* produces humor. Yet, it also serves as a scary warning. It is part of the novel's humor because it is ridiculous, but it is also frightening because it feels so familiar. Just like the GlobalTeens, real-world social media is also controlling our use of language. There are only certain numbers of letters allowed in one 'tweet'. People increasingly use emojis, GIF, and memes to express themselves instead of using actual words. *Super Sad* hence uses language to 'poke fun' of the reader's reality and warn them. If things remain unchanged, this could be the kind of reality the reader ends up living in. Humor in *Super Sad* thus makes the novel both light

and heavy at the same time. It is light-hearted but also uncomfortable. It aims to invoke mixed and ambiguous feelings in the reader who need to actively engage with the novel to make sense of those feelings.

The fact that human feelings are supposed to be complex, ambiguous, and even incomprehensible is a crucial motif of Shteyngart's critical dystopian novel. At the plot level, it truly is a sad love story about two incompatible people who love each other but are doomed by social conditions to be separated. The writing style and language make the novel a satire that does not seem to take itself seriously. Yet, the story contains serious and alarming messages about the future of humanity. These mixed emotions are invoked in the reader simultaneously. The reader finds themselves constantly engaged with the text on an affective term. This is how *Super Sad* fully becomes a critical dystopia. The novel uses the ambiguity of feelings to invite a critical engagement from the reader at the level of affect. Through the layers of humor, sadness, hopefulness, and bleakness, there could be hope hidden somewhere, which the reader may find as they try to understand myriads of textual feelings that they are experiencing all at once.

Narrative Form and the Utopian Rhetoric in *The Circle*

In one regard, *The Circle* is a story about the power of utopian rhetoric. According to Marlana Portolano, utopian rhetoric refers to 'the use of symbolic communication in an attempt to move the actual state of human affairs into alignment with an imagined, better state of affairs – that is, a utopia, either one shared by the community or one invented by the speaker or both'.[132] From the company's circle logo, the design of its glasshouse campus

[132] Marlana Portolano, 'The Rhetorical Function of Utopia: An Exploration of the Concept of Utopia in Rhetorical Theory', *Utopian Studies*, 23 (2012), 113-141 <DOI: 10.5325/utopianstudies.23.1.0113>, p. 116.

to the weekly product launch event aptly named ‘Dream Friday’, the Circle is a company that is also a masterful rhetorician. Its success comes from its ability to use symbolic expression to present a hyper-surveillance network society as a utopia in which ‘all that happens must be known’ so that humans will achieve their full potential and become ‘all-seeing and all-knowing’.[133]

The novel contains many examples of utopian rhetoric in action. The opening campus tour is an example of how a utopian discourse performs its rhetorical function. During the tour, Mae is exposed to many symbols and expressions intended to convince a newcomer that what they are seeing is the embodiment of perfection. Another good example is Mae’s conversations with other Circlers, especially Bailey. As one of the three wise men, Bailey performs the role of the company’s chief rhetorician who is ‘most likely to appear on talk shows representing the Circle’.[134] While Ty plays the part of the enigmatic, young inventor and Stenton the aloof and ruthless businessman, Bailey is rather commonly known as ‘Uncle Eamon’:

> He was wry. He was funny. He had a way of speaking that was both lyrical and grounded, giving his audiences wonderful turns of phrase one moment and plainspoken common sense the next.[135]

His wit, accessibility, and ability to produce ‘turns of phrase’ while provoking ‘common sense’ in his audiences cast him as the master rhetorician responsible for selling the Circle’s vision as a utopian dream. Mae’s conversations with Bailey can effectively demonstrate the power of utopian rhetoric. Their talk discussion about the death of Mae’s ex-boyfriend

[133] Ibid., p. 70.
[134] Ibid., p. 24.
[135] Ibid.

Mercer, who commits suicide as a final act of resistance against the Circle's totalizing power, provides a particularly chilling example of how the rhetorical power of utopia can easily transform personal accountability into self-celebration. Consoling Mae for her loss, Bailey says:

> Mae, you were trying to help a very disturbed, antisocial young man. You and the other participants were reaching out, trying to bring him into the embrace of humanity, and he rejected that. I think it's self-evident that you were, if anything, his only hope.[136]

In his remark, Bailey shifts the blame from Mae onto Mercer by first attacking his character and then invoking the utopian ideal of 'reaching out' to create 'the embrace of humanity' as a justification for Mae and the Circle's action that contributes to his death. In this case, the utopian discourse is used to acquit the culprits of accountability and even justify the cause that forces Mercer to commit suicide in the first place. Even though Mercer drives off a cliff as an ultimate rejection of the Circle's effort to create a fully transparent society, Bailey successfully uses Mercer's death to justify further the need for complete transparency which he describes in the utopian terms as a form of 'communion and unity':

> You reject the groups, the people, the listeners out there who want to connect, to empathize and embrace, and disaster is imminent. Mae, this was clearly a deeply depressed and isolated young man who was not able to survive in a world like this, a world moving toward communion and unity.[137]

[136] Ibid., p. 462.
[137] Ibid., p. 464.

As the example demonstrates, utopian discourse as a form of rhetoric can be a powerfully persuasive tool. At the end of the conversation, Mae becomes so convinced by Bailey's reasoning that she is even more committed to the Circle's cause even after it takes Mercer's life:

> It was not knowing that was the seed of madness, loneliness, suspicion, fear. […] Full transparency would bring full access, and there would be no more not-knowing Mae smiled, thinking about how simple it all was, how pure.[138]

The exchange between Mae and Bailey over Mercer's death is one of many instances that the novel demonstrates the manipulating power of the utopian rhetoric that can capitulate to any side of an argument.

Moreover, Eggers also produces a critique of utopianism at the discourse level of his narrative. Specifically, he employs several formal affordances that may clash and create tension at the novel's story-discourse relation and affect the reader's experience. The reader's response to the story at the level of discourse is where the novel produces its anti-utopian criticism most forcefully. A story-discourse relation is a relation between events (story) and the representation of events (discourse). According to H. Porter Abbott, a story refers to a sequence of events, while discourse is how those events are represented.[139] At the story level, *The Circle* highlights the power of utopian rhetoric in Mae's characterization. At the discourse level, Eggers also adopts several conventions of literary utopia to tell Mae's story. However, at this level, he significantly departs from the utopian

[138] Ibid., p. 465.
[139] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 16.

genre that usually deploys the first-person narrator to recount the story. Instead, Eggers uses a limited third-person narrator to tell the story from Mae's perspective. Consequently, he can deploy the gap between the story and the discourse of the narrative form to produce a critical representation of utopia. That is, the narrator can expose the hypocrisy and inconsistency in Mae's thinking as she is exposed to the utopian rhetoric.

In one example, the narrator describes that Mae feels excited that she is now working for the Circle because the company only hires 'gifted young minds'.[140] However, in the same paragraph, the narrator also reveals that Mae feels grateful to Annie because she believes that Annie helps her get the job. Thus, there is a discrepancy in the claim that the Circle is the best company that only hires gifted young minds and that Annie uses her connection to help Mae. With the third-person narrator, Mae's oblivion to the contradiction in her thought becomes apparent. The narrator is able to follow Mae's line of thinking from feeling indebted to Annie to feeling smug that she is one of the chosen ones:

> And though Annie insisted she pulled no strings, Mae was sure that Annie had, and she felt indebted beyond all measure. A million people, a billion, wanted to be where Mae was at this moment, entering this atrium […] on her first day working for the only company that really mattered at all.[141]

The immediate transition from the feelings of indebtedness to smugness in this passage undermines Mae's claim that the Circle is a utopia because it is perfect. What is implied in this paragraph is that the Circle is far from being an ideal company simply because it also allows the use of personal connections. The third-person narrator can demonstrate that her

[140] Eggers, p. 2
[141] Ibid., p. 3.

judgment about the Circle is unreliable. The first-person perspective would have shown that she only sees the 'perfect' side of the company because she cannot acknowledge the flaws that will contradict her utopian assumption about it. Thus, Mae's belief that the Circle is a utopia becomes the very thing that prevents her from having a fair and honest opinion about the company. The idea of utopia as perfection becomes a trap in Mae's logical thinking: she cannot acknowledge the company's flaw if she wants to hold on to the belief that the Circle is a utopia. The novel's anti-utopian criticism is therefore rooted in how the idea of perfection obstructs critical thinking ability. Utopian perfection is dangerous because it could prevent a fair judgment and limit any chance of further improvement. This criticism, however, can only be delivered through the narrative device of the limited third-person narrator.

Apart from deploying the third-person narrator to destabilize the effectiveness of the utopian rhetoric, Eggers also use the time-bound, linear, and progressive nature of the narrative form to contest the timelessness and wholeness of the utopian form. When the story of the utopian rhetoric is presented in the narrative form, the paradox and impossibility of utopia become clear. According to Fredric Jameson, the utopian form is structurally ambiguous. On the one hand, utopia conveys totality and closure as it posits the image of perfection. On the other hand, utopia is used as an impulse that inspires changes and progresses. For Jameson, there is 'the formal dilemma of how works that posits the end of history can offer any usable historical impulses, how works which aim to resolve all political differences can continue to be in any sense political'.[142] Eggers

[142] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005) p. xiv.

mobilizes such a formal dilemma by revealing how utopia as a form that affords the idea of totality and boundedness cannot be sustained when it is represented through the linear, time-bound form of narrative. The ending of the novel is a good illustration of the tension between the two forms. The idea of utopia representing closure and totality is the novel's main motif. It is most discernible in the centralization of the circle symbol and the theme of 'completion' associated with the company's vision, products, and services. The novel ends with the Circle on its way to achieve completion with the launch of its 'demoxie' service which will allow all U.S. citizen to perform their civic duties through the TruYou account. Demoxie will make Circle membership mandatory. The company founder Ty warns Mae of the danger of completion as 'a totalitarian nightmare' and asks Mae to help him stop the Circle's effort. The final Book III section of the novel reveals that Mae sees Ty's warning as 'bizarre claims and misguided efforts to derail the completion of the Circle'[143] and proceeds to stop him. However, Mae still finds another thing that manages to remain outside the completed Circle. Watching her friend Annie being in a coma from over-exhaustion, Mae realizes that Annie's mind, encapsulated in her physical body, remains an enigma:

> Mae reached out to touch her forehead, marvelling at the distance this flesh put between them. What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing. It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. […] They need to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait.[144]

[143] Eggers, p. 490.
[144] Ibid., p. 491.

The paragraph suggests two things. First, the Circle's completion is not fully realized. There is still something else beyond its reach: the embodied human mind. Annie's body and mind represent another bounded whole used to contest the wholeness of the Circle's completion. According to Levine's concept of the 'contending wholes,' one of the main affordances of a bounded whole is that 'it always depends on a "constitutive outside." It is created and maintained by acts of exclusion.'[145] To contest wholeness, Levine suggests that we use the affordance of the bounded whole against itself:

> While we might want to resist the dominance of unified wholes by crushing them, or by rupturing their boundaries, a productive alternative involves not the destruction of form but its multiplication. That is, an effective strategy for curtailing the power of harmfully totalizing and unifying wholes is nothing other than to introduce *more wholes*. (emphasis in original)[146]

The fact that the bounded whole affords the constitute outside means there are bound to be more wholes out there. To contest the form of wholeness is to introduce those external wholes and undermine its totality. As Mae's remark about Annie clarifies, the embodied human mind remains out of reach of the Circle. It is a testament to the company's incompletion. Annie thus becomes a problem that she needs to resolve quickly.

Second, with the remark that the world 'would not wait', Eggers also implies that utopia's totality is unsustainable because it cannot resist the passage of time. The world will always move with time. Utopian perfection, as Jameson suggests, is also the 'end of history'. The representation of utopia in the narrative form is bound to reveal its

[145] Levine, p. 31.
[146] Ibid., pp. 45-46.

impossibility. As the novel's final paragraph indicates, the Circle's vision of completion is not only unattainable because of the threat of the constitutive outside such as Annie's body. It is also an impossible vision because of the existence of time.

Moreover, apart from using the narrative form to expose the temporal paradox of utopia, Eggers also demonstrates the effect of the utopian form on the narrative form by deliberately using the rhetorical style of utopia in the novel's narrative rhetoric. Specifically, Eggers uses utopian rhetoric to warn the reader of the danger of utopian ideals promised by media technologies. John Masterson writes that the novel deliberately oscillates between utopian and dystopian discourses to explore the fluctuation between dream and nightmare in the utopian vision of the Circle.[147] Timothy W. Galow points out that *The Circle* uses the argumentative or debate style of writing to 'help the reader understand, and not merely experience, the protagonists' gradual conversion to the supposedly utopian ideology'.[148] Characterizing the novel as part of the 'platonic turn', Magaret-Anne Hutton also argues that *The Circle* uses the Platonic mirror analogy to criticize media technologies and the capacity to misrepresent or distort the truth. However, Hutton points out that the novel ends in ambiguity. Despite its didactic and critical tone, the novel only 'invite[s] reflection rather than provide solutions'.[149]

While some of these arguments, except for Hutton's more reserved conclusion, point out that Eggers plays with the utopian and dystopian narratives to criticize the

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[147] John Masterson, 'Floods, Fortresses, and Cabin Fever: Worlding "Domeland" Security in Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* and *The Circle*, *American Literary History*, 28 (2016), 721-739 <DOI: 10.1093/alh/ajw041>, p. 734.
[148] Timothy W. Galow, *Understanding Dave Eggers* (Columbia, University of South Caroline Press, 2014), p. 116.
[149] Margaret-Anne Hutton, 'Plato, New Media Technologies, and the Contemporary Novel', *Mosaic: an Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 51 (2018), 179-195 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/688070> [accessed 9 April 2020], p.193.

positive view towards media technologies, Peter C. Herman argues that *The Circle* expresses optimism towards social media nonetheless. He reads Mae's characterization, especially her transformation into a schizophrenic networked individual, as a site that contains a utopian possibility. 'From the dystopia of non-stop rating, tweeting, and surveillance comes the utopia of knowing one's existence made a difference.'[150] Contrary to Herman's argument, Frida Beckman sees that Mae's flat characterization demonstrates Eggers's attempt to use literary forms to criticize how the control society changes individuals into 'nonpersonal and fluid nodulations of desires and affects'.[151] Mae's flatness as a character, Beckman argues, projects 'the very failure to keep up the appearance of the importance of the individual bourgeois subject within the dispositive of control'.[152] Despite arriving at different conclusions, these analyses agree that Eggers uses utopian and dystopian traditions to produce critical views about media technologies and human subjects.

Because the novel's form assumes a critical role, it also becomes a criticism for many critics. Several critics point to the novel's dull and didactic tone and the overt use of symbolism as its shortcoming. For example, Ellen Ullman writes that Eggers tends to 'overexplain' in his novel because he 'reframes the discussion as a fable, a tale meant to be instructive'.[153] Susanna Luthi sees that the novel is 'disappointing' but successful as

[150] Peter C. Herman, 'More, Huxley, Eggers, and the Utopian/Dystopian Tradition', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 41 (2018), 165-193 <DOI: 10.33137/rr.v41i3.31560>, p. 193.
[151] Frida Beckman, 'Control and the Novel: Dave Eggers and Disciplinary Form', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 66 (2020), 527-546 <DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2020.0024>, p.542.
[152] Ibid., p.543.
[153] Ellen Ullman, 'Ring of Power', *New York Times*, 1 November 2013 < https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/books/review/the-circle-by-dave-eggers.html> [accessed 12 May 2020).

'commentary on the era of big data and transparency'.[154] However, I contend that this is another instance in which Eggers uses the novel's form for a critical end. The dullness and is evidence of the novel's self-reflexivity that aims to use the form of utopia to criticize utopia itself. The instructive or commentary tone mirrors the didacticism of the utopian narrative. Character flatness or narrative dullness is a deliberate narrative strategy to criticize the inefficiency of utopian rhetoric. Hence, while critics may claim that the novel falls short of being an engaging piece of writing about online culture, the same formal operation that causes such grievance among critics allows the novel to express its anti-utopian criticism most efficiently.

Another important use of the novel's form to criticize utopia is in the narrative voice. The use of the limited third-person narrator that gives the reader access to Mae's inner thoughts and feelings also provides the reader the ability that is also Mae's ultimate utopian dream: to access the human mind. Reading *The Circle* in the third-person voice, the reader gets to experience the utopian scenario that the Circle and Mae envisions. In this regard, the novel formally presents itself as the realization of the very utopian dream that drives its own plot. In this regard, the novel appears to ask the reader the same question that Mercer used to ask Mae about the Circle: 'you think this is okay?' The answer, as many critics suggest, is not ok. Getting to live in the kind of utopia that the Circle envisions feels boring and uninspiring. Moreover, as a criticism of utopia's totalitarian tendency, which manifests in *The Circle* as a dream to create a totally transparent society that leads to the erasure of privacy and inner lives, the novel succeeds in using its form to demonstrate

[154] Susanna Luthi, 'Brainwash, Condition, Repeat: Dave Eggers's "The Circle"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 November 2013 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/dave-eggerss-the-circle/>.

the peril of such a dream. As Betiel Wasihun argues, 'the storytelling omniscience cannot be denied: the text represents transparency at every thinkable level in order to criticize the company's promotion of total surveillance under the guise of security and care.'[155] The novel's mode of narration makes the reader experience first-hand the fact that 'no privacy and no shame would mean no individual'.[156] In *The Circle*, the third-person narration and the apparent use of symbolism and didacticism limit the reader's critical and subjective engagement with the text.

The affective manipulation that the novel achieves through Mae's characterization and its didacticism expresses a fundamental anti-utopian view that utopia is oppressive. In *The Circle*, utopian oppression occurs at the levels of characterization, rhetorical style, and narration that aim to reflect the company's utopian motto that everyone is 'a full knowable human being of unlimited potential. And a crucial member of community'.[157] The flat characterization of Mae and the reader's engagement with the novel are a direct criticism of such utopian thinking. Mae's inability to engage with anyone in her community, and even with the reader, speak to the kind of community that will emerge if total transparency is achieved. Scott Selisker argues that a transparent society that the Circle tries to achieve also changes the dynamics of social life at the level of privacy. Complete transparency, according to Selisker, prevents the social form of privacy from emerging: 'Privacy resides in our ability to selectively manage and partition our information within our social

[155] Betiel Wasihun, 'Surveillance and Shame in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*', *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, 6 (2018), 2-21 <http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2018/13898/> [accessed 7 April 2020], p. 11.
[156] Ibid., p. 17.
[157] Ibid., p. 180.

networks.'[158] Mae's inability to engage fully with people in her community thus results from her inability to exercise her privacy at the social level.

Moreover, transparency and the idea of human's full knowability also glosses over humans' complex and affective nature. Instead, it only regards humans as an entity that is closed, complete, and comprehensible. One of the Circle's services, called LuvLuv, is an excellent example of how the Circle network produces affectless subjectivities and lacks substance and appeal. LuvLuv uses data from the individual's online activities to create a set of data about the person. Francis, Mae's love interest, runs her data through the LuvLuv algorithm. She finds the experience curious and disturbing:

> She couldn't put her finger on it. Was it only the surprise of it? Was it the pinpoint accuracy of the algorithms? Maybe. But then again, it wasn't entirely accurate, so was *that* the problem? Having a matrix of preferences presented as your essence, as the whole you? Maybe that was it. It was some kind of mirror, but it was incomplete, distorted. And if Francis wanted any or all of that information, why couldn't he just *ask* her? (emphasis in original)[159]

Mae's feedback to LuvLuv illustrates how a fully transparent network society can fundamentally change human relationships. As Mae herself ponders about the need for LuvLuv in a relationship: 'why couldn't he just *ask* her?' Moreover, she realizes that there is more to herself than a set of data produced by an algorithm. Even though the data is 'accurate', she cannot pinpoint what makes her uncomfortable. Behind her complete and seemingly undistorted representation through an algorithm, she feels it cannot fully express

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[158] Scott Selisker, 'The Novel and Wikileaks: Transparency and the Social life of Privacy', *American Literary History*, 30 (2018), 756-776 <DOI:10.1093/alh/ajy040>, p.772.
[159] Eggers., p. 125.

her subjectivity. What Mae finds missing is the affective level of the human condition and connection. It is also precisely the lack of affection in the characterization of Mae and in the novel's mode of narration that disengages the reader. Thus, the novel's ultimate criticism of utopia appears to be that the notion of perfectibility can obstruct an opportunity to form affective relations, which are crucial to the constitution of human subjectivities. *The Circle*'s utopian vision is an affectless network society, and it has to be so because it is founded on the principle of complete transparency and knowability. The novel reflects on the state of affectlessness by deliberately forming an affectless relation with the reader. Thus, reading The Circle becomes an uncomfortable, disengaging, and uninspiring experience in which the reader keeps getting 'bludgeoned' by its messages and lessons.[160] However, that is the point of the novel after all. For through the anti-utopia lens, utopianism is nothing but an attempt to bludgeon people into agreeing with its view about perfection.

Conclusion

As dystopian novels *Super Sad* and *The Circle* warn about the emergence of a neoliberal network society in which advanced communication technologies and neoliberal values produce network subjects who are propelled to consume, connect, and constantly refashion their identities to fit in and improve their social status. Both novels are written in the post-critical tradition that recently emerges as a response to the crisis of representation and critique brought about by neoliberalism. The post-critical turn promotes a more constructive approach to the critical practice that usually aims to debunk or delegitimize oppositional viewpoints. As neoliberalism becomes all-encompassing, the traditional mode

[160] The term is used to describe Eggers's lacklustre narrative, see Graeme McMillan, 'Dave Eggers's *The Circle*: What Internet Looks Like If You Don't Understand It', *Wired*, 10 November 2013 <https://www.wired.com/2013/10/the-circle-review-dave-eggers/> [accessed 12 May 2020].

of critique appears to be ineffective. Critique is now required to do more than just defending or debunking a claim because neoliberalism can co-opt any side of the argument. Post-critical thinkers such as Latour thus suggest that critics should describe how many participants are involved in the unfolding of an event. The new critical practice should try to trace relations and associations among as many actors as possible.

This chapter discussed how the post-critical turn is closely associated with the new formalist approach that relies on the affordances of form to produce a critical discourse. I argued that *Super Sad* and *The Circle* adopt such a relativist and formalist approach to reassess utopia as a critical discourse. They respectively use the traditions of critical dystopia and anti-utopia to produce a post-critical narrative that exposes and explores limitations and possibilities of utopian discourse in the neoliberal context. I used Latour's argument about the network being a double-movement structure in my analysis of the novels' use of the utopian genres to represent neoliberal network subjects. I argued that *Super Sad* represents network subjects that possess an oppositional agency that is formed through relations and alliances. These subjects are able to constructively respond to their social circumstances because they can cultivate self-awareness as an embedded member of a larger collective. The network subjects in *Super Sad* thus represent the kind of subjectivity with a post-critical attitude. Being part of the network, they constitute and enrich themselves through the various relations they are inevitably a part of. As a result, they possess a stronger sense of self capable of actively affecting and contributing to improving the social circumstances.

The Circle takes a different approach to the post-critical turn by highlighting the danger and limitation of traditional critical practices such as the utopian rhetoric. The

constitution of the network subject in *The Circle* is grounded on the utopian ideal of human perfectability in which humans are believed to have a core self that can be perfected given the right circumstances. These network subjects socialize and connect as networked individuals who move freely in the network and never belongs to any group. As a result, they become schizophrenic subjects which, in Baudrillard's description, are lost in the ecstasy of communication. They are incapable of having a strong and assured sense of self despite believing in the idea of self-sovereignty.

In the second half of this chapter, I examined how *Super Sad* and *The Circle* employ formal affordances to produce a text-reader relationship that grants a post-critical sensibility to the text. In *Super Sad,* Shteyngart uses the network form to demonstrate the intertwined relationship between texts and human subjects. He does so by telling the story of Lenny and Eunice through the self-writing modes of the diaries and the correspondence to illustrate their embeddedness in the networked relations with other human subjects and other texts. He also emphasizes the fluidity and historical embeddedness of textual meaning and genre by presenting the novel as a book in the guise of another book capable of moving freely in and out of different genres and producing different meanings as it passes through different genres and historical contexts. To further illustrate the fluidity and relationality of text, Shteyngart incorporates humor and playfulness in his writing style to form an affective relationship with the reader whose understanding of the text is contingent on their ability to appreciate the humor and language play in the novel.

On the other hand, Eggers uses the tension between the enclosed form of utopia and the open and progressive narrative form to highlight the paradox and impossibility of utopia and the utopian rhetoric. The tension between the two forms brings to light the paradox of

utopianism that is grounded in the idea of static perfection but dismisses the significance of progression and changes. Additionally, Eggers uses the rhetorical style of utopia in the narrative to demonstrate the incompatibility of the two forms and how the utopian rhetoric is proved to be ineffective and disengaging when the reader is directly exposed to it in the novel's narrative. Therefore, the novel's anti-utopian criticism is post-critical to the extent that it does not produce a counterargument but seeks to engage with the reader at the level of form.

My discussion of *Super Sad* and *The Circle* aims to suggest that the two novels are hybrid fiction to the extent that they are written with an awareness of their embeddedness and contingency on the conditions that they aim to represent and critique and on the context in which they are read and interpreted. These texts respond to the emergence of a neoliberal network society in which advanced information technologies and consumer culture have converged to produce network subjects. To effectively respond to these conditions and represent the experience of these subjects, the novels adopt the post-critical mode of writing to explore the possibilities of engaging with neoliberalism. Moreover, the novels formally posit themselves as a text that relies on the readers' contribution to give it meanings and values. In this chapter, therefore, the term 'hybrid' in 'hybrid fiction' is interchangeable with the network concept to the extent that it refers to the coming together of heterogeneous elements that are constantly morphing and changing according to the relations they forge with other elements. Likewise, the novels like *Super Sad* and *The Circle* are a hybrid text because they seek to build a text and reader relationship that is dynamic, contingent, and grounded on the assumption that the text and the reader are both a networked entity – an actant, that is always relational, and thus hybrid.

Conclusion

In *Metamorphoses*, Rosi Braidotti writes that amidst rapid changes and developments, we need 'alternative representations and social locations for the kind of hybrid mix we are in the process of becoming. Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, positions.'[1] Braidotti links the new figuration to nomadic subjectivity that is 'always a collective enterprise, "external" to the self'.[2] These nomadic subjects are in a larger web of connections with other entities that can change and transform them. As a composite kind of being, they require a 'post-personal' style of representation that can make such interconnections comprehensible.[3]

This thesis examines how contemporary American literature adopts such post-personal figurative thinking in its representation of subjectivities. The thesis focused on narrative, urban, and network subjectivities as they represent what Braidotti calls 'transformations, metamorphoses, mutations, and processes of change'.[4] The consideration of narrative subjectivities in the first chapter explored how the self is formulated through a narrative construction that is a collaborative and interpersonal process. The attention to the narrative aspect of the self also leads to the conceptualization of sincerity and self-authenticity as a form of accountability. The second chapter considered the relation between the urban space and subjectivities that calls for an affective form of literacy that can render such relations legible. Lastly, the third chapter explored how the attention to

[1] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 2.
[2] Ibid., p.7.
[3] Ibid., p. 9.
[4] Ibid.

network configuration is connected to a new mode of critical thinking that is sensitive to the affective relations of the subject with others.

The undertaking of this thesis is also part of an effort to identify some characteristics of contemporary American fiction. Specifically, I posit that a group of writing portrays the human conditions and experiences in the twenty-first century in such a way that challenges our understanding of human subjectivity and literary texts. I label this body of work 'hybrid fiction' with a proposition that 'hybridity' is a dominant logic governing its formal features, subject matters, and representation of human subjects. More specifically, in my reading of the six novels, I aim to trace the connection between hybridity and affect by examining how hybrid subjectivity and literature can be understood as an affective entity.

Therefore, on one level, it is possible to define hybrid fiction as affective fiction. To an extent, this also means that I see hybrid fiction necessarily being part of what Mark McGurl calls the 'new cultural geology'. The term describes a critical approach that does not consider culture solely from the humanistic viewpoint and only within human's historical time. Instead, McGurl points our attention to the cultural, geological thinking that operates '*outside of* rather than *after* the modern and postmodern' (emphasis in original).[5] This mode of thinking is 'exomodern' because it cannot be incorporated into the humanist temporal progression marked by the shifts, ruptures, and transitions from modernity, postmodernity, and post-postmodernity. Rather the temporal and spatial scale of exomodernism surpasses and encompasses all of the human enterprises, rendering

[5] Mark McGurl, 'The New Cultural Geology', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 380-390 <DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4011> p. 381.

human agency extremely contingent and insignificant. Therefore, the exomodern thinking is a strand of posthumanism as it places human existence in such a vast, geological context to emphasize the ontological condition of humans. Exomodernism, moreover, pays attention to other nonhuman entities that exist alongside humans within this geological time and space. Thus, exomodernism does not simply focus on the ontology of humans but also considers the contingency and limited agency of humans through the recognition of the equal power and agency of the nonhuman others.

The new cultural geology influences my conceptualization of hybrid fiction in two ways. First, it allows me to consider hybrid fiction outside the modernism/postmodernism genealogy but as a group of literary works that reflects the commitment to thinking ontologically about the world and itself as a literary object. This leads me to consider hybrid fiction as a text that produces and transmits meanings affectively. Second, the ontological turn in the new cultural ontology reminds us of the interconnection among humans and nonhumans on the level of bodies. Therefore, the relationship between the reader as a human and literature as the nonhuman other may be reconceptualized on the basis of their ontological, affective relations. Rachel Greenwald Smith's theorization of impersonal feelings is an exemplary work in affective literary criticism. It recognizes that there is an emotional relationship between the text and the reader. She sees a transmission of affect in the act of reading that potentially constitutes both the text and the reader's subjectivity. When Smith invokes the concept of an ecosystem in her argument about textual affectivity, she inevitably places her work in the tradition of exomodernism. From the exomodern perspective, hybrid fiction may be more than just a literary label but a reflection of a commitment in the text and reader relation at the ontological level.

In a way, my study of hybrid fiction belongs to the ontological turn of literary criticism that Walter Benn Michaels calls the 'commitment to the meaningless'.[6] Michaels argues that attention to the materiality of the text that disregards authorial intention can lead to the situation in which subject positions become the only thing that matters. The subject's different experiences of the text substitute what the text means. The primacy of the subject that arises from the commitment to textual ontology, Benn warns, could lead to the end of ideology and history. Ideologies, beliefs, and values will be reduced to a matter of beings and positions. Disagreement about right or wrong is replaced by a debate about what is and what is not. Consequently, there will no longer be a possibility for historical thinking, critical thinking, and ideological development outside of personal identities, subject positions, and identitarian politics. 'The replacement of the sign by the mark […] is foundational for and constitutive of the aesthetics of posthistoricism.'[7]

Michaels imagines a somewhat dystopian scenario that results from the attention to the materiality of texts and subject positions. However, this thesis aims to illustrate that the emphasis on subject positions does not necessarily abolish the collective awareness that Michaels speculates. On the contrary, the recent ontological turn emphasizes relational thinking. It demonstrates a mutually constitutive relation between the subject and the object. In *Without Criteria*, Steven Shaviro argues that in this kind of relation, the subject is 'neither active nor quite passive, nor even really self-reflexive but […] in the *middle*

[6] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 7.
[7] Ibid., p. 18.

voice' (emphasis in original).[8] By the term middle voice, Shaviro explains how the subject is affected by the object and vice versa during the moment of encounter and contemplation:

> The contemplated object perpetuates itself in, and for the contemplating subject; the subject subsists only to the extent that it resonates with the feelings inspired by that object. […] The feelings cannot be separated from the subject for whom they exist; yet the subject itself can only be said to exist by virtue of these feelings, and in relation to them.[9]

Following Shaviro, paying attention to the materiality of texts is not limited to perceiving only their physicality. Reading with an awareness of texts as an object is not the same as sensing the 'sensuous appearance' of the text and seeing it 'without reference to the maker's purpose'.[10] The text as an object is not void of the agential capability to affect changes. Instead, as Shaviro argues, the ontological turn considers reading as a contemplative act during an encounter. Textual meaning is a product of a contemplative interaction in which the subject's feeling and judgment of the text is derived from the text itself, even though the feeling only belongs to individual subjects.

The term hybridity is central to the thesis because it reflects the ontological relationality that arises from attention to materiality. Seeing the world through the material lens does not result in the subjects being cut loose from beliefs, values, and ideologies while floating aimlessly as individuals with no ties or connections. Quite the opposite, the ontological turn reinforces the subject's embeddedness in the social world that endows beliefs, values, and ideologies and reflects the subject's relations with other human and

[8] Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 13.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Michaels, p. 6.

nonhuman entities. In other words, considering the text as an object is part of the speculative tradition. Speculative thinking can be traced back to Alfred N. Whitehead whose speculative philosophy, Isabel Stengers argues, is a constructivist approach that 'raise[s] the question of "how it holds together," or how it is affect by its environment and how it affects it'.[11] Stengers thus characterizes Whitehead's speculative thinking as a 'leap of imagination' that experiments with and explores possibilities of relations to answer an essential question about humans as they experience changes and developments: "what has happened to us?".[12]

A practice of reading that pays attention to the materiality of texts may reveal the primacy of the subject but can also answer important questions about ourselves, our place in a web of connections, how relations constitute us, and vice versa. It makes us aware of what has happened to us in the process of reading, what changes us, and how we affect the meaning of the text we are reading. Put differently, by paying attention to the material quality of the text, reading becomes less reflective but more diffractive. Karen Barad explains that both reflective and diffractive ways of thinking originate from optical metaphors. While reflection refers to mirror and sameness, diffraction is sensitive to differences. The distinction between reflection and diffraction has a critical ramification in critical practice. Reflection contributes to a mode of critique that is reflexive. By contrast, Barad writes, 'diffractions are attuned to differences-differences that our knowledge-making practices make and the effects they have on the world.'[13] All entities involved in

[11] Isabel Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans.by Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 18.
[12] Ibid., p. 22.
[13] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 72.

the process of diffraction will be affected and become different. Therefore, diffraction as a critical method cannot only help one to gain and produce knowledge but, in the process, one is bound to affect and be affected by all entities involved. As Melanie Sehgal writes, the process of diffraction

> not only forces us to reconsider what an entity "in its essence" is, but brings the entire distribution of subject and object, knower and known, words and things, words and world under reconsideration. The relation between knower and known can no longer be described as on of distant gaze. To engage in a process of knowing is to be part of the equation […] Epistemology and ontology can no longer be kept apart.[14]

Diffractive reading thus does not consider knowledge and meaning as a discovery of something that belongs to the object. Instead, it contributes to the becoming of both the subject and the object in the process of reading. This leads Sehgal to conclude that ontology and epistemology are not necessarily separated – 'knowing is part of the intra-action'. Sehgal's argument is also echoed in Karin Murris and Vivienne Bozalek's description of reading as 'response-able methodology' that is 'the cultivation of collective knowing, desiring, being and making-with so that we render each other capable'.[15] In both diffractive or response-able reading modes, subject positions may gain primacy but might not be such a bad thing. As Sehgal writes, it represents 'one possible rendering of the world we inhabit,

[14] Melanie Sehgal, 'Diffractive Propositions: Reading Alfred North Whitehead with Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, *Parallax*, 20 (2014), 188-201 <DOI: 10.1080/13534645.2014.927625>, p. 189.
[15] Karin Murris and Vivienne Bozalek, 'Diffraction and Response-able Reading of Texts: The Relational Ontologies of Barad and Deleuze', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32 (2019), 872-886 <DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2019.1609122>, p. 882.

a possibly interesting and adequate one'.[16] And if I may add, it is also a rendition in which we are directly implicated and thus reinforces our relational subjectivity.

Therefore, while Michaels might protest the supposed end of ideology and history as a consequence of the ontological turn that lets loose the subjects from their embeddedness in the social world, it might be possible to imagine a new kind of politics when we are left with only subject positions. The ontological turn allows us to understand the subject as a 'whatever singularity' in Giorgio Agamben's argument. 'Whatever singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an idea, that is, to the totality of its possibilities.'[17] Because the subject has now gained primacy, it becomes free to imagine all the possibilities without limitations. Elizabeth Grosz also writes about the inherent futurity in ontological thinking to illustrate its merit:

> Yet an ontology entails a consideration of the future, not only of what we can guarantee or be certain but above all what virtualities in the present may enable in the future. This is the possibility of the future being otherwise than the present, the openness of a future which is nevertheless tied to, based on but not entirely limited by, the past and present.[18]

Rather than being bereft of possibilities for meaningful actions, the ontological turn might be able to provide as many possibilities to engage with the world as we are willing to take that leap of imagination.

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[16] Ibid., p. 198.
[17] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans.by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 67.
[18] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 2.

The use of the term hybridity in this thesis reflects such hopefulness and openness embedded in speculative and ontological thinking. Hybridity reflects the decentering of human subjects and the interconnectedness of all things. It emphasizes the relation between the non-human and the human and considers humans an entity in a network of connection with others. Moreover, another important resonance of hybridity also lies in its potential as a destabilizing force. Being hybrid implies impurity and inauthenticity. As the thesis demonstrates, hybrid fiction thus directly challenges ideals such as authenticity, fixity of meaning, or rigid criticism. However, and more importantly, hybridity can produce both a destabilizing and generative force. Accordingly, I tried to demonstrate in this thesis that the attempt to reassess notions such as authenticity, literacy, and criticism also entails a new alternative and possibility that hybrid thinking makes possible.

In other words, hybridity also contains a sense of regeneration and futurity. This aspect of hybridity informs the main motifs of hybrid fiction explored in this thesis. The trickster trope and the use of signifying practice in *The Intuitionist* are examples of the productive potential of hybridity. The novel incorporates various tropes from African-American literary traditions and genres such as speculative fiction and detective novels to imagine new ways to signify and produce meaning. Therefore, hybrid fiction may be best described in the words of Carrie Wexler from *Innocents and Others* when she compares an artist to a gleaner: 'What is a gleaner? Well, it is a nice word for a thief, except you take what no one wants. Not just unusual ideas or things. You look closely at the familiar to discover what everyone else overlooks or ignores or discards.'[19]

[19] Dana Spiotta, *Innocents and Others* (London: Picador, 2016), p.219.

The ontological turn also happens concomitant with the emergence of post-postmodernism. In asking 'what was postmodernism?' Linda Hutcheon points to the end of the postmodern era by concluding that 'electronic technology and globalization, respectively, have transformed how we experience the language we use and the social world in which we live'.[20] This transformation alters the relationship between textuality and worldliness – or how the engagement with texts reflects the conditions in the world – that can no longer be characterized as postmodern. Post-postmodernism signifies this moment of change. Defining post-postmodernism, Robert McLaughlin emphasizes the feeling of discontent that postmodern fiction becomes too self-reflexive, co-opted by the mainstream that it is ought to subvert, and thus incapable of having a genuine and productive connection with the social world. The 'post-postmodern discontent' is expressed as the 'aesthetic sea change' that aims to 'reenergize literature's social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives.'[21] In a more recent essay about post-postmodernism, McLaughlin is more cautious in declaring the advent of post-postmodernism. Instead, he describes the new moment as 'postmodernism in the 21st century' in which the postmodern sensibilities have a change in focus.

> Where the postmodernists represented – celebrated, really – a highly indeterminate reality through insistently experimental self-referential means, the post-postmodernists have tended to deemphasize the self-referentiality in their fiction,

[20] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 181.
[21] Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symblokē*, 12 (2004), 53-68 <DOI: 10.1353/sym.2005.0029>, p. 55.

> at times, […] appearing to return to the conventions of realism, yet still insisting on the indeterminacy of reality.[22]

McLaughlin's call for fiction's renewed engagement with the social world is realized in its commitment to reality whose representational transparency is exposed by postmodern self-reflexivity, parody, and irony. However, while this return to realism can be seen as the post-postmodern mission to revive the relationship between the text and the world, post-postmodern realism is also indicative of the attempt to chart the changing conception of human subjectivity and the new relationship between the human and the world. Therefore, post-postmodernism is not simply a naïve return to realism. It recognizes that those binaries terms such as reality and representation, humans and non-humans, subjects and objects need a reconceptualization before any return to realism can be achieved.

This is the entry point for hybrid fiction in contemporary American fiction. Hybrid fiction is partly a post-postmodern project because of its commitment to realism. It is committed to representing humans in the social world in which all entities exist in an affective, networked relationship as a hybrid subject and object. However, the focus on hybridity and affect in this thesis also separates hybrid fiction from the traditions of modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. Instead, it is possible to characterize hybrid fiction as part of what Mark McGurl calls exomodernism. On the one hand, exomodernism provides the clarity and rationale behind the use of the term 'hybridity' in my inquiry. With such clarity, on the other hand, I can begin to establish the link between hybrid fiction and the current trend of cultural engagement that could be characterized by

[22] Robert L. McLaughlin, 'After the Revolution: US Postmodernism in the Twenty-First Century', *Narrative*, 21 (2013), 284-295 <DOI: 10.1353/nar.2013.0021>, p.289.

its attention to affect, to the interdependence, or the network, of the human and the nonhuman in the formation of both the natural and the cultural worlds.

In McGurl's introduction of exomodernism, however, there is not an explicit reference to hybridity. The term only invites a re-examination of humans outside of their own history and encourages a recognition of the limit and insignificance of human agency. It is a heightened awareness of the ontological condition of humans and a deprivileging of the humancentric perspective even within the humanist project such as cultural studies. Along the line of the exomodern thinking, therefore, the distinction between the subject and the object is blurring. Humans are exposed as just an object while other nonhuman objects appear to have gain agency.

For McGurl, exomodernism functions as an umbrella term. Any cultural works and studies that aim to decenter human subjectivity and recognize the hybrid relations between humans and others all belong in the scope of exomodernism. Among the works that McGurl posits to have reflected the exomodern sensibility are those of Latour and the speculative realists. What he regards to be characteristically exomodern in their works are the attempt to 'take non-human objects as seriously as possible, refusing the philosophical privileges long accorded to the human and to human representation and consciousness in particular'.[23] As such, McGurl specifically identifies labels such as "object-oriented ontology", and "speculative realism" in association with exomodern thinking. These strands of philosophy provide a theoretical foundation for what hybridity signifies in hybrid fiction. They allow the concept of hybridity to be realized not only at the level of contents but also at the formal

[23] McGurl, p.384.

and structural levels. With my intention to associate hybrid fiction with exomodernism, it is in the works of thinkers such as McGurl and other exomodern theorists that lend important critical tools for my study of hybrid fiction in this thesis.

As previously stated, what I understand to be the moment of transition from postmodernism is the return to realism and the increasing attention to the ontological condition of humans. These traits mark the arrival of post-postmodernism for many literary scholars. Hybrid fiction also shares the same emphasis on the indeterminacy of reality and the ontology of humans. However, what makes hybrid fiction exomodern is that they do not see these emphases as a renewed energy invested in the realist mode of fiction. As Madhu Dubey observes, the post-postmodernists regard the return to realism as 'the emergence of a new kind of social novel', which has a renewed ability to connect with the social world.[24] However, she does not see the post-postmodern recommitment to realism to have solved the problem of the postmodern self-referential impasse. For Dubey, the post-postmodern return to realism is not a solution to this impasse as long as the division between reality and representation is maintained. What will indicate the passing of the postmodern moment is the change in the relationship between the textual and the worldly as suggested by Hutcheon.[25] In exomodernism, this relationship has finally changed because we are now confronted with and overwhelmed by the geologic time and space for which humanistic representation can never be sufficient and by the fact that both human and nonhuman entities are mutually and equally constituted and transformed by affect. The textual cannot maintain its representative or critical ability when the scale of the worldly

[24] Madhu Dubey, 'Post-Postmodern Realism?', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 364-371 <DOI: 10.1215/0041462X-2011-4012> p.369.
[25] Hutcheon, p. 181.

is too large for human imagination to contain, and the anthropocentric conception of the human itself is greatly destabilized.

Thus, hybrid fiction as a product of exomodern thinking does not naively claim to possess a more effective critical and representational function with its investigation on the condition of reality and humans. Hybrid fiction functions as a 'descriptive tool' that aims to 'detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence'.[26] The meaning that is produced by hybrid fiction is descriptive and thus constructive. The writers of hybrid fiction are the ones who have a realist attitude with an awareness that they can never claim to know reality; reality can only be affectively felt, described, imagined of, and speculated.

This descriptive form of representation of hybrid fiction carries a realistic undertone with a certain sense of humility. They do not claim that reality can be represented in a more sincere and productive way. The realistic mode of hybrid fiction is a form of speculative realism that acknowledges the inaccessibility to reality. Treating reality as speculation, hybrid fiction moves beyond conventional realism. Instead, we often see in hybrid fiction the integration of realistic representation and fantastical imagination. The marriage between fantasy and realism is the formal acknowledgment of the reality that our mental ability can never grasp and comprehend. At best, we can attempt to describe and imagine a reality that we are a part of, with a full awareness that there is an externality that exists independently from humans, and thus human minds can never be a privileged vantage point from which the real can be revealed.

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[26] Bruno Latour, Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 225-248 <DOI:10.1086/421123>, p. 246.

The speculative realist attitude of hybrid fiction also creates a narrative mode that does not aim to establish a cause-and-effect connection or aspire to arrive at a solution. The narrative structure of hybrid fiction leans towards being a descriptive observation of how entities are related, affected, and constituted. Often the narrative progression in hybrid fiction is dominated by the sense of indeterminacy, irresolution, constant movement. There is not an obvious indication of where and when the actions take place or end. There is not an endpoint of resolution where a judgment is made, or knowledge is gained. Events are not linked in a causative manner; they are described to the reader as an ongoing happening. The reader is thus given an invitation to make a free interpretation and assumption of what those events could actually mean as they are unfolding and developing.

The lack of clear narrative closure, indeterminacy, and irresolution also leads to another trait of hybridity discernible in the relationship between the text and the reader. Without closure, the text does not contain an absolute and final truth about the story. At the same time, the reader needs to be actively involved in the meaning production of the text. There is no clear division between a piece of writing as a signifier and the reader as the receiving end of what is signified. Reading becomes a collaborative process in which the production of meaning comes from both participants in the process. This mutual relationship between the text and the reader provides an example of a network in which all entities, including both humans and nonhumans, exist interdependently. The reading process that hybrid fiction encourages through the use of narrative indeterminacy is the process that does not regard the text as a passive object within which the meaning is contained and waiting to be revealed, nor the reader as a subject who is able to seek such meaning that exists independently from them. Reading becomes the process of affectation

- hybridization between the text and the reader as two equal entities that generate meanings and feelings through affective encounters.

With the reader being actively involved in the way the text produces its meaning, what is understood to be fixed and authentic about a piece of writing or any work of art is also challenged. A novel can become different novels for different readers. The fact that a single text can be so unstable and fluid testifies to its status as an entity in the network in which 'no one entity is significant in isolation, but instead attains meaning through its numerous – and changeable – relation to other entities.'[27] While the speculative realist mode endows the sense of hybridity in the formal quality of hybrid fiction, the indeterminacy in the narrative also reflects the affective nature of the text that allows us to see the text itself as a hybrid object.

Finally, it may be possible to conclude that hybrid fiction may belong in what Francis Halsall calls 'actor-network aesthetics' or relational aesthetics that take these relations among hybrid entities that populate a network as their subject matter.[28] Hybrid fiction aims to represent the nature and movement of relations among these entities constituted by their affective encounters. Therefore, the narration of events and portrayal of humans in hybrid fiction become a description of various relations in a single temporal and spatial location, an observation of how the change in time and space may affect those relations and thus the human subjectivity which is constituted by those affective relations. With these intimate and highly contingent relations that humans can have with other

[27] Anders Blok and Togben Elgaard Jensen, *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.
[28] Francis Hall, 'Actor-Network Aesthetics: The Conceptual Rhymes of Bruno Latour and Contemporary Art', *New Literary History*, 47(2016), 439-461 <DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2016.0022 >, p. 447.

entities, their subjectivity and identity become fluid and constantly shifting. The fluidity and relationality of human subjectivity finally lead to the question of what it means to be human after the recognition that the distinction between humans and others cannot be made at all. While hybrid fiction may share the posthuman sensibility in this regard, it is a strand of posthumanism that enriches, instead of diminishing, our understanding of what it means to be human. It is the posthuman strand that works as an extended humanism. It recognizes humans as being a part of the collective of hybrid and affective entities. With this recognition, humans may begin to grasp both their limitations and potentials as members of a larger collective in which all entities – humans and nonhumans, signs and things, subjects and objects – play a part in a mutually constituting process. With this recognition, humans may begin to explore all the possibilities that their relationality can help realize.

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