Loneliness as Affective Structure in Contemporary Autofiction

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his 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 uses a range of contemporary works of autofiction to show that authors are increasingly turning to the form in order to write about loneliness. It argues that this reflects a recent affective shift, borrowing ideas from history of emotions discourse and applying them to a specific section of contemporary literature. It shows, in particular, that authors represent loneliness not only thematically in their works but also stylistically and formally, and argues that autofiction offers a medium for both representing and resisting this. Moreover, it argues that much of an author's ability to do so is dependent upon a reader's willingness to read their works 'reparatively', taking it as a given that their readers subscribe to 'post-theory' ideas about the novel as a form. More specifically, it looks at four authors, and four different versions of loneliness. In the first chapter, it shows how David Foster Wallace's later works tried to move away from metafiction and towards autofiction, arguing that this allowed him to address a sense of existential loneliness. In the second chapter, it considers how Ben Lerner writes about, and against, feelings of loneliness which are triggered by meditating on one's place in a global, neoliberal world. In the third chapter, it examines Rachel Cusk's engagement with experiences of domestic loneliness, particularly those of wives and mothers. Finally, in the fourth chapter, it analyses Tao Lin's work and the impact of digital mediation on loneliness, and ends by addressing some of the ethical questions his work forces us to consider. The thesis concludes by considering the efficacy of writing autofiction as a way to represent and assuage loneliness, and reflects on what the overall project suggests about how autofiction might be adopted as a mode in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

Autofiction and Loneliness in the Twenty-First Century

Fay Bound Alberti, in her recent monograph on loneliness, pointed out that in the pursuit of a cure for the so-called 'loneliness epidemic', medical practitioners in the West tend to prescribe 'remedies that engage the mind—talking therapies, book groups, [and] interventions based on combatting depression and anxiety through connectedness to others'.[1] As Alberti acknowledges, the act of reading is often viewed as an antidote to loneliness, especially when it connects one to a wider community of readers. In this thesis I will demonstrate that contemporary fiction is increasingly interested in interrogating its own capacity to constitute such a 'remedy' of the mind. While reading and writing are, of course, ordinarily solo pursuits, in this project there will be an emphasis on the ways that they facilitate what David Vincent calls 'networked solitude', through which 'solitary individuals… enjoy their own company and at the same time feel that they [are] in some sense part of a wider community'.[2] Developing this idea, the thesis will explore contemporary fiction's explicit engagement with loneliness as a theme, and consider the ways that this thematic focus has catalysed experimentation with both form and genre, as represented by the recent rise in popularity of autofiction. While there is existing work that argues that the writing of autofiction can function therapeutically for writers, this thesis extends that idea by arguing that autofiction, understood as both a genre and a mode, amplifies one's sense of 'networked solitude', allowing it to function therapeutically for both writers and readers.[3] To make this argument, in the chapters that follow I will closely analyse a range of works - both autofictional and otherwise - by four authors whose texts I will argue exemplify this contemporary trend: David Foster Wallace, Ben Lerner, Rachel Cusk, and Tao Lin.

The thesis is particularly timely, since autofiction has enjoyed what Clara Sitbon has called 'exponential popularity in twenty-first century literature'.[4] In the year before I began this project, for instance, Grace McCleen noted that 'five of the eight novels shortlisted for… [the] Rathbones Folio

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[1] Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 14.

[2] David Vincent, *A History of Solitude* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), p. 34.

[3] See: Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development' in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 179-96; David Vincent, *A History of Solitude* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), p. 34.

[4] Clara Sitbon, 'Fake Testimonies: How the Literary Hoax becomes a Tool for Social and Humanitarian Awareness', in Laura Crossley and Clara Sitbon, *Deception* (Boston: BRILL, 2019), p. 55.

Prize were autofictions'.[5] Academic studies of anglophone autofiction, too, have emerged in recent years that respond to this increased interest in autofiction outside the francophone world. Three of these texts in particular have greatly informed my understanding of the term for this project and, in many instances, established a precedent for the theoretical approaches I take throughout: Hywel Dix's edited collection, *Autofiction in English*, Marjorie Worthington's *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction* and Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor's *The Autofictional*. Likewise, loneliness has increasingly become an object of study, not only for psychologists and sociologists (for whom it has been an ongoing topic since Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's landmark study in 1959 of loneliness as an illness) but also for historians of emotions. Since the UK introduced its first Minister for Loneliness in 2018, Fay Bound Alberti has published *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion*, David Vincent has published his closely related *A History of Solitude*, and a Wellcome Trust-funded research project has been established at Queen Mary University of London examining 'Solitudes: Past and Present'. This thesis seeks to synthesise these two increasingly popular academic strands to consider how an increased focus on loneliness (and ostensible rise in our experiences of it) might be reflected in a concomitant rise in the popularity of autofiction.[6]

Additionally, the thesis will show that the effects of the postcritical turn that has occurred in academia are increasingly visible in this particular strand of contemporary fiction. By arguing that writers of autofiction are acutely aware of its heightened capacity to instil a sense of networked solitude, I will show that authors capitalise on this fact by modelling various forms of postcritical engagement with art (both literary and visual) in their works, in order to encourage a similar readerly disposition in their audience. As such, this thesis is situated not only in the socio-historical moment when loneliness seems to be reaching new levels, but also in the literary-historical moment after postcritical theory became embedded in the academy, and the subsequent emergence of what Mitchum Huehls has called the 'post-theory theory novel'.[7] Thematically, these four authors reflect this shift via an interest in forms of community building (that attempt to serve as a counter to the loneliness that is referred to in the texts), but more importantly they embody it in their approach to autofiction. In spite of its roots in the life of the author, the works studied here repeatedly and aggressively demonstrate the outward-looking nature of autofiction. Whether it be by refusing to

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[5] Grace McCleen, 'Auto-Nauts: Voyages of the Self to the End of the Novel', *Boundless*, 2018 <https://unbound.com/boundless/2019/08/08/auto-nauts-voyages-of-the-self-to-the-end-of-the-novel/> [accessed 5 December 2019].

[6] ONS data, for instance, found that 5% of the UK population felt lonely 'often' or always' in 2016-7. See: Edward Pyle and Dani Evans, 'Loneliness - What Characteristics and Circumstances Are Associated with Feeling Lonely?', *Office for National Statistics*, 2018 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10> [Accessed 21 January 2023].

[7] See: Mitchum Huehls, 'The Post-Theory Theory Novel', *Contemporary Literature*, 56.2 (2015), 280–310.

maintain onomastic correspondence (unity between the name of the author and protagonist), by creating polyvocal narratives, or by displacing the imperative to empathise on to a reader rather than a narrator, these texts insist that autofiction is always about more than simply the writer themselves; it is instead about the self's engagement with others.

While my study examines the work of four authors in particular, they are broadly indicative of the ways that other authors have also imagined that autofiction might expand its interests beyond the self. Olivia Laing's *Crudo,* for instance - a work of autofiction in which Laing imagines herself to be, and indeed calls herself, Kathy Acker - clearly models the postcritical disposition in a similar manner to the authors studied herein.[8] Similarly, in its emphasis on dialogue and the shifting of attention away from the author/narrator, Miranda Popkey's *Topics of Conversation* appears to be performing something very similar to Cusk's texts.[9] Meanwhile, other writers of autofiction also emphasise the simple importance of paying attention to others. Teju Cole's work *Open City* for instance, echoes Lerner's calls to harness the 'transpersonal', when, at the novel's close, the narrator imagines that he could 'detect the intense concentration, the hundreds of private thoughts, of the people in the auditorium with me'.[10] In these works and others, acts of networked solitude, including reading – but also writing – are often shown to be crucial in escaping or assuaging one's sense of loneliness.

The texts studied here, it should also be noted, range widely from those that might by now be considered canonical works in the emerging field of anglophone autofiction (in particular Lerner and Cusk), to those whose place in such a study might seem less immediately obvious (especially Wallace, who is more commonly associated with the New Sincerity, metafiction or post-postmodernism).[11] The texts are also predominantly - although not exclusively - American, and the dividing line between the American and British texts here also serves to illustrate a broader gender imbalance in the publication of autofiction between the two. While the landscape of American autofiction is largely dominated by male writers, in the UK (like in France, where autofiction first emerged), as Hywel Dix points out, 'many of the principal practitioners of autofiction... are women'.[12] Indeed, in this study, questions of gender and genre are often inextricable, as are

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[8] Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018).

[9] Miranda Popkey, *Topics of Conversation* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2020).

[10] Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 253.

[11] See, respectively: 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 & Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-46; Thomas Winningham, '"Author Here": David Foster Wallace and the Post-Metafictional Paradox', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.5 (2015), pp. 467–79; Charles Reginald Nixon, 'The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-Postmodernism' (University of Leeds, 2013).

[12] Hywel Dix, 'Autofiction: The Forgotten Face of French Theory', *Word and Text*, 7 (2017), p. 73.

questions about who has the right to write about loneliness, something which has long been considered a largely masculine pursuit.[13] However, whether American or British, by men or women, all the texts are united by the inclusion of autofictional enhancers, and a range of common interests and themes, including but not limited to: a close examination of what constitutes therapeutic practices; an interrogation of the capacity for engagement via the act of literary address; an increasingly optimistic outlook about these capacities as traced through serial works of autofiction; and the reconciliation of seemingly paradoxical notions of belief and intent as being integral to maintaining this optimism.

The texts are united, too, in their broadly historical scope, having all been written in the twenty-first century, and they might all be conceived of as a response to the so-called metamodernist era, which constitutes 'a designation for the structure of feeling – emerging and coagulating throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century – which has superseded postmodernism as the dominant cultural logic in Western capitalist societies'.[14] Metamodernism, a term which originates in the work of Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, emerged with the unfolding of historical events that incited unprecedentedly global responses, including 'the Iraq War, 9/11, the 2008 financial crash, the Arab Spring, and the climate change emergency'.[15] This new structure of feeling has been linked to a shift in contemporary art, towards 'an art of that which actually *is* in the world, of what it is to *be* in the world, and of that which is to come'.[16] With this new art, Debbie Atkinson claims, 'socially engaged, often politicised subcultures have emerged, in which Roland Barthes' theories about collective authorship are embraced and exploited, recasting the artist as engineer, the art as a situation or project promoting interaction between individuals, and the audience as active participants collectively effecting social change', a point that will be borne out by many of the arguments made about contemporary autofiction in this project.[17] While few of the texts examined here might typically be considered political fiction, this interest in collectivity does, nevertheless, constitute a political ambition. As such, I would also argue that these authors' works also form part of a contemporary trend in autofiction that is increasingly interested in the political horizons that exist beyond the narrator themselves. Other examples include Valeria Luiselli's work of

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[13] For more on this, see: Fay Bound Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic": Loneliness as an Emotion Cluster and a Neglected Subject in the History of Emotions', *Emotion Review*, 10.3 (2018), p. 247.

[14] Alison Gibbons, 'Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's 10:04 and "The Utopian Glimmer of Fiction"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 62.2 (2021), p. 138.

[15] Gibbons, 'Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity', p. 138.

[16] Terry Smith, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry*, 32.4 (2006), p. 692, cited in Debbie Atkinson, 'Participation and Affect', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2013 <https://www.metamodernism.com/2013/07/02/participation-and-affect/> [accessed 14 June 2022].

[17] Debbie Atkinson, 'Participation and Affect', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2013 <https://www.metamodernism.com/2013/07/02/participation-and-affect/> [accessed 14 June 2022].

autofiction, *Lost Children Archive*, which is deeply informed by her own experiences working with migrant children, and Jenny Offill's recent text *Weather*, which is accompanied by a website detailing causes that Offill urges her readers to learn about and contribute to.[18]

While a crucial part of my intervention here is to argue that these texts are indicative of our current cultural moment, that is not to say that the texts are not also underpinned by much longer textual histories, particularly those that relate to literature about loneliness, and the history of autofictional writing in the Anglo-American tradition. This will be of particular importance for this study, because, as will become clear, each of the authors I write about is deeply concerned with intertextuality, dissecting the impact of their own reading on their lives in their autofictional works. While autofiction has been claimed by various scholars to extend back beyond even the twentieth century (Grace McCleen for instance makes the claim that Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* and Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* constitute examples of the form), it is widely understood to have been introduced in the American context by Jerzy Kosinski, whose work, it seems important to note, was a particular favourite of David Foster Wallace.[19] Wallace's work also makes apparent the close link between autofiction and metafiction, both explicitly and implicitly engaging with a number of authors synonymous with that earlier period, perhaps most notably John Barth, but also with more recent practitioners such as David Markson who used the form to explicitly explore solipsism. The idea of exploring solipsism and loneliness in fiction, likewise, has a heritage that pre-dates my study by decades, if not centuries. Fay Bound Alberti has demonstrated, for instance, that the emergence of our contemporary understanding of loneliness as an emotional experience is in fact closely linked with its representation in Romantic literature - in particular Wordsworth - while in the twentieth century the representations of loneliness shifted once more to explore its role as both a creative stimulus and as an obstacle to creativity.[20] Modernists such as Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys explored the loneliness of modern life, often with a focus on the particular loneliness of female experience, and their influence is clear in the work of both Rachel Cusk and Tao Lin. Lin is likewise heavily influenced by Richard Yates, whose *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* acts as a key intertext for much of his earlier writing. It will become clear throughout this study, therefore, that many of the literary touchstones that the authors I examine return to are by writers admired specifically for the ways that they have written

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[18] Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019); Jenny Offill, *Weather* (London: Granta, 2020).

[19] McCleen, 'Auto-Nauts: Voyages of the Self to the End of the Novel'; Bran Nicol, 'Eye to I: American Autofiction and Its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 258.

[20] Fay Bound Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic": Loneliness as an Emotion Cluster and a Neglected Subject in the History of Emotions', *Emotion Review*, 10.3 (2018), p. 247.

about loneliness. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, how many of the authors mentioned here stress the therapeutic benefits of identifying with art in their own works, emphasising again and again the importance of what Rita Felski has called 'attunement'.[21] This attunement, she writes, is 'not a specific affect but a state of affectedness' that denotes 'things resonating, aligning, coming together... [as when] reading the opening lines of a novel, hearing a song on the radio, we may be gripped by the strength of a felt connection'.[22] The intertexts alluded to in the works studied here are those that have evoked a sense of attunement in their readers, and these authors, in turn, attempt to recreate this in their own audience, with the ultimate intention of assuaging both their own, and their reader's, loneliness.

What It Means to Be Lonely and How Literature Might Offer a Remedy

While some might argue that the term 'epidemic' is somewhat hyperbolic, there is evidence that loneliness has increased in recent decades.[23] In industrialised countries, studies suggest that 'around a third of people are affected by [loneliness], with one person in 12 affected severely… [and] these proportions are increasing'.[24] While any general reasons offered for this increase in loneliness risk being reductionist, most academics agree that it is the product of 'the incredibly rapid growth of technology, social media, globalization, and polarization of societies… [which] have also upended social mores and disrupted traditional social connections'.[25] This is not to say that these same points might not offer a way to assuage loneliness (social media in particular does have the potential to reduce one's experiences of loneliness) but it is to assert that the rapid shifts in societal structures in recent years are akin to the industrial shifts that Fay Bound Alberti has shown gave rise to our modern understanding of loneliness in the first place.[26] Loneliness is, she shows us, a relatively modern emotion – its emergence as a term in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century 'reflect[ed] the framing of a new emotional state' that was quite distinct from earlier forms of solitude for spiritual contemplation, being, instead, the product of 'secularization and evolutionary

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[21] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 41.

[22] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* p. 42.

[23] See: Susanne Buecker et al, 'Is Loneliness in Emerging Adults Increasing over Time? A Preregistered Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review', *Psychological Bulletin*, 147.8 (2021), pp. 787-805.

[24] John T Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo, 'The Growing Problem of Loneliness', *The Lancet*, 391.10119 (2018), p. 426.

[25] Dilip V. Jeste, Ellen E. Lee, and Stephanie Cacioppo, 'Battling the Modern Behavioral Epidemic of Loneliness: Suggestions for Research and Interventions', *JAMA Psychiatry*, 77.6 (2020), p. 553.

[26] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness*, p. 227.

theory, industrialization, competitive individualism, modern psychological and emotional frameworks, and philosophies of existentialism and alienation'.[27]

To define loneliness, Alberti borrows an earlier definition from Karen Rook: it is an 'enduring condition of emotional distress that arises when a person feels estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others and/or lacks appropriate social partners for desired activities, particularly activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy'.[28] Loneliness, however, as Alberti rightly points out, 'can be positive as well as negative', and the attitudes towards loneliness displayed in the texts I examine range from radical celebrations (of what Denise Riley calls 'the right to be lonely') to bleak portrayals of loneliness as a barrier to creativity and mental wellbeing.[29] It is also important to note, early in this study, the ways that loneliness distinguishes itself from, or overlaps with, other associated emotions - those which Bekhet, Zausniewski and Nakhla call 'borderline cases'.[30] Alienation, for instance, is often taken to denote the more objective experience of being detached from someone or something, while loneliness denotes 'the *subjective* experience of separation from someone or something that one is attached to' (emphasis mine).[31] Likewise, solitude is sometimes understood simply as the act of being alone, but it also carries certain connotations that loneliness lacks – it often 'has a more optimistic sense… [and] is perceived as refreshing and calming'.[32] We must resist this simplification though, because, as Alberti tells us, and as the works examined here attest to, loneliness can sometimes be 'positive and nurturing, providing a space for us to think and grow and learn'.[33] She goes on to explicitly state that by this she does 'not mean merely solitude, or the state of being alone, but a profound awareness of the boundaries of the self which can, in the right contexts, be restorative'. Solitude is not, therefore, merely the positive experience of loneliness but is instead a borderline case which denotes the desire to be alone but which does not preclude loneliness from also being restorative. The subtle differences between loneliness and its borderline cases are visible throughout this project: some characters often seek what they think is solitude, only to mistakenly find, for instance, that they are experiencing loneliness; others, such as Lerner's protagonists, become aware of their alienation and it triggers a contemplation of their own loneliness

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[27] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* pp. xi; 227.

[28] Karen S. Rook, 'Promoting Social Bonding: Strategies for Helping the Lonely and Socially Isolated', *American Psychologist*, 39.12 (1984), p. 1389.

[29] Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic"', p. 242; Denise Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13.1 (2002), 1–13.

[30] Abir K. Bekhet, Jaclene A. Zauszniewski, and Wagdy E. Nakhla, 'Loneliness: A Concept Analysis', *Nursing Forum*, 43.4 (2008), p. 210.

[31] Bekhet, Zauszniewski, and Nakhla, 'Loneliness: A Concept Analysis', p. 210.

[32] Bekhet, Zauszniewski, and Nakhla, 'Loneliness: A Concept Analysis', p. 210.

[33] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* p. ix.

(experienced at what I call the political and personal levels respectively). The close links between loneliness and its borderline cases or associated emotions (such as frustration, sadness, or anger) also mean that it is at times perhaps more useful to think of loneliness as what Alberti calls an 'emotion cluster', not always clearly visible, but whose presence can be inferred from the secondary affective states that it evokes.[34]

Moreover, the subjectivity with which loneliness is defined also means that it manifests itself differently in different contexts. As Fay Bound Alberti puts it, loneliness 'might take on different meanings depending on context… [it is] shaped by and reflect[s] bigger social concerns that include gender, ethnicity, age, environment, religion, science, and even economics'.[35] This study, for instance, must account for the potential difference in experiences of loneliness in both the American and European context. In the American imagination, for instance, what Thornton Wilder once called the concept of 'American Loneliness' persists – informed by the long history of transcendentalist writings that advocated the retreat (usually of men) to solitude to contemplate one's connection with society.[36] This dream is reimagined in the twenty-first century, and is certainly visible in Lerner and Lin's work, but is much less dominant in the European context.

Reflecting the ways that loneliness manifests itself differently depending on the context in which it arises, each of the following four chapters therefore conceives of loneliness in a different way. The chapter on David Foster Wallace, for instance, examines what might be termed 'existential loneliness', which he conceives of as less of a symptom of isolation but instead as an inherent trait common to writers and readers, especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The second chapter, on Ben Lerner, examines the societal loneliness that stems from an awareness of one's place in an increasingly globalised, neoliberal world, and an attendant sense of what Ann Cvetkovich calls 'political depression'.[37] The third chapter, on Rachel Cusk, looks at the particular forms of loneliness that emerge from a consideration of one's place in domestic networks. Lastly, the fourth chapter pays particular attention to digital technologies and their role in both reinforcing and offering an escape from loneliness. Loneliness is understood in this project as a dynamic emotion cluster then, but one which is endemic in contemporary society, and often as a direct consequence of societal structures. As an affective state, it constitutes a defining feature of our

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[34] Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic"', p. 242.

[35] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* p. viii.

[36] Thornton Wilder, 'The American Loneliness', *The Atlantic*, August 1952, p. 65. Available online at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1952/08/the-american-loneliness/641448/> [accessed 11 July 2023].

[37] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 1.

current so-called 'structure of feeling'.[38] While some of the texts I examine deal with it as a visible, articulable state (often reinforced by an extended period of solitude), it is also present at other moments in what Sianne Ngai calls the 'tone' of a text - that which 'resembles the concept of collective mood frequently invoked by historians… but [which] poses the additional difficulty of aesthetic immanence, of being something that seems "attached" to an artwork'.[39]

This tone of loneliness, I would be remiss to acknowledge, has arguably intensified enormously in the years since I began this project, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Partly in response to this, it felt especially important to emphasise in this project not only the ways that the texts examined here might portray loneliness, but also the ways that they might offer a hopeful resistance to that same issue. While hope is something that the texts themselves already emphasise (indeed, it is possible to trace a broadly optimistic trajectory about our capacity for meaningful engagement in many of the serial works explored herein), I found reassurance for this as a scholarly approach in much recent postcritical scholarship. Ann Cvetkovich, for instance, cites David Foster Wallace's work as 'not only… inspiring my thinking but, quite literally… making it possible to get up in the morning'.[40] This postcritical thinking is not, of course, an outright repudiation of critique and Paul Ricoeur's so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion', but it instead emphasises the potential coexistence of what Eve Sedgwick calls 'paranoid' and 'reparative' reading.[41]

'Paranoid reading' is Sedgwick's term for the suspicious reading advocated by Ricoeur, which 'describe[d] the position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their intellectual offspring'.[42] It has been attacked by critics as various as Susan Sontag ('the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys'), Rita Felski (suspicion moves readers 'from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment'), and of course, Sedgwick.[43] Sedgwick's main issue with paranoid reading is first and foremost the way that it has monopolised critical thinking, having become 'widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities' in mainstream academic thought.[44] This is a problem, she argues, because suspicious reading has complete 'faith in exposure… as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere

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[38] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.

[39] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 43.

[40] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, p. 26.

[41] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 356; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51.

[42] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp. 124-5.

[43] Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 4; Rita Felski, 'After Suspicion', *Profession*, 2009, p. 30.

[44] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p. 125.

hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved'.[45] Contrary to this faith, she argues, there is little

basis for assuming that 'it will surprise or disturb - never mind motivate - anyone to learn that a

given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent'.[46]

Sedgwick is not, however, arguing that reparative reading should supersede suspicious reading. As

she acknowledges, 'paranoia knows some things well and others poorly', but her aim is to merely

situate paranoid reading 'as one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones', and

to frame 'paranoid and reparative critical practices, not as theoretical ideologies (and certainly not

as stable personality types of critics), but as changing and heterogeneous relational stances'.[47] In this

sense, as Cara L. Lewis puts it, the contemporary turn to postcritique might more usefully be seen

less as a 'method… [than] a disposition'.[48] By maintaining this disposition, Rita Felski argues it will

ultimately foster a critical stance that 'looks to a work of art for solace and replenishment rather

than viewing it as something to be interrogated and indicted'.[49]

Paranoid reading, rather than being merely dismissed, must therefore be supplemented by

so-called 'reparative reading'. Critics use different terms for readings akin to this (Timothy Bewes,

for instance, refers to 'generous' reading, while Rita Felski refers to 'reflective reading'), but they all

seek to achieve something similar to Sedgwick's goal in reading reparatively.[50] Sedgwick aims, she

says, to consider 'a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks', in order to learn about 'the many

ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a

culture'.[51] Felski is more specific about the sorts of affects that might be covered by reparative (or

reflective) reading:

> trance-like states of immersion or absorption in literature's virtual worlds; surges of
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> sympathy or mistrust, affinity or alienation, triggered by particular formal devices; the
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> suddenness with which we can fall in love with, or feel ourselves addressed by, an author's
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> style; less auspicious, but all too frequent, sensations of fretfulness, irritation, or boredom.[52]

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[45] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p. 139.

[46] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p. 141.

[47] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp. 128, 130.

[48] Cara L. Lewis, 'Beholding: Visuality and Postcritical Reading in Ali Smith's How to Be Both', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 42.3 (2019), pp. 132-3.

[49] Rita Felski, 'After Suspicion', *Profession*, 2009, p. 34; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 151.

[50] See: Timothy Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism', *Differences*, 21.3 (2010), pp. 1–33; Rita Felski, 'After Suspicion', *Profession*, 2009, p. 33.

[51] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', pp. 150-1.

[52] Felski, 'After Suspicion', p. 31.

In considering these affects, Felski argues, we can ultimately clarify 'how and why particular texts matter to us'.[53] It does not negate suspicious reading, but instead augments it, attending 'to the depth, intensity, and power of our attachments', rather than seeing 'scholarly reading as requiring a shedding of such attachments'.[54]

My own project is, therefore, aligned with this in its attempt to articulate the ways that literary worlds might variously imagine, embody, catalyse or resist surges of loneliness, and in particular it examines the ways that autofiction as a formal device might allow writers to achieve that. Certainly, it is interested in how we feel addressed by novels, and the novels examined here are deeply interested in exploring the effects of reading on their own narrator/author figures. Moreover, the hope I seek to pin down in these texts is explicitly identified by Sedgwick as one of the qualities that suspicious reading often overlooks. She writes that 'hope… is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates'.[55] Similarly, Felski, in her outlining of the fundamentals of postcritique, argues that 'critique needs to be supplemented by generosity, [and] pessimism by hope', both claims that I aim to do justice to in this project.[56] By adopting such an approach – paying particular attention to the emotive and affective states both portrayed within and engendered by texts – this thesis will ultimately support Jessica Swoboda's assertion that, contrary to views of postcritique as reactionary and apolitical, it might offer us a way to show that 'the political, affective and aesthetic… are not incompatible but mutually enriching'.[57] While my study does not aim to make outsized claims about literature's ability to assuage loneliness, it does subscribe to Madeleine Watts' idea that while:

> telling personal stories can [not] fix any of the political or social problems the world is beset by… an autofictional response to structural inequality, ecological crisis and political turmoil might be, in fact, a totally appropriate response. It is the self, after all, that experiences all of these things at the same time, amongst the day to day of personal relationships, and domestic hardships, and the weather.[58]

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[53] Felski, 'After Suspicion', p. 31.
[54] Felski, 'After Suspicion', p. 34.
[55] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p. 146.
[56] Felski, 'After Suspicion', p. 33.
[57] Jessica Swoboda, 'Practicing Acknowledgment', *The Point Magazine*, 2021 <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/practicing-acknowledgment/> [accessed 11 February 2021].
[58] Madeleine Watts, 'On the Diaries of Helen Garner and the Quagmire of the Fictionalized Self', *Literary Hub*, 2020 <https://lithub.com/on-the-diaries-of-helen-garner-and-the-quagmire-of-the-fictionalized-self/> [accessed 20 July 2020].

To Watts' list I would add the experience of loneliness - although as this study will make clear, loneliness is itself often the result of structural inequalities, ecological crises and political turmoil.

The idea of critical reading being 'reparative' also seems a fitting approach for autofictional works that could be deemed examples of 'reparative writing'. Celia Hunt has already explicitly linked the writing of autofiction to its therapeutic benefits, and there is an argument to be made that the form even has its origins in therapeutic processes.[59] Claudia Gronemann, for instance, points out that Serge Doubrovsky developed autofiction 'out of the talking cure of psychoanalysis, which he not only portrays in his book *Fils* in the form of a transcribed analytical session... but practices through his literature by transforming his first--person narrator into a self--analyst'.[60] Similarly, Élisabeth Roudinesco has criticised 'the cult of autofiction', for attempting to replace psychoanalytical therapy by 'making it possible for an author to take herself for the clinician of her own pathology'.[61] This idea is reflected not only in a textual emphasis in these works on therapy as a practice, but also in the paratextual discussions by the authors about the therapeutic benefits of literature itself. Each of them insists on the idea that, to give just one example from David Foster Wallace, 'fiction is one of the few experiences where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved'.[62] In Wallace's work there is an extensive and sustained interrogation of conventional therapeutic practice, which is then echoed in the work of Lerner (*The Topeka School* is notably set in large part in a fictionalised version of the Menninger psychiatric clinic) and Cusk (whose most recent work involves a scene denouncing a psychoanalyst for having 'done nothing').[63] In Lin's early work, the most obvious attempt at therapy comes from self-medicating, an approach that his later works ultimately criticise in favour of advocating reading widely. While conventional therapeutic practices routinely come under fire in these texts, they instead turn to the potential therapeutic benefits of literature, and art more broadly.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the form's roots in psychoanalysis and the talking cure, that such an important part of these novels' attempts to resist loneliness lies in the emphasis they place on dialogue. The autofictional pact that Jacques Lecarme argued underpins autofiction as a mode is predicated on an understanding of reading and writing as a dialogue, and it is this pact that compels the writers to believe that readers might approach their works 'generously', in Timothy Bewes'

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[59] Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 179.

[60] Claudia Gronemann, 'Autofiction', in *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, ed. by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), p. 242.

[61] Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*, trans. by Gregory Elliott. (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 44-5.

[62] Gerald Howard, 'Infinite Jester', *Elle Magazine*, 11.6 (1996), p. 58.

[63] Rachel Cusk, *Second Place* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021), p. 69.

terms, and disregard theoretical obstacles to their good faith in this relationship.[64] But dialogue as it exists in these novels takes many different forms, well beyond the image of reader and writer. In Wallace's work, the texts model two forms of dialogue: that between reader and writer, which I will term 'extratextual' dialogue; and that between characters, which I will term 'intratextual'. Critical analysis of many of Wallace's works I examine has previously restricted itself to an intratextual understanding of his work, with the result that many of them do not fully account for Wallace's emphasis on dialogue as a means to resist loneliness. In Lerner's work, the capacity for dialogue with a reader is repeatedly interrogated through his extended meditations on poetic address and prosopopoeia. In *The Topeka School*, he also questions the extent to which all speech is shared by allowing the voices of characters to carry over into other characters' speech, an act of polyvocal ventriloquism that arguably tries to textually embody the emphasis on community that the novel espouses. In Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, speech is the mechanism that propels the novels forward.[65] Interlocutors talk to (or at) the protagonist, Faye, and the repeated omission of Faye's response undermines any sense of monologic authorial control by removing the thoughts of the apparent authorial stand-in. This move invites the reader into dialogue with the text to fill the emotional and vocal gap left behind by Faye/Cusk. In Lin's work, the understanding of relationships between readers and writers is inflected by real correspondence maintained between Lin and his audience through digital media (and in particular, blogs). The distinctions made between face-to-face communication and digital communication in many of his early works problematises the notion that all talk is good, and his later works explore other means of establishing dialogue and intimacy in light of this.

Moreover, it could be argued that this emphasis on dialogue constitutes an attempt to dramatise what these novels suggest true empathy and identification might look like. In Wallace's work, he utilises what Lorna Martens calls 'voice contamination' in an attempt to emphasise the fluidity of characters with whom one might identify.[66] In Lerner's texts, this same technique is used to portray the emotional labour of empathetic identification as an author; rather than pretend to have perfect access to the interiority of others, he presents fissures in character voices to demonstrate that it is the *attempt* to know others that is important, not the actual attainment of

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[64] Jacques Lecarme, 'L'Autofiction, un Mauvais Genre?', in *Autofictions & Cie*, ed. by Philippe Lejeune (Paris: RITM, 1993), p. 242.

[65] Melinda Harvey does rightly point out, however, that Cusk's work is more 'mimetic' than earlier canonical 'dialogue novels', including Linda Rosencrantz's *Talk* and Nathalie Sarraute's *The Golden Fruits. See:* Melinda Harvey, 'Verisimilitude', *Sydney Review of Books*, 10 March 2020 <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/cusk-outline-trilogy-coventry/> [accessed 30 September 2020].

[66] Lorna Martens, 'Autofiction in the Third Person, with a Reading of Christine Brooke-Rose's Remake', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 52.

that knowledge itself (which will always, inevitably, be false). Likewise, Cusk arguably presents the attention Faye pays to her interlocutors as the empathetic heart of the texts, and by remaining silent she instead lays the imperative to empathise on the reader. The role of empathy is emphasised, therefore, without the need to rely on simplistic ideas about reading as *always* inherently encouraging empathy, a position which has been justifiably criticised by critics such as Jennifer Cooke and Rachel Greenwald Smith.[67]

The Term 'Autofiction' and Theoretical Approaches: Genres, Modes and Pacts

Having outlined the ways that literature, and more specifically autofiction, might offer writers a way to textually assuage loneliness, I will now consider the wider importance of autofiction as a genre and mode to my project as a whole. To define 'autofiction' is not my ambition here - indeed, Armine Mortimer has claimed that a 'consensus definition [of autofiction] has become impossible' by this point - but I do want to begin by outlining some of the theoretical approaches to autofiction that are most illuminating for my study.[68] Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor have, for example, usefully pointed out that critical writing about autofiction usually mentions one or more of the following aspects: 'a combination of real and invented elements; onomastic correspondence between author and character or narrator; and stylistic and linguistic experimentation... [and] where critics or theorists focus more on the context of production and reception, we also find references to a double pact—autobiographical and fictional—or to a combination of, or oscillation between, reading modes'.[69] Few of the texts I examine adhere to the rules about onomastic correspondence, although I want to posit that this might be particular to the types of autofiction at hand. They do, however, all combine real and invented elements, as well as stylistic and linguistic experimentation, and an awareness of the oscillation between reading modes they encourage will be central to my own approach to the texts as works of autofiction.

While onomastic correspondence has been emphasised as critical in the designation of a work as autofiction, including in Serge Doubrovsky's original definition, in the works examined here

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[67] See: Jennifer Cooke, 'Violations of Empathy', *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 89.89 (2017), p. 156; Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 1.

[68] Armine Kotin Mortimer, 'Autofiction as Allofiction: Doubrovsky's L'Après-Vivre', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 49.3 (2009), p. 22.

[69] *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), p. 1.

the aura of 'the autofictional' is instead created by the inclusion of what Arnaud Schmitt has called 'enhancers'.[70] Schmitt cites Philippe Gasparini, who asks why we do not admit that, 'besides a family name and a first name, a whole series of hero/author identification operators exist: their age, their socio-cultural background, their profession, their aspirations, etc.?'.[71] These 'enhancers', often reinforced by paratextual documents by and about the authors themselves, are the primary indicator in the works that I examine that they are engaging with an autofictional mode. I stress here that autofiction can be adopted as a mode because for the purposes of this project, to reduce it to a designation of genre is to misunderstand the importance of the form in its full capacity. Indeed, Karen Ferreira Meyers has pointed out that autofiction possesses a 'dual status… as both writing genre and theoretical concept', and more specifically that it is commonly viewed broadly as a 'genre' in France and a 'modus' abroad.[72] By considering autofiction as a 'modus' as well as a genre, this thesis seeks to better frame autofiction as an act that reinforces the so-called 'autofictional pact' that Jacques Lecarme argued establishes an intimate connection between writers of autofiction and their readers.[73]

This concept of an autofictional pact derives from Philippe Lejeune's influential and much-contested concept of the 'autobiographical pact', an ostensible contract that is established between readers and writers through the writing of an autobiographical text.[74] In Celia Hunt's words, to meet Lejeune's criteria for autobiography, texts had to be 'a retrospective prose narrative in which (a) the name of the author is the same as that of the narrator; and (b) there is an implicit or explicit contract between the author and the reader that the author will, as far as possible, tell the truth of the self'.[75] Doubrovsky defined autofiction in opposition to this pact, claiming that it might be possible to maintain onomastic correspondence without strict adherence to any notion of truth. As Hywel Dix has noted, 'although Lejeune's attempts to define autobiography via the concept of intentionality

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[70] In his original definition of the genre, Doubrovsky stressed that it must include 'three requirements: a literary style, a perfect onomastic correspondence between author, narrator and main character, and finally a strong psychoanalytic angle'. See: Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il je? roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), p. 12, trans. by and cited in Arnaud Schmitt, 'Making the Case for Self-Narration Against Autofiction', *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 25.1 (2010), p. 126; Arnaud Schmitt, 'The Pragmatics of Autofiction', in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), p. 86.

[71] Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il je? roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), p. 25, trans. by and cited in Arnaud Schmitt, 'The Pragmatics of Autofiction', in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), p. 88.

[72] Karen Ferreira-Meyers, 'Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 36.

[73] Lecarme, 'L'Autofiction, un Mauvais Genre?', p. 242.

[74] See: Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Contract', in *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 193.

[75] Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought', p. 182.

have proved to be problematic… in attempting to understand the nature of autofiction from the perspective of writers… intentionality holds the key'.[76] I want to reaffirm this idea that author intentionality is critical to our understanding of contemporary autofiction, and follow Todd Womble's suggestion that readings of contemporary autofiction ought to therefore draw upon Wayne Booth's notion of the 'implied author', to fully understand the ways in which 'postmodern narratives… textually enact postmodernity'.[77] In this respect, my thesis might also be considered a part of what Benjamin Widiss calls 'the legacy of reader response theory', since it suggests that the construction of implied authors and implied readers are central to an author's ability to establish a sense of intimacy with their reader.[78] While several critics have stressed the existence, and importance, of a pact in their criticism, my thesis will consider it the central mechanism of autofiction as a 'modus', and central to its ability to broach the topic of loneliness.[79] By utilising what Sonja Longolius terms 'performative authorship', autofictional writers carefully construct implied author figures in their texts, who in turn encourage what Meg Jensen has called the 'active readership' of autofiction.[80] Autofiction, Jensen goes on to argue, is therefore the literary form 'that comes closest to achieving moments of true intimacy between reader and subject matter… because they proclaim their fictional status while simultaneously hinting (via paratexts, such as author biographies, prefaces, photographs and the like) that there may be truths hidden within'. [81] This process, she demonstrates, 'slows down the process of the text's consumption' and leads to more thoughtful and reflective engagement with the content they address.

While my work does emphasise the understanding of autofiction as a mode, this is not to say that it is entirely unrelated to questions of genre. Indeed, much of the work examined in this thesis is either informed by, or constitutes a response to, work by those same writers in other genres. Wallace's use of autofiction, for example, can be viewed as a response to the public persona that

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[76] Hywel Dix, 'Foreword', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 17-8.

[77] Todd Womble, 'Roth Is Roth as Roth: Autofiction and the Implied Author', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 224. See also: Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 74.

[78] Benjamin Widiss, *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 15.

[79] In particular, see: Karen Ferreira-Meyers, 'Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?', and Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development' in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 27-48 and pp. 179-96 respectively.

[80] Sonja Longolius, *Performing Authorship: Strategies of Becoming an Author in the Works of Paul Auster, Candice Breitz, Sophie Calle, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (London: Transcript, 2016), p. 8; Meg Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. By Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 76.

[81] Meg Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. By Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 76.

emerged out of his non-fiction, while Lerner's use of autofiction is undoubtedly informed by his poetic works, where the binary between fiction and non-fiction is typically emphasised less than in prose. Likewise, Cusk's autofiction might be seen as a direct response to the reception of her memoirs, and as such it addresses vital questions about the ethics of these forms, as well as interrogating the desire for confessional writing that is dictated by both market demands and problematic gendered assumptions about the work of women writers (whose confessional work, unlike that by men, is often termed 'oversharing').[82] Finally, Lin's autofiction is directly informed by, and sometimes explicitly incorporates, his work in digital media, and considers the implications of this shift in audience and medium for his ability to connect with readers. Overall, therefore, while autofiction is largely understood as a mode in this thesis, its concurrent status as a genre does directly impact questions of demographics, market demands and style that are not unrelated to the project.

Ultimately, this thesis is therefore less concerned with establishing an exhaustive list of criteria that designate a work as autofiction, than it is interested in asking *why* readers and writers turn to autofiction in the first place.[83] As such, it follows on from Alison Gibbons' and Alexandra Effe's claim that there is a 'specific autofictional mode of reading' as well as a 'a mode of autofictional writing'.[84] The intentional adoption of a mode of autofictional writing, they point out, might be to seek 'goals particular to the autofictional mode', which include 'creative, explorative thinking in the pursuit of self-understanding, self-performance and self-creation, and readerly positioning (with the aim, for example, of anticipating objections or of inviting reader engagement)'.[85] The last of these highlights the symbiotic interaction between readerly and writerly strategies of engaging with autofiction, showing how the mode of writing might try to pre-empt a particular mode of reading. Similarly, Celia Hunt has claimed that 'looking at [autofiction] from the perspective of writers in the process of writing reveals it to be a cognitive– emotional tool', from which they can 'derive therapeutic benefit'.[86] This is consistent with Hywel Dix's view that a great deal of anglophone autofiction constitutes a response to trauma, 'so that the process of writing in

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[82] See: Rachel Sykes, '"Who Gets to Speak and Why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43.1 (2017), p. 162.

[83] It is for this reason that my project sometimes borrows Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor's term 'the autofictional', which they argue 'creates the necessary flexibility for extending and revising our understanding of [autofiction]' and whose use seeks to demonstrate that they do not 'aim to arrive at a uniform definition, and much less to impose one'. See: *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 3-4.

[84] Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons, 'A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading', in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), p. 66.

[85] Effe and Gibbons, 'A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading', p. 66.

[86] Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought', p. 179.

response to trauma can be seen as a means of situating the self in a new context when other relational constructs have been removed or jeopardized'.[87] Dix references Arnaud Genon's concept of the 'faille fondatrice', or founding fault, that encourages writers of autofiction to turn to the genre, and in this project I want to explore the idea that loneliness might constitute one such founding fault.[88]

The authors studied here also employ autofiction for a wide range of reasons less overtly to do with loneliness or the processing of trauma. The attempt to reconcile a personal image of oneself with a media-dictated public persona is one recurring theme in the chapters that follow, as is the attempt to use self-referentiality (by alluding to one's own earlier texts) as a way of proving self-sufficiency. It is also a form uniquely well-suited to discussing both the personal and the political at once (the 'I' of autofiction, Camille Laurens writes, is 'not me, it's each of us'), and the coexistence of two scales or spheres is also a recurring idea in the texts that follow: between the personal and the political; the domestic and the public; and the historical and the contemporary.[89] In each of these shared concerns, however, lies a desire to interrogate the self in its wider contexts, a concern that is often inextricably linked to one's experiences of being, and perception of one's self as, lonely.

It is also important to consider what it is about autofiction that is so appealing to readers, as well as authors, and it is here that Nancy K. Miller's work on the 'autobiographical act' proves most enlightening.[90] She argues that to understand autobiography as an act rather than an object is to emphasise the relationship between readers and writers, performing 'a relational act that creates identifications (which include disidentifications and cross-identifications), conscious or unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience'.[91] This heightened sense of identification, she argues, is the root of autobiographical writing's popularity. Reading reparatively, readers of autofiction manage to identify, cross-identify and disidentify in ways that ultimately give them a sense of place in relation to others, which in turn offers them a way to imaginatively assuage their own sense of loneliness. Moreover, Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons have shown, with reference to cognitive analyses, that an oscillation between factual and fictional modes of reading affects our imaginative engagement with a text. Autofiction's 'rootedness in reality is likely to create personal relevance which… is linked to higher emotional involvement—that is, to an affective effect', while

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[87] Dix, 'Foreword', p. 4.

[88] Arnaud Genon, *Autofiction: Pratiques et Théories,* trans. by Hywel Dix (Paris: Mon Petit Editeur, 2013), p. 58.

[89] Camille Laurens, 'Dialogue Entre Nous', *La Nouvelle Revue Française: Je & Moi*, 598 (October 2011), p. 141, trans. by and cited in Meg Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 69-70.

[90] Nancy K. Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2.Fall 2000, pp. 422-3.

[91] Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', p. 423.

the 'fictional dimension of autofiction… is likely to lead readers to create detailed mental representations and contemplate contradictory elements'.[92] They go on to explain that 'such contemplation… [might] mean more critical, perhaps also more creative, engagements with the text, including the ways in which readers relate to autofictions and what changes they themselves might put into action in their lives'. Readers who approach the novels studied in this thesis with an interest in representations of loneliness are, this suggests, not only more likely to be emotionally affected by the texts before them, but also more likely to reorient their actions as a result of reading them.

Chapter Summary:

Chapter One: David Foster Wallace

The thesis opens with an exploration of loneliness in the work of David Foster Wallace. Although his work is not typically associated with autofiction, recent scholarship by Karen Ferreira-Meyers and Bran Nicol has positioned him in the burgeoning canon of anglophone autofiction, and I argue that this offers a useful way to consider his engagement with loneliness. The chapter focuses specifically on the ways that his fiction paints an affective portrayal of loneliness itself, and how his use of authorial stand-ins works to textually resist that same loneliness. This chapter functions as a useful bookend both historically (as an example of the shift from metafiction to autofiction) as well as thematically, since Wallace's work introduces several key themes already mentioned that will be of recurring interest throughout the chapters (for example, an interest in therapeutic practices; forms of dialogue; paradoxes and the importance of suspending disbelief; the perceived insufficiency of literary theory). With a close focus on the aforementioned intratextual and extratextual models of dialogue in his work, I will argue that Wallace's mature texts - which include authorial avatars, occasionally even named David Wallace - demand a narratological reading, which emphasises the role of the implied author and implied reader in his fiction. In particular, the chapter closely analyses the way that dialogic models function in a range of Wallace's late texts, specifically: 'The Depressed Person' from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*; 'Good Old Neon', from *Oblivion*; and his final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King*. It will argue that Wallace's use of authorial stand-ins in these stories offers him a way to confront what might be considered a form of existential loneliness, which is not

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[92] Effe and Gibbons, 'A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading', p. 77.

so much a symptom of isolation as much as it is an inherent trait that Wallace perceived to be common to writers and readers. Lastly, the chapter will consider Wallace's readership, with a particular emphasis on examining the role that gender has played in the reception of his work. More broadly, it will consider the extent to which the recent popularity of autofiction as a genre might, as Marjorie Worthington argues, be seen as a direct response to a loss of status for white male authors.[93] It will examine Wallace's awareness of this process, arguing that by drawing his readers' attention to the process through which we believe someone to be sincere, or more specifically, credible, he discourages his readers from hero-worship, all the while allowing them to feel directly addressed.

Chapter Two: Ben Lerner

In the second chapter, I will analyse Ben Lerner's fiction, making the case that a discussion of loneliness in his work ought to be understood as part of the affective turn towards what Ann Cvetkovich calls 'political depression'.[94] The chapter begins by outlining how Lerner's work differs in its goals from the New Sincerity (and, implicitly, Wallace), showing how his magnified awareness of one's place in a globalised world shifts his priorities, considering wider monetary and labour networks than his predecessors. It argues in particular that Lerner's anxiety about establishing what he calls a 'coeval readership' should be understood as reflecting a wider concern about social atomism and alienation in the modern, neoliberal world, and that this manifests itself at both the personal and political scale.[95] Indeed, it is notable that many of the contemporary discussions about the current loneliness epidemic explicitly tie it to neoliberal economies, a fact interrogated in Lerner's texts through a constant examination of the self's place in relation to wider global networks.[96] This chapter also interrogates the idea that neoliberalism encourages and incentivises the act of network-building, but that this does not necessarily lead to any increased sense of community or intimacy.

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[93] Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of Me: Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 21.
[94] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, p. 1.
[95] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 93.
[96] See, for example: George Monbiot, 'The Age of Loneliness Is Killing Us', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014, section Opinion <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us> [accessed 5 May 2022].

I also consider the reception of Lerner's work, which has both criticised it for embodying gestural politics and praised it for establishing alternative models for engaging with the political in literature.[97] The chapter will then navigate these two arguments in order to frame his engagement with the political as a way of resisting loneliness, and establishing what Lauren Berlant calls an 'intimate public', a thread which will be returned to later in the project in the chapter on Tao Lin's work.[98] Questioning the political efficacy of both poetry and the novel as forms, this chapter argues that Lerner's mature works can be understood as political inasmuch as they establish an 'affective consonance' among their readers, which should be interpreted as a political act.[99] Subsequently, Lerner's work also introduces the idea that political hope and community building might be reflected in the narrative trajectory of serial works of autofiction. Drawing on Wayne Booth's notion of the 'career author', this chapter argues that Lerner's engagement with autofiction self-consciously shifts across his texts, from the earlier monologic approach of *Leaving the Atocha Station* to the polyphony of his third novel, *The Topeka School,* and that this reflects his interest in resisting loneliness and attempts to establish community.[100] While Lerner's early novels occasionally romanticise the retreat from society to fulfil artistic needs, this position is ultimately criticised by his later works of autofiction. In particular, the chapter will examine the ways that his works increasingly emphasise engagement with art as an experience that undermines loneliness, especially via a thematic emphasis on the importance of beholding art alongside others. The chapter then more broadly traces the ways that Lerner's work textually embodies this emphasis on the collective, particularly in its use of direct address, and in his latest work through presenting polyvocality in such a way as to stress the emotional labour of empathising with other perspectives. The chapter concludes with a consideration of some of the paradoxes this presents, particularly in considering the political efficacy of such an approach, arguing that the wilful suspension of disbelief necessitated by Lerner's works hinges upon acknowledging the lack of political agency in poetic address and yet choosing to utilise it nevertheless, in order to establish a sense of 'affective consonance'.[101]

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[97] See for example: Jon Baskin, 'On the Hatred of Literature', *The Point Magazine*, 26 January 2020 <https://thepointmag.com/letter/on-the-hatred-of-literature/> [accessed 8 March 2021]; Tom Evans, 'Tome On The Range: Ben Lerner, 10:04 & The Death Of "Silence"', *The Quietus*, 22 February 2015 <https://thequietus.com/articles/17286-ben-lerner-1004-silence-art-sontag> [accessed 8 March 2021].
[98] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 226.
[99] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 260.
[100] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 431
[101] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 260.

Chapter Three: Rachel Cusk

The third chapter of the thesis examines the work of Rachel Cusk, and it is particularly interested in the role that gender plays in affecting portrayals of loneliness in life writing. While there is a long history of loneliness - and solitude - being associated with creativity, as Fay Bound Alberti has noted, this association is fraught with gendered assumptions about who has the right to be lonely.[102] While the image of an isolated male has long been associated with hermitic reflection and creativity, isolated women in literature were typically figures of exile, spurned by the male figures in their lives. Similarly, Cusk's choice of form is politically loaded in a way that it is not for her male counterparts. Autofiction, as alluded to earlier, is predominantly practiced by women in France, but the opposite is largely true of anglophone autofiction. In fact, many female anglophone writers reject the label entirely due to a problematic propensity for women's texts to always be read, as Olivia Sudjic notes, as 'metonyms... for themselves'.[103] Furthermore, before her autofictional trilogy (*Outline, Transit* and *Kudos*), Cusk wrote a series of memoirs exploring her experiences as a wife and mother. Memoir, much like autofiction, also has a long history of being considered a women's genre, an issue which in Cusk's case was compounded by her decision to write memoirs about domestic experiences.[104]

The loneliness that Cusk's autofictional works are interested in is still largely that of the domestic, and in particular the loneliness of wives and mothers. What makes Cusk's work so radical, however, is not simply the emphasis she places on the loneliness of these experiences but also the loneliness that accompanies the escape from these experiences, and the dissolution of familial structures. The chapter ultimately argues that autofiction offers Cusk a way to address experiences of loneliness that are tied up with female domestic experiences while avoiding the vilification that her earlier memoirs generated. Cusk's work achieves this via its use of what she calls 'negative literature', which is akin to what Armine Kotimer calls 'allofiction'.[105] This is literature that depends heavily upon secondary characters' voices, rather than the narrator's (and therefore, implicitly, Cusk's). In doing so, it demonstrates that Cusk's emphasis on silence should not be mistaken for a depiction of women's lack of agency, but instead the opposite, and that one of the effects of this is

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[102] Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic"', p. 247.

[103] Olivia Sudjic, *Exposure* (London: Peninsula Press, 2018), p. 106.

[104] For more on the ways that memoir has historically been coded as female, see: Carolyn G. Heilbrun, 'Contemporary Memoirs: Or, Who Cares Who Did What to Whom?', *The American Scholar*, 68.3 (1999), pp. 35–42.

[105] Rachel Cusk, *Kudos* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 182; Armine Kotin Mortimer, 'Autofiction as Allofiction: Doubrovsky's L'Après-Vivre', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 49.3 (2009), p. 25.

the displacing of the emotional labour of empathy on to a reader. In this way, Cusk makes use of what Meg Jensen has called the 'active readership' of autofiction to establish a sense of intimacy, by positioning readers as both confidant and protagonist, and by framing community building as an act that can be achieved by reading and writing.[106]

Chapter Four: Tao Lin

The fourth and final chapter of the thesis looks at loneliness in Tao Lin's work. It, too, begins with an exploration of the ways in which identity impacts Lin's discussion of loneliness, in particular his experiences as an Asian-American writer. It then considers the importance of digital media in establishing Lin's position as a figurehead for what has come to be called 'Alt-Lit'. This collective of writers shared a detached style heavily influenced by New Narrative works, and was facilitated almost entirely by internet communities and the opportunities these provided for so-called 'networked solitude'.[107] These communities created new opportunities for online publishing, which meant that 'some of the traditional gatekeeper roles in the publishing industry such as agent and editor… started to become obsolescent'.[108] The digital nature of the movement is also central to considerations of genre in this chapter, as much of Lin's writing was originally first published as social media content.[109] This alters the reception of his work as autofiction, and thus a reader's understanding of the implied author in the texts, since his collected oeuvre can be seen as an exercise in self-curation that invites a reader's engagement, mirroring their ability to interact with Lin digitally. While this might be viewed as indicative of what has been called 'the internet's dream of inclusivity', this dream is frustrated and radically juxtaposed by the depthlessness of characterisation and seemingly unsustainable nature of relationships as they are presented in his early fiction.[110]

In particular, the chapter considers the utopic vision of the internet as a place to establish community and the extent to which this idea is both embodied and undermined by Lin's early works,

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[106] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 76.
[107] Vincent, *A History of Solitude*, p. 34.
[108] Dix, 'Foreword', p. 11.
[109] Lin has even published editions of his digital writings, including a collected book of tweets. See: Tao Lin and Mira Gonzalez, *Selected Tweets* (Ann Arbor: Short Flight / Long Drive, 2015).
[110] Jonathon Sturgeon, 'The Living Death of Alt Lit', *Flavorwire*, 2014 <https://www.flavorwire.com/493627/the-living-death-of-alt-lit> [accessed 14 April 2022].

which explore a world in which we are always, 'alone together'.[111] It compares the ability to communicate meaningfully with others as it is presented via digital media and face-to-face interactions in Lin's early works, in particular *Taipei*. In doing so, it will argue that these novels present characters who largely embrace loneliness, unaware of, or unbothered by, the negative impact it so transparently has on their lives. It then considers the extent to which the establishment of this literary aesthetic might have contributed to the sexual misconduct allegations that ultimately proved the community's downfall. By situating his subsequent writing as a response to these allegations, it represents the increased focus on community-building and the therapeutic role of art in Lin's late works as part of an attempt to rescue his public image by attaching himself to an ascendant trend of both autofiction and the wellness industry. In doing so, it raises important questions about the ethical implications of taking solace in autofictional works that are rooted in the lives of problematic figures, an idea which first arose in the Wallace chapter. In Lin's work, however, these questions are more pressing, given that the allegations were made public during his working career. This allowed him the chance to respond to them textually, not least of all by co-opting the ideas about autofiction as a community-building form that this project more broadly demonstrates.

Conclusion

While the fourth chapter ends with a consideration of some of the issues that this project requires us to face, it is by no means the only point at which these issues arise. Details about Wallace's real life have dramatically altered the landscape of Wallace studies over the past decade, and recent scholarship is now beginning to consider these questions in relation to his work and their implications on our engagement with an implied author figure. Likewise, Lerner's politics have been questioned for being gestural and performative rather than action-oriented. Cusk, too, is often accused of social elitism, and this subsequently prompts us to ask questions about her implied audience and for whom she is writing. My study, too, is problematic in its narrow diversity – all but one author are white, and all but one are men, for instance. This is, in part, a reflection of problematic publishing trends alluded to earlier in the study, as well as a reflection of the deeply embedded history of writing about loneliness being a male pursuit. My hope is that the study does indicate some ways that this might be resisted, but it is not blind to these issues as an inherent part of both autofiction and writings about loneliness. Questions also recur throughout the project about

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[111] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

what really constitutes community, and there is an ongoing interest in the nature of parasocial relationships and the ways that we as readers (and likewise as digital users) engage with writers that cannot be tidily summarised. Questions about what constitutes true and false intimacy abound, something that the texts themselves often emphasise can only be resolved by disregarding the question entirely. The project does not, therefore, offer a naively optimistic portrayal of autofiction as an antidote for all experiences of loneliness, but it does hope to explore the importance of reading and writing autofiction as a method of networked solitude that *can* have a real bearing on one's own experiences of loneliness and the search for community. To misquote Marianne Moore slightly, it is a project that suggests that one possible 'cure for loneliness is [networked] solitude'.[112]

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[112] Quoted by Robert Duncan, in Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. by Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 99.

Fiction as Therapy: David Foster Wallace and Existential Loneliness

I'm pretty lonely most of the time, and fiction's one of the few experiences where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved. Drugs, movies where stuff blows up, loud parties - all these chase loneliness away by making me forget my name's Dave and I live in a one-by-one box of bone no other party can penetrate or know… In lots of ways it's all there is.[113]

- David Foster Wallace

There can be little doubt that loneliness constituted one of the central themes in David Foster Wallace's fiction. In fact, on reading interviews, resisting loneliness often appears to be the sole reason he ever put pen to paper, claiming it was, ultimately, 'all there is'. That said, while the reader familiar with Wallace's work might immediately perceive the logic which justifies his inclusion in a thesis about loneliness, his relevance to a project examining autofiction might at first glance appear less obvious. Although much of Wallace studies remains dominated by discussions of *Infinite Jest*, my research focuses largely on his later works: the two short story collections, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*, and his final, unfinished novel, published posthumously as *The Pale King.* Although Wallace's interest in using fiction to countenance loneliness was a longstanding one, I believe that it is in these works, in which he most clearly indicates his authorial presence – occasionally even by name – that he best managed to bring that project to fruition. These texts can be seen as part of a movement in the early twenty-first century towards the writing of books in which the perceived sincerity (or as I will argue later in this chapter, credibility) of the author is crucial in nurturing a reader's engagement with the text. In this pursuit, Wallace joins authors of the so-called New Sincerity such as Dave Eggers, whose works deliberately include details of their real author's life in order to establish some sort of contract with the reader, which might be best understood as what Jacques Lecarme called an 'autofictional pact'.[114] As such, this chapter builds upon recent scholarship by Karen Ferreira-Meyers and Bran Nicol which has begun to situate Wallace's work in the burgeoning canon of anglophone autofiction, arguing that a reading which emphasises Wallace's use of autofiction might offer a way to understand his attempts to use literature to quell the feeling of loneliness in both himself and his reader.[115]

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[113] Gerald Howard, 'Infinite Jester', *Elle Magazine*, 11.6 (1996), p. 58.

[114] Jacques Lecarme, 'L'Autofiction, un Mauvais Genre?', in *Autofictions & Cie*, ed. By Philippe Lejeune (Paris: RITM, 1993), p. 242.

[115] See: Karen Ferreira-Meyers, 'Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?', and Bran Nicol, 'Eye to I: American Autofiction and Its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers', both taken from *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 27-47 and

While my research by no means attempts to promote the idea that Wallace was the first writer to foreground loneliness as a thematic concern in their work, I do believe that he was among the first to use it as a catalyst for a very particular style of formal experimentation. His debt to American metafiction is by now a well-discussed topic, but a consideration of how Wallace drew on those techniques for new purposes has not always taken full consideration of the importance of loneliness in Wallace's work.[116] This chapter will argue that while metafiction sought to unmask the fallacy of realism in literature, Wallace used a similar toolkit to try to redress the division between reader and writer that he saw as following in the wake of poststructuralism. In considering his use of carefully crafted implied author and implied reader figures in his late works, I will demonstrate that Wallace established a new form of dialogic reading model in his fiction, which aimed at fostering a sense of intimacy between the reader and the writer, therefore offering a corrective to loneliness. In doing so, my work follows Todd Womble's assertion that criticism of autofiction ought to consider the legacies of reader-response theory in order to fully appreciate the ways in which texts construct the interaction between reader and writer.[117]

The chapter begins with an exploration of what loneliness looks like in Wallace's fiction, with a close reading of his short story 'The Depressed Person', taken from the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Using paratextual documents to support the analysis, I will argue that Wallace drew heavily on his use of both narrative voice and authorial avatars to confront what might be called existential loneliness. It then builds on this to examine the way that two models of dialogism – the intratextual and the extratextual – function in his fiction as a way of establishing a connection with the reader to address this problem. Following this, I will analyse 'The Depressed Person' in tandem with a later story of Wallace's, 'Good Old Neon', from *Oblivion*, in which he introduces a character called David Wallace. In doing so, I will argue that drawing on more explicit constructions of implied author figures – and therefore moving towards what might be better understood as autofiction and not simply metafiction – allows Wallace another way of approaching this same problem, one which he would build upon much more expansively in his final novel, *The Pale King.* It will seek to demonstrate, therefore, that the dialectical relationship that Marshall Boswell has identified between *Oblivion* and *The Pale King,* whereby the later novel functions as 'a corrective…

255-74 respectively. It is also worth noting that Nicol's essay attributes the introduction of the term 'autofiction' to America to Jerzy Kosinski, a writer Wallace admired and publicly praised in numerous essays.

[116] Wallace's relationship to metafiction is covered in numerous essays. For two examples of particularly illuminating discussions on the topic I would suggest: Charles B. Harris, 'The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.2 (2014), pp. 103–26, and Mike Miley, 'Desperately Seeking David: Authorship in the Early Works of David Foster Wallace', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7.1 (2019), pp. 1-26.

[117] Todd Womble, 'Roth Is Roth as Roth: Autofiction and the Implied Author', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 219-36.

to Oblivion's haunted insularity', can more accurately be viewed as a longstanding gradual progression away from insularity that in fact predates the composition of *Oblivion*. I will then consider the ramifications of this model for Wallace's relationship to poststructuralism, and posit that the idea of an autofictional pact might offer a useful concept for considering how Wallace textually attempts to resist the loneliness that his works thematically address.

The chapter then moves on to analyse Wallace's construction of an implied author in *The Pale King*, arguing that a reader's belief in that figure's sincerity is crucial to establishing a meaningful connection. It also recounts the ways in which Wallace 'performs' his authorship, including incorrect details as a way to encourage interactive and investigative reading. Next, it contemplates the other side of the equation, considering the importance of implied readers in Wallace's work. It will also, therefore, address the demographic of Wallace's readership and consider the exclusionary boundaries of his project, focusing particularly on the importance of a masculine, homosocial intimacy in Wallace's work and what this means for whose loneliness he appears to speak for and to. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of the role of credibility in Wallace's work, introducing a phenomenon known as the 'horoscope paradox', through which Wallace warns readers against placing blind faith in his authorial constructs, thereby gambling that this will in fact ultimately establish a closer connection between reader and writer.

Overall, what the chapter will present is an analysis of the ways that Wallace writes about and against a very particular form of existential loneliness, which is not so much a symptom of isolation as much as it is an inherent trait that Wallace understood as being common to writers and readers. As literary history, it bookends my thesis as a record of the seminal moment at which the techniques of metafiction were redeployed by writers who might be better understood as working within the mode of autofiction, particularly in the American tradition. It also introduces a number of key concerns that will reappear throughout the wider project, including, but not limited to, an interest in: therapeutic practices, types of dialogue, paradoxes, the importance of suspending disbelief, and the perceived insufficiency of critical theory. Lastly, it offers a broadly hopeful perspective on the idea that loneliness can be countenanced through the writing and reading of literature, even when the real-life details, particularly those of Wallace's suicide, might have otherwise prohibited readers from maintaining that hope. It is, in essence, an exploration of Wallace's fiction as therapy.[118]

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[118] There has been a recent trend in Wallace studies for framing Wallace's work in terms of its therapeutic capacity. For more detail, please see Mike Miley's concept of 'fiction therapy', in 'Desperately Seeking David: Authorship in the Early Works of David Foster Wallace', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7.1 (2019), p. 21, and Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

What it Means to be Lonely: 'The Depressed Person', 'Good Old Neon' and Dialogism

> The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror.[119]
>
> -   David Foster Wallace, 'The Depressed Person'

David Foster Wallace's short story, 'The Depressed Person', is defined by paradoxes. It evokes the psychic horror of feeling alone, while at the same time showing the futility of establishing networks to battle that same horror; it shows someone in desperate need of therapy, while simultaneously undermining the very role of therapy as we traditionally understand it; and finally, it seems to be a call to arms for empathy and understanding, while at the same time painting a picture of someone so self-involved and unlikeable that that challenge seems impossible to meet. In spite of scant critical attention, I believe that these paradoxes define much of Wallace's mature fiction, and this story offers an interesting starting point for considering how his formal approaches to these issues progressed over his career. In particular, it will allow us to see how his later works – most notably *The Pale King* – employ a revised model of textual dialogism that allows them to function as a corrective to these issues.

To begin, the story repeatedly emphasises not only the pain of the depressed person, but also, crucially, links this pain's intensity to its inability to be articulated. At the story's opening we are told this impossibility 'was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror'.[120] Later, as the depressed person breaks down to her therapist, she claims that 'she felt able to share only painful circumstances and historical insights about her depression and its etiology… instead of feeling truly able to communicate and articulate and express the depressions' terrible unceasing agony *itself*'.[121] As Jon Baskin has written of Wallace's later fiction, this issue seems to reflect the fact that 'Wallace addresses a readership he presumes to be in pain and one whose pain is connected to, and possibly a function of, a certain way of thinking'.[122] Indeed, the tautological description of her attempts to vocalise her pain – 'communicate… articulate… express' –

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[119] David Foster Wallace, 'The Depressed Person', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), p. 31.
[120] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 31.
[121] Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 49.
[122] Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 8.

demonstrate the depressed person's desperation to believe in the simple idea that talking around her problem might offer relief, while simultaneously reinforcing how utterly inarticulable her pain must be. In this respect, the problem reflects a similar issue with expressing loneliness, which as an 'embodied experience… has been neglected', due to 'the difficulty in defining, accessing, and describing loneliness as a physical, lived experience'.[123]

It is worth noting, too, that it never occurs to the depressed person that communicating does not seem to actually help her; instead, we are told that 'her attempts at intimate, mutually nurturing relationships with men' constituted 'an agonizingly demeaning across-the-board failure', while her 'attempts to reach out in her emotional isolation and try to cultivate and develop caring friends and relationships in the community' proved nothing short of 'excruciating'.[124] Indeed, even the supposedly beneficial relationships she has already established – those concerning her 'Support System' – seem to actively exacerbate her problems more than they do address them. We are told that once her friends manage to end the phone call, she feels 'even more isolated and inadequate and contemptible than before she had called'.[125] In one of the few instances of reported speech where we actually learn what her support network have replied, we are told that they advise she becomes as 'special and caring and unflaggingly nurturing a friend to herself as [her] late therapist had been'.[126] In both these instances we see repeated the verbal tic of the syndetic listing of three near-synonyms, illustrating the redundancy inherent in the depressed person's way of thinking. Indeed, the friend's thinly veiled attempt to shirk their duties as a listener suggest that they are themselves the ones suffering at this point in the depressed person's narrative, an irony entirely lost on the titular character.

The insufficiency of therapy to help the depressed person (and implicitly to inflict suffering on those she leans on) is a repeated theme throughout the story, perfectly encapsulating the sentiment that Jon Baskin claims is the driving force behind much of Wallace's writing, which 'hopes to compel its reader to recognise that her feeling of "lostness" is connected to her philosophical and rhetorical commitments, as opposed to being addressed by them'.[127] The therapist, who later dies by suicide perhaps for want of her own support network, claims that 'defences against intimacy' which once served evolutionary needs, in 'nearly all cases… now, paradoxically, actually caused a

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[123] Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 178-9.
[124] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* pp. 47, 50.
[125] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 35.
[126] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 50.
[127] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, p. 41.

great deal more trauma and pain than they prevented'.[128] As Ellen Defossez suggests, the story 'invites readers to think against the long-standing assumption that narrativizing the pain of depression is crucial to overcoming it, and the contemporary view that empathic responses from others effectively promote recovery of the depressed'.[129] I agree with her assertion that 'the structural and interactive norms of the therapeutic setting guide and constrain patients in their storytelling' and that this 'inducement toward certain kinds of narratives — or towards narrative at all, with its demand for coherence—can have the effect of limiting patients' available modes of understanding and expressing their experiences'.[130] However, what Defossez's analysis overlooks is that Wallace's story is as much an exploration of the depressed person's pain – and therapy's inability to ease it - as it is an implicit exploration of the pain this inflicts on those forced to engage with her attempts to communicate, including both her therapist and her supposed friends.

Early in the story, the narrator describes how, as a child, she resented having to bear witness to her parents' fighting, without pay, while their divorce lawyer was reimbursed handsomely for performing a similar role. In an ironic turn, near the end of the story, the depressed person confesses to her support network that it 'felt demeaning and pathetic to feel forced to *buy* patience and empathy' from her therapist, a role her listener in turn has had to adopt for no remuneration.[131] Wallace transforms this from a comic narrative showing the depressed person's self-involvement to something more deeply troubling with the revelation that the therapist – whom the depressed person once referred to as the 'absolutely ideal friend', since she did not have to 'reciprocally meet or empathize with or even consider the other's own emotional needs' – has died by suicide, and that her main confidante in the support network is a divorced mother of two, who has recently undergone chemotherapy. [132] Contrary to societal expectations, Defossez writes, 'rather than portraying the experience of depression as one marked by passivity and anti-sociality, Wallace represents the depressed person's experience as one marked by agency and sociality: it takes a lot of communicative work, in concert with others, for the depressed person to understand herself as depressed'.[133] What ultimately remains unarticulated, however, is not only the depressed person's pain, but also the suffering of those around her. In his radical reframing of the value of therapy in Wallace's works, Jamie Redgate has suggested that 'when [the] therapist commits suicide, the story is written so that the absence is felt by an attentive reader… [making] the therapist… the saddest

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[128] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 42.

[129] Ellen Defossez, 'Unending Narrative, One-Sided Empathy, and Problematic Contexts of Interaction in David Foster Wallace's "The Depressed Person"', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 39.1 (2018), p. 16.

[130] Defossez, 'Unending Narrative', p. 18.

[131] Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 44.

[132] Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 47.

[133] Defossez, 'Unending Narrative', p. 23.

and least one-dimensional character' in the story.[134] While Redgate is right to argue that the story alludes to the struggles of the therapist as much as the titular character, it also performs a similar feat in its presentation of the other characters who engage with the depressed person. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the climax of the story, when the depressed person waits for her friend with the neuroblastoma to finish retching – without asking how she is – before stubbornly continuing to ask them what their 'honest assessment' of her is.[135]

'The Depressed Person' seems a fitting starting point for analysing Wallace's concerns with loneliness since it not only highlights the dangers that are at stake in pursuing a life lived alone, but it also works so hard to trouble almost all of the conventional therapies that might be offered in response to that alienation. It offers very little in terms of how one might imagine a way out of this horror - a criticism that has been levelled at Wallace by both critics and friends alike. Jonathan Franzen, for instance, once wrote that he and David Foster Wallace had jointly decided that fiction's ultimate aim was to establish a 'neutral middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being', a space from which one might pursue 'a way out of loneliness'.[136] In his greatly anticipated 2011 essay about their relationship, 'Farther Away', however, Franzen went on to categorise what he saw as their two different approaches to the novel – broadly defined as what Jon Baskin calls Franzen's model - the 'social novel' - and Wallace's model - the 'novel of the self'.[137] As Baskin writes, in Franzen's analysis, 'the novel of the self appears… as a symptom of neurosis and depression [where] Wallace laid out "the extremes of his own narcissism, misogyny, compulsiveness, self-deception, dehumanizing moralism and theologizing"', thereby managing 'to reinforce his reader's alienation under the pretense of describing it'.[138] Baskin rightly points out that contrary to the expectations this might set up, however, Franzen's work is itself often dominated by images of men 'whose idealism about relationships is eroded and finally destroyed by his experience with them'.[139] Meanwhile, as 'The Depressed Person' should sufficiently illustrate, 'if there is a unifying horror in Wallace's early fiction, it would be that of "radical individualism"', which Wallace was careful to have 'never romanticized'.

That loneliness was a dominant theme in Wallace's work, and moreover in his philosophy of writing, is documented widely in the paratextual documents that surround his writing. In 1993, he

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[134] Jamie Redgate, 'David Foster Wallace's Treatment of Therapy after Postmodernism', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.3 (2018), p. 290.

[135] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 55.

[136] Jonathan Franzen, 'David Foster Wallace', in *Farther Away* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), p. 164.

[137] Jon Baskin, 'Coming to Terms', *The Point Magazine*, 15 February 2012 <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/coming-to-terms/>. [accessed 4 January 2020].

[138] Baskin, 'Coming to Terms'.

[139] Baskin, 'Coming to Terms'.

told Larry McCaffery that he 'strongly suspect[s] a big part of real art fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it'.[140] In 1996, responding to a question about why one might choose to write in an age of 'attenuated attention spans', he replied that it was because 'I'm pretty lonely most of the time, and fiction's one of the few experiences where loneliness can be both confronted and relieved'.[141] I want to posit here that this focus on loneliness and our ability to countenance it through fiction constituted not only a thematic concern of Wallace's, but was also the driving force behind much of his experimentation with form. In the manuscript notes for Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King,* David Hering points out that in November 1999, Wallace identified '"two broad arcs" that supposedly underpin *The Pale King*', the second of which was identified as the sense of 'being individual vs being part of larger thing'.[142] While most critics have viewed this comment as reflecting Wallace's thematic interest in bureaucratic institutions, I would argue that it also reflects his understanding of writing itself – a solitary pursuit undertaken with the ultimate purpose of establishing community.[143]

Seen from this perspective, the real issue with Franzen's discussion of Wallace's work is perhaps not its tactless handling of a dead friend's legacy, but rather its misunderstanding of the framing of community and loneliness in Wallace's work. He argues that 'close loving relationships, which for most of us are a foundational source of meaning, have no standing in the Wallace fictional universe', overlooking the possibility that Wallace's countenancing of loneliness occurred off-page, in a radically revised model of author-reader relationships.[144] As Adam Kelly writes, 'it is only by invoking this future off the page that dialogue can be engaged, and that both reader and writer can be challenged by the dialogic dimension of the reading experience'.[145] While I will argue that this dialogic model is something Wallace first develops in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men,* and refines in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*, I first want to apply this logic to 'The Depressed Person', a story which so vividly portrays a world in which close loving relationships appear to have little standing.

In his genetic analysis of the manuscript drafts of this story, Elliott Morsia writes that the most 'crucial, innovative role in the story's composition' was played by Wallace's decision to revise the text from its 'originally closed, monological structure', in favour of a 'new dialogical structure',

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[140] Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations With David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 32.

[141] Howard, 'Infinite Jester', p. 58.

[142] David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p.130.

[143] For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of Wallace's work, please see: Mark McGurl, 'The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program', *Boundary 2*, 41.3 (2014), pp. 27–54.

[144] Jonathan Franzen, 'Farther Away', in *Farther Away* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), p. 39.

[145]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 & Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), p. 145.

which brought the story from two pages to fifteen in length.[146] Morsia's depiction of this rearrangement could usefully be categorised into two forms of dialogism, which I will argue are crucial to Wallace's formal innovations in his mature works. The first of these is what I will term intratextual dialogism – which takes the form largely of what Morsia simply calls 'the intervention of dialogue', most notably in the conversations between the depressed person and her therapist or support network.[147] It is this which allows Wallace to open up the story thematically to address not simply isolation but also the problematic role that communication with others might play within that. I would also like to posit that Franzen's understanding of Wallace's work in 'Farther Away' limits itself largely to this intratextual model of dialogism. However, what Wallace also begins to model in this story, and more widely in the collection, is what we might term an extratextual model of dialogism. In discussing Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of The System*, critics Marshall Boswell and Adam Kelly dispute the degree to which its ending might be viewed as open or closed. The final words of the novel ('I'm a man of my')[148] lead Boswell to conclude that 'the system remains open', since it is unfinished and able to be completed by a reader.[149] Kelly, however, argues that since 'there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in this closing sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated. There is thus a gesture toward an open system and a readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it'.[150] Similarly, 'The Depressed Person' ends before we ever hear the response of her interlocutor, leading to Morsia's conclusion that, 'placed at the end or terminal point of the text, this question leaves the text open… [and] in a sense, the text becomes an extended question posed to the reader'.[151] While I agree ultimately that this does extend the text's concerns beyond its own parameters and thus constitutes a move towards extratextual dialogue, I am also inclined to borrow Kelly's notion that this might be best understood as a 'gesture' towards dialogism, given that readers can easily guess how the friend with the neuroblastoma might describe the depressed person's character. In this sense, while Wallace does begin to move away from a Bakhtinian model of monologic authorship, 'The Depressed Person' does not yet embody the polyphonic model that will be developed in his later works.[152]

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[146] Elliott Morsia, 'The Composition of "The Depressed Person"', *Textual Cultures*, 9.2 (2015), pp. 79–99 (p. 92).

[147] Morsia, 'The Composition of "The Depressed Person"', p. 93.

[148] David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of The System* (London: Abacus, 1997), p. 467.

[149] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), p. 63.

[150] Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas', in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 9.

[151] Morsia, 'The Composition of "The Depressed Person"', p. 93.

[152] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 82.

A limited understanding of Wallace's use of dialogic models, and particularly a reading which emphasises his use of intratextual methods at the expense of considering extratextual dialogism, also therefore risks mistaking what Wallace really meant when he was discussing loneliness. Erik P. Hoel makes an important distinction that we ought to keep in mind when he notes that 'the loneliness that [Wallace's] novels cure, unlike television, is not social. It is metaphysical'.[153] Moreover, the potential implications of this misunderstanding move beyond a discussion of Wallace's work, and are all too-easily wrestled into a tidy argument about what led to Wallace's suicide in 2008. As Franzen puts it, remarking upon the unfinished state of *The Pale King*, 'when his hope for fiction died, after years of struggle with the new novel, there was no other way out but death'.[154] The conflation of Wallace's inability to finish that novel with Wallace's inability to establish dialogue with the outside world is repeated in critical accounts of Wallace's work. In his discussion of Wallace's authorial intrusions into *The Pale King*, for instance, David Hering claims that Wallace had deferred to 'a new and extraordinarily convoluted mode of collative composition… [which] carries a significant risk of collapsing inward into the kind of monologic narrative that Wallace has tried to refine out of his work'.[155] Hering's comments might best be explained by his understanding of dialogism as being 'most immediately apparent in Wallace's sustained use of dialogue in his fiction', relying heavily therefore upon an intratextual model. Hering goes on to state that what he sees as the monologic failings of that text might only be ameliorated by 'at least being honest about the premises of monologism. In this sense the text might perform a dialogic relationship whereby the *reader* provides the critique of the "revenant author"'.[156] Hering spends minimal time discussing this idea further, seeming to view it as a necessary justification for Wallace's reliance upon authorial intrusions within the text, but I believe that actually it constitutes the most radical reimagining of dialogism within Wallace's late fiction. By reading against this notion that *The Pale King* was a formal or compositional failure, arguing instead that it should be judged by its existence as an extratextual dialogic model, my work will offer a different perspective on Wallace's late works, one which resists the tendency to read them as the catalyst for his suicide.

What perhaps makes Jonathan Franzen's comments in 'Farther Away' even more shocking is that this extratextual model of reading echoes much of Franzen's own earlier ideas about what he called the 'contract model' of writing, which believes that 'the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist *existential loneliness*' (emphasis

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[153] Erik P. Hoel, 'Fiction in the Age of Screens', *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society*, Spring/Summer 2016 (2016), pp. 93–109 (p. 107).
[154] Franzen, *Farther Away*, p. 174.
[155] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 145.
[156] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 146.

mine).[157] This existential loneliness is precisely that which cannot be countenanced simply by reading social novels; it is one which requires a different understanding of reading's very purpose. In Franzen's words, it is dependent largely upon an understanding that 'a novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader', and this is a compact which Wallace's fiction repeatedly insists upon.[158] Moreover, I believe that Wallace profoundly understood why it was that fiction was the best place to experience this 'compact', since, as Hoel writes, fiction is an 'intrinsic' technology, capable of recreating qualia in a way unmatched by other media. Television, for instance, can only offer an extrinsic view of the world, the 'scientifically describable, physically modelable surface-world of appearances'.[159] Fiction, however, can offer an intrinsic perspective on the world, capable of seeing other selves 'as complicated collections of both third-person and first-person facts', thus offering an antidote to the risk of solipsism inherent in both the acts of reading and writing.[160]

As an example of this perspective, I would like to return a final time to Wallace's story, 'The Depressed Person', in order to understand how this manifests itself in his use of voice and authorial perspective. The story is narrated in close third person, but the interiority of the protagonist is increasingly hinted at through free indirect discourse. There is, for instance, a motif throughout the story of the narrator describing the imagined lives of her friends, which gradually shifts from imagining their 'active, vibrant, largely pain-free long-distance lives' to imagining at the story's close 'their functional and blissfully ignorantly joyful if perhaps somewhat shallow lives'.[161] The increasingly bitter thoughts of the depressed person therefore appear to bleed into the third-person narrative in a way that echoes her domination over the conversation with her therapist and friends. The eruption of repressed anger reaches its zenith when the depressed person is said to imagine the therapist's unseen next patient as a 'pathetic contemptible whiny self-involved snaggletoothed pig-nosed fat-thighed *shiteater…*so desperate for a personally interested friend'.[162] What is most interesting about this particular example is that it takes place not in the main body of the narrative, but in the footnotes, which, as Defossez points out, constitute one of 'Wallace's hallmark authorial moves'.[163] While Defossez claims that, as an assertion of authorial presence, the footnotes themselves risk silencing 'the depressed person… [who was] possibly on the verge of claiming a

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[157] Jonathan Franzen, 'Mr. Difficult', *The New Yorker*, 2002 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/30/mr-difficult> [accessed 4 December 2019].
[158] Franzen, 'Mr. Difficult'.
[159] Hoel, 'Fiction in the Age of Screens', p. 104.
[160] Hoel, 'Fiction in the Age of Screens', p. 104.
[161] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* pp. 33; 48.
[162] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 46.
[163] Defossez, 'Unending Narrative', p. 19.

voice', she overlooks the fact that the intrusion of her interiority into the footnotes arguably does the opposite, instead showing her influence over the authorial voice.[164]

The freedom with which characters and author figures assert and yield their authority in this story might ultimately point to the way that the story seeks to undermine its thematic insularity. While I agree with Defossez that the 'extensive, winding footnotes are narratives within a narrative… serving as a visual representation of how once we get stuck in our stories it can be difficult to get un-stuck', I believe that they also fulfil a more important role. Thomas Winningham has previously argued that 'layers of just who is supposed to be who… in terms of imagined identification and subject position, can easily distract from [Wallace's] message, as the reader loses herself in the structural and metatextual pyrotechnics', but in the case of 'The Depressed Person', it is possible that the ability to inhabit multiple perspectives is in fact central to the dialogic model Wallace is attempting to use to resist his, and his readers', loneliness.[165] This might also offer a reason for Wallace's insistence on using parenthetical pronoun qualifiers such as 'her own (i.e., by therapist's own)… she (i.e., the "friend")' in the story.[166] While these have been dismissed as 'redundant', or at best as 'Wallace… trying to ratchet up the story's sense of being frustratingly convoluted and repetitive', we might instead view them as a necessary qualification in a story in which we are encouraged to see imaginative identification as potentially limitless.[167] Interior perspectives are therefore shown to be able to be inhabited by either the narrator, the depressed person, Wallace himself, or indeed us as readers, and therein lies the key to Wallace's story in terms of how to resist the 'essential horror' of isolation at its heart. It is not simply a case of narrativizing the pain and establishing support networks, but instead about feeling that the pain can be truly inhabited by others and thus empathised with. In this respect, what Wallace aims to achieve here is a heightened version of what Wayne Booth calls '"involvement" or "sympathy" or "identification", [which] is usually made up of *many reactions* to author, narrators, observers, and other characters' (emphasis mine).[168] Booth also points out that 'if an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them' – like the depressed person – 'then the psychic vividness of prolonged inside views will help him'.[169] Wallace's use of both closely focused interiority, and fluidity between points of empathetic identification therefore allow him to cultivate the potential for

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[164] Defossez, 'Unending Narrative', p. 19.

[165] Thomas Winningham, '"Author Here": David Foster Wallace and the Post-Metafictional Paradox', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.5 (2015), p. 471.

[166] Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 56.

[167] Simon de Bourcier, '"They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace": Syntax and Narrative in Infinite Jest, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, Oblivion and The Pale King', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017), p. 15.

[168] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 158.

[169] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 377-8.

empathetic identification and offer a textual antidote to the issue of loneliness that the story addresses.

Consequently, while it might seem obvious to view the therapy-patient relationship in the story as an allegory for the relationship between the author-figure and the reader, what is most radical about Wallace's story is that it does not clearly demarcate where we ought to draw these boundaries of identification. Wallace, through the very act of writing, might be best seen as analogous to the depressed person, intent on narrativizing their pain, an idea easily justified by reference to Wallace's public struggles with depression. However, commercially speaking, Wallace is perhaps better understood as the therapist given that readers have quite literally paid to take comfort in his words. Therapeutically speaking, readers wilfully overlook the fact that Wallace is not speaking directly to *them* – his message, if one can be said to exist, is by its very nature generic - in much the same way that the therapist refuses to deviate from her dogmatic approach to therapy. Finally, we might look to textual clues of authorial presence, as Defossez did by pointing to the loaded nature of footnotes in Wallace's work. Along these same lines, I would like to dwell on one of the odder details of the text – the therapist's insistence in cold weather on wearing a 'ghastlily moist-looking flesh-coloured "pelisse" in the cold months'.[170] The specific description of the pelisse as 'flesh-coloured', and 'ghastlily' might perhaps conjure an image of the therapist as ghost, a trope commonly understood in Wallace's work to be representative of his authorial presence, from *Infinite Jest's* wraith to *The Pale King's* phantoms.[171] By positioning himself in a range of roles throughout the text and implicitly allowing us to inhabit opposing, or even simultaneous positions, Wallace's story allows him to resist the loneliness at the heart of the story, by creating a dialogic model of reading and writing that encourages empathetic responses. In this way, he performs what Benjamin Widiss calls authorial 'see sawing', whereby an author 'oscillates in and out of any identification with [their] characters… affirming the importance of [the] impersonal construction of [their] own presence'.[172] While Mary K. Holland has argued that 'The Depressed Person' 'ends with crucial questions that it does not begin to attempt to answer' and that it thus 'asks, rather than elucidates, how we are to understand and communicate the self, and escape narcissism, all through language',

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[170] Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 41.

[171] For an in-depth consideration of the role ghosts play in Wallace's fiction, see: David Hering, 'Reading the Ghost in David Foster Wallace's Fiction', in *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017), pp. 1-30.

[172] Benjamin Widiss, *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 163.

Wallace's answer to the questions he raises are perhaps not to be found in the content of his words at all, but instead in the form in which he presents them.[173]

Thematically, we might view Wallace's later story, 'Good Old Neon', as a partner text to 'The Depressed Person'.[174] Both texts initially appear largely monologic, although 'Good Old Neon' makes use of the first-person perspective as opposed to the more detached third, and, crucially, both explore in great detail the relationship between an analyst and analysand. Just as in 'The Depressed Person', through the motif of the pelisse, there are numerous hints throughout the story as to how it might best be interpreted – an example of the ways in which a text, in Garret Stewart's words, 'might encode – might teasingly encipher – its own reading'.[175] While almost all of the story is taken up by a monologue spoken by Neal, it is hinted at twice in the text that his narrative is not the central theme of the story: first, the reader is told that 'what turns out to be the meaning of the term "my life" isn't even close to what we think we're talking about when we say "my life"'; and then 'despite appearances this isn't even really about me… [but] you'll have at least some idea of why what happened afterward happened and why it had the impact it did on who this is really about'.[176] Further insight into this mystery might lie in the depiction of Neal – still narrating in the first-person – describing the outer-body experience of writing his suicide note:

> Even as I wrote my note to Fern… another part was observing the whole scene of a man in a dress shirt and no tie sitting at his breakfast nook writing a heartfelt note on his last afternoon alive… this part of me sort of hovering above and just to the left of myself, evaluating the scene, and thinking what a fine and genuine-seeming performance in a drama it would make.[177]

Here, as in 'The Depressed Person', the act of poesis and narrativization seems to function as a sort of marker, guiding readers towards the true heart of the story, and the way that duplication of selves might work within its world. What makes 'Good Old Neon' unique in Wallace's oeuvre up to this point, however, is that it marks the first point that Wallace has actually included 'David Wallace' as a character in his own work, which has numerous implications for the ways in which we as a

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[173] Mary K. Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), p. 117.

[174] Likewise, Marshall Boswell has argued that 'The Depressed Person', 'Good Old Neon' and Chris Fogle's monologue in *The Pale King* form a loose trilogy. See: Marshall Boswell, 'The Constant Monologue Inside your Head', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp. 156-7.

[175] Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 11.

[176] Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 151, 152.

[177] Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 175-6

reader might receive and understand the dialogic model in this story, and in turn its ability to address, and assuage, our loneliness.

The climax of the story seems to transparently acknowledge this polyphonic expansion of voices, starting with a thematic shift away from Neal's worries about his fraudulence to a discussion of people's capacity for accessing other perspectives. This is reinforced by the proliferation of direct address, such as the moment when the narrative suddenly asserts that 'you already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know'.[178] Wallace then draws heavily on the symbolism of accessing other people's selves as if through a door, giving an undeniably clichéd veneer to his story. Beneath this first-order discussion of access to other selves, however, the formal ways in which Wallace attempts to make this access manifest all seem to coalesce. First of all, a footnote – that hallmark denotation of Wallace's authorial presence – emerges two pages before the ending's close but finishing with the declaration of '- THE END', supposedly marking the completed suicide of the narrator, Neal.[179] Thus, Neal and Wallace are implicitly aligned through their formal access to space on the page, even as Neal's story is declared to be over.

When 'David Wallace' is said on the following page, however, to be blinking 'in the midst of idly scanning class photos', one might presume that the narrative is still that of the posthumous presence of Neal, as David Hering does when he concludes that 'Neal frames the instantaneity of "this whole seemingly endless back-and-forth between us" within the miniscule details of the lives of five supporting characters before entering, wraith-like, into the empathetic consciousness of "David Wallace"'. [180] As Cory Hudson notes, the shift from the hypodiegetic to the diegetic level certainly presents us with a 'change in protagonists', but whether the narrating voice has also shifted is less clear.[181] The pejorative description of David Wallace as the 'dithering, pathetically self-conscious outline or ghost of a person David Wallace knew himself back then to be' refuses to make clear whether the narrative has entirely shifted to a close third narrative guided by David's self-deprecating perspective or whether Neal's interiority still dominates the story. It is important to note that the character 'David Wallace' is then said to have 'back then imagined [Neal] as happy and unreflective and wholly unhaunted by voices telling him that there was something deeply wrong with him that wasn't wrong with anybody else', essentially mapping the fraudulence paradox which

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[178] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 178.
[179] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 179.
[180] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 180; David Hering, 'Reading the Ghost in David Foster Wallace's Fiction', in *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017), p. 16.
[181] Cory M. Hudson, 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and "Good Old Neon"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.3 (2018), p. 302.

has dominated Neal's narrative for the majority of the story ('I put up a very good front as somebody who could have deep conversations and really wanted to know and understand') onto the younger character 'David Wallace'.[182] By linking the characters in this way it becomes possible to interpret the entire narrative of Neal as an imagined projection by David Wallace, acting now not just as character but also as authorial stand-in, as indeed Cory Hudson argues.[183] Seen from this angle, what might have initially been interpreted as free indirect discourse might be better understood as what Lorna Martens calls 'voice contamination…[whereby] A the narrator adopts the style of B the character at times'.[184] As Martens goes on to note, in 'works that occupy the grey area between autobiography and fiction' – like autofiction – 'such blurring between narrator and character is particularly likely, seemingly on account of the fact that both narrator and character are versions of the author', allowing 'stylistic overlap [to] readily be naturalized as continuity'. This continuity, in turn, allows us to empathise with the author in front of us as readily as we do the narrators and characters, allowing Wallace to resist loneliness through the dialogic model of his fiction.

Rather than simply viewing Neal as inhabiting Wallace's perspective, therefore, we come to understand that Neal might inhabit 'David Wallace' the character's perspective at one and the same time as 'David Wallace' the character and author-figure inhabits Neal's. Anecdotal evidence from Wallace's editor at the time, Adriene Miller, supports such a reading. She claims that Wallace 'suggested to me that the narrator of "Good Old Neon" is perhaps not the apparent speaker, or the character named David Wallace, or the ghost, but all three'.[185] This sleight of hand is then unveiled to the reader in the final passage of the story, when 'David Wallace' declares that he is 'fully aware that the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt'.[186] Thus, we as readers are invited to pull off the same 'hoary and insipid' attempt and understand that perspective and identity in this story functions both fluidly and dynamically, meaning that avenues for potential connection appear almost everywhere. Moreover, compared to 'The Depressed Person', the stakes are raised higher in this invitation through the inclusion of 'David Wallace' as a character, since, as Lee Konstantinou writes, it allows Wallace to pull off 'a kind of trick… whereby Wallace pulls away the "fourth" wall of the fictional world of his story, revealing that what readers were led to believe was fiction (and specifically postmodern metafiction) may in fact

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[182] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 141.

[183] Hudson, 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend', p. 302.

[184] Lorna Martens, 'Autofiction in the Third Person, with a Reading of Christine Brooke-Rose's Remake', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 52.

[185] Adrienne Miller, *In The Land of Men* (New York: Ecco, 2020), p. 321.

[186] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 181

be a kind of meta-nonfiction', thereby causing 'the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer… not "Dave Wallace" the character, but the author'.[187] It is worth noting that, just as Hering criticised *The Pale King* for its monologic structure, Marshall Boswell has claimed that the stories in *Oblivion* (including, of course, 'Good Old Neon') 'provide almost zero in the way of character interaction', meaning that they undermine 'many of the techniques for alleviation that Wallace had already established… [because] the characters in *Oblivion* have no one to talk to'.[188] However, just as an extratextual understanding of dialogue might offer a rebuttal to Hering's claims about *The Pale King*, so too does it work here to refute Boswell's claim and instead demonstrate that the characters in 'Good Old Neon' – including 'David Wallace' – do in fact have someone to talk to in order to escape their loneliness: the reader.

Against Poststructuralism

To emphasise this experience between Wallace the writer and us as a reader is to subscribe to the idea of Wallace's that art fundamentally exists as 'a living transaction between humans', as well as to believe that art can have a real impact on one's loneliness.[189] By situating Wallace's writing in this context, it carves out a place for discussions of his work in a line of recent critical rebuttals of Barthes' work, following Benjamin Widiss' assertion that, although 'the author has been placed intrinsically off limits by poststructuralist theory and is… never wholly accessible, [it] should not blind us to the fact that she or he is very much in play notionally in texts' and that authorial deaths might be, in his words, best understood as 'less-than-fatal'.[190]

Writing in 1988, in his essay 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', Wallace wrote that his generation stood at a crossroads, between American writers who had 'breathed the relatively stable air of New Criticism and an Anglo-American aesthetics untainted by Continental winds' and the generation to come, for whom the climate 'is aswirl with what seems like long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin,

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[187] 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), p. 98.
[188] Marshall Boswell, 'The Constant Monologue Inside your Head', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp. 152, 166.
[189] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 41.
[190] Widiss, *Obscure Invitations*, p. 4. As Widiss points out, this broader critical shift is probably best understood as beginning with Seán Burke's landmark study, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man'.[191] The ramifications of this were of course undeniable, and Wallace himself claimed that 'the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from his own concerns'.[192] Four years later, however, Wallace wrote in his review of Harvey Hix's 'Morte D'Author: An Autopsy', that he was among those for whom the 'whole question [of authorship] seems sort of arcane' since they 'know in [their] gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another'.[193] Moreover, in 1996, writing in his review of Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky*, Wallace went so far as to claim that 'most theoretical readings consist in just running [literature] through a kind of powerful philosophical machine', an act 'equivalent to dissecting a flower instead of looking at it or smelling it'.[194] In this regard, as David Hering rightly points out, Wallace seems to belong to what Judith Ryan has called the generation 'troubled by the implications of theory for contemporary life'.[195] We might see this attitude reflected textually by two of Wallace's imagined accounts of reading, taken from *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* respectively. In 'The Soul is Not a Smithy', the narrator remarks of his childhood that he 'could not, in any strictly accepted sense, read'.[196] He goes on to clarify that he could 'scan a page… and supply a certain amount of specific quantitative information, such as the exact number of words per page, the exact number of words on each line… and yet could not, in the vast majority of cases, internalize or communicate in any very satisfactory way what the words and their various combinations were intended to mean'. Similarly, in *The Pale King*, from which many of the stories in *Oblivion* were taken in early draft form, Chris Fogle recounts that 'for almost two years at Machesney [Elementary School], instead of reading something I'd count the words in it, as though reading was the same as just counting the words'.[197] It is easy to see these descriptions as allegorical representations of what Eve Sedgwick calls 'paranoid reading', which Rita Felski tells us had been 'elevated to the governing principle of literary studies', but in doing so, had 'solidifie[d] into a sensibility and set of disciplinary norms no less doctrinaire than the fastidious aestheticism and canon worship it sought to replace'.[198] That

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[191] David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 8.3 (1988), p. 13.

[192] Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', p. 13.

[193] David Foster Wallace, 'Greatly Exaggerated', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 1997), p. 144

[194] David Foster Wallace, 'Feodor's Guide: Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky', *The Village Voice*, 1996 <https://www.villagevoice.com/2019/07/04/feodors-guide-joseph-franks-dostoevsky/> [accessed 8 January 2020].

[195] Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 208.

[196] David Foster Wallace, 'The Soul is Not a Smithy', in *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 72.

[197] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 162.

[198] Rita Felski, 'After Suspicion', *Profession*, 2009, p. 31.

Wallace represented this stultified practice in not one but two of his late works tells us a great deal about how pervasive he saw the dangers of such theoretical readings as being.

One of the texts that most clearly wrestles with how to approach literature after theory is Wallace's earlier story 'Octet'. This text has attracted a great deal of critical attention over the years, not least of all due to its disarming use of second-person narrative and its invitation to imagine a scenario in which 'you are, unfortunately, a fiction writer'.[199] David Hering argues that the text functions as dialogue in two distinct ways, which I want to consider individually. First, by offering 'in its appeal to the reader, something close to a reciprocal form of metafiction', it means that 'the ghostly presence is inverted and becomes extradiegetic, mapped on to the reader, who is given possession over the narrative's success'.[200] As evidence of this extradiegetic model, he cites the fact that in manuscript drafts the ending was changed from 'Q: Self-evident' to the final published version, which reads in the form of a command: 'So decide'.[201] To this extent, I concur with Hering's argument that this aspect of the story constitutes a dialogic model, inasmuch as it accords great authorial responsibility to the reader. However, I also believe that what is absent from existing critical approaches to 'Octet', including Hering's, is an understanding and appreciation of the broader fluidity of occupiable positions in the text. Most analyses of 'Octet' either stress the ending as an imperative command to the reader, as in Hering's reading, or, like 'Mulhall, Kelly, and Smith… [they] consider the "decision" at the end of the story as a referendum on Wallace', which 'reinforce[s] the very framing of the author-reader relationship that the story is designed to therapeutically undermine'.[202] By stressing the text as being about fundamentally Wallace *or* the reader, these critics are implicitly wrestling with their own understanding of the story's relationship to conventional metafiction, as when Konstantinou writes that 'Octet', unlike 'traditional metafiction [which] opens onto the situation of the reader (revealing that what the reader reads ought to be disbelieved)', instead 'opens onto the situation of the writer (whom we are asked to believe in)'.[203] As Baskin asserts, it might be better to understand the story (and indeed, the collection) as undermining metafiction's efficacy altogether, and that, 'having brought its readers, in part by asking them to think of themselves as writers, to the rhetorical impasse that makes metafiction seem attractive, the story shows self-reference to be as haunted by the threats of inauthenticity and fraudulence as the conventionally realistic "illusions" it had promised to supplant'.[204] Even Baskin,

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[199] David Foster Wallace, 'Octet', in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), p. 123.
[200] Hering, 'Reading the Ghost in David Foster Wallace's Fiction', pp. 14-15.
[201] Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 136
[202] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, p. 103.
[203] Konstantinou, 'No Bull', p. 96.
[204] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, p. 104.

however, ultimately believes that the final words of the story serve as 'a reminder in the form of a command... for the reader'.[205] Instead, we might consider that the command is for *both* the reader – to decide whether they can trust the narrator and/or Wallace, and to decide whether they feel they can empathise with and inhabit the mindset of the narrator and/or Wallace – and *also* for Wallace himself – to decide whether it is worth the risk of attempting such a radically extradiegetic story in the first place. In this way, the story can be read in its most fully dialogic form, as a conversation which allows both reader and writer to inhabit the position of narrator and narratee at will, situating them as an active agent in the dialogue of the text itself and thereby reducing their feelings of loneliness.

Then there is the second way in which David Hering views the story as dialogic, which is the extent to which the story itself is in dialogue with the others in the collection. He argues that the other stories in the collection are monologic, and that 'moments of dialogic communication in *Brief Interviews* [i.e. 'Octet'] are notable for their stark contrast with other standalone stories of extreme solipsism or narcissism-induced paralysis'.[206] He points out that its central placement in the collection 'allows it to reflectively radiate upon the adjoining and surrounding stories... [so that] the rest of the collection can be refractively viewed "through" it'.[207] Again, he argues that this allows for an extradiegetic aspect to our engagement with the text, according 'judgment to the reader over not only the cohesion of "Octet" but the whole of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*'.[208] However, this understanding of the text essentially hinges upon the idea that 'Octet' constitutes an exception in the collection, as the only story which grapples directly with authorial presence, but this overlooks such explicit references to authorial presences as emerge in stories such as 'Adult World (II)', which, as Simon de Bourcier notes, uses a 'schematic narrative' which makes 'Wallace's focus on voice... illuminatingly explicit'.[209] Similarly, Mary K. Holland emphasises the 'consistent structural monovocality' of the collection, arguing that the one-sided interview structure 'enacts exactly the interior solipsism and resulting communicative barriers that Wallace's fiction as a whole aims to diagnose and overcome'.[210] She, too, acknowledges that the stories 'assert a kind of integrity by implying echoes and connections among themselves' and that these 'repetitions and echoes imply that they all participate in some larger whole, or series of wholes, that themselves might be connected'.[211] By not revealing the grander narrative behind the book, Holland argues, *Brief*

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[205] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, p. 103.
[206] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 112.
[207] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 113.
[208] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 114.
[209] Bourcier, 'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace', p. 14.
[210] Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', p. 109.
[211] Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', pp. 109-10.

Interviews with Hideous Men 'compel[s] its reader to do this logicking work, and to manufacture the compulsion from its faint logical promise, [and this] provides its ultimate integrity', but she too neglects to develop this point into an argument for the ultimately dialogic nature of the collection as an extratextual model.[212] I want to argue, instead, that Wallace's presence is even constructed (albeit in less explicit terms) within the supposedly monologic, titular, 'brief interviews', which invoke Wallace's authorial presence without relying upon an actual construct of a writer figure. Moreover, I want to argue that his purpose in doing so is to highlight, and potentially assuage, the loneliness that these same texts so often seem to exemplify.

In 'BI #42', we find a description of one eponymous hideous man's father, who worked his whole adult life as a toilet attendant. Notably set in 'Peoria Heights, Illinois' (where the author-figure 'David Wallace' goes to work in *The Pale King*), a reader familiar with Wallace's oeuvre is primed to interpret this story as one that comments on his implied author figure. Most of the story describes his father's attempts to make himself appear only ever 'provisionally there, contingently there'.[213] Although he must be quiet so as to not intrude, his presence must be noted to some degree, since 'the effacement cannot be too complete or they forget he is there when it comes time to tip'.[214] Symbolically, it is possible to interpret this story as a metaphor for Wallace's approach to authorship. It addresses the fine line between authorial presence that is acknowledged and acceptable, and that which seems an intrusion. It is also possible to interpret the father figure as a symbol of Wallace's literary forefathers, the poststructuralists who first began to overtly signal authorial presence in their texts and whom Wallace once tellingly referred to as the 'patriarch[s] for my patricide'.[215] He even remarks at one point that the father appeared 'at men's elbows to hand them towels... [showing] an impassivity that is effacement', echoing Dickens' famous authorial intrusion that he is 'standing in the spirit at your elbow'.[216] It is at the close of the story, however, that I would argue the text becomes most outwardly dialogic. Often, throughout the collection, the ending of these stories demonstrates that an epiphany the hideous men believed themselves to have undergone has in fact taught them nothing and they naively model their earlier habits of thinking or speaking.[217] In the toilet attendant's son's interview, however, he pre-empts the interviewer's question, asking, 'do I

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[212] Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', p. 110.
[213] David Foster Wallace, 'BI #46', in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), p. 76.
[214] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 75.
[215] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 48.
[216] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 74; Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2018), p. 19.
[217] See, for example: Mary K. Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', pp. 120-1.

admire the fortitude of this humblest of working men? … Or do I despise him, you're wondering?', without offering an answer. The piece ends following this question with:

> Q.
> "…"
> Q.
> "What were the two choices again?"[218]

What Hering and others have argued was a monologic form, always dominated by the hideous men, in this instance does not appear to have been absorbed even by the man himself, becoming instead a sort of anti-monologue. Rather, the only way the text can cling to meaning is if we as the reader are able to parrot back the man's question to himself, thus making it function dialogically in an extratextual manner. If we consider that the hideous man, on a symbolic level, functions as a stand-in for Wallace, or at least as a generic authorial presence, then this story invites dialogue between the reader and writer themselves, enacting a dialogic model which Hering claims the collection lacks without the guiding hand of the more overtly metafictional 'Octet'. In this way, Wallace seems to both espouse metafictional approaches while at the same time demonstrating their redundancy, or as Charles Harris puts it, he 'doesn't abjure so much as he redeploys metafiction, achieving pre-postmodernist values through postmodernist narrative techniques, striving, in particular, for a reciprocal relationship with the reader'.[219]

Like David Hering, Charles Harris sees *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* as the highpoint in Wallace's rebuttal of metafiction, whereas I believe that it is in his final works, particularly those which include authorial stand-ins, that this finds its apotheosis, and indeed the point at which it might be said that Wallace's work moves from metafiction towards autofiction. As Bran Nicol writes, 'the difference between metafiction and autofiction is really a question of end points'.[220] Metafiction's aim is 'to complicate the fictional act and to reject realism', whereas autofiction is 'the product of compulsion and necessity; it must seem to be written by the author for himself or herself', and it need only be 'autobiographical in a directly existential sense rather than springing from the need to produce a coherent, factual, reliable narrative'.[221] While I agree with Nicol's argument that contemporary autofiction must be considered explicitly in relation to metafiction, I

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[218] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 76.

[219] Charles B. Harris, 'The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.2 (2014), pp. 103–26 (p. 122).

[220] Bran Nicol, 'Eye to I: American Autofiction and Its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 271.

[221] Nicol, 'Eye to I', p. 263.

would add to this that autofiction for Wallace is being written not just for himself as the author, but also for his reader, as part of an implicit pact which, as Grace McCleen puts it, 'invites us to step inside along with the author and see that the circle is actually infinite, extends so far it includes writer and reader as well'.[222] It is in this way that Wallace manages to address the loneliness of both himself and his readers, leveraging his autofiction to resist this.

Considering Wallace's work as an exercise in autofiction sheds interesting light on the ways in which Wallace, in Marshall Boswell's words, 'plays fast and loose' with 'details from his life', both throughout *The Pale King* and in his earlier fiction.[223] Wallace did not, for instance, work at the IRS during a suspension from his university studies for plagiarism, but he did allegedly take high-level accountancy courses in the lead-up to writing the novel, and he did drop out of Amherst in his sophomore year due to issues with his mental health. In each case, as Boswell notes, 'the story is a fiction in fact, but still true in spirit'.[224] Mike Miley, commenting on the lack of objective truth in *The Pale King*, claims that the 'breach of the contract in no way leads the reader to feel betrayed by Wallace… [perhaps] because even though Wallace gets the facts of his life blatantly wrong, he accurately delivers his persona to the reader'.[225] Miley extends this observation by recognising that 'all these biographical moments… represent key crisis moments in his earliest attempts to become a writer and a public figure', thus the persona which is 'accurately delivered' to the reader is in fact only the persona of Wallace the writer. Hence Boswell's assertion that 'when Wallace identifies *The Pale King* as "a kind of vocational memoir"… he is expressing a fictional truth', akin to Wallace's earlier statement that *The Broom of the System* might be viewed as a 'coded autobio'.[226] What is most interesting about this is that while *The Pale King* verges on what Wallace himself derogatorily calls a 'metafictional titty-pincher', and although the authorial chapters are, for the most part, signposted by the words 'author here', they never directly address Wallace's past as a writer per se.[227] By presenting his (fictional) history in the IRS rather than, say, on an MFA course, he negates his textual presence as an omniscient author figure. Instead, by emphasising his credibility not as an author but as an accountant, he manages to escape the more conventional tropes of metafiction,

[222] Grace McCleen, 'Auto-Nauts: Voyages of the Self to the End of the Novel', *Boundless*, 2018 <https://unbound.com/boundless/2019/08/08/auto-nauts-voyages-of-the-self-to-the-end-of-the-novel/> [accessed 5 December 2019].

[223] Marshall Boswell, 'Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's The Pale King', *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), p. 36.

[224] Boswell, 'Author Here', p. 36.

[225] Mike Miley, '… And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself: Performance and Persona in The Pale King', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.2 (2016), pp. 191–207 (Fn. 15).

[226] Boswell, 'Author Here', pp. 37-8; McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 41.

[227] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 69.

while still presenting – in a coded manner – an account which is true in spirit to his journey to becoming an author, in the form of a quasi-metafictional künstlerroman.

By labelling Wallace's later work as autofiction, it also prompts a new methodological approach to his work. Nicol's justification for considering his early fiction autofictive is the fact that it is 'founded upon a mutually respectful dialogue between writer and reader, which breaks from supposed postmodern authorial didacticism, and which has strong similarities to Lejeune's autobiographical pact'.[228] In his reading of Wallace as an early adopter of autofiction, he advocates narratological readings of Wallace's work, a reading which Todd Womble claims is central to our understanding of anglophone autofiction, arguing that we must draw upon Wayne Booth's notion of the 'implied author' to fully understand the ways in which 'postmodern narratives… textually enact postmodernity'.[229] As Womble rightly points out, 'while it by no means solves all of the mysteries of these postmodern texts, the concept of the implied author provides a platform on which scholars and readers can navigate some of the rather complex questions' which might be raised by the inclusion of authorial stand-ins.[230] In this respect, I see this study of Wallace's work as a continuation of what Benjamin Widiss calls 'the legacy of reader response theory'.[231] As he points out, reader response theory seemed to '[lose] its currency just as postmodernism's hectoring might have made it most apposite' since, as he argues, theorists such as Wolfgang Iser seemed 'to make of the author too quiescent a being… [leaving] the reader to his own devices rather than prodding him in a certain direction', a tactic which is entirely at odds with what Wallace and other writers in the wake of postmodernism attempted. While Cory Hudson has therefore criticised Wallace scholars for reading Wallace's 'authorial intrusion[s]… as a sincere gesture of empathy by Wallace directed at the individual reader', because, he claims, it 'categorically dismisses Booth's familiar formulation of an implied author', I want to argue instead that acknowledging these intrusions as a constructed implied author figure in no way negates their status as an empathetic gesture.[232] Moreover, he argues that Wallace studies is 'infected with a Barthesian "prestige of the individual" plague', where 'the author's para-textual dictates often are read as gospels that definitively account for his fictional works'.[233] Far from taking them as gospel, an approach to Wallace studies that positions his work as autofictional will undoubtedly consider his paratextual works, but only as part of the larger scheme of Wallace's construction of an implied author figure, and again this does not have to preclude a

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[228] Nicol, 'Eye to I', p. 267.
[229] Womble, 'Roth Is Roth as Roth', p. 224.
[230] Womble, 'Roth is Roth as Roth', p. 230.
[231] Widiss, *Obscure Invitations,* p. 15.
[232] Hudson, 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend', pp. 295-6, 7.
[233] Hudson, 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend', p. 298.

reading that still interprets his authorial presences as a gesture of empathy. While Hudson ultimately argues that Wallace scholars 'should focus on and begin with how Wallace's fiction acts as a node within a literary network of different genres, periods, and schools and the techniques', we must now acknowledge that one such context is in fact autofiction.[234]

'Author Here': The Implied Author

It is important to note that Wallace himself does not in fact describe the 'author here' sections of *The Pale King* as autofiction. Most commonly, he refers to these sections as a kind of 'vocational memoir', presenting them as the counterpart to Fogle's so-called 'vocational soliloquy'.[235] Yet even by aligning himself with memoirists, he asserts that he is 'not going to be one of those memoirists who pretends to remember every last fact and thing in photorealist detail' and that he will not 'waste time noodling about every last gap and imprecision in my own memory'.[236] Wallace tries, that is, to have his cake and eat it, by distancing himself from all conventional forms; he is not writing metafiction, nor conventional memoir, nor straight fiction. However, inasmuch as his novel encodes its own reading and creates interpretive communities, it *does* matter how we label Wallace's work, since our understanding of genre to a certain extent dictates our methodological approach to Wallace. Marshall Boswell, for instance, writing about Wallace's use of the term memoir, claims that it brings with it 'all that genre's attendant blurring of the line between "the personal and public, or rather between private vs. performance"' and while this is certainly part of what Wallace wishes to destabilise, it dismisses the equally relevant disturbance between truth and fiction, and perhaps more subtly, between subjective understandings of outward sincerity and inward authenticity.[237] When Wallace is pontificating on the details of his memoir for instance, he claims that 'what follows is substantially true and accurate', and that 'the modifier in "substantially true and accurate" refers not just to the inevitable subjectivity and bias of any memoir'.[238] Moreover, Wallace does not always use the term memoir, occasionally deeming the 'author here' sections 'reconstructive journalism'.[239] What Wallace later describes as the 'vocational memoir' also appears to have at first been called 'a piece of journalism' in a draft written circa 2000.[240] The final

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[234] Hudson, 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend', pp. 298-9.
[235] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 72, 259.
[236] Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 259-61
[237] Boswell, 'Author Here', p. 26.
[238] Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 71-2.
[239] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 74.
[240] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 134.

'author here' sections only emerged late in the composition, having been set down in 2006, according to Toon Staes's research.[241] It is clear therefore that Wallace was still in the process of developing an understanding of quite how to describe his own act when the composition of the text was ongoing.

Moreover, applying genre labels to these authorial inclusions is made even more difficult when we consider the multifarious approaches to inserting his presence into his works that Wallace had already set as a precedent. Theories abound on where Wallace appears as a construct in his fiction, but as Benjamin Widiss asserts, a good critic should be 'less interested in establishing anything concrete about these authors as actual personages than… in describing the authors who emerge as spectral presences from our readings of their works'.[242] Wallace's authorial presence is, as demonstrated already, signalled by any one of a number of approaches: occasionally his presence is signified by shared biographical traits; sometimes stylistically (i.e. by the presence of footnotes); sometimes by the presence of writer figures, such as the journalists in 'The Suffering Channel' and 'Wickedness', which David Hering calls attempts to 'mine his established nonfiction persona for the purposes of his fiction'; and occasionally it is through free indirect discourse.[243] What is problematic and destabilising about *The Pale King* is the presence of several, if not all, of the modes at once – or as Wallace anxiously puts it in his first 'author here' section, the voices become increasingly 'distorted, depersonalized [and] polyphonized'.[244] Even as the ostensibly transparent 'author here' sections are being narrated, for instance, Wallace alludes to other characters being 'named, described, and even sometimes projected into the consciousness of… so-called "characters" in *The Pale King*', acknowledging the potential for Wallace's persona to be found inhabiting other characters (the most obvious example would be the other vocational narrator, Chris Fogle).[245] Indeed, when Chris Fogle narrates his experiences of 'Obetrolling', he claims that the drug makes him 'much more self-aware' so that under its effects he was 'not only in the room, but I was aware that I was in the room' – a process which he refers to as 'doubling'.[246] In this state, it is not simply the act of having a thought that is important but the narration of that thought itself; Fogle claims that 'in fact, I remember I would often think, or say to myself, quietly but very clearly, *"I am in this room"*'.[247] Thus, the process of 'doubling' acts as an analogue for the very process of writing a

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[241] Toon Staes, 'Work in Process: A Genesis for The Pale King', *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), p. 71.

[242] See: Marshall Boswell's discussion of authorial avatars in *The Broom of The System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*, in 'Author Here', and David Hering's discussion of 'The Suffering Channel', 'Wickedness', and drafts of *Sir John Feelgood,* in *Fiction and Form*; Widiss, *Obscure Invitations*, p. 12.

[243] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 133.

[244] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 74.

[245] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 73.

[246] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 183.

[247] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 183.

character; Wallace is himself 'doubling' each time he writes in a voice which is not his own. The proliferation of selves that emerges from this process also gives readers more opportunities to potentially connect with the author/character figure before them, since his presence becomes increasingly apparent.

Since Wallace's work has always incorporated some form of authorial presence – and been read accordingly – it is worth considering why, in *The Pale King*, he considered it necessary to move towards a more overt model, explicitly naming himself as an author figure within the work, which David Hering points out had not been attempted by Wallace in drafts before what he calls the 'compositional crisis' of 2005.[248] The move, as Vincent Haddad notes, is one which he obviously had initial doubts about, writing in his manuscript notes besides the first draft of the 'author here' sections, 'dumb? The real-or-fiction theme is cool. But it could get annoying'.[249] Hering's justification for the move is largely structural and compositional, arguing that it 'affords the novel, for the first time, a pervasive structural "spine"… [since] by becoming the master narrator Wallace also implicitly dramatizes his attempted mastery of *The Pale King's* prior baggy and disparate narrative'.[250] Certainly the rate of composition following this move suggests the 'author here' sections did constitute a breakthrough for Wallace, but Hering's explanation still overlooks why it was that *this* particular approach facilitated Wallace's progress. Several explanations bear exploring, beginning perhaps with Mike Miley's assertion that it allows him 'to step out from behind the curtain… and speak directly to the reader without the mediation of performance'.[251] The extent to which writing can ever escape the 'mediation of performance' is, of course, questionable, but certainly it appears to be this urge which motivates Wallace's long digression on the contractual obligations between reader and writer in the first 'author here' section. He writes there, in an obvious allusion to Lejeune's notion of the autobiographical pact, that:

> There's always a kind of unspoken contract between a book's author and its reader; and the terms of this contract always depend on certain codes and gestures that the author deploys in order to signal the reader what kind of book it is, i.e., whether it's made up vs. true. And these codes are important, because the subliminal contract for nonfiction is very different from the one for fiction. What I'm trying to do right here, within the protective range of the copyright page's disclaimer, is to override the unspoken codes and to be 100 percent overt and forthright about the present contract's terms… Our mutual contract here is based on

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[248] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 144.
[249] Vincent Haddad, 'Conjuring David Foster Wallace's Ghost: Prosopopeia, Whitmanian Intimacy and the Queer Potential of Infinite Jest and The Pale King', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017), p. 21.
[250] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 136.
[251] Miley, '… And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself', p. 196.

the presumptions of (a) my veracity, and (b) your understanding that any features or semions that might appear to undercut that veracity are in fact protective legal devices… and thus are not meant to be decoded or 'read' so much as merely acquiesced to as part of the cost of our doing business together.[252]

This framing of the exchange seemingly undercuts the sentimental implications of reaching out to a reader. While it does suggest Wallace desires intimacy between the reader and writer, the discussion of this as part of a 'commercial' transaction, whereby the reader 'acquiesces' to the author figure imposes a cold and hierarchical power structure onto the text that Wallace knows any reader even remotely familiar with literary theory will be inclined to question, if not outright dismiss. In a footnote to this passage, Wallace explains the stakes of breaking the contract, which for ostensible nonfiction (and here he notably cites the scandal surrounding Kosinski's *Painted Bird)* is a sense of 'betrayal or infidelity' whereas with fiction 'the reader tends to feel more aesthetically disappointed than personally dicked over'.[253] Wallace's use of what might be termed meta-nonfiction puts him at risk of evoking both these emotions, but by pre-empting them he hopes to avoid the charge, in spite of breaking the veracity of the contract. Moreover, he can only be successful in his endeavour to resist his, and his readers', loneliness if they choose to not feel betrayed by this ploy.

One way that the reader can assert their power over the narrative, however, is by holding Wallace accountable to this charge of complete veracity. Many critics have analysed where Wallace's real life matches up to the life narrated in *The Pale King:* David Hering writes that 'he lists his age as 40 in Spring 2005, when Wallace would have actually been 43'; Jon Baskin writes of the deliberate mistake in listing Wallace's birthplace as Philo that this alludes to 'the fact that, on the opening page of his essay, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," Wallace writes of a childhood memory: "this was in my home of Philo, Illinois"'.[254] What these critics overlook, however, is the deliberate, and often playful nature of these mistakes. Certainly, by the time *The Pale King* was being composed, Wallace was well aware of his literary stature, and knew that he had accrued a following who would, and with the internet, could, verify these facts. In an act of what Sonja Longolius terms 'performative authorship', Wallace manages to draw upon (often false) constructions of the writer 'David Foster Wallace', usually taken from his non-fiction work, encouraging a form of ludic reading which assumes a reader's interaction with disentangling reality from fiction.[255] In this way,

[252] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 74.
[253] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 75. Fn. 9.
[254] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 144; Baskin, 'Coming to Terms'.
[255] Sonja Longolius, *Performing Authorship: Strategies of Becoming an Author in the Works of Paul Auster, Candice Breitz, Sophie Calle, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (London: Transcript, 2016), p. 8.

autofiction creates what Meg Jensen calls its 'active readership', whose interaction is invited and rewarded through the satisfaction of thinking themselves a 'better' reader of the author's work, and thereby offering another countenancing of their loneliness.[256]

Lorna Martens, writing about why writers adopt autofiction, offers another useful perspective on why authors might choose to construct overt authorial presences in a text, including the notion that it might give an opportunity for 'taking or asserting internal distance from one's former self'.[257] This idea certainly resonates with several critics' readings of the 'author here' chapters. Mike Miley, for instance, in archival research of Wallace's library, discovered that his books were regularly marked with a code of either DW or DFW in the margins of texts. As he notes, 'the passages that bear "DFW" generally appear next to passages that deal with writing, suggesting he associated these passages with his writing persona, while the "DW" annotations appear alongside passages discussing personal and psychological struggles'.[258] Based upon these codified personae, he argues that 'the David Wallace sections in *The Pale King*, especially when viewed in concert with other texts by and surrounding Wallace, can be read as a compelling examination of authorship in which David Wallace engages in a showdown with David Foster Wallace'.[259] By this, he means that Wallace the author engages in a showdown with the public persona of Wallace the writer, a figure often reduced to 'three words: footnotes, bandannas, and sincerity', an image 'so prevalent that it has threatened, both during his lifetime and after, to reduce Wallace almost to the level of caricature'.[260] It is therefore crucial that his examination of the persona alludes to paratextual elements – those both 'by and surrounding Wallace'. By parodying his own writing style, Miley argues, Wallace attempts to demonstrate mastery over his public self. It is for this reason that 'even the most casual Wallace reader could skim two paragraphs of §9 of *The Pale King* and know for certain that he or she was reading something by David Foster Wallace', since he attempts to perform a misprision of his own earlier writing style, instead opting to write 'in a voice that is no longer his own, as it is not his real voice but rather the voice of his persona'.[261] This is easily backed up by reference to the 'author here' sections, where the narrator asserts that they are 'the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona. Granted, there sometimes is such a persona in *The Pale King,* but that's mainly a pro forma statutory construct'.[262] Again, Wallace's pre-

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[256] Meg Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Literary Empathy, and the Interesting in Autofiction', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 76.
[257] Martens, 'Autofiction in the Third Person', p. 50.
[258] Miley, '… And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself', p. 195.
[259] Miley, '… And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself', p. 191.
[260] Miley, '…And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself', p. 194.
[261] Miley, '… And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself', p. 200.
[262] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 68.

emptively acknowledging the existence of such a persona (which essentially equates to an implied author) is distinguished from the more real, 'sincere' narrative voice – which is of course only another, albeit less overtly acknowledged, implied author figure.

David Hering offers a similar reading to Miley, but rather than focusing on the tensions between the public and private sphere, Hering argues that the showdown Wallace engages in is between his nonfiction and his fiction personae. He begins by deconstructing this tension in 'The Suffering Channel', from *Oblivion*, where 'Wallace implicitly dramatizes, for the first time, an iteration of his non-fiction reporting persona, a persona much more strongly conflated, however inaccurately, with a public idea of the "real" David Foster Wallace', but he warns that this risks becoming 'a public "working out" of a personal problem'.[263] Citing the detail about Philo being his birthplace, he then argues that this 'highlights the true identity of the "author" of *The Pale King*: it is "written" by Wallace's non-fiction persona, *not* by "the fiction writer"'.[264] While this is a tidy explanation for the Philo detail, it does seem to overlook other factual inaccuracies (Wallace's nonfiction persona, for example, cannot have been 40 in 2005 while the 'real' Wallace was in fact 43). Instead, it might be more productive to see the inaccuracies and wilful subversions as mediations of tensions in Wallace's writing career as a whole. For instance, it has as yet been largely overlooked that while the younger 'real' David Wallace comes from Philo, IL, the more senior David F. Wallace comes from Rome, NY, the 'Northeast REC'.[265] It seems no accident that the authorial persona is given a mistaken birthplace near to where Wallace grew up (and the birthplace routinely ascribed to Wallace over the years), while the other David Wallace hails from the state Wallace was in fact born in. Moreover, it seems important that these two IRS locations arguably represent Wallace's two literary reference points: the Midwest, where Wallace largely grew up, and often seen as synonymous with so-called MFA literature; and the Northeast, where Wallace completed his undergraduate studies. Wallace's work is often claimed by both these geo-cultural spaces, and he himself consciously performs Midwest and East coast styles in his work, perhaps inviting the reader to consider his career trajectory as one of mediated tensions, rather than as something to be distilled into one central exegesis.[266]

It is also worth noting that in spite of his assertion in the first 'author here' sections that he is the 'real author', in §38 this perspective is switched, referring to 'the second (i.e., the "real") David

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[263] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 117-8.
[264] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 144.
[265] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 413.
[266] See: Mary Shapiro, 'Midwestern and Rural', and 'Boston and Urban', in *Wallace's Dialects* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 135-58, 159-70.

F. Wallace' and 'the "unreal" David Wallace [i.e., the author]'.[267] While stylistically this chapter carries all the hallmarks of the other 'author here' chapters (lengthy footnotes, including one with a reference to 'my initial misassignment'), the text occasionally suggests that Wallace has ceased to see himself as a signifier of reality in the text.[268] That Wallace foregrounds the dissolution of his persona as 'real' or 'unreal' suggests something about his concerns while writing the novel. While Miley and Hering's contributions certainly do speak to one of Wallace's aims – to detach himself from a supposedly fake or distorted version of himself that had emerged in the public eye, perhaps especially among those not familiar with his actual work – if we reduce the text to this one function, then Wallace's work only really serves as potential therapy for himself – the 'public "working out" of a personal problem,' in Hering's terms. For Wallace, however, it is imperative that his persona is taken to be 'true', not only because his own validation rests upon it, but because he believes that a reader's ability to connect with him rests upon the sincerity of that claim.

Wallace's belief that he might be able to connect with his readers in this way has, however, been questioned by critics in the past. James Santel, for instance, in his exploration of Wallace's political conservatism, argued that in Wallace's persistent 'assignment of ultimate responsibility to individual agency', he consistently demonstrates 'a curious blindness to the extent to which his writing… reached people'.[269] I want to posit, however, that he was all too aware of his influence on readers, particularly those most vulnerable to his particular brand of community: well-educated, largely white male readers who perceived themselves to be, in some sense of the term, lonely. It is because of Wallace's acute awareness of this influence that his mature works are peppered with what I would argue serve as cautionary tales against idolatry. Jon Baskin addresses perhaps the most obvious of these in *The Pale King* when he analyses the paradoxical nature of Meredith Rand's monologue about meeting her would-be husband at a time when she needed to be told to not look outwardly for a saviour. As he writes, '[t]he story casts the attendant himself… as precisely the saviour she had so childishly been looking for... [and] insofar as Wallace's therapy is always aimed ultimately at his reader, it is fitting that his fiction's most explicit scene of therapeutic instruction would include a kind of warning about the inherent dangers in therapy - philosophical or otherwise - of idolatry'.[270] This is an important observation, and one which I believe demands greater attention be paid to the broader development of this theme in Wallace's mature fiction.

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[267] Wallace, *The Pale King,* pp. 414, 416.
[268] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 415.
[269] James Santel, 'On David Foster Wallace's Conservatism', *The Hudson Review*, Winter 2014 (2014). <https://hudsonreview.com/2014/02/on-david-foster-wallaces-conservatism/> [accessed 6 February 2020].
[270] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, pp. 118-9.

In 'The Suffering Channel', for instance, he describes the 'single great informing conflict of the American psyche' as 'the management of insignificance', defined by 'the conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance'.[271] While this conflict defines much of our modern-day experience, Wallace writes that 'it was [most] alive in the paradoxes of audience. It was the feeling that celebrities were your intimate friends, coupled with the inchoate awareness that untold millions of people felt the same way - and that the celebrities themselves did not', especially since 'celebrities were not actually functioning as real people at all, but as something more like symbols of themselves'.[272] This false relationship between audiences and celebrities is an example of what social scientists term a 'parasocial relationship', and it is clearly parodied in the Chris Fogle monologue, itself an exercise in inchoate awareness.[273] He recounts that in his youth he believed that 'I and maybe one or two friends were among the very, very few people who truly understood what Pink Floyd was trying to say. It's embarrassing'.[274] Likewise, in 'Another Pioneer', Wallace parodies the same issue using a form more akin to a parable. There, a child-deity is approached by a rival holyman, who whispers in his ear:

> Is it possible that you have not realized the extent to which these primitive villagers have exaggerated your gifts, have transformed you into something you know too well you are not?... Have you begun yet then to plan for the day when they wake to a truth you already know: that you are not half so complete as they believe?[275]

Marshall Boswell has argued that this particular story offers a 'wry parody of the artist as wise sage, an honorific often bestowed upon Wallace himself'.[276] In this light, it is important to note that the passage precedes the abandonment of the child by his villagers, perhaps serving as a cautionary tale of Wallace's own fears that idolisation by his readers can only end in his own abandonment, ultimately reinforcing rather than alleviating his loneliness. Moreover, the story describes the emergence of a whole industry built around interpreting the child's words - a parody of hermeneutics which we might view as an analogy for the way in which criticism perpetually threatened to undercut Wallace's image, and therefore his capacity for engaging meaningfully with his readers.

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[271] David Foster Wallace, 'The Suffering Channel', in *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 284.

[272] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 285.

[273] Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction', *Psychiatry*, 19.3 (1956), 215–29.

[274] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 164.

[275] David Foster Wallace, 'Another Pioneer', in *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 138.

[276] Boswell, 'The Constant Monologue Inside your Head', p. 159.

Implied Readers

Having discussed Wallace's construction of the implied author, I want now to consider the parallel construction of an implied reader in Wallace's fiction, without which there can be no understanding of Wallace's attempts to formulate reading as a 'living *transaction* between humans' (emphasis mine).[277] The concept is most closely associated with the reader-response criticism of Wolfgang Iser, and specifically his transactional, bi-active model of reading. This concept seems valuable for understanding not just Wallace's late work, but also other so-called New Sincerity writing which was emerging during the composition of *The Pale King,* much of which framed discussions of author intentionality in terms of battling loneliness*.* In Adam Kelly's seminal work on the topic, he outlines the existence of 'two way conversations' in a wide range of works associated with the movement, partially crediting Wallace's 'reconfiguration of the writer-reader relationship' with spearheading the transactional style found in works such as Joshua Ferris' *Then We Came To An End*, and Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*.[278] In James Clements' discussion of a similar approach in Dave Eggers' work, he argues that New Sincerity writers encourage communities 'initiated by, and forming around, an author' but in which 'the author does not occupy a privileged position'.[279] Clements comments on the importance of framing the text as a contract in Eggers' *Velocity* (although it is equally true of *The Pale King);* that by 'resting their definitions on a "contract" or "pact"… genre [is seen] as much as a "mode of reading" as a mode of writing,' offering an egalitarian view of the construction of textual meaning.[280]

While criticism of Wallace's work does therefore exist which begins to address the transactional nature of reader-writer relationships, it has not as yet framed the discussion in terms of implied authors and readers. Moreover, while the explicit construction of implied author and reader figures in *The Pale King* makes viewing it as the apotheosis of Wallace's dialogic model seem inevitable, current critical approaches which emphasise the transactional element almost exclusively focus on Wallace's earlier texts. David Hering, for instance, examines the 'major territorial shift with *Infinite Jest*…[where] egress can be found in the erection of a communication loop between narrative and reader', as well as examining the 'refractive' approach which Wallace deploys in 'Westward The Course of Empire Takes Its Way'.[281] Similarly, Mike Miley claims that in *Girl With*

[277] McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 41.
[278] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and The New Sincerity in American Fiction', p. 146.
[279] James Clements, 'Trust Your Makers of Things!: The Metafictional Pact in Dave Eggers' You Shall Know Our Velocity', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.2 (2015), p. 122.
[280] Clements, 'Trust Your Makers of Things!', p. 125.
[281] Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 66.

Curious Hair, 'the author must regard the reader as another subject eager to engage in dialogue with another, equally present and engaged, human being', thereby necessitating 'an author figure whose persona is convex'.[282] Where critics do reflect upon the polyphonic nature of the final novel, they tend to claim, as Simon de Bourcier does, that 'as in *Brief Interviews*, Wallace in *The Pale King* stages dialogues with one voice suppressed, rendering them effectively monologues', a claim that is tenable when examining the work as an example of intratextual dialogism, but which neglects to account for its extratextual ambitions.[283]

   I want to posit also that Wallace's construction of his implied reader is critical to his success and popularity as a writer, since a large part of the reason that Wallace's readers feel such an intimate connection with him has to do with the specificity of his - and his critics' - understanding of who his typical reader is. As Mark McGurl has written, any account of Wallace's work is 'insufficient without some account also of his readership'.[284] The account of Wallace's readership can be drawn at many levels: first, there is a pseudo-psychosociological premise recounted by critics, exemplified by Baskin's assertion that Wallace 'addresses a readership he presumes to be in pain and one whose pain is connected to, and possibly a function of, a certain way of thinking', or Konstantinou's claim that Wallace 'writes out of a conviction that we live in a society and culture of indefinable but ubiquitous sadness — crippled by a complex of solipsism, anhedonia, cynicism, snark, and toxic irony'.[285] The next consideration, and perhaps the most controversial, is the demographic understanding of Wallace's readership, which as Mark McGurl notes is typically considered to be 'young, educated, middle-class white people, mostly but not exclusively men'.[286] Catherine Toal has in fact linked the gendered aspects of Wallace's readership to this cultural zeitgeist, arguing that the cultural depression Wallace's works address coincides with a contemporary 'crisis in masculinity'.[287] Wallace himself was aware of the gender imbalance in his readership, once commenting that at readings he noticed that 'the people who seem most enthusiastic and most moved by [*Infinite Jest*] are young men. Which I guess I can understand – I think it's a fairly male book...about loneliness', an observation he justified since he himself 'was excited by [experimental literature] because I found

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[282] Mike Miley, 'Desperately Seeking David: Authorship in the Early Works of David Foster Wallace', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7.1 (2019), p. 4.

[283] Bourcier, 'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace', p. 23.

[284] Mark McGurl, 'The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program', *Boundary 2*, 41.3 (2014), p. 29.

[285] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, p. 8; Konstantinou, 'No Bull', p. 85.

[286] McGurl, 'The Institution of Nothing', p. 43.

[287] Catherine Toal, 'Corrections: Contemporary American Melancholy', *Journal of European Studies*, 33.3–4 (2003), p. 306.

reproduced in the book certain feelings, or ways of thinking or perceptions that I had had'.[288] This aspect of Wallace's work has guided much of the critical responses to his oeuvre, including Vincent Haddad's analysis of his use of prosopopoeia to promote 'a bodily, and even potentially erotic, (male) author/(male) reader relationship', understood in Eve Sedgwick's terms as an expression of 'male homosocial desire'.[289] Perhaps most importantly for a consideration of how this homosocial intimacy might resist the perceived loneliness of Wallace's readership is Haddad's assertion that 'what the production of shame, in opening and reading and conjuring Wallace's ghost in [*The Pale King*], corresponds with is the potentiality of one (male) reader's intense interest, and desire, for the (male) author', since 'the "literary novel", as staged by Wallace, becomes, rhetorically, the last remaining safe space for "sincere" intellectual kinship and, relatedly, the intimacies of male homosocial desire'. Haddad therefore shows the ways that homosocial desire is consciously produced and exploited by Wallace in his production of a white, male readership.

Of course, establishing the white male reader, and indeed writer, as the alienated other who feels lonely and detached, is a problematic notion. In Franzen's original publication of 'Perchance to Dream' in *Harper's*, he cites a letter from Wallace in which he writes that:

> Just about everybody with any sensitivity feels like there's a party going on that they haven't been invited to – we're *all* alienated. I think the guys who write directly about and *at* the present culture tend to be writers who find their artistic invalidation especially painful… it really *hurts* them. It makes them *angry*. And it's not an accident that so many of the writers 'in the shadows' are straight white males. Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture's alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture.[290]

As Dale Peck wrote of this letter, it is easy to view Wallace's claims as 'nothing more than a (sadly) fashionably anti-PC complaint about the loss of straight white-male privilege'.[291] Indeed, it seems telling that Franzen cut this passage from his printing of the essay (newly titled 'Why Bother?') for his collection *How To Be Alone.* However, that Wallace's message can be dismissed as, in Peck's words, a 'silly diatribe', still does not negate the large number of readers who *do* feel that his work

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[288] David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip With David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), p. 273.

[289] Haddad, 'Conjuring David Foster Wallace's Ghost', p. 4.

[290] Jonathan Franzen, 'Perchance To Dream: In The Age of Images, A Reason To Write Novels', *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, p. 51.

[291] Dale Peck, 'Well, Duh', *London Review of Books*, 18 July 1996 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v18/n14/dale-peck/well-duh> [accessed 20 March 2020].

speaks to their own alienation in some way. Marjorie Worthington's commentary on contemporary American autofiction perhaps offers an interesting perspective on what Wallace's work achieves in this respect. She claims that autofiction 'has proliferated in this contemporary moment in reaction to the diminishing cultural authority of the novel and of authors in general and the white male author in particular', and that 'the overt presence of an author-character in autofiction marks an attempt to reassert authorial authority while simultaneously demonstrating the limits of that authority'.[292] In this way, autofiction 'serves paradoxically as a postmodern challenge to traditional notions of authority and truth and as a somewhat conservative attempt to reassert those traditions'. Certain authorial decisions might be seen as consciously working against this – for instance Wallace's deliberate choice of female pronouns for his implied reader in 'Octet' ('ask her straight out') – but ultimately he leaves himself open to the criticism that he creates community at the expense of making that community exclusionary.[293]

Exclusionary though it is, it would be hard to name a writer around whom communities have formed as rapidly and intensely as they have done around Wallace. Andrew Warren offers a range of community models in his examination of Wallace's late fiction, two of which seem particularly important for considering the extratextual engagement with his work. The first of these is what he calls 'contracted realism', which sees 'literature within such a community [as] the imitation, or reflection, or representation of community', which in *Infinite Jest* manifests itself as an accurate description of 'fin de siècle American life, at least as it is or has been experienced'.[294] To exemplify this description, Warren cites the fact that 'Hal's addiction to solitude [is seen] as a description of what [readers] themselves are feeling'.[295] He develops this point further by arguing that the descriptions of Hal's loneliness are 'not merely constative; they are also performative', since their calls to community (such as his declaration that 'we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part of, not be Alone, we young') evoke the idea that 'it is not merely Hal or Kate Gompert who's craving Unaloneness, but us, and the narrative voice, and—we are compelled to postulate—

[292] Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of Me: Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 21.

[293] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 131. For further details on Wallace's exclusionary politics, it would be worth considering feminist critiques of Wallace's work, in particular: Mary K. Holland, '"By Hirsute Author": Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.1 (2017), 64–77; and Mary K. Holland, 'Quite Possibly the Last Essay I Need to Write about David Foster Wallace', in *#Metoo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture a Book by Heather Hewett and Mary K. Holland*, ed. by Heather Hewett and Mary K. Holland (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 113-32.

[294] Andrew Warren, 'Narrative Modeling and Community Organizing in The Pale King and Infinite Jest', *Studies in the Novel*, 44.4 (2012), p. 397.

[295] Warren, 'Narrative Modeling', p. 398.

David Foster Wallace'.[296] This idea certainly aligns with the sociological understandings of Wallace's work, such as Konstantinou's claim that Wallace broadly addresses our 'society and culture of indefinable but ubiquitous sadness'.[297] Warren also offers another model for how communities form around Wallace's work, however, which potentially offers a more tangible concept of community – that of the 'jargony argot model'.[298] This model, as Warren conceives it, is 'a consequence of a larger trend in Wallace's work that assumes that communities are built and dismantled by shared language', and it functions by introducing readers to a range of terms which slowly come to serve as shibboleths for Wallace's readers.[299] Warren cites numerous examples of these terms in Wallace's work, such as 'the squeak, eating cheese, interface, eliminating one's own map, howling fantods', each of which he claims 'starts out as a way of modeling community within the novel [and then] becomes a tactic for organizing community outside of the novel'.[300] What Warren alludes to in this final point is the way in which constative language again might become performative, something we might see best encapsulated in the use of the phrase 'howling fantods', which is now synonymous with an online community dedicated to Wallace's work, established in 1997 and still corresponding with readers at present. In this way, Wallace's work resists loneliness not only at an individual level for readers who feel soothed by his words, but also by facilitating the existence of digital communities that allow 'networked solitude', a phenomenon which will be explored in much greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis.[301]

Besides Wallace's exclusionary politics, the other potential barrier to true communion that readers might point to is the impossibility of his intentions reading as 'sincere'. Sincerity was certainly one of the primary critical concerns of the first wave of Wallace studies – spearheaded by Adam Kelly's analysis of its place in the so-called New Sincerity – and has been a point of consideration for most critics of his work since. Kelly's discussion of the topic is particularly useful for its nuanced understanding of the inherently performative nature of sincerity. Building on Van Alphen and Bal's ideas, he asserts that its performative nature should not render sincerity obsolete but merely reorient our understanding of it as an 'affective (hence social) process between subjects', and therefore, of course, a literary process best facilitated by the transactive reading models that both the New Sincerity and autofiction so heavily rely upon.[302] In this formulation, true sincerity, Kelly argues, 'must take place in the aporia between the conditional and the unconditional. Or in

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[296] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997), p. 695; Warren, 'Narrative Modeling', p. 398.

[297] Konstantinou, 'No Bull', p. 85.

[298] Warren, 'Narrative Modeling', p. 397.

[299] Warren, 'Narrative Modeling', p. 395.

[300] Warren, 'Narrative Modeling', p. 397.

[301] David Vincent, *A History of Solitude* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), p. 33.

[302] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and The New Sincerity in American Fiction', p. 135.

Wallace's terms, sincerity must involve "intent" but cannot involve "motive"… a fraught distinction, [since] even the writer him- or herself will never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either'.[303] Kelly argues this is most clearly demonstrated in 'Octet', where 'the secret beyond representation requires a blind response from the other to legitimate it; [which] in "Octet"… is the actual reader of the text'.[304] What is crucial here is the idea that real sincerity is dependent upon a leap of faith on the part of the reader, akin to what James Clements calls a 'Riceourian hermeneutics of faith'.[305] It is precisely because of this that I would like to posit that a better term for understanding Wallace's intentions in his mature writing – by which time this paradox is fully subsumed in his project – might be credibility, which seems to have largely usurped the role of sincerity.

The two characters that perhaps best represent Wallace's notion of the credible figure both appear in *The Pale King*: Glendenning, the Midwest REC director; and the Jesuit substitute teacher, who prompts Fogle's epiphany. Of Glendenning, one narrator identified only as 'Dave', remarks that 'I didn't know a person at the Post who didn't like and admire DeWitt Glendenning… [and] that this was one quality of a successful administrator, to be liked. And not to *act* in such a way as to be liked, but to *be* that way. Nobody ever felt that Mr. Glendenning was putting on any kind of act'.[306] Similarly, the Jesuit teacher is described as not being 'anxious to "*connect*" or be liked… What he seemed to be was "*indifferent*"' and that 'the word that kept arising in my mind as he looked at us… was *credibility*'.[307] Following this, in what appears to be a parallel commentary on the role of credibility in authorship, he claims that 'a real authority was not the same as a friend or someone who cared about you, but nevertheless could be good for you, and… the authority relation was not a "*democratic*" or equal one and yet could have value for both sides, both people in the relation'.[308] To see Fogle and the Jesuit as analogous to the reader and Wallace also uncovers an important truth about the place for sincerity in *The Pale King*. Fogle's narrative is perhaps most notable in the novel for the way in which it mirrors an earlier narrative re-told by Fogle about his roommate's girlfriend's epiphany. He recounts how she underwent 'a huge, dramatic spiritual change deep inside of her' after hearing a priest state in church that '*[t]here is someone out there with us in the congregation today that is feeling lost and hopeless'*.[309] The woman's story is, perhaps unsurprisingly, initially met by Fogle's aloof suspicion, 'asking her just what exactly had made her think the evangelical pastor

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[303] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and The New Sincerity in American Fiction', p. 140.
[304] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and The New Sincerity in American Fiction', p. 144.
[305] Clements, 'Trust Your Makers of Things!', p. 133.
[306] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 435.
[307] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 228.
[308] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 229.
[309] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 214.

was talking to her directly, meaning her in particular'.[310] However, as this is Fogle narrating his past, we also have his contemporary reflection on this, where he recognises that although 'her story was stupid and dishonest… that doesn't mean the experience she had in the church that day didn't happen, or that its effects on her weren't real… the truth is probably that enormous, sudden, dramatic, unexpected, life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else, and this is because they really *are* unique and particular'.[311] When recounting the way that he felt personally addressed by the Jesuit, and the thought occurs to him that maybe everyone else in the class felt similarly, Fogle comments that 'that would make no difference as to its special effect on me, which was the real issue, just as the Christian girlfriend's story would have already demonstrated if I'd been aware and attentive enough'.[312] Therefore, although he does not quite acknowledge it as such, the epiphanic realisation that Fogle undergoes is not that he is vocationally called to a career in tax, but rather that sincerity is ultimately unimportant. Instead, credibility of the authority figure and a willed personal decision (even if consciously acknowledged as fraudulent) akin to a leap of faith is what is truly required. What Wallace implicitly demonstrates here is the benefit of reading not suspiciously (to unmask the lack of sincerity behind the epiphany) but reparatively. The reparative reader is one for whom 'it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise', including, Sedgwick reminds us, the surprise of feeling 'hope', which despite often being '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'.[313] Unlike the paranoid reader who is determined to never be surprised (modelled by Fogle's earlier, more cynical attitude), the reparative reader is open to the possibility of hope for the future. Likewise, if readers have good faith in the credibility of their author, then it might allow them to connect with him in spite of, or perhaps even because of, their lack of belief in his sincerity. In *The Pale King*, Wallace extends this theory by revealing in plain sight several of the secrets that he uses to draw readers into his community, betting that this bald show of fraudulence, which I will term the horoscope paradox, will not - as perhaps might be first thought - repel his readers and return them, and him, to their loneliness.

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[310] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 215.
[311] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 216.
[312] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 230.
[313] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 146.

The Horoscope Paradox

It is easy to approach an unfinished work such as *The Pale King* and be dismissive of its goals. Mike Miley, whose academic focus in Wallace's work is largely on his authorial constructions, argues that in Wallace's later fiction he never quite manages to eschew the 'traces of the more imperial forms of authorship that run throughout his early work that seek to direct and control the reader'.[314] In his analysis of *The Pale King*, he argues that it 'unmasks Wallace's persona as a construction' meaning that 'the "contract […] Wallace goes out of his way to establish" with his readers only to break undermines, if not contradicts, Wallace's body of work to no achievable purpose'.[315] However, if a reader pays attention to the stream of anecdotes in Wallace's mature fiction that relay how to manipulate someone via what I am calling the horoscope paradox, then Wallace might be better understood as trying to draw our attention to imperial forms of authorship, thereby diminishing their power over the reader. To examine perhaps the most obvious place this occurs in *The Pale King,* let us first turn to Chris Fogle's monologue.

Fogle's monologue is perhaps unique in *The Pale King* because it imagines several different versions of what I am calling the horoscope paradox, told both first and second hand. The first of these comes during the aforementioned re-telling of his roommate's girlfriend's conversion to Christianity, where she felt personally addressed by the preacher. Fogle's undermining of this story is framed by his asking, 'what if the preacher or father's saying *"Someone here's lost and hopeless"* was tantamount to those *Sun-Times* horoscopes that are specially designed to be so universally obvious that they always give their horoscope readers… that special eerie feeling of particularity and insight, exploiting the psychological fact that most people are narcissistic and prone to the illusion that they and their problems are uniquely special[?]'.[316] This universality is ironically reinforced by the word choices Fogle uses thereafter: after stressing that the girlfriend felt 'lost' and 'desolate', he then claims that he left 'feeling somewhat lost and desolate inside', thereby projecting those emotions back on to himself, and narrating them as if their uniqueness rendered them worthy of mentioning.[317] This gullibility for feeling unique is then mirrored directly in Fogle's recounting of his own epiphanic moment with the Jesuit substitute teacher, who seemed to have 'mastered that trick in Uncle Sam posters and certain paintings of seeming to look right at you no matter what angle you faced him from' meaning that 'perhaps all the hushed and solemn older other students (you

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[314] Miley, 'Desperately Seeking David', p. 23.
[315] Miley, '… And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself', p. 202.
[316] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 215.
[317] Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 214-5, 216.

could hear a pin) felt picked out and specifically addressed as well'.[318] What is crucial about this story, however, is that Fogle himself has the later realisation that there was 'an obvious paradox in the memory — despite how attentive and affected by his remarks about courage and the real world I was, I was not aware that the drama and scintillance I was investing the substitute's words with actually ran counter to those words' whole thrust'.[319] Fogle essentially portrays (in the past tense) the model of a reader who does not catch on to the fact that Wallace is telling us, quite directly, to not idolise him or his words, while simultaneously portraying (in the present tense) a model of the 'good reader' who realises this and still chooses to imbue those words with greater meaning; therein lies the central paradox of the horoscope model.

More than a simple illusion which allows Wallace's readers to feel smug, however, I want to posit that the horoscope paradox is also what allows Wallace to pull off the trick of making his readers feel less alone, even when they recognise the performativity of this manoeuvre. In 'Good Old Neon', Wallace alludes to the explicit fact that 'we're all lonely, of course. Everyone knows this, it's almost a cliché. So yet another layer of my essential fraudulence is that I pretended to myself that my loneliness was special'.[320] In many respects, Wallace's great project was to make everyone's loneliness feel special, while at the same time inviting them to understand that he felt the same way. Personal epiphanies coexist with the understanding that those epiphanies are mundane across all Wallace's late fiction: in 'Good Old Neon', Neal's epiphany comes upon hearing a joke about 'one more yuppie… whining to me about how he can't love' in an episode of *Cheers*, sparking his realisation that far from being unique he is in fact one of 'those stock comic characters who is always both the butt of the joke and the only person not to get the joke'; in *The Pale King* Fogle experiences an almost identical moment upon hearing the line 'You are watching As The World Turns'.[321] Wallace even explains how the trick is pulled off in a series of troubling anecdotes that read like the notes of a pickup artist in *The Pale King*. An unnamed character in §2 explains, apropos of nothing and apparently directly to the reader, that when they next find themselves in light conversation with somebody they should:

> stop suddenly in the middle of the conversation and look at the person closely and say, 'What's wrong?… Something's wrong. I can tell. What is it?' And he'll look stunned and say,

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[318] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 230.
[319] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 234.
[320] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 153.
[321] Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 168-9; *The Pale King,* p. 224.

'How did you know?' [Because] he doesn't realize something's *always* wrong, with everybody.[322]

Similarly, in the final story in *Brief Interviews*, 'BI #20', the hideous man recounts how he seduced a young woman by creating 'the sense of affinity and connection that will allow you to pick her up', by employing what he terms the 'lingua franca of the Inward Bound'.[323] This is, not incidentally, the lingua franca Wallace himself employs in his authorial constructions and it is no accident that his readers feel so personally addressed by him.

The other major instance of Wallace guiding our reading to understand this trick that he is performing comes in Meredith Rand's extended meditation on how she met her husband. She explains that while she was in a psychiatric ward for self-harming, she began talking to him and that he 'right away told me two separate things about myself that I knew but nobody else knew. Nobody'.[324] Later in the narrative she reveals that one of the things which he told her was 'how lonely I was', in spite of the fact that shortly after this she shows an understanding of how easy a ploy this might be for someone in his position to utilise.[325] She shows an awareness that anyone who wanted to exploit this fact could choose to 'work in a place [where] everybody comes in all mucked up and lonely and in crisis, and find the young girls… [who] all had the same really essential problem', which was 'not feeling like they were really known and understood and that was the cause of their loneliness'.[326] Rand's understanding that this would be such an easy thing to do does not negate her belief in her husband's credibility, or the fact that their relationship helped her more than traditional therapeutic methods. Wallace, similarly, sees himself as addressing readers who are 'lonely and in crisis' and he knows that even if he tells his readers this that it will not negate their ability to take solace in his writing. His gamble is based first on an intuited understanding of the sociological factors that have left a generation feeling alienated, and secondly on his understanding of the kinds of people already predisposed to pick up his fiction. Some intimation of this is given by Fogle when he states that in spite of their fraudulent basis, 'life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else, and this is because they really *are* unique and particular', though what makes them unique, rather than the experience itself is 'the circumstances in which it hits you, of everything in your previous life-experience which has led up to it' – in other words, of what it is about us as readers that makes us uniquely primed to assign meaning to those

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[322] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 19.
[323] Wallace, *Brief Interviews,* p. 248.
[324] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 481.
[325] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 487.
[326] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 489.

moments.[327] This description that Fogle gives here is akin to Felski's description of attunement, the 'state of affectedness', when, on encountering art, we are 'gripped by the strength of a felt connection'.[328] As Felski notes, this might in part be a product of our social circumstances (which predispose us to like some art more than others), but beyond this there is 'a wide spectrum of responses [that remain] unexamined and unaccounted for: trance-like states of immersion or absorption in literature's virtual worlds; surges of sympathy or mistrust, affinity or alienation… [and] the suddenness with which we can fall in love with, or feel ourselves addressed by, an author's style'.[329] Fogle is right that everything in his previous life experience plays a part in why he is so moved, but it does not explain it entirely; his sense of attunement is infinitely more complex than this.

The scene involving Rand's monologue is also important because it shows Wallace pre-empting our realisation of how we have been tricked. Rand's monologue is not simply about how she met her husband, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how that relationship helped put her on the path to rehabilitation. It is important that her husband was candid about the premises of their relationship – she emphasises that 'it's part of his act that there is no act', and in response to Drinion's question about whether she spoke to him about her fears that he was exploiting his position of power she answers that 'I didn't have to… He brought it up'.[330] It is no coincidence that these statements are equally true of Wallace's approach to authorship – he pre-empts his readers' suspicions and radiates a performed lack of pretence. In doing so, he hopes to impart the same wisdom to us as Rand's husband did for her – that no matter what the problem, self-harming or feeling lonely, the only way to resolve it is to recognise that 'you only stop if you stop'.[331] Many critics have claimed that the 'author here' sections of *The Pale King* risk undermining his career-long project by 'confirming what Wallace's increasingly obsessive readership might sometimes fail to recognize, namely, that the sense of intimate communication one might feel with the author of a text… is an illusion', but in reality Wallace *wants* readers to acknowledge this as an illusion.[332] That this seems paradoxical – to understand we are being misled and yet to accept it anyway – is indicative of Wallace's approach to therapy, which seeks to dismantle the existing therapeutic approaches, and instead 'hopes to compel its reader to recognise that her feeling of "lostness" is connected to her philosophical and rhetorical commitments, as opposed to being addressed by

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[327] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 216.
[328] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 41.
[329] Rita Felski, 'After Suspicion', *Profession*, 2009, p. 31.
[330] Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 488, 490.
[331] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 488.
[332] Boswell, 'Author Here', p. 38.

them'.[333] Wallace's way of resolving this is to construct a world which 'challenges the reader to face it without asking whether it is true or actual or moral but what it could mean to see that [it] is true and actual, and with what moral implications', and the decision to imagine and believe in this construction is ultimately left to the reader. [334] It is in the context of this that we might best understand Fogle's frustratingly abstract realisation that 'if I wanted to matter — even just to myself — I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way'.[335]

To stress the capacity for what might be termed a positive wilful delusion does, of course, risk overlooking the real-world implications of what reading according to Wallace might constitute. I want to return now to consider the impact of Wallace's own biography, and in particular how his suicide might affect our engagement with *The Pale King*, or indeed our willingness to take advice from a man for whom it apparently did not work. Vincent Haddad touches on this when he states that in *The Pale King*, 'the combination of Wallace's recent biographical suicide and the construction of the book itself by his editor make all too real the closure of the textual space in which the author and reader might meet' and that 'Wallace's ghost in [*The Pale King*] initiates the production of shame and the inhibition of joy'.[336] It seems inevitable that this might raise the question of 'whether or not readers should read his fiction teleologically to deliberate on the circumstances of Wallace's own suicide', but I also believe that Wallace populated his mature works with so many warnings against idolatry for perhaps this very defence. While it is therefore possible for Wallace's suicide, as Konstantinou points out, to 'be described as a failure of literature to achieve its promise', it might be better to approach Wallace's suicide as we do his notion of authorship, with a wilfully selective belief in what might best function as therapeutic; or in other words the 'good reader' of Wallace might choose to do as he says, not as he does.[337]

Similarly, in light of recent revelations about Wallace's personal life - and more specifically his behaviour towards women - we also need to reflect on how an approach that places such emphasis on biographical details might be problematic. It prompts us to ask, as Mary K. Holland does, how we might reconcile ourselves to the fact that 'a man and a body of work that claimed feminism in theory primarily produced a stream of abusive relationships between men and women in life and art'.[338] She rightly points out that 'while Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument against the

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[333] Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, p. 41.

[334] Paul A. Kottman, 'Foreword', in Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness,* p. viii.

[335] Wallace, *The Pale King,* p. 226.

[336] Clements, 'Trust Your Makers of Things!', pp. 120, 124.

[337] Konstantinou, 'No Bull', p. 105.

[338] Mary K. Holland, 'Quite Possibly the Last Essay I Need to Write about David Foster Wallace', in *#Metoo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture a Book by Heather*

intentional fallacy is compelling and important, its goal is to protect the sanctity of the *text* against the undue influence of our assumptions about the person who wrote it… [but] arguments defending the importance of Wallace's beautiful empathizing fiction in spite of his abuse of women threaten to do the opposite'.[339] While, of course, it is ultimately up to readers to decide what to do with Wallace's work – whether to continue reading him or to avoid him altogether as Amy Hungerford advocates – the emphasis in the work itself against hero worship does become eerily prescient in light of these issues.[340]

Finally, in considering the real-world implications of Wallace's work, and the shift from implied to actual author, it is also instructive to consider his actual, and not simply implied, readers. As John Jeremiah Sullivan noted in his review of *The Pale King*, 'many of Wallace's readers (this is apparent now that every single one of them has written an appreciation of him somewhere on the Internet) believed that he was speaking to them in his work—that he was one of the few people alive who could help them navigate a new spiritual wilderness', and he says that Wallace's own knowledge of this is what fuelled his 'frequent and uncharacteristically Pollyanna statements about the supposed power of fiction against solipsism'.[341] Sullivan's allusion to the floods of commemorative statements following Wallace's death might in fact give us the most concrete evidence of his ability to countenance the loneliness of contemporary life. The extraordinarily lengthy collection of memories collected for the McSweeney's tribute following his death is testament to this, praising the various ways that his work 'expressed a philosophy, or a working faith… that, however we talked, we weren't spiritually stupid. That we weren't alone in our minds. That we were, all of us, worthy of understanding'.[342] It is, then, Wallace's acute understanding of how his reader felt themselves to be alone and unique in their aloneness – even, and perhaps especially, when they understood this to be largely untrue – that made him function as such a wellspring of support, a constant reminder that we are always connected to something broader.

Moreover, as Wallace progressed in his career, his ability to perform this feat was increasingly tied to his reliance on what we might now consider autofictional techniques. The challenge that Wallace set himself – and which is taken up in various forms by the authors who are

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Hewett and Mary K. Holland, ed. by Heather Hewett and Mary K. Holland (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 120.

[339] Holland, 'Quite Possibly the Last Essay I Need to Write about David Foster Wallace', pp. 115-6.

[340] Amy Hungerford, 'On Refusing to Read', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016 <https://www.chronicle.com/article/on-not-reading/> [accessed 17 May 2022].

[341] John Jeremiah Sullivan, 'Too Much Information', *GQ*, 2011 <https://www.gq.com/story/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan> [accessed 7 February 2020].

[342] Lorin Stein, in 'Memories of David Foster Wallace', *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/pages/memories-of-david-foster-wallace> [accessed 20 April 2020].

studied in the following chapters – was to successfully construct an implied author figure in his texts so that readers could imagine themselves in correspondence with Wallace himself. In order to achieve this, he drew on an autofictional mode that allowed him to establish a sense of credibility, which in turned encouraged readers to wilfully suspend their disbelief. In particular, Wallace was trying to overcome the disbelief of readers familiar with the theoretical arguments that had by then dominated the academy for decades, encouraging them to read suspiciously. Wallace's allegorical references to suspicious reading hint at the ways that he thought following Ricoeur's method was insufficient; instead, he advocates an approach akin to Felski's revision of critique. Critique, Felski tells us, 'needs to be supplemented by generosity, pessimism by hope, negative aesthetics by a sustained reckoning with the communicative, expressive, and world-disclosing aspects of art'.[343] His use of what I have called the 'horoscope paradox' functions as a recurring motif that highlights the importance of this, moving beyond suspicious reading and towards a reparative approach that is ready to take the text on its own terms and to believe Wallace to be credible, if not always sincere. Ultimately, therefore, we should not consider *The Pale King* a failure to live up to the therapeutic promise of literature but instead see it as a testament to, and culmination of, the ways that Wallace managed to make use of autofictional methods to establish dialogue between readers and writers. In the chapters that follow, I will show how other authors have since continued this project, using autofiction as a way to place readers and writers in conversation with each other, thereby allowing them to both address and alleviate the loneliness of modern life.

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[343] Felski, 'After Suspicion', p. 31.

Embracing the Collective: Resisting Personal and Political Loneliness in Ben Lerner's Novels

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Wallace's engagement with the New Sincerity aesthetic wedded his use of metafictional techniques to more social ends. In many ways, Lerner continues Wallace's project, and indeed it has already been noted there are a striking number of shared thematic concerns between Lerner's *The Topeka School* and Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.[344] Certainly they both emerge out of what Robert McLaughlin calls the 'perceived dead end of postmodernism' and share the desire to 'reconnect language to the social sphere or, to put it another way, 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'.[345] Lerner is rarely, however, considered to be a writer associated with the New Sincerity, a term which had arguably lost much of its cultural relevancy by the time his novels began to be published. Instead, the entangling of Lerner's fictional project and its social implications has so far largely been examined as the product of institutional funding projects, as examples of what Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan call 'novel[s] of commission'.[346] What this suggests is that what separates Lerner's work from writers more typically associated with the New Sincerity is not only a period of time, but also its consideration of literature's place in a monetary framework. Jacqueline O'Dell is perhaps the most explicit on this point; in her analysis of Lerner's relationship to sincerity she begins by outlining where the New Sincerity came unstuck, claiming that:

> These producers of capital-L Literary fiction, who spoke from the center of the literary market, were… branding literature as a good old-fashioned escape from market trends while presenting their aims in the very terms of risk and competition that they sought to combat. What is more, in championing literature's ability to produce community through affective attachments, these writers 'reiterate neoliberal capital's expanding investment in consumer affect and sentiment'.[347]

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[344] For a detailed breakdown of these similarities, see: Dan Dixon, 'Why Would You Doubt Me?: The Topeka School by Ben Lerner', *Sydney Review of Books*, 2019.

[345] Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symplokē*, 12.1/2 (2004), p. 55.

[346] Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, 'Notation After "The Reality Effect": Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti', *Representations*, 125.1 (2014), p. 88. See also: Ben De Bruyn on Lerner's 'compromise aesthetic', in Ben De Bruyn, 'Realism 4°. Objects, Weather and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's 10:04', *Textual Practice*, 31.5 (2017), p. 952.

[347] Jacqueline O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling: Repetition, Contingency, and Sincerity in Ben Lerner's 10:04', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 60.4 (2019), p. 448. See also: Mitchum Huehls and Rachel

As a literary project largely dominated by white male authors who were attempting to reassert their importance in the face of a broadening literary market, she claims that New Sincerity authors in fact subsumed and thereby reinforced neoliberal logic in their works, both via their control of the literary market and by managing to market a form of productive affect, through the purchasing and reading of their texts. Lerner, on the other hand, 'implies that sincerity appears when readers experience repetitions that force them to grapple with the erasures on which literary value is predicated', thereby 'promoting a sincere mode of reading that recognizes the erasure on which the fantasy of sincerity is founded. Readers need not speculate about what insincere motives potentially propel *10:04* since Lerner pulls back the curtain on his process'.[348] For O'Dell, then, it is Lerner's frank consideration of his own place in the neoliberal and globalised network that allows him to sidestep the accusation of insincerity that could, from this vantage, be applied to other writers of the New Sincerity, including Wallace.

It is important to mark this distinction not only for the sake of periodisation, but because an examination of loneliness in Lerner's works is to a significant degree inextricable from his consideration of one's place in the larger networks of a neoliberal, globalised world. Lerner's presentation of loneliness should, in this context, be understood as a manifestation of what Ann Cvetkovich calls 'political depression'; his desire to establish a 'coeval readership' is a desperate attempt to fight against this depression and to keep the loneliness of the contemporary world at bay.[349] It is important to note, too, that many critics have tied our current loneliness epidemic to our neoliberal conditions, which, via 'a mythology of lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone', has caused us to enter what George Monbiot calls 'a post-social condition'.[350] In spite of ostensibly encouraging the building of networks (through, say, adding friends or connections on social media), the neoliberal world only encourages us to use other people to enrich our own selves.[351] Alison Gibbons' argument that Lerner's work might be understood as 'metamodernist' is also useful for our understanding of the ways that he responds to this

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Greenwald Smith, 'Introduction: Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature', in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), p. 8.

[348] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', pp. 449, 456.

[349] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 1; Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 93.

[350] George Monbiot, 'The Age of Loneliness Is Killing Us', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014, section Opinion <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us> [accessed 5 May 2022].

[351] See: Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 40-2.

contemporary condition.[352] In order to understand Lerner's relation to this structure of feeling, I want to advocate an approach to his work which is interested in the presentation of different forms of affect in his texts, as well as the production of affect in his readers. These forms of affect might be hard to pin down, not always present as a thematic concern so much as pervading the text, more akin to what Sianne Ngai calls 'tone'.[353] While there are certainly instances of what can be readily recognised as loneliness throughout Lerner's texts, there is also a pervading mood of alienation and disconnect, a defining feature of the metamodernist structure of feeling.

This chapter begins with an interrogation of two types of loneliness in Lerner's texts, which are triggered by meditating on the two scales at which the novels function: the personal and the political. Personal loneliness is that which is felt when considering one's detachment from peers, while political loneliness is that which is felt when considering one's place in a globalised, networked world, as one becomes aware of one's alienation. In the novels, these two scales often collapse into one another, meaning that moments of personal loneliness are often inextricable from moments of political loneliness. The chapter then moves on to consider the ways that personal loneliness is occasionally romanticised in these works, as an escape from society that facilitates creativity. In particular, it examines the gendered politics underpinning such an idea, and argues that Lerner's texts ultimately undermine the stereotype of men's withdrawal from society being a necessary aspect of their creative pursuits. Having established that loneliness is not a desirable affect in these texts, the chapter moves on to consider the role of art (both literary and visual) in assuaging feelings of loneliness, both for creators and recipients. More specifically, it traces a motif in Lerner's work of art being something which is most productively enjoyed together, thereby emphasising an interest in collectivity that the texts address more broadly in both their themes and, increasingly, their form. The chapter then considers how form affects Lerner's potential capacity to draw together both the personal and the collective, linking this to his decision to include both moments of non-fiction and poetry in his autofiction. It examines the ways that Lerner uses direct address in his novels, as well as polyphony, to demonstrate the emotional labour of empathising and to therefore illustrate a more ethical way of portraying empathy in the novel. Finally, the chapter ends by considering the impact of each of these aspects on the political efficacy of Lerner's works, arguing that the unavoidable contradictions that they provoke are in fact part of Lerner's intentions, and that his novels aim to illustrate the importance of embracing, rather than evading these tensions. Contrary to critical claims that Lerner's politics are merely gestural, I argue that Lerner's work establishes what Lauren

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[352] Alison Gibbons, 'Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's 10:04 and "The Utopian Glimmer of Fiction"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 62.2 (2021), p. 138.
[353] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 28.

Berlant has called an 'affective consonance' among his readers, who themselves constitute his 'intimate public'.[354]

Overall, I will develop Jacqueline O'Dell's argument that Lerner distinguishes himself from the New Sincerity by establishing 'dialogue… between Lerner's own works, not, as in the case of New Sincerity, between the single text and its reader', by demonstrating that much of this 'dialogue' between his novels is explicitly interested in loneliness itself.[355] I will show that Lerner's autofictional trilogy can be viewed as a collective work that constantly reinterrogates its own attitude towards loneliness, asking whether it can function as a catalyst for artistic creativity; how best to textually embody it; and, finally, how best to textually undermine it. Studied as a serial work of autofiction, Lerner's three novels represent a unique instance of the implied author: the 'collective author', who, in Lerner's case, grows increasingly politically aware and advocates for collective responses to social issues.[356] In doing so, the trilogy also functions as a microcosm for the changing attitudes towards loneliness over the last few decades, and, as my wider project will prove testament to, the ways that writers are now responding to loneliness in contemporary fiction.

Two Scales: Personal and Political Loneliness

I want to begin my study by tracing the prominence of what I am terming political loneliness, which is notably more present, though not exclusively, in Lerner's first two novels, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (hereafter referred to as *LTAS*) and *10:04.* This is perhaps due not only to the overall shift towards embracing communal engagement across Lerner's three novels, but also the time period each text covers. Lerner's first two novels are set in the twenty-first century, firmly in the period which Alison Gibbons deems the metamodernist era, in which networked 'social movements' (a term she borrows from Manuel Castells) came to define a sense of political unrest, 'from Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001) to Syntagma Square (Greece, 2010), the Indignados (Spain, 2011), and Occupy (US, EU, and many other countries, 2011–12)'.[357] Lerner's third novel, however, takes place in the late nineties, and is intellectually underpinned instead by Fukuyama's notion of the 'end of

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[354] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 226; 260.

[355] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', p. 455.

[356] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 431.

[357] Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, 'Metamodernism: Period, Structure of Feeling, and Cultural Logic – A Case Study of Contemporary Autofiction', in *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 43. See also: Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

history', the belief that there 'would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled'.[358] While *The Topeka School* therefore relies heavily on the dramatic irony of a contemporary reader's understanding of the naivety of such a position, Lerner's earlier works function as a portrayal of the repercussions of this intellectual shift, namely the sense of alienation and detachment which have come to define our contemporary structure of feeling.

This sense of alienation has already been observed by numerous critics responding to the first two novels. In an article entitled 'Always Already Alienated', Jon Baskin famously described Lerner's works as 'novel[s] of detachment', whose protagonists are distinguished by their 'isolation from—and cynicism about—any human community or politics'.[359] As Baskin sees it, this is a reflection of the fact that, 'to be educated and sophisticated [in modern society] is to know that politics and society are fundamentally compromised and fraudulent, and therefore entities that should be held at a distance, so as not to contaminate what we see as our true—that is, our "private"—selves'. Theodore Martin has similarly argued that Lerner's texts might be seen as typical of the contemporary 'critical fiction or the theory memoir', in which 'literary theory has been transformed from a collection of culturally circulated names and concepts (as in the work of a prior generation of postmodern novelists) into an aspirational narrative mode'.[360] This shift, Martin argues, has allowed writers such as Lerner, Maggie Nelson, Teju Cole and others, to 'lament the distance between writing and political intervention' and to distance 'themselves from political radicalism through the very acts of writing and theorizing'.[361] Baskin goes on to suggest that *10:04* reflects 'a mood in the country at large, or at least some aspects of that mood that are germane to the literary left… [involving] a reluctance, or an ambivalence, that educated, privileged people now seem to feel about engaging passionately in political life'. However, in Baskin's argument this appears to constitute something which ought to be criticised, rather than acting as a necessary literary response to our emerging structure of feeling – the 'mood in the country at large'.

The distancing from politics which Baskin describes is perhaps most visible in the narrator's attitude towards the emerging protests in Madrid in the first novel, *LTAS*. There, Adam repeatedly finds himself on the cusp of real communal engagement after the crisis of a terrorist attack but

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[358] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. xii. It is worth noting that Lerner himself acknowledges this link in an interview with Sally Rooney, available online: Ben Lerner and Sally Rooney, 'Theaters of Speech', *FSG: Work in Progress*, 2019 <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/10/11/theaters-of-speech/> [accessed 5 May 2021].

[359] Jon Baskin, 'Always Already Alienated', *The Nation*, 11 February 2015 <https://www.thenation.com/article/always-already-alienated/> [accessed 17 November 2019].

[360] Theodore Martin, 'Contemporary, Inc.', *Representations*, 142.1 (2018), p. 138.

[361] Martin, 'Contemporary, Inc.', p. 139.

seems unable to follow through on his commitment. One of Adam's first responses to the attack is to consider giving blood, only to then tell the nurse that he 'felt sick'.[362] The nurse waves him away and Adam consoles himself with his assumption that 'by that point, they didn't need blood for the injured anyway; they were probably still there only so people could feel like they were contributing; hadn't they done that in New York?'. It is telling of the novel's logic that we do not learn whether Adam truly felt sick or simply used it as an excuse, thereby avoiding making a real, pragmatic gesture of communal kindness. It is also important to note that, consistent with Adam's ongoing excuses for his lack of rootedness in Madrid, he refers back to his homeland to justify his behaviour, when he questions 'hadn't they done that in New York?'. Whether the reader believes his excuse or not, it is unlikely that they will feel sympathy for Adam's detached, non-committal attitude.

What cements a reader's lack of sympathy for Adam, however, comes in the paragraph that follows. He walks to El Retiro, where he notes that he 'didn't see anyone, not even the hash dealers', but he later learns that 'while I was in the park, the entire city had emptied into the streets for a moment of silence without me'.[363] His comment on the city emptying onto the streets 'without [him]' makes him sound like a spurned child, unable to see the political horizons that exist beyond his own personal grievances. Moreover, Adam's shock that even the hash dealers have disappeared shows a lack of comprehension about the way that the neoliberal world around him is structured – a world in which, as Lauren Berlant puts it, 'the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life. Communities, when they exist, are at best fragile and contingent'.[364] Adam later learns that the dealers were rounded up as part of a city-wide crack down, and it only strikes him then that their disappearance was not in fact a sign of their political mobilisation but rather their precarious existence as a community at all.

There is, however, a later moment in the text which builds upon his earlier annoyance that the city had protested 'without [him]' that presents Adam in a different light. Several pages after that first passage, Adam finds himself at a loss for social engagement, and for the first time actively seeks out the protests for himself. Unable to locate the crowds, the tone moves from one of petulance to something more pitiful, as Adam:

> walked to Colón but [found] the plaza was empty. From Colón I moved up El Paseo de
> Recoletos, which became El Paseo del Prado. It felt strange to be looking for a crowd, to be

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[362] Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 120.
[363] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 120.
[364] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 167.

wandering around in search of History or Teresa. I walked all the way to Atocha. I saw

candles and small groups of people but no protest. For the first time since I had been in

Spain, I wished I had a phone.[365]

Although the word is not explicitly used, if one had to pinpoint the moments in the text where Adam seems to be experiencing something akin to loneliness, this seems an obvious point to choose, and it seems no accident that it is precisely the tension between Adam's aloneness and his desire to be within a crowd – a communal body large in size and politically engaged – that serves as its catalyst, rather than the more everyday desire to simply be among friends. The image of technology facilitating meaningful communication is revisited throughout the text, so Adam's desire for a phone speaks to the awareness of technology's place in escaping loneliness, as well as highlighting his detachment from both his immediate surroundings, as well as those further afield (back home in America) whom he wishes he could call.[366] The pathos of this particular moment is heightened when Adam retires to a bar, where he can see the protests playing out on a television. Pointing to the television, he mistakenly asks the bartender (in Spanish), 'is this living', before correcting himself to 'is this live[?]'.[367] His confusion implies the disconnect that Adam feels from other people, which he equates here - by way of his Freudian slip - with the experience of life itself. What began as a display of Adam's narcissistic tendencies - the protests and Adam's attitude towards them – thereby turns into something much more pitiful and troubling. It becomes a demonstration of Adam's incapacity to engage with a real community. Instead, Adam exists within what Berlant calls an 'inoperative community', comprised of those who exist only 'in affective proximity, political potentiality', rather than 'an active, interdependent network that delivers reciprocal recognition and affective synchronization'.[368]

The remainder of *LTAS* is fundamentally about Adam's inability to reconcile these two scales of the novel, the personal and the political. As he himself puts it, he 'tried to justify [his] pettiness by meditating on the relation of the personal to the historical but [his] meditations did not go far'.[369] *10:04*, although it also explores the narrator's relation to collective expressions of solidarity (e.g. a food co-op, the city as it prepares for a cataclysmic storm, the Occupy movement), constitutes an attempt to take stock of these two scales simultaneously, and to meditate further on this

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[365] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 136.

[366] As an example, consider one of the few instances of an intimate connection between Adam and another person, his friend Cyrus, a moment that is facilitated through instant messenger. See: Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta, 2012), pp. 68-78.

[367] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 137.

[368] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 254.

[369] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 132.

relationship. Hence its obsession with the unconscious sense of 'proprioception', which as Emily Witt points out, functions both as a 'literary homage [to Charles Olson]… but also a refrain about the poor perceptual relationship of the individual to the social body'.[370] One reason for this transformation is a shift in the understanding of what constitutes the exceptional event in the two texts. While the protests in *LTAS* are a function of upcoming elections and a terrorist attack, events understood at the historical level, *10:04* begins to incorporate a third scale, that of the geological, through the incorporation of an exceptional event which is weather-driven. Alison Gibbons has noted that the influence of climate change on our contemporary structure of feeling is important precisely because of the way it collapses the personal and the political scales, since 'the precarity it evokes is characteristic not only of individual experience but collective experience in the acknowledgment of our shared human fate'.[371] Lerner's language pointedly alludes to this influence when the narrator claims that both he and the young boy he tutors, Roberto, 'tended to figure the global apocalyptically'.[372] The global scale is therefore inextricably linked to an awareness of the temporal scales, which loom large in their omnipresent precarity, reflecting what Henry Ivry has called the 'ambient esthetic' of *10:04*, in which 'scales… interact with each other simultaneously and co-constitutionally'.[373] This can clearly be seen when the narrator finds himself cooking a meal for a protestor from the nearby Occupy camp. Ben wonders:

> what did it mean to say that Aaron or Alena had prepared those meals for me, when the ingredients were grown and picked and packaged and transported by others in a system of great majesty and murderous stupidity? The fact is that realizing my selfishness just led to more selfishness; that is, I felt lonely, felt sorry for myself, despite the fact that I was so often cooked *for*, because, as I stood there in my little kitchen stirring vegetables, stood there at the age of thirty-three, I was crushed to realize nobody depended on *me* for this fundamental mode of care, of nurturing, nourishing… For the first time I could remember — whether or not the desire was a non sequitur — I wanted a child, wanted one badly.[374]

What is of particular note here is the specific reference to the narrator feeling lonely as he considers his place in a globalised world, and that the articulation of this feeling *as* loneliness is also what seems to shift the scale from the global to the personal and familial. That is, meditating on labour

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[370] Emily Witt, 'Interview with Ben Lerner: "People Say, 'Oh, Here's Another Brooklyn Novel by a Guy with Glasses'"', *The Guardian*, 3 January 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/ben-lerner-1004-novel-books-interview> [accessed 6 May 2021].

[371] Gibbons, 'Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity', p. 139.

[372] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 14.

[373] Henry Ivry, 'Writing in the "Second Person Plural": Ben Lerner, Ambient Esthetics, and Problems of Scale', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 62.2 (2021), p. 124.

[374] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 47.

systems from far-flung corners of the world leads Ben to consider systems of dependence among his friends and potential family, and the collapse of these scales is intimately related to his feelings of loneliness. While *LTAS* therefore suggests that meditating on one's detachment from a *local* political phenomenon might trigger feelings of what appear to be loneliness, *10:04* suggests that meditating on *global* political networks might do the same, but develops this point by explicitly naming the effects of this meditation as a sense of personal loneliness. In both instances, however, it is an oscillation between the two scales that both triggers, and makes one aware of, loneliness.

Lonely Men in the Neoliberal Novel

The loneliness that Ben experiences during his meditations on labour systems seems to be an unequivocally negative feeling, but this is not the way that loneliness is always presented, especially in the work of male authors. Therefore, before examining in greater depth the ways that this loneliness is resisted in Lerner's texts, I want to first consider how Lerner interrogates the longstanding representation of loneliness as a necessary stimulus for male creativity. In both *LTAS* and *10:04,* the narrator experiences a period of isolation from others that follows the starting of a commissioned work, perhaps reflecting the idea that, as Fay Bound Alberti points out, men are free to 'tap into a longer tradition [than women] of being alone for reasons of religiosity or intellect, as depicted in the image of the hermit or the scholar'.[375] In *LTAS* this occurs at the beginning of the novel itself, which sees Adam arriving in Madrid on a poetry fellowship, where he claims that he 'didn't have to worry about building a community, whatever that meant'.[376] A few pages later, he reinforces this, by stating that he 'didn't have a phone, and… had failed to attend any of the social events the foundation arranged, [meaning] there was no one whose company I could join if I wanted to do the things one was supposed to do while in Madrid'.[377] This enforced lack of contact seems like an ascetic boundary imposed by Adam on himself as a way of getting work done, especially when one considers that he does in fact admit that during this period he was sometimes 'desperate for some form of participation'.[378] The conflation of artistic creativity and the need for isolation is later addressed more explicitly in the novel, when Adam reflects on a day in which his contact which

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[375] Fay Bound Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic": Loneliness as an Emotion Cluster and a Neglected Subject in the History of Emotions', *Emotion Review*, 10.3 (2018), p. 247.
[376] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 15
[377] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 21.
[378] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 21.

other people seemed to have 'transpired with disorienting speed'.[379] Rather than provoke a moment of reflection on his inability to connect with others, this scene instead leads to a meditation on the creative process: 'I thought of Levin sweating out his alienation in the fields. I thought of Picasso producing masterpieces in his sleep'. The first reference is particularly telling, since he is contemplating the alienation of Konstantin Levin, the semi-autobiographical portrayal of Tolstoy in Anna Karenina – suggesting a mirror image of Lerner the author transforming his own alienation into creative works.

In *10:04*, too, the narrator seems to equate the creative process with a need for solitude. On beginning a writing residency in Marfa, the narrator rapidly falls into a routine of avoiding social contact. He claims:

> my only contact with other humans [were] the few words I exchanged with the attendant at the gas station where I continued to buy groceries… or with the elderly Mexican woman, Rita, whom Michael had recommended, who sold burritos out of her house. (I would drive to her house and buy a burrito soon after I woke, then reheat it for my midday meal at midnight; soon this meal was the only one I reliably took.) With the exception of one other wave on the porch when Creeley came out to smoke, I didn't see the resident in the reflection of my house across the street, nor did I see anybody else. I had poor cell phone service and largely kept it off, exchanging some e-mails with Alex, none with Alena, and I talked to nobody from home.[380]

This extended passage on his lack of contact with others speaks to the narrator's conception of how he ought to be completing his work. What is interesting about this particular passage, however, is the concurrent narration of the slow stemming of the narrator's dietary intake. The ascetic avoidance of contact with others is mirrored in his avoidance of regular meals, a parallel that implies the unhealthy nature of his isolation. A few pages later, the narrator claims that he may have 'surfaced too quickly… [having] gone more than two weeks without really speaking to anyone, a period of silence with no precedent in my life'.[381] He washes and leaves the house, walking past a coffee shop where he sees two women typing on laptops. He claims that a 'basic, acute physical desire for one of the women passed through me, and was gone, as if the desire were en route to someone else'. This primal desire for other people is at once a damning commentary on the narrator's attitude towards women as well as a telling marker of the way in which desire for any

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[379] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 161.
[380] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 169.
[381] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 176.

connection spins out of control after a period of isolation. That the desire is said to be 'en route to someone else' denotes his urgent need not for this woman, but for *any* person at all, to satiate his desire for contact; it is a function of what he later calls his being 'socially disoriented', a phrase whose wording suggests the actual, physiological implications of this lonely period for him.[382] This pseudo-medical language continues at the first social engagement Adam attends since his period of isolation, where he claims that the social atmosphere and presence of alcohol 'transformed all my accumulated circadian arrhythmia into manic energy', again suggesting that the exiting of his period of isolation is something which negatively impacts him not only creatively but bodily.[383]

It seems clear from these examples that loneliness is not, therefore, the positive, romanticised emotion it might sometimes appear to be in the works of male authors. Moreover, the descriptions – or lack thereof – suggest that loneliness might constitute what Greenwald Smith calls 'an impersonal feeling', which is 'not easily codifiable or recognizable'.[384] This is neatly demonstrated by Lerner's reference in *LTAS* not to loneliness itself, but rather to what he calls the 'texture of his loneliness', which is said to be unnarratable.[385] In one of the only explicit meditations on loneliness, he writes that:

> These periods of rain or periods between rains in which I was smoking and reading Tolstoy would be, I knew, impossible to narrate, and that impossibility entered the experience: the particular texture of my loneliness derived in part from my sense that I could only share it, could only describe it, as pure transition, a slow dissolve between scenes, as boredom, my project's uneventful third phase, possessed of no intrinsic content. But this account ascribed the period a sense of directionality, however slight or slow, made it a vector between events, when in fact the period was dilated, detached, strangely self-sufficient, but that's not really right.[386]

Here, loneliness is presented as an indescribable emotion, or as Greenwald Smith puts it, we seem to be dealing with a 'different form of literary affect – not the representation of an individual character's feelings but a tonal intensity'.[387] Even as he tries to articulate the specifics of this texture – by distinguishing it by its lack of directionality – the narrative is forced to yet again undermine this attempt by concluding that that wasn't 'right either'. While loneliness is therefore presented as

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[382] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 177.
[383] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 180-1.
[384] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 2.
[385] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 64.
[386] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, pp. 63-4.
[387] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 12.

something which cannot be narrated, it does in a more literal sense provide a creative catalyst, inasmuch as its un-narratability comes to serve as something which Adam can meditate on. It is worth noting, however, that no such extended meditation on loneliness occurs in Lerner's later texts. While the experience of loneliness might be understood as productive for the writing of a novel therefore, it is never presented as a meaningful way to live one's life. When the narrator of *10:04* claims in an imagined dialogue with his would-be child that 'art has to offer something other than stylized despair', we might then understand this as a comment on - and implicit criticism of - the stylising of loneliness in this earlier novel.[388]

Moreover, if the narration of the feeling itself poses a problem, and if Lerner is wary of using art only to stylise his despair, then we may need to infer something about loneliness as an affective structure instead by examining his narrators' ability to sustain meaningful, intimate relationships. Often shown to be insecure and tragicomic, Lerner's narrators seem incapable of sustaining long-term romantic relationships, instead attempting to manipulate the women around them by presenting themselves as figures of pity. In *LTAS*, for instance, Adam finds himself trying to convince Teresa that he is more hurt by a fight than he truly is; he 'licked the tips of my fingers, and rubbed the spit under my eyes to make it look like I'd been crying', before claiming that nothing was wrong with him, but 'in a way I hoped confirmed incommunicable depths had opened up inside me'.[389] A moment later this exaggerated display of the male need for control turns much darker when Adam 'said… was shocked to hear myself say: My mother died'.[390] The repetition and detached narration of the external registering of his own voice suggests that Adam earnestly had not been expecting those words to come out of his mouth. His detachment from Teresa becomes mirrored then in his detachment even from himself, as his manipulations grow increasingly out of hand.

Moreover, Adam justifies his detachment with constant reference to the temporary nature of his stay in Spain. This reaches its peak towards the close of the novel, where he claims that:

> all of this, all of Spain, would cease to be real if I went back; it would be my year abroad, a
> year cast out of the line of years… [which] would not, in any serious sense, form part of my
> life. I would not stay in touch with Teresa or Arturo, not to mention Isabel.[391]

He then justifies this attitude by stating that he 'could not believe Teresa would ultimately mind'. His insistence that Teresa too would have such a detached view of her time with Adam speaks to

[388] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 93.
[389] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, pp. 28-9.
[390] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 29.
[391] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 170.

Adam's inability to afford to other people the deep emotional connections he himself seems to be so sorely lacking. Later, he declares to himself (as if by repeating it he might make it true) that:

> You don't love Teresa and she doesn't love you. None of this is real. You don't like Madrid… you are done with Teresa and hash and drinking and lying and lyric and the intersections thereof. I have never been here, I said to myself. You have never seen me.[392]

His decision to address himself in the second person makes visible the loneliness which has overcome him, made only more pitiful since the content of his speech seems like a desperate attempt to convince himself that he is detached, rather than an earnest reflection on his real detachment. The text also functions as an intertextual allusion to his need for self-dependency, as the final line of the passage is taken from a poem in Lerner's collection *The Lichtenberg Figures.*[393] By appealing to his own texts, Lerner manages to compound the illustration of Adam's loneliness, turning a conversation between Adam and himself into a conversation between Adam, himself and Lerner (yet another version of his self).

The other way Lerner demonstrates Adam's inability to form intimate connections in *LTAS* is through his insistence on viewing relationships for their virtual potential, rather than as actual, lived exchanges. Speaking about Isabel, Adam claims that their 'most intense and ostensibly intimate interactions were the effect of her imbuing my silences, the gaps out of which my Spanish was primarily composed, with tremendous intellectual and aesthetic force', and that their relationship 'largely depended upon my never becoming fluent, on my having an excuse to speak in enigmatic fragments… [since the] invisible threshold of proficiency would render me devoid of interest'.[394] Similarly, he writes of Teresa that he 'had never attempted to initiate anything with [her], but this was in part because I always assumed I could, that she was, if not exactly waiting for my advances, open to them, and that keeping such a possibility alive was for both of us… more exciting than any consummation'.[395] On the one hand, this is a very typical defence mechanism to avoid being rejected, but what this defence mechanism belies is not only the insecurity that underpins Adam's fear of rejection but also his inability to understand that people cannot be treated analogously to art. As Sheila Heti points out, Adam's attitude towards the women of the novel reflects his attitude towards poetry, a form which he claims at one point in the novel manages to keep 'virtual possibilities… intact because the poem remains beyond you, inscribed on the far side of [a]

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[392] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 178.

[393] Ben Lerner, 'The Lichtenberg Figures', *No Art* (London: Granta, 2016), p. 21.

[394] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, pp. 46, 51.

[395] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 87.

mirror'.[396] As Heti writes, Adam lives 'as though he believes himself to be a poem, an ineffective conveyor of meaning… [and] imagines that the women who like him like only the image they're projecting'.[397]

This is, unsurprisingly, an attitude implicitly criticised in the novel, and one explicitly criticised in Lerner's own discussions of the text, since, as he points out, '[Adam's] conception of how virtuality functions in their relationship is inaccurate… so his attempt to ground his relationships the way he grounds his aesthetic has some painful results'.[398] It is not insignificant that Lerner himself comments on his novel like this in paratexts, since one of the ways in which these ostensibly unlikable details about his characters are forgiven is through their transparent link to his own biographical details. By way of its autofictional status, it is possible to read the texts as a form of confessional literature, and through this the narcissistic tendencies of Adam might be partly redeemed by the unflinching nature of Lerner's self-examination. Moreover, the disclosure of secrets has long been considered a tool for 'obtaining intimacy', and so these declarations might also be seen as a way for Lerner to court community and thereby resist his loneliness.[399] The gendered nature of this perception must always be borne in mind, however, since, as Rachel Sykes notes, what is framed as self-examination in the work of men is often considered an act of 'oversharing' in the work of women.[400] Reviewers, too, have noticed the emergence of a new male literary hero in contemporary fiction, one which Lerner's works perfectly encapsulate: Elaine Blair has written that 'Ben and Adam can seem to be iterations of a collective character we've met in other novels of the last twenty years… Americans [who] confess to episodes of excruciating, sexually themed embarrassment. They cryptically acknowledge their morally compromised positions near the top of an unfair social system, and at the same time register and lament a loss of status'.[401] Likewise, Sheila Heti has claimed that '*Leaving the Atocha Station* is partly a description of the inner territory of a new kind of American artist: cold, lazy, artificial, yet oddly honourable given the extreme honesty and thoroughness of his self-scrutiny'.[402] This privileging of confession as honourable is, however, often denied female writers working in the same form, and as Jonathan Gibbs points out, there is

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[396] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 91.

[397] Sheila Heti, 'I Hadn't Even Seen The Alhambra', *London Review of Books*, 30 August 2012 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v34/n16/sheila-heti/i-hadn-t-even-seen-the-alhambra> [accessed 25 March 2020].

[398] Tao Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner', *Believer Magazine*, 1 August 2011 <https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-ben-lerner-2/> [accessed 18 March 2021].

[399] Ben Agger, *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 3, 13.

[400] Rachel Sykes, '"Who Gets to Speak and Why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43.1 (2017), p. 162.

[401] Elaine Blair, 'So This Is How It Works', *London Review of Books*, 19 February 2015 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n04/elaine-blair/so-this-is-how-it-works> [accessed 25 March 2020].

[402] Heti, 'I Hadn't Even Seen The Alhambra'.

something extremely frustrating about the way that its ostensible acknowledgment of flaws inherently resists criticism. In these novels, 'acknowledgement of failure is a species of success… [but] what's so tricksy about this kind of writing is that every critical position against it has already been adopted. Whatever you want to accuse it of, it agrees with you'.[403]

Linked to this frustration is the critical tendency to emphasise the unfeeling and objectifying nature of Lerner's narrators, often compounded by the 'gendered and even narcissistic identification between… male reviewers, Ben Lerner and his semi-autobiographical characters' that Rachel Sykes has observed.[404] If a reader chooses not to view Adam/Ben/Lerner's confessions as honourable then they instead suggest a wildly insensitive male narrator who seems unable – and unwilling – to connect meaningfully with those around him. As Jon Baskin writes, 'Lerner's protagonists are cold, analytical, profoundly self-involved. Adulation by women is important to such characters insofar as it bolsters their fragile self-regard… but they are rarely moved by care, passion, even lust'.[405] Christian Lorentzen echoes this sentiment, arguing that Adam's treatment of the female characters constitutes a 'possible flaw of [the] book'.[406] While certainly there is much to criticise in the narrators' attitudes towards women in the books, I would posit that these opinions occasionally overlook some important nuances in Lerner's texts. For it is not entirely true that Lerner's narrators are always cold, analytical, or profoundly self-involved. In fact, early in *LTAS*, Adam expresses the desire for real intimacy when he says that with Isabel he suddenly 'desired to get my point across instead of attempting to make its depth a felt effect of its incommunicability'.[407] Later in the novel, in a moment of inspired contemplation about the future that might await him, he claims that he will 'buy a phone and consummate my relationship with Teresa'.[408] In this sentence it is unclear whether the two actions are linked causally or are in fact one and the same; buying the phone might allow Adam to pursue Teresa sexually, or the act of texting her might itself constitute the 'consummation' of their relationship. Adam's detachment from others and hesitation to make himself freely contactable throughout the narrative places outsized importance on the act of calling or texting, something parodied here by the possible parallel drawn between it and sexual consummation. The

[403] Jonathan Gibbs, '10:04 by Ben Lerner, Book Review', *The Independent*, 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/10-04-ben-lerner-book-review-accomplished-novel-maddening-it-moving-9965411.html> [accessed 5 March 2021].

[404] Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 172.

[405] Baskin, 'Always Already Alienated'.

[406] Christian Lorentzen, 'Back to the Present', *Bookforum*, November 2014 <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2103/ben-lerner-s-metafictional-novel-about-art-ambition-and-a-writer-named-ben-13640> [accessed 18 December 2019].

[407] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 51.

[408] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 164.

moment becomes less a macho brag about his sexual desires than a declaration of his readiness to be both more available and vulnerable with the people he surrounds himself with, implicitly moving away from his self-imposed state of loneliness.

As well as expressing a desire for greater intimacy, we might view Adam's response to rejection as further proof of his emotional involvement in the relationships he is in. When he learns, for instance, that Isabel is in fact already in a relationship, Adam 'felt the wind had been knocked out of [him]'.[409] He then asks in desperation whether Isabel loves him, something he himself calls a 'stupid, clichéd question'.[410] His desire to ironise his own response speaks to his vulnerability – this is not the commentary of a cold, unfeeling narrator, but rather one who is hurt and attempting to mask it. When the conversation moves on to Adam's supposedly dying mother, he finds himself 'grateful for a reason to be upset', before excusing himself to go to the bathroom, where he 'let out a single ridiculous sob'.[411] Adam's commentary on the episode attempts to downplay the emotional intensity of it – he calls the sob 'ridiculous' for instance - but this makes the hurt no less sincere. It is also important that the false story about his mother reappears here; at the beginning of the novel, it was framed as a manipulative way for him to appeal to women, but by this point in the text the story functions as a false narrative which serves as a cover for his legitimate sadness at not being romantically involved with a woman. It is also interesting to note that when he originally tells the lie about his mother, although he begins by faking the appropriate emotional response to accompany it, the scene ends with Adam starting 'to cry, both arms around Teresa now, *real* tears falling down her back as she hummed to comfort me' (emphasis mine).[412] While there is no denying that many of the actions of Lerner's male protagonists are inherently performative and duplicitous, Lerner is also careful to demonstrate that what begins as fake always contains the potential of becoming real.

This same vulnerability can be seen in *10:04* too, most notably in Ben's relationship with Alena. Early in the novel he is shocked by her lack of public affection for him shortly after they have had sex: 'her tone implied my offer presumed a greater degree of intimacy than our exchange of fluids warranted. I was alarmed by the thoroughness of what I experienced as Alena's dissimulation, felt almost gaslighted'.[413] As the passage continues, Ben claims to have 'admired how she appeared capable of taking or leaving me, of taking and leaving me simultaneously, found it exciting, inspiring even', but this attitude only emerges as he narrates to himself his initial, emotional responses in lengthy and winding, paratactical sentences. In other words, rather than believe that Ben admires

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[409] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 93.
[410] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 94.
[411] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 94.
[412] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 29.
[413] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 29.

this quality in Alena, the reader suspects they are watching the process of Ben convincing himself that he admires this. This moment is later mirrored in the novel when Ben tries to suspend his relationship with Alena, pending his attempts to impregnate his best friend, Alex. When she replies that they had barely seen each other in two months and that their 'relationship was already on hiatus', Ben finds himself floundering – 'instead of trying to let her go, I felt like I was trying to get her back'.[414] Earlier in the novel, too, Adam addresses an unnamed second person, saying that 'I received your wedding announcement and was shocked to be shocked, crushed, and started a frightening multiweek descent, worse for being embarrassingly clichéd'.[415] Again, the pattern of dismissing the episode as 'clichéd' is visible, but the eruption of such a candid confession of romantic feeling surely belies a narrator who is not only 'cold' and 'analytical'.

Ultimately, therefore, while Lerner's novels might occasionally seem to act as a testament to the importance of isolation (after all, the text he secludes himself to write in both novels does get written – the evidence, we are told, is the novel in our hands), a more careful reading illuminates the cracks in this façade. His male protagonists yearn for intimacy, and rarely seem well adjusted either during or immediately after their periods of isolation. Even when they profess to be fine with their aloneness, they narrate the episode in such a way as to make it clear they are anything but, allowing Lerner to subtly undermine the longstanding gendered stereotype of the lonely man undertaking creative labour.

Art as Therapy and the Importance of Togetherness

Maintaining intimate relationships is not, however, shown to be the only way that Lerner's protagonists might assuage their loneliness; experiencing a deep and meaningful engagement with art is also shown to fulfil a similar function. But, just as different critical readings of the novels interpret Adam and Ben as either capable of intimacy or not, so too do critics differ on the question of Adam and Ben's capacity to connect meaningfully with art. Lerner has in fact claimed that he was shocked by much of the critical response to *LTAS*, noting that 'nonpoets who read the novel - even pretty sophisticated readers - tend not to take what Adam says about poetry very seriously. Reviewers focus on Adam's inability to have "a profound experience of art" but ignore the profound experience he has of Ashbery'.[416] He goes on to express his frustration with such a reading, since 'it

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[414] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 209.

[415] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 33.

[416] Ben Lerner and Gayle Rogers, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner', *Contemporary Literature*, 54.2 (2013), p. 236.

is a totally different book, I think, if you consider Adam's reading of Ashbery to be serious and central or if you think of Adam as having no direct experience of poetry'. Gayle Rogers makes a similar remark in that same interview, noting that *LTAS* allows for two divergent readings: 'if you think the narrative demonstrates serious literary engagement and ability, then it's easy to read the work as a Künstlerroman; if nothing in the prose gives the lie to Adam's doubts about his own commitment and seriousness, then it's something else - a year in the life of an anxious young conman'.[417] These two interpretations are linked by their dependence upon a reader's belief in Adam's capacity for feeling; his ability to have either a profound experience of art, or other people. It is true, of course, that much of Lerner's work, and *LTAS* in particular, is engaged with questioning what might constitute a profound experience of art, but this cynicism should not be confused with an absolute lack of belief in its potential. After all, in the opening of *LTAS,* despite Adam's detached tone and disbelief that the man in front of the painting might be having a 'profound experience of art', it is often overlooked that Adam only observes this scene because he himself returns to the same painting every day and is flustered when his routine is disrupted.[418] Prior to the interruption, he claimed that his daily ritual involved ingesting drugs and waiting for the effects to arrive as he looked at the painting, 'await[ing] equilibrium'.[419] Although he does not term his own connection a profound experience, to deny that there is some sort of important identification at play here would be a mistake; it is perhaps a perfect example of what Rita Felski terms 'attunement'.[420]

Of course, the claim that Adam struggles to have any profound experience of art which critics have made is not entirely unfounded. He says himself in the novel that he had 'long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art and I had trouble believing that anyone had'.[421] However, it might be better argued that Adam is in fact capable of profound experiences of art, he is only incapable of understanding or articulating them as such. When he is told by others that he himself is an artist, as when Teresa tells him that he is a 'a serious poet' who is only 'pretending that you're only pretending to be a poet' he considers this notion seriously, wondering 'if Teresa was right; was I in fact a conversationally fluent Spanish speaker and a real poet, whatever that meant?'.[422] Although his knee jerk reaction is to deny his own status as an artist, for lack of a belief in the power of art, it is important that he does experience these moments of reconsideration. His meditation on the power that poetry can wield is perhaps the most important of these moments,

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[417] Lerner and Rogers, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner', p. 235.
[418] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 8.
[419] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 8.
[420] Rita Felski, *Hooked* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 41.
[421] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 8.
[422] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 168.

contemplating first of all the lack of its political efficacy: 'I tried hard to imagine my poems or any poems as machines that could make things happen, changing the government or the economy or even their language, the body or its sensorium, but I could not imagine this, could not even imagine imagining it'.[423] What follows this point is perhaps more important though, as it suggests something about Adam, and perhaps by extension Lerner's own opinion of whether this should matter. Adam claims that:

> when I imagined the total victory of those other things over poetry, when I imagined, with a sinking feeling, a world without even the terrible excuses for poems that kept faith with the virtual possibilities of the medium, without the sort of absurd ritual I'd participated in that evening, then I intuited an inestimable loss, a loss not of artworks but of art, and therefore infinite, the total triumph of the actual, and I realized that, in such a world, I would swallow a bottle of white pills.[424]

In spite of his difficulty in imagining poems as being politically productive, Adam does ultimately seem to believe in the power of poetry, and Lerner's works might therefore be read in part as a defence of the poetic form, and more widely as a defence of art itself.

Another way that Lerner's texts reimagine the importance of art, and more specifically reimagine it in a way which might resist loneliness, is through an emphasis on beholding art being an experience that is most meaningful when shared. This idea appears repeatedly throughout *10:04*, a book in which 'the narrator and Alex's most intimate moments... [occur] when they're looking at something together, a painting or an image on a screen, as opposed to looking at one another'.[425] This motif neatly frames the book – at the beginning of the novel Ben and Alex wander around a gallery, their 'gazes… parallel, directed in front of us at canvas and not at each other, a condition of our most intimate exchanges; we would work out our views as we coconstructed the literal view before us'.[426] At the close of the book, as Ben and Alex look at the ultrasound scan of their future child, there is said to be 'that intimacy of parallel gazes I feel when we stand before a canvas or walk across a bridge'.[427] The concurrent construction of the view before them and the processing of their own emotions speaks to art's capacity to move people, even when the view before them ostensibly has little to do with the subject of contemplation. Instead, it is the fact of looking together that

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[423] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, pp. 44-5.
[424] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, pp. 44-5.
[425] Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner'.
[426] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 8.
[427] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 233.

seems to be of importance, so that the experience of art is inextricably linked in Lerner's work with the experience of acknowledging one's part in a larger community.

It is also notable that this capacity to make visible forms and experiences of collectivity constitutes one of Ben's benchmarks for good art – he celebrates Christian Marclay's work *The Clock* (a work screened to a mass audience) for making 'visible our collective, unconscious sense of the rhythms of the day'.[428] Conversely, he derides art which does not make possible this experience of collectivity, scorning the art in a doctor's office because he cannot 'imagine a doctor lingering over one of these images between appointments, being interested in it or somehow attached to it, having his day inflected by it… [meaning] we can't look at them together. They help establish, deepen, the gulf between us, because they address only the sick'.[429] That both doctor and patient would never contemplate the art together is what makes them a failure in Ben's eyes. It is especially interesting to note that a similar remark appears in *The Topeka School*, this time by Adam's mother, who wonders about 'a painting of sunflowers on the wall; where did nursing homes purchase art?'.[430] The tone here suggests that she thinks the art is in some way unsuitable for the setting and it is no accident that both these scenes take place in domains which are focused on health and wellbeing (a doctor's office and a nursing home respectively), settings that emphasise art's role in therapeutic practices.

The importance of looking together has also been applied to critical readings of Lerner's texts, most notably by Jennifer Ashton, who gives an astute interpretation of the seemingly paradoxical claims of the narrator at the close of the novel that he is 'looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural', before continuing in the first person singular: 'I am with you, and I know how it is'.[431] Ashton argues that this can be 'understood to be in the second person plural even if the pronouns are first person singular, because the difference between you and me… no longer matters. The sentence that we're looking at, we're looking at together'.[432] Jacqueline O'Dell claims that this is an overly tidy interpretation of the final lines, arguing that Lerner's re-readings of Whitman suggest that all moments of connection in a text are 'transitory and highly contingent', but I would argue that O'Dell's reading overlooks the central importance of this motif of looking together in the novel as a whole.[433] That the moment might be transitory does not undermine its

[428] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 53.
[429] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 73.
[430] Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School* (London: Granta, 2019), p. 218.
[431] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 240.
[432] Jennifer Ashton, 'Totaling the Damage: Revolutionary Ambition in Recent American Poetry', *Nonsite.Org*, 18, 2015 <https://nonsite.org/totaling-the-damage/> [accessed 23 March 2021].
[433] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', p. 456.

power, and it is contingent only upon a reader's willingness to believe that they are looking at the words alongside Ben/Lerner, something which the novel itself aggressively argues is the case. In one of the most quoted passages of the novel, for instance, Ben defends his choice to exchange 'a modernist valorization of difficulty as a mode of resistance to the market for the fantasy of coeval readership'.[434] The word coeval – while functioning as an intertextual nod to George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* – is important as it suggests something about Lerner's relation to posterity. This is not the plea for his art to outlive him, but instead a plea that he might be read *specifically* in his own time – when both he and his readers can look at the words together, and therefore assuage their loneliness.

Of course, the desire to assert authorial importance in order to remind a reader of their presence is one of the driving factors that leads writers to adopt an autofictional mode in the first place. Although the novels do not use works of autofiction as intertexts, it is no accident that in *10:04* Ben is just as interested in Whitman's account of his own life in *Specimen Days* as he is his poetry. Moreover, in his attitude *towards* Whitman, he models the way that he hopes his own readers might engage with his works. He writes at one point that he 'took him [Whitman] up on his repeated invitations to correspond, however trivial a correspondent I might be', and at various points considers what he believes Whitman the man's response to the world might be, such as when he wonders 'how would Whitman have tended such an illness, what gifts would he have distributed?'.[435] In *The Topeka School*, too, the image of the author standing behind the text is repeatedly alluded to. Joanna Biggs quite rightly draws a parallel between Jonathan's experiments in milieu therapy, in which 'patients and staff… mix, collaborate on treatment', and the act of writing a work of autofiction.[436] She claims that a 'therapeutic relationship is eventually built not by talking but through the sort of trust that comes from working on something together. Perhaps this is one of the ways autofiction works too… [because] the writer stands behind the text'. This is perhaps made even more explicit in that novel when Evanson points out that Adam bobs his head when he debates – something which Jane defends as 'a form of listening, of making himself a medium… like Glenn Gould's humming in *The Goldberg Variations*. It was a sign that the artist was alongside an art that exceeded him'.[437] By applying the point to Adam himself the text makes explicit the hitherto implicit point running throughout all three of the novels; that the traces of Lerner's presence here are

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[434] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 93.

[435] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 194; 219-20.

[436] Joanna Biggs, 'Can't Hear, Speak Up!', *London Review of Books*, 25 November 2019 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n23/joanna-biggs/can-t-hear-speak-up> [accessed 1 June 2021]. See also: Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 54.

[437] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 209.

deliberate, and that readers ought to pay attention to them since they make the experience of art collective and therefore therapeutic for those experiencing loneliness.

By writing in an autofictional mode, therefore, Lerner presents the book as a collaborative event, albeit one dependent upon a reader's willingness to engage with it on its own terms. Elaine Blair has, however, rightly pointed out that it might be viewed as 'presumptuous for a white, male scion of the professional American middle classes to offer a fictionalised version of his life as representative of a larger public'.[438] This is echoed by Jacqueline O'Dell when she writes that 'despite Ben's poetic aspirations, the novel shows how the impulse to understand literature as a universal balm against neoliberal atomization is, in fact, one of neoliberalism's most serious ills' since it risks evading the history of textual production that stands behind the book.[439] As O'Dell points out, however, a speech by Ben examining his interest in poetry recounted later in the novel 'indicates the novel's larger interest in interrogating the contingencies of literary circulation and literary address that are violently erased when we ask literature to present universal experience'.[440] This particular moment in the text emphasises the importance of art as a collective experience in three distinct ways: first, by representing the experience of hearing poetry as part of a collective mass audience (addressed by Ronald Reagan on television); second, by highlighting intertextual connections within the poem itself, which points back to and draws influence from a range of earlier sources; and third, by showing the ways that narratives about the event in question (the *Challenger* disaster of 1986) then circulated among the masses following Reagan's address. When the narrator describes their 'first experience of poetic measure', the awareness of being part of a communal audience of addressees is explicitly said to be part of its power, since they 'felt simultaneously comforted and stirred by the rhythm and knew that all across America those rhythms were working in millions of other bodies too', an experience Ben later describes as 'the transpersonality of prosody [that] constituted a community'.[441] Following a discussion of the collective consumption of art, Ben moves on to a consideration of the collective production of art, reflecting on the fact that:

> Reagan's unattributed quotation provided by Noonan was taken from a poem that was
> cobbled together by a young poet out of an anthology of other young poets enthralled by
> the power of flight… I find this less scandalous than beautiful: a kind of palimpsestic

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[438] Blair, 'So This Is How It Works'.

[439] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', pp. 447-8.

[440] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', pp. 447-8.

[441] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 112-3.

plagiarism that moves through bodies and time, a collective song with no single origin, or whose origin has been erased.[442]

Collectivity is therefore framed as part of the beauty of a work of art in both its consumption and its production. Finally, Ben considers the afterlife of these stories, commenting on the emergence of joke cycles about the Challenger disaster which circulated among the public following the event. These sinister jokes, he claims, are formally uninteresting but could be understood 'as bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility: prosody and grammar as the stuff out of which we build a social world'. Here then, Ben implicitly draws a parallel between the social experience of narratives and language as a collective form of trauma-processing with his own writing, which he hopes might function as a 'good' counterpart to the Challenger joke cycles. His text enacts the collective process of art's production and consumption in an attempt to illustrate these good forms of collectivity at work. We are told early in the novel, for instance, that one of the central stories of the book, about a man fabricating letters from famous writers, was in fact the idea of another character within the book itself.[443] Thus, the production of the book in our hands is framed within the book itself as the collective work of a group of people who extend well beyond Lerner. Just as he sought to do with his use of the implied second person plural, Lerner therefore attempts to instil in his readers an acute awareness of their continued existence as part of a wider collective, which he implicitly suggests might offer some respite from their loneliness.

This idea of collectivity, so crucial to the texts' resistance of loneliness, is clearly emphasised at the close of each of Lerner's novels, where it is shown to be necessary for optimism about the future. Of *LTAS'* ending, Sheila Heti has written that it is 'a happy ending… [but] only subtly happy. Adam sits alone, and reading a poem aloud in Spanish, doesn't "hear an American accent"'.[444] I would argue that Heti is right to note that the ending marks a shift in tone from the earlier sections of the novel, but would add that her focus on Adam's happiness overlooks the more important idea that the novel's ending is resoundingly optimistic. She is correct that Adam sits alone, but neglects to note the more important aspect of the ending - its final lines - which include Adam's vision that he will 'live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends'.[445] Gary Sernovitz perhaps better sums up the ending, writing that it signals his 'progress as an artist', as represented by his 'having a more

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[442] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 114.
[443] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 37.
[444] Heti, 'I Hadn't Even Seen The Alhambra'.
[445] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 181.

honest relationship with Teresa… and with abandoning his emotional isolationism'.[446] *LTAS* suggests, therefore, that 'hope lies in the excision of self-consciousness, [and] a less partial view of oneself', an idea that will be developed and expanded upon in each of Lerner's subsequent novels.[447]

I have already alluded to the ways in which the final lines of *10:04* textually enact collectivity through their implicit use of the second person plural, but the final moments of that novel also more broadly and thematically present community - and an attendant sense of collective intimacy - as the ultimate successes of the book. As Benjamin Noys points out, '*10.04* ends on a series of successes, most obviously the book we are reading but also Alex's successful pregnancy and Ben's ability to form a relationship with Roberto'. [448] The text therefore alludes to two alternative forms of collectivity: the bourgeois, normative establishment of the family; and the extrafamilial connection with a child who is not Ben's. These two moments are the culmination of two major plot strands of the novel itself, and so it is perhaps much easier to argue that in *10:04* these moments of connection populate the narrative in a way that they did not in *LTAS*. This is visible not only in its thematic interest in moments of collectivity (the Occupy movement, mass responses to environmental disasters) but also in the relationship between people that it models. In the moment discussed earlier where Ben confesses his desire for a coeval readership, he proclaims that 'if one begins to withdraw from the possibilities of experience, then no one would take any of the risks involved with love. And love has to be harnessed by the political'.[449] Maggie Nelson's reading of the novel attends very carefully to this particular message. She notes, discussing a scene where Ben tends to an intern who is struggling with having ingested too many drugs, that the tone shifts drastically from parody to sobriety, demonstrating that 'no matter what the circumstance, human suffering matters. Our attending to it matters. Acts of tenderness are not morally trivial. Which is why our narrator stays with the intern until he is asleep, then kisses him on the forehead before taking leave'.[450] Nelson's review is a perfect example of reading Lerner's work reparatively, concluding as she does that:

> By the time I finished *10:04*, I felt I knew some: not being ashamed of the desire to make a
> living doing what we love, while also daring to imagine 'art before or after capital'; paying as

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[446] Gary Sernovitz, 'Lost Generations', *The New York Times*, 9 March 2012, section Books <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/books/review/what-leaving-the-atocha-station-says-about-america.html> [accessed 5 March 2021].

[447] Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo, 'Imperfect Strollers: Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, W.G. Sebald, and the Alienated Cosmopolitan', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2 February 2013 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/imperfect-strollers-teju-cole-ben-lerner-w-g-sebald-and-the-alienated-cosmopolitan/> [accessed 23 March 2021].

[448] Benjamin Noys, 'Happy Like Neurotics: Roland Barthes, Ben Lerner, and the Writing of Neurosis', *College Literature*, 45.2 (2018), p. 238.

[449] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 94.

[450] Maggie Nelson, 'Slipping the Surly Bonds of Earth: On Ben Lerner's Latest', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2014 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/95063/> [accessed 5 March 2021].

intense attention to our collectivity as to our individuality; demanding a politics based on more than reproductive futurism… [and] attempting to listen seriously to others, especially those who differ profoundly from ourselves.[451]

Nelson acknowledges critiques of Lerner's work - its 'language that rides the line between precise articulation and jargon' might read as sarcastic, she notes – but ultimately she chooses to take these moments of the novel seriously. Her review echoes Ben's own relationship to the food co-op – which 'although [he] insulted it constantly', he 'didn't think… was morally trivial'.[452] Ben's reason for this is that he 'liked having the money I spent on food and household goods go to an institution that made labor shared and visible... [and] when a homeless shelter in the neighborhood burned down, "we"— at orientation they taught you to utilize the first-person plural while talking about the co-op — donated the money to rebuild it'. It is, therefore, the emphasis on the collective that gives both the co-op – and perhaps *10:04* itself – the ability to transcend these criticisms, moving away from individualism, isolationism and any attendant sense of loneliness.

The end of *The Topeka School*, too, makes an explicit nod to the importance of collective action. It closes with the narrator's participation in the so-called 'people's mic' at an ICE protest, an act which Adam claims 'embarrassed me, [as] it always had, but I forced myself to participate, to be part of a tiny public speaking, a public learning slowly how to speak again'.[453] The ending has, however, been criticised by John Patrick McHugh as 'a shotgun to the temple' due to its lack of 'ambiguity'.[454] He goes on to state that perhaps 'Lerner sought to display positive community action, the happy ending of a single voice combining with others in protest at vile evil… [and] as a writer living in precarious and upsetting times, he felt obliged to offer hope', but ultimately concludes that it reads like the 'very earnest finale of a wannabe Great American Novel'. I would argue, however, that in ending with such an overtly didactic and hopeful message, Lerner's text sits alongside a range of other contemporary texts who novelise real political issues and which explicitly call for collective action.[455] These authors, including Lerner, paratextually stress the importance of their biographical experiences in order to reinforce the political efficacy of their work. In an essay about the people's mic from 2012, for instance, he anticipates the close of *The Topeka School*, writing 'my

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[451] Nelson, 'Slipping the Surly Bonds of Earth: On Ben Lerner's Latest'.
[452] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 96.
[453] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 282.
[454] John Patrick McHugh, 'The Topeka School', *The Stinging Fly*, 2019 <https://stingingfly.org/review/the-topeka-school/> [accessed 3 June 2021].
[455] See, for example: Jenny Offill's recent work of climate fiction, *Weather*, which was published alongside a website detailing possible routes for getting involved in collective action, called www.obligatorynoteofhope.com; or Valeria Luiselli's text *Lost Children Archive*, itself in part a novelisation of her non-fiction work *Tell Me How It Ends* about her experiences working with child refugees.

embarrassment, a feeling of nakedness, indicates to me that the people's mic is a serious site of *poesis',* where *'*I'm learning how to position my body in relation to others in a new kind of space'.[456] Perhaps, then, just as the writers associated with the New Sincerity had to risk writing unironically, these new writers must risk writing without subtlety, without the 'ambiguity' whose loss McHugh laments, in order to make their novels politically efficacious and able to resist what I am calling here political loneliness.

Empathy as Emotional Labour

Just as Lerner's work reflects a shift towards a new type of political fiction, it also reflects a contemporary shift away from reductionist understandings of the role of empathy in fiction. Nicholas Dames, in his examination of solitude in the contemporary novel, draws upon Richard Rorty's theory of pragmatism, which he says has dominated our understanding of the novel in recent years, implying that 'by encouraging us to adopt the perspective of an other—in particular, a profoundly alien other—fiction leads us to draw new and wider nets around our otherwise more isolated selves'.[457] This idea is reflected in certain academic readings of Lerner's work, such as Pieter Vermeulen's claim that in his novels the 'literary characters grant us access to intimate thoughts, feelings, and motivations, and this unreal access allows readers to imagine a familiarity and intimacy that is unchecked by customary epistemological boundaries', meaning that 'readers engage with characters as more than just textual features'.[458] There is, however, a turn against this particular reading in certain approaches to the contemporary novel; Rachel Greenwald Smith for instance calls the belief that we 'read works of literature because they allow us direct contact with individuals who are like us but not us' an 'odd and unsettling consensus' since it reduces the novel to a neoliberal project of affective production in the service of book sales.[459] There is, also, the question of identity politics to consider, which Elaine Blair rightly points out complicates the type of empathy that an author can in good faith present in their novels. Where once, novelists (or a particular type of novelist – the 'great white author') might have encompassed the perspectives of 'coffee growers and harvesters and processors and wholesalers and lay bare the institutional and corporate networks

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[456] Ben Lerner, 'A Note on the Human Microphone', *Critical Quarterly*, 54.2 (2012), pp. 66–68.

[457] Nicholas Dames, 'The New Fiction of Solitude', *The Atlantic*, 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-new-fiction-of-solitude/471474/> [accessed 17 November 2019].

[458] Pieter Vermeulen, 'How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future', *Political Theory*, 45.5 (2017), p.666.

[459] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 1.

that connect and bind these characters', Lerner himself writes 'in a time of doubt about the realist writer's authority to take us very far beyond the bounds of his own experience'.[460] In his own words, and in a thinly veiled attack on this type of presumptuous fiction as written by Dave Eggers (in particular his co-authored work *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*), Lerner's books want to 'see what spaces for healing can exist, as opposed to the model of fiction that's like "The way I deal with the political is that I pretend to have access to the mind of a nine-year-old boy in Sudan"'.[461] As Elaine Blair points out, Lerner's response to this is to instead create 'a knowledgeable, articulate, idealistic, ruminative narrator who can acknowledge the limits of his own perspective, [so that] we can join him in *thinking* about coffee production, as well as overpopulation'.[462] Lerner therefore acknowledges the limits of whose loneliness he can represent on the page, but overcomes this issue by managing to present a character who nevertheless attempts to empathise with other, often lonely, characters.

The presentation of an empathetic position in Lerner's texts does not, therefore, fundamentally rest upon the always artificial presentation of complete access to other minds. Rather, he adopts a position that is acutely aware of the limits of empathy and which satisfies itself with the knowledge that attempting to make space for others is the only real step towards empathy anyone – fictional or real – can reasonably take. Maggie Nelson's review of *10:04* emphasises this by examining the importance that book places on the act of listening, rather than trying to inhabit other people's mindsets. The narrator of *10:04*, she claims is 'an engaged, even breathless, listener. His eagerness to listen to other people from varying walks of life… stands in sharp contrast to the kind of pompous, self-centered male author' that is parodied elsewhere in the novel.[463] Nelson ultimately claims that 'the novel's accomplishment lies in its offering of an experience of a certain kind of openness and curiosity, not in literally providing a platform for other voices', teaching us to hold 'ourselves in a state of negative capability while we allow others their [loquacity]'.[464] Lerner himself also appears to lament a reading which considers his refusal to directly inhabit others' minds a shortcoming of the novels: 'just because the narrator doesn't have access to the innermost thoughts of a character doesn't mean that the character doesn't have thoughts… I don't think it's always a sign of respect for persons (inside or outside of fiction) to pretend to be able to represent, to have access to, their multi-dimensionality at every moment. That doesn't imply people aren't multi-

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[460] Elaine Blair, 'Learning to Fight', *The New York Review of Books*, 13 February 2020 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/02/13/ben-lerner-topeka-school-learning-to-fight/> [accessed 5 March 2021].
[461] Witt, 'Interview with Ben Lerner'.
[462] Blair, 'Learning to Fight'.
[463] Nelson, 'Slipping the Surly Bonds of Earth: On Ben Lerner's Latest'.
[464] Nelson, 'Slipping the Surly Bonds of Earth: On Ben Lerner's Latest'.

dimensional'.[465] It is not, then, the mere inclusion of others' stories that makes Lerner's works empathetic - as this will always inevitably ring false - but rather his narrator's *attention to* those stories which constitutes the empathetic model. Likewise, in *The Topeka School*, a novel which notably does inhabit the voice of other characters beyond the Lerner figure, we ought to read the attempt to do so, and the acknowledgment of the difficulty in doing so as the empathetic act, rather than the (actually unrealised) accomplishment of writing as other people. In Lerner's own words:

> The goal of [*The Topeka School*] is to make felt the drama of that effort to imagine the other voice, not to realize it in a way that encourages you to forget that it's a reconstruction. For me the empathy isn't the accomplished access to other minds and voices; it's the dramatization of the effort with all its hazards and limitations.[466]

This might account for the recurring motif of Thematic Apperception Tests, or TATs, which encourage people to question 'what are these people in this picture thinking? Feeling? Start by telling me what led up to this scene'.[467] It is important that these tests are a way of exercising one's faculty for empathy that relies explicitly on narrative – that they are about what might have led up to the scene equates storytelling with the imaginative act of empathising with characters, a central premise not only of *The Topeka School*, but all of Lerner's texts. It is also worth noting that the TAT appears again at the close of the novel, specifically encouraging readers to consider how Darren might have ended up protesting with the Phelps family.[468] In this way, Lerner encourages us to actively perform the work of empathising with Darren, implying that our access to his thoughts in the interstitial chapters that concern him was not in and of itself sufficient for us to do so. Lerner therefore shows that empathy involves emotional labour, and cannot be accomplished merely through the narration of a chapter from an other's perspective.

Furthermore, displacing the imperative to empathise on to a reader rather than the narrator arguably allows a book like *10:04* to avoid criticisms such as John Patrick McHugh's claim that '[Ben's] desire to empathetically listen is constantly running against his desire to demonstrate he understands the world, and his privilege in it'.[469] McHugh accuses Ben of constantly exploiting the stories of others, such as Noor, to facilitate a discovery about himself, and argues that he is unmoved by his encounters with others, choosing for example not to join the activist he has shared a meal and his home with. If the imperative to empathise is instead laid on the reader, this failing of

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[465] Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner'.

[466] Catherine Barnett, 'Ben Lerner: On Writing, Boundary Blurring, and Magic Pills', *The Yale Review*, 107.4 (2019), p. 193.

[467] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p.27.

[468] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 275.

[469] McHugh, 'The Topeka School'.

Ben's cannot be equated, as it appears to be in McHugh's reading, with a failing of the novel itself, a method which Rachel Cusk, too, makes use of and which will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter. Moreover, this technique, which puts agency on the reader, forces them to perform the emotional labour during reading that they will have to sustain in the outside world if they are to resist loneliness; they are therefore trained in the empathetic skills that are necessary not only for reading, but for co-existing.

John Patrick McHugh is not, however, alone in claiming that Lerner's texts do little to model an empathetic disposition for its readers. Nicholas Dames, for instance, included *10:04* as one example of a series of contemporary novels which '[estrange] us from any conventional sense of intuitive insight into others' and in which 'the focus is… explicitly on rejecting the goal of generating empathy', and Rachel Sykes has pointed out that *LTAS* relies upon a narrator who is 'unable to empathise with the people [he] meet[s]'.[470] That Lerner's first novel does little to evoke empathy is something that Lerner himself would perhaps even acknowledge, having once claimed that the relation between his first two novels was 'primarily a relation of difference—the second narrates a moving away from the first'.[471] An observation by Ariana Reines about the difference between two of Lerner's intertextual allusions functions as a perfect illustration of this, noting as she does that 'the line quoted several times in your first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, "You have never seen me," [shifts] to the refrain "You might have seen me" in your latest, *10:04'*.[472] The shift demonstrates the capacity for Lerner's addressees to feel they have seen and therefore empathised with the speaker of these lines. It is interesting to note, too, that Lerner's method for textually incorporating this thematic interest in empathy is rooted in poetic address, a recurring interest of both Lerner and his narrators. In *LTAS*, Lerner introduces this idea with a long meditation on the work of John Ashbery. Adam praises Ashbery's use of pronouns, which 'created a sense of intimacy, as though you were being addressed or doing the addressing or were familiar with the context the poem assumed', meaning that 'the "you" devolved upon the reader'.[473] Paratextual documents only reinforce this interest in address, as in Lerner's 2017 piece on Ashbery, where he describes 'the beautiful fungibility of [Ashbery's] "you": the way sometimes the poems address you, are alone in the room with a particular reader (yes, *you*), and sometimes address all possible yous', or his claim in 2015 that 'sometimes *you* means all of you here tonight and sometimes just you, alone with your

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[470] Dames, 'The New Fiction of Solitude'; Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel*, pp. 177-8.
[471] Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner'.
[472] Ben Lerner and Ariana Reines, 'Ben Lerner and Ariana Reines', *BOMB*, 129, 2014, p. 71.
[473] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 90.

thoughts'.[474] What is clear is that Lerner is trying to replicate some of the 'fungibility' of Ashbery's pronouns, and it leads him to the use of direct address which he employs tentatively in *LTAS* and at great length in *10:04.* Therefore, while Lerner's first novel does not offer an ideal model for those interested in textual attempts to resist loneliness, it is in that book that he begins to attempt to escape solipsism by utilising forms of address, a technique that he will return to repeatedly in his two later novels.[475]

Addressing the Reader(s)

The question of poetic address is undoubtedly integral to Lerner's own poetry, with Daniel Katz having once observed that prosopopoeia and 'the problem of address and its generic histories and implications [are] central to *Mean Free Path*'.[476] We can see this not only in that collection, but also in poems written since, such as 'Plume', in which Lerner writes 'I believe my role is to address you, to turn away from the rocks and towards you, as though you could respond', or 'The Snows of Venice', where he writes that 'if you didn't think political experience was grounded in the sensation of touch, particularly of / bruised fruit, you wouldn't be here tonight (and you're not)'.[477] These examples, taken from much later in Lerner's poetic career show not only his continued interest in the theme of poetic address but also an acute awareness of the naivety of believing that poetry can directly address its audience. That the Whitmanian assertions – 'my role is to address you' – are caveated by an awareness of the futility of such a move does not, however, end in the erasure of the address from Lerner's poetry. This is a perfect illustration of what Lerner once claimed was poetry's modus operandi, which is 'about opening a channel, about making a space for the possibility of address more than communicating any particular thing... about exercising the faculty of address in

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[474] Ben Lerner, 'John Ashbery's Whisper Out of Time', *The New Yorker*, 2017 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/john-ashberys-whisper-out-of-time> [accessed 8 March 2021]; Ben Lerner, 'The I and the You', *The Paris Review*, 2015 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/12/09/the-i-and-the-you/> [accessed 23 June 2021].

[475] Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo have even argued that in *LTAS* Lerner 'alienate[s] readers on purpose'. See: Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo, 'Imperfect Strollers: Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, W.G. Sebald, and the Alienated Cosmopolitan', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2 February 2013 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/imperfect-strollers-teju-cole-ben-lerner-w-g-sebald-and-the-alienated-cosmopolitan/> [accessed 23 March 2021].

[476] Daniel Katz, '"I Did Not Walk Here All the Way from Prose": Ben Lerner's Virtual Poetics', *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (2017), pp. 333-4.

[477] Ben Lerner, 'Plume', *The Claudius App: A Journal of Fast Poetry*. <http://theclaudiusapp.com/2-lerner.html>, with a recording available at Ben Lerner, *Plume*, The Claudius App, 2012, II <https://soundcloud.com/the-claudius-app-ben-lerner-plume> [accessed 24 June 2021]; Ben Lerner, 'The Snows of Venice', *BOMB*, 140, 2017, pp. 108–19.

the abstract'.[478] Tom Evans, writing about Whitman and Lerner's use of the second person plural claims that the fundamental difference between them lies in the fact that 'Whitman spoke in a pre-modernist voice', meaning that 'not only did he make no attempt to restrict his audience. He expanded it beyond the actual to the potential'.[479] Here one might hear an echo of a line of Lerner's taken from his earliest poetry collection, 2004's *The Lichtenberg Figures*, where he writes that 'in the era before the flood, you could speak in the second person'.[480] It is possible to read *10:04* in particular as an attempt to wed these antediluvian modes of address that Whitman adopted to the self-aware postmodern tropes of autofiction; as Tom Evans puts it, Lerner 'synthesises [an] appeal to the second person plural, a political appeal, with the knowing methods of modern fiction'.[481] But more than simply resituating the question of address in new forms, Lerner's unpicking of the possibility of poetic address also forces a re-examination of its possibility in the novel too. Autofiction, so often criticised as a genre of navel-gazing, becomes a more outward looking form when merged with Lerner's use of poetic address, which instead aims to make of his readers a correspondent (mirroring his own correspondence with both Whitman and Ashbery as modelled in the texts themselves).

This interrogation of address in different literary forms is reinforced by Lerner's repeated resituating of his own work across different genres. The inclusion of details from Lerner's other literature (in particular, although not exclusively, his poetry) in his novels has often been read as part of Lerner's destabilising of the fact/fiction boundaries which places him alongside other postmodern or metafiction writers. However, as Daniel Katz points out, to frame Lerner's genre fluidity in such a way plays into the tendency to situate Lerner's work alongside:

> writers like Philip Roth, Paul Auster, or sometimes Jonathan Franzen and David Foster
> Wallace, more than the poets Lerner discusses and cites, like Ashbery, Creeley, Spicer,
> Whitman, Marianne Moore, Auden, Lorca, and William Bronk… [thereby] establishing a
> mimetic link to Lerner himself so that the boundaries between 'autobiography' and 'fiction'
> can be disturbed according to a problematic familiar to readers of the 'advanced' American
> novel of the last forty years.[482]

Echoing Wallace's concerns about metafiction, Lerner has claimed that he doesn't care for the metafictional project of 'mocking fiction's inability to make contact with anything outside of itself',

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[478] Lerner and Reines, 'Ben Lerner and Ariana Reines', p. 76.

[479] Tom Evans, 'Tome On The Range: Ben Lerner, 10:04 & The Death Of "Silence"', *The Quietus*, 22 February 2015 <https://thequietus.com/articles/17286-ben-lerner-1004-silence-art-sontag> [accessed 8 March 2021].

[480] Lerner, 'The Lichtenberg Figures', p. 95.

[481] Evans, 'Tome On The Range'.

[482] Katz, '"I Did Not Walk Here All the Way from Prose": Ben Lerner's Virtual Poetics', p. 316.

claiming instead that he is more concerned with 'how we live fictions, how fictions have real effects'.[483] In emphasising Lerner's similarities to a metafictional canon he shows little interest in being situated alongside, and therefore side-lining the importance of Lerner's interest in poetry - that which he calls 'the site of my education and still the center of my thinking about literature' - readers neglect to attend to the fact that poetry has never really been divided into fiction/non-fiction in the same way.[484] Lerner himself tries to direct readers' attention to this in *10:04,* when he writes that 'part of what I loved about poetry was how the distinction between fiction and nonfiction didn't obtain, how the correspondence between text and world was less important than the intensities of the poem itself, what possibilities of feeling were opened up in the present tense of reading'.[485] We cannot, therefore, understand Lerner's refusal to work in one stable genre and medium if we only frame it in relation to the history of the novel, and in particular the brand of postmodernism which so exercised the generation before him, including Wallace.

If we attend to Lerner's understanding of the distinction between fiction and poetry more carefully, then Lerner's playful dissolution of the boundaries between the two might instead be read as a comment on the two forms' ability to draw together the individual and the collective. Lerner has written a great deal about the prevalence of a certain attitude towards poetry that expects it to use the particular to express the universal, something he has deemed the 'impossible demand' of poetry as a form.[486] In particular, he argues that there is a critical tendency to mistakenly claim that Whitman achieved this impossible demand, which has since been rendered an impossible goal by the rise of identity politics, a misconception that Lerner claims stems from the inability to recognise that the so-called 'Whitmanic programme has never been realised in history'.[487] As Catherine Gallagher has pointed out, the emergence of the novel in the eighteenth century was also closely linked to its capacity to represent 'whole class[es] of people in general' rather than simply 'persons in particular', something which Lerner seems acutely aware of, and which directly informs his use of address in the novel.[488] As he puts it in his poem 'The Snows of Venice', 'the confusion of the individual heartbeat for larger historical / rhythms gave rise to the novel as a form'.[489] Both poetry and the novel therefore have a long history of being defined by their capacity to address readers, and Lerner's dissolution of the boundaries between the two highlights his interest in this. It serves as

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[483] Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner'.

[484] Ben Lerner and Sally Rooney, 'Theaters of Speech', *FSG: Work in Progress*, 2019 <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/10/11/theaters-of-speech/> [accessed 5 May 2021].

[485] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 170-1.

[486] Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), pp. 19-20.

[487] Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, pp. 67-8.

[488] Catherine Gallagher, 'The Rise of Fictionality, in *The Novel, Volume 1*, ed. by Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 342.

[489] Ben Lerner, 'The Snows of Venice', *BOMB*, 140, 2017, 108–19.

a wry comment on the forms' inability to fulfil this promise, while simultaneously underlining Lerner's decision to draw on this history in spite of that, attempting to use it to soothe loneliness while knowing perhaps that it cannot.

It is also important to note that many of the lines of poetry which Lerner recycles or resituates in his novels are those which explicitly thematise the intimate relationship between reader and writer. Take, for instance, the lines 'I have never been here. / Understand? / You have never seen me', from Lerner's collection *The Lichtenberg Figures,* which repeatedly reappear in *LTAS*.[490] Of these lines, Lerner himself has commented that since it is 'a real poem from the historical author inserted into the fiction' it could be interpreted as a 'slippage [acting] as a line of escape', but might also be read as a comment on 'the possibility of a correspondence between reader and writer and character and historical author'.[491] If neither poetry nor fiction can ever truly represent the universal through the individual, then Lerner instead resolves to use genre as a provocation, prompting readers to interrogate their own capacity for being addressed by literature.

This resolution is also reflected in Ben's attitude towards Whitman in *10:04.* At the close of that novel, he claims that he had 'been hard on Whitman during my residency, hard on his impossible dream, but standing there with Creeley after my long day and ridiculous night, looking at the ghost of ghost lights, we made, if not a pact, a kind of peace'.[492] If Lerner realises that he cannot in fact fulfil the Whitmanic project, that does not mean that he cannot still respect the desire to believe in its fulfilment, nor does it mean that Whitman's dream has nothing to offer his protagonists as a model for living. As with the moment when Ben tends to a panicked young intern, quoting Whitman's lines to him and meditating on what Whitman's response might have been ('Whitman would have kissed him. Whitman would have taken the intern's fear of the loss of identity as seriously as a dying soldier's') does in fact lead Ben to treat the intern more affectionately and tenderly.[493] As Lerner himself puts it in an interview, 'there are all kinds of problems with [Whitman's] bid for universality. But that (not just) Whitmanic fantasy that you can dissolve yourself through art into collective possibility—the dream remains live for me whether or not I can defend it'.[494] The Whitman allusions function, therefore, as a way for Lerner to figure both the difficulties of drawing the universal and the particular together, as well as testifying to the importance of ultimately overlooking those issues.

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[490] Lerner, 'The Lichtenberg Figures', p. 21. A version of these lines appears in Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta, 2012), pp. 127-8; 178.

[491] Lerner and Reines, 'Ben Lerner and Ariana Reines', p. 71.

[492] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 194.

[493] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 190.

[494] Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner'.

Moreover, it is important to remember that address is about more than simple acknowledgement for Lerner, as is particularly evident in the moments when he calls on a reader to perform a certain action, imploring them to not only read Lerner's words but follow his actions. At one point in *10:04,* for instance, Lerner writes that 'you can drag the "pegman" icon onto the Google map and walk around the neighborhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I'm doing that in a separate window now', a moment which Pieter Vermeulen claims synchronises 'three activities: perception, remembrance, and the verbalization of thought'.[495] More than this, however, Lerner's use of the second person pronoun invites a reader to join Lerner in the action. While it could be argued that 'you can' is simply Lerner's way of choosing to construct the modal verb, Lerner's readers are by this point in the novel attuned to instances of direct address; as with Ashbery, each 'you' is imbued with productive ambiguity. In *The Topeka School*, a similar moment occurs, this time without the explicit second person being invoked, but instead making use of the imperative to imply a 'you' receiving instruction: 'Click on the cue ball and drag it to the edge of the table'.[496] Again, readers feel directly addressed by this, but it functions as much more than what Vermeulen credits the earlier passage as; this is as much a moment of setting-down as it is an invitation to participate. Lerner thereby creates a literary equivalent to what is often called 'relational aesthetics' in contemporary art, which Debbie Atkinson points out, offers 'an alternative to postmodern alienation through interactivity and interpersonal connection'.[497] This interactivity encourages a connection between his readers and himself that in turn makes both them, and him, potentially feel less alone.

Another aspect of Lerner's direct address that has largely been overlooked thus far is precisely what is being narrated in the instances when Lerner makes use of it. In *10:04*, for instance, it is notable that in two separate instances of direct address being used Lerner is describing a moment of crying: 'you might have seen us walking on Atlantic, tears streaming down her face, my arm around her shoulders, but our gazes straight ahead; or perhaps you've seen me during one of my own increasingly frequent lacrimal events'; 'you might have seen me sitting there on the bench that midnight… having, as I projected myself into the future, a mild lacrimal event'.[498] In Alison Gibbons' argument, Lerner's use of direct address seeks to achieve two things – it 'creates the illusion that the narratorial I and real reader share ontological territory… [and] it strengthens the

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[495] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 163; Vermeulen, 'How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future', pp. 672-3.

[496] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 258.

[497] Debbie Atkinson, 'Participation and Affect', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2013 <https://www.metamodernism.com/2013/07/02/participation-and-affect/> [accessed 14 June 2022].

[498] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 8, 109.

phantasmatic pact'.[499] Arguably reinforcing both of these aims, I would add that direct address is often used by Lerner *specifically* at the moments when people might most obviously be called upon to empathise with him (as in moments of great emotion, especially those which are physiologically expressed like crying). Direct address thereby functions as a way for Lerner to textually evoke the empathy that the novels thematically address and becomes a way of building community for Ben/Lerner at the moments when it is most needed.

The other way that Lerner textually enacts this desire for community is by addressing a second person plural. In *10:04* he explicitly establishes this as the addressee of his art – describing 'a collective person who didn't yet exist, a still-uninhabited second person plural to whom all the arts, even in their most intimate registers, were nevertheless addressed', and claiming that he thinks of his 'audience as a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence'.[500] Echoing Whitman's use of poetic address, Tom Evans has argued that among novelists this is a unique use of the second person. Unlike Jonathan Franzen, for instance, for whom the 'concept of the writer-reader relationship is bivalent', Lerner is 'addressing the second person plural'.[501] While Tom Evans and other critics have credited *10:04* with the successful employment of the second person plural, I want to posit that the best demonstration of its function is perhaps actually to be found in *The Topeka School*.[502] In that novel, Adam's mother watches Adam perform in a public speaking competition, and we are told that:

> when he turns to face the audience, when he squares up with the judges, I can tell that he's a little blinded by the stage lights; Evanson has taught him, however, to feign eye contact, to pretend he can make out faces (beyond the parapet). Suddenly, although I know it is impossible, Adam seems to look directly at me, smiling slightly, politely, but without recognition. (Do you know who these nice people are?) He stands there motionless, as if he's holding my gaze, waiting for me to start his time.[503]

This act of blind address parallels the act of writing – facing an unseen but presumed audience in the collective, who will all feel both individually addressed in spite of a rational awareness that they are only one of many. To do so requires a suspension of disbelief akin to the one underpinning Wallace's

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[499] Alison Gibbons, 'Autonarration, "I", and Odd Address in Ben Lerner's Autofictional Novel 10.04', in *Pronouns in Literature: Positions and Perspectives in Language*, ed. by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 94.

[500] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 108-9; 157.

[501] Evans, 'Tome On The Range'.

[502] See, for instance: Ralph Clare, 'Freedom and Formlessness: Ben Lerner's 10:04 and the Affective Historical Present', *Open Library of Humanities*, 4.2 (2018).

[503] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 228.

horoscope paradox, which enhances a reader's affective investment in the novel itself. As Alison Gibbons puts it of *10:04*, readers must choose to 'accept the perceptual positioning of the second person, but in the knowledge that even an apostrophic "you" is implied and collective'.[504] As Gibbons' comment makes clear, readers must be willing to meet Lerner on his own terms, but by modelling his own engagement with writers before him, Lerner makes the case that it is worth our effort. By imagining ourselves as part of a second person plural, and by responding to Lerner's calls to perform actions alongside him, or to at least imagine ourselves capable of such a feat, readers are invited to, at least, 'make a kind of peace' with Lerner, 'if not a pact', and to thereby lessen their own experiences of loneliness.

Beyond Direct Address: On Other Perspectives and Dissolving Personhood

Having examined the ways that Lerner uses the second person plural to involve a reader, I want to now focus on the ways that he also manipulates the first and close third person to textually enact intimacy and resist loneliness. Critics such as Jacqueline O'Dell have already focused on the fluidity of perspective in *10:04* largely by analysing the way that the narrator explicitly acknowledges perspectives as being interchangeable, as when he writes that his personality is 'dissolving into personhood so abstract that every atom belonging to me as good belonged to Noor'. She rightly argues that:

> replacing the second-person-plural with 'Noor' produces a flicker between the universal 'you' and the particular Noor, as well as between the particular 'you' reading 10:04 and Noor, promoting a sense that the reader is also part of this communal body of poetic address.[505]

What deserves closer examination, though, is the way that shifts between first and third person occasionally break down in the telling of a story in *10:04.* There are numerous examples in that novel of speech being reported via several frame narratives, resulting in phrases such as 'your father, my mom said to me, Noor said', and 'the ticket collector said after looking me over, my dad said to me, I said to Alex'.[506] These complex structures that at once make visible the numerous frames of narrative while paradoxically masking them by deliberately making them difficult to parse are a way

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[504] Gibbons, 'Autonarration, "I", and Odd Address in Ben Lerner's Autofictional Novel 10.04', pp. 92-3.
[505] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', p. 454.
[506] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 102; 141-2.

for Lerner to textually perform the dissolution of personhood that he describes in the moment between Noor and Ben.[507] Similarly, there are points in the novel where Ben narrates another person's predicament in the first person, thereby dissolving the origins of narrative itself. When describing a plotline for his planned novel to a fellow novelist, Ben says that: '"'The lie described my life better than the truth,'" I added. "'Until it became a kind of truth.'" I drained my drink. "'I would have done the chemo if they'd offered it to me'"'.[508] The proliferation of quotation marks here signals that the 'I' referred to in the dialogue is a separate entity to the 'I' in the first-person narration, but the insistence on using the first-person pronoun repeatedly makes the clarity of this distinction harder to maintain as the passage proceeds. His interlocutor's response reflects this, as the novelist he is conversing with is said to be 'trying to figure out if the story was lifted from my life'. It is not, then, only through the second person that Lerner signals the diminished authority of the first-person perspective in his novels, but also through his use of first-person bleeding into third.

The removal of boundaries between narrative perspectives is also visible in a motif that recurs in all of Lerner's novels, which is the repeated references to his narrators seeing or hearing themselves in the third person. In *LTAS*, for instance, Adam claims that he 'felt as I crossed the plaza that I was observing myself from the roof of my apartment'.[509] In *10:04,* Ben claims that he 'was starting to misremember crossing [into Brooklyn] in the third person, as if I had somehow watched myself walking beneath the Brooklyn Bridge's Aeolian cables'.[510] What each of these instances demonstrates is that the fluidity of perspective does not limit itself to the imagined occupying of another's perspective but also to the distancing of the narrative perspective from itself. This image is repeated in *The Topeka School*, but there it becomes a much more central idea to the functioning of the text as a whole, not only as an acknowledgment of the narrator's detachment from his own experience but as a way for the narrative voice to willingly switch between perspectives – as at the beginning of that novel when Adam claims that, while looking at a miniature train set, 'he occupied two vantages at once: he pictured himself beneath their branches and also considered them from above; he was looking up at himself looking down. Then he could toggle rapidly between these perspectives, these scales, in a relay that unfixed him from his body'.[511] In *The Topeka School*, the dissolved boundaries between first and third person experience are a repeated concern of the narrative. This is reflected in the polyphonic narrative perspective itself, which appears to inhabit the perspective of both Adam, as well as his mother and father, and also in interstitial chapters which

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[507] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 125.
[508] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 125.
[509] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 22.
[510] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 134-5.
[511] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, pp. 10-1.

relate the experiences of a fellow student of Adam's called Darren. While Steven Watts therefore criticised *10:04's* inability to overcome in its narrative form the neoliberal structures that it thematically undermines, Lerner arguably sets about addressing these complaints through *The Topeka School*. Comparing *10:04* unfavourably against Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, Watts claims that the latter 'succeeds in narrating in a collective voice that generously represents the perspectives of the characters [the narrator] encounters… with the help of interstitial chapters that she does not narrate'.[512] The comparison, Watts claims 'demonstrates the possibility of collective voice and the necessity of including multiple perspectives, or focalizers, in order to successfully access that collective voice', a point which *The Topeka School* seems all too aware of, using as it does a multi-perspectival form to possibly overcome those criticisms, subsuming its politics in its form. In this way, readers must attend not only to theme of collectivity but also to the ways that literature enacts this collectivity – something like what Rachel Greenwald Smith calls 'reading affectively', which involves 'reading for what literature does, not simply for what it says… [and] reading for the ways works of literature themselves act in larger systems'.[513] Reading affectively, therefore, allows one to read in a way that might offer a resistance to one's loneliness.

In *The Topeka School*, not only does Lerner include the perspective of characters other than Adam, he dissolves the boundaries between first, second and third person absolutely and repeatedly. Memories are repeatedly shown to be constructed not by individuals, but by groups: such as Adam's claim that he 'remember[s] the next several hours of the Episode in both the first and third person, probably because I've depended heavily on Jane's account'; or Jane's version of the same story, which acknowledges its influence on Adam – 'you've been told most of what happened next, must remember it in the third person'.[514] These are instances of what Lerner has called in interviews 'corporate' memories, those which are remembered 'in the first and third person simultaneously… because they are so inflected by the stories others tell us about what we experienced'.[515] It is important to note, however, that the ability to speak of oneself in the third person is never understood in that novel as sufficient in and of itself, especially as it is echoed in the conservative remarks of Bob Dole, a politician noted for his use of illeism.[516] Instead, the novel insists on the awareness of both first, second and third person perspectives as the key to a more open experience and the route away from isolation and loneliness.

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[512] Steven Watts, 'An Eerie Cacophony: Forms of the Collective in Occupy Novels', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 8.1 (2020).

[513] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 25.

[514] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, pp. 48-9; 97.

[515] Barnett, 'Ben Lerner: On Writing, Boundary Blurring, and Magic Pills', p. 193.

[516] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 27.

Moreover, the inclusion of other perspectives in these texts should not be mistaken for a representation of perfect polyphony. Lerner is candid about the fact that his novel is not by any means a true representation of his parents' experience, nor could it ever be, but instead is filled with what he calls 'tears in the voice, where you [can] see that it's the adult Adam trying to reconstruct his parents' voices from his familial and political present'.[517] Motifs reappear in chapters supposedly narrated by different characters, and verbal tics suggest at various points a narrator behind the narrator, as it were. As an example, consider the chapters which purport to be written from Jane's perspective. Occasionally, these passages work tirelessly to establish a sense of verisimilitude, even incorporating dialogue with the younger Adam into the text, as when she addresses Adam, saying 'I should find the leaked memo for you in which a senior analyst called me a "trumpeting virago" to Dr. Tom; you could reproduce a slightly redacted version in your book', or the moment when Adam performatively finishes Jane's sentence for her (which of course on another level, he is always doing): 'you'll have to ask him—… —If I want details'.[518] At these moments the text seems to be trying almost *too* hard to maintain the veneer of complete access to Jane's mindset. Occasionally, however, this disappears, as when Jane is describing her family's arrival at an event she is due to speak at: 'We passed the knot of Phelps protesters, some of whom started yelling at the Brain'.[519] The Brain is a pejorative term for Jane herself, but it is unclear whether the use of it here signifies an attempt on her part to lay claim to the name and thereby neuter it, or whether it is the voice of Adam/Ben bleeding through into her narration. Earlier in the novel a similar moment occurs when part of Jane's narrative suddenly and momentarily shifts to the second-person. Describing an encounter with her colleague Sima, the passage begins 'you have lunch with a friend you haven't seen in a while… you ask her several times what she's been up to, but she keeps turning the conversation back to you and your book tour'.[520] It is clear that the emergence of this 'you' is different to its appearance in the earlier novels – this is not simply a case of direct address. It is unclear, however, whether one is to read it as Adam addressing his mother, or an instance of Jane narrating in the second person to mark her detachment from an awkward moment. This lack of clarity, the sense of boundaries dissolving, is meant to demonstrate the imperfection of Lerner's polyphony, which in turn serves to remind readers that it is not the performance of perfect access to another's thoughts in these novels that is shown to be important but the act of attempting to do so. In this way, Lerner's use of polyphony illustrates his wider point about empathy in the novels – it is about illustrating the emotional labour of empathising, not pretending to have perfectly achieved it.

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[517] Lerner and Rooney, 'Theaters of Speech'.
[518] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, pp. 79, 103.
[519] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 198.
[520] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 101.

While Baskin has therefore criticised the novel, claiming that 'the expanded cast of characters is not accompanied by an enlargement of sensibility or experience', we should perhaps consider whether Lerner's point is not in fact to demonstrate that nobody can enlarge their sensibility to the degree needed to fully inhabit another self; instead it is in the attempt to do so that the importance lies.[521]

It should be noted that Lerner is by no means the first author to textually represent these 'tears in the voice'. Lorna Martens has written thoughtfully on the same phenomenon in Christina Brooke-Rose's work *Remake* – but his point in doing so perhaps is unique. Where Brooke-Rose uses these techniques to make a metafictional point – Martens claims she uses 'echoings… to remind the reader that all these characters are versions of the author Christine Brooke – Rose… [who] is not self-identical but multifarious and intersubjective' – Lerner is using them to make a point about what responsible fiction might look like, and how it might be used to resist loneliness.[522] The link between this faux-polyphony and resisting loneliness is perhaps made most explicit in the sections which follow Adam's perspective, which at one point involves an extended meditation on his ability to summon the voices of his friends and family in his head. He begins first by trying to recall the sound of his grandfather's voice, but is unable to do so, and then fails also to recall the sound of his girlfriend's voice, wondering 'if this meant there was something wrong with him'.[523] A few pages later, however, Adam finds success in his endeavour, when he remembers his mother correcting his split infinitive in the recitation of a poem they performed in the past. 'If he ever needed to summon her voice', Lerner writes, 'all he had to do was quote his misquotation, their ritual refusal of repetition across the generations, their shadowed passage, weak spell, and then his mother would answer in his head'.[524] That he appears only to summon a voice – his mother's – when he imagines it as a response to something he has said alludes to the importance of language as a communal endeavour in this novel. *The Topeka School* can therefore be understood as an explicit counterpoint to the alleged solipsism of Lerner's earlier works. In fact, in at least one instance, a story from the earlier novels that refers to Adam/Ben's parents is revisited in *The Topeka School* from their supposed perspective, as when Jonathan refers to marrying Rachel 'the year before I started grad school, after we both, within the space of a few days, lost a parent'.[525] While these moments serve to provide continuity between the novels, they also indicate something about the attempt to more fully empathise with the situation presented here – demonstrating the novels' collective progression

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521 Jon Baskin, 'On the Hatred of Literature', *The Point Magazine*, 26 January 2020 <https://thepointmag.com/letter/on-the-hatred-of-literature/> [accessed 8 March 2021].
522 Lorna Martens, 'Autofiction in the Third Person, with a Reading of Christine Brooke-Rose's Remake', *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 61.
523 Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 235.
524 Lerner, *The Topeka School*, pp. 241-2.
525 Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 42, c.f. Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 138-42.

towards a more empathetic situation. Just as the plot of the trilogy culminates in the moment of the human microphone (where many voices come together to amplify one idea), the modus operandi of the texts similarly shifts, illustrating one voice trying to amplify many.

Political Efficacy: Communal Engagement as an Antidote to Political Loneliness

There are, however, those who question the efficacy and earnestness of Lerner's shift towards emphasising political engagement, and since this constitutes one of the primary ways that Lerner's texts resist loneliness I want to now consider these views in turn. That critics might take issue with the political engagement of *LTAS* – a novel in which Adam 'was sleeping in the Ritz' during the moment 'when history came alive' - seems unsurprising.[526] Rachel Sykes even goes so far as to imply that *LTAS* poses a danger, through its ambivalence 'about the novel's role as a vehicle for social and political commentary... [which] risks silencing other citizens who are already marginalised and disenfranchised'.[527] Adam's repeated regurgitation of the Ortega y Gasset quotation 'literature reflects politics more than it affects it, an important distinction', or the Auden quotation 'poetry makes nothing happen' seem to be a tacit acknowledgment of such a fact.[528] Such pessimism might be alleviated by adopting the view that, as Sianne Ngai puts it, 'bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its own "powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world" is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis', but the text's lack of overt political engagement does make it an easy target for critics who, understandably, desire less political ambivalence from contemporary novels.[529]

In *10:04*, however, the narrator does seem to attempt to establish community and engage politically with those around him in a more earnest manner. Even when community is shown to be transient – as in the 'the physical intimacy with Alex... [or] like the sociability with strangers' which Ben claims 'wasn't just over, but retrospectively erased' by the storm's non-arrival – this is implicitly critiqued by Ben's persistent desire to establish what he calls the 'transpersonal'.[530] But even Ben's desire for the transpersonal, a desire expressed while he is cooking dinner for an activist protesting as part of the Occupy movement, is something which various critics have questioned, not least of all

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[526] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, p. 158.
[527] Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel*, p. 153.
[528] Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, pp. 171; 175; 143.
[529] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2.
[530] Lerner, *10:04*, pp. 24; 47.

because of the way that that moment itself is narrated. As Jon Baskin points out, Ben explicitly acknowledges that as he left the protestor on the subway, he 'never considered altering his plan' to join him at the protest, hardly the actions of somebody attempting to harness the effects of the so-called transpersonal.[531] Steven Watts points out that at this same moment 'the narrator does not build solidarity with the philosophy of the camper and instead focuses on how neoliberal biopolitics reproduce themselves unconsciously', meaning that 'the novel never actually represents a "transpersonal subject" as much as [it] highlights the biopolitical obstacles blocking that creation'.[532] Finally, Theodore Martin points out that the 'jargon here ("transpersonal," "co-construct") seems suspiciously overdone; the passage reads more like a parody of "transpersonal revolutionary" politics—a phrase that no one who held this politics would actually use—than an affirmation of such politics'.[533] Each of these observations inevitably leads to a conclusion like the one Nicholas Brown arrives at: that Ben is 'a Stoic in the bad, Hegelian sense of someone who substitutes his freedom to interpret the world for the possibility of changing it', and that 'in the world of the novel, a world of potential co-op members, it is hard to imagine political beliefs making much of a difference'.[534]

Maggie Nelson, however, has argued that *10:04* is 'bolder and more politically incisive than… any number of heavily promoted works of art whose material conditions remain shrouded in mystery', namely 'by exhaustively bringing our attention to the ways in which we collectively, if distinctly, participate in the contradictions, hypocrisies, and exhilarations of our time'.[535] Echoing Jacqueline O'Dell's point that *10:04's* intentions are 'not just a matter of alleviating the reader's alienation by addressing them directly… [but] also an attempt to make valuable the disparate forms of alienated labor that make the novel possible', we might instead posit that although Ben himself doesn't appear to have become a model politically engaged citizen, it is Lerner's approach to the novel form that instead constitutes the redemptive aspect of the text and its best defence against loneliness.[536]

To further complicate matters, it is also worth noting that even if we concede that the form of *10:04* might achieve community, it is still possible to cynically interpret this as Lerner subsuming neoliberal values if one subscribes to Rachel Greenwald Smith's idea that neoliberal individualism is distinguished by 'its inclusivity of the very forms of collective attachment that liberal individualism

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[531] Baskin, 'Always Already Alienated'.
[532] Watts, 'An Eerie Cacophony'.
[533] Theodore Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage: Art, Form, Formlessness: A Reply to Jennifer Ashton', *Nonsite.Org*, 18, 2015 <https://nonsite.org/9500/> [accessed 23 March 2021].
[534] Nicholas Brown, 'Art after Art after Art', *Nonsite.Org*, 18, 2015 <https://nonsite.org/art-after-art-after-art/> [accessed 23 March 2021].
[535] Nelson, 'Slipping the Surly Bonds of Earth: On Ben Lerner's Latest'.
[536] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', p. 452.

eschewed'.[537] This means that 'contemporary novels are increasingly concerned with communities and groups, so they can appear to signal a growing interest in collectivity that runs in opposition to capitalism's emphasis on individual competition'. She points out that this should come as no surprise, since:

> the neoliberal subject is not individualistic in the traditional sense. Neoliberal society requires and encourages engagement with others: it is, after all, under neoliberalism that we see the rise of social media and the premium put on networking and the acquisition of 'friends.' But these forms of association are largely understood to lead to the enrichment of the self.[538]

Consequently, 'in neoliberal novels attachments to others are seen as themselves constitutive of the individual's full realization… [and] we therefore see the waning of the kind of plot that pits the autonomous individual against a monolithic society'.[539] Instead, she writes, 'we get pairs, families, and ensemble casts characterized by pronounced intimacy'. Emotional connections to others are therefore framed not as community-building acts in these neoliberal fictions, but instead as a way of developing the always isolated self. Just as one can feel lonely in a crowd, so too can one feel lonely in spite of numerous 'connections'.

Ralph Clare, however, frames Lerner's description of community in the present moment as an act of resistance to neoliberalism's perpetual deferral of revolution. He points out that '*10:04* shares an intellectual lineage with what has been called messianic Marxism… in which the moment of emancipation, redemption, or revolution is to be grasped in the here-and-now' and which 'involves paying attention to the actual immediate present, not the possible techno-future or entrepreneurial society imagined by neoliberalism, [in order] to discover the emergent potential for change'.[540] Lerner himself implicitly supports such a reading of his text when he says that there is:

> a sense in which community is already here. It's already here in the Marfa lights and the circuits of global capital (that moves a baby octopus from Portuguese waters to a Chelsea restaurant) and even if those are deeply perverted forms of interconnectedness they nevertheless have a utopian glimmer.[541]

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[537] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, pp. 40; 41-2.
[538] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 6.
[539] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, pp. 40-1.
[540] Ralph Clare, 'Freedom and Formlessness: Ben Lerner's 10:04 and the Affective Historical Present', *Open Library of Humanities*, 4.2 (2018), 19.
[541] Lin, 'An Interview with Ben Lerner'.

If *10:04* posits that there are, admittedly perverted, forms of interconnectedness in the present, then *The Topeka School* is perhaps Lerner's most overt attempt to both identify and open up more channels for less perverted forms to exist in contemporary society. As outlined already, it achieves this formally through the inclusion of other perspectives (even while acknowledging the impossibility of achieving this fully) and through a thematic interest in collective politics. This thematic interest, however, has come under fire from critics for embodying the gestural politics of contemporary society. Notably, Jon Baskin has claimed that the shift in tone from Adam's attitude in *LTAS* to that of *The Topeka School* is 'supposed to be representative of Lerner's generation's stutter-step toward political participation', but that the demographic scope of the novel is so limited that 'it is not at all evident how the story of Adam and his über-progressive parents… is emblematic of anything besides the trajectory of a neurotic and status-conscious literary liberal'.[542] Not only this, but he criticises its reliance on gestural politics, claiming that 'there is a lot of talk about politics in *Topeka School*, just as there is a lot of talk about art in *Atocha*: in neither case, though, is it clear what hinges on the choice of language game'. This last point is one taken up in greater detail by Davis Smith-Brecheisen, who claims that 'the politics of the spread—of experience—is also, paradoxically, the political horizon of the novel, whose liberalism hinges on gestural demonstration at ICE offices in New York'.[543] Ascribing to the series of novels a progressive narrative arc of political awakening, he argues, 'depends on seeing Adam's hesitating politics as a triumph' rather than what Jon Baskin called a 'stutter-step toward political participation'. Smith-Brecheisen's other issue with *The Topeka School* is in the critical approach to it as a novel, pointing out that while 'critics differ about whether or not Lerner's novels are aesthetically and politically successful, they agree that "aesthetic experience" and the "emotions inspired" by *The Topeka School* are constitutive of its politics'. He likewise criticises the ending, which 'produces a political finale that roughly 80 million Biden supporters would find attractive', constituting 'a way of deepening its appeal to the reader, of selling its liberal readers their politics back to them in the form of a redemptive political arc'. While Smith-Brecheisen makes some astute observations about the gestural politics of the novel's plot trajectory and its so-called redemption narrative, I would not dismiss out of hand this idea of appealing to readers, which I would contend does itself constitute a political and not merely aesthetic goal of the novel. As Jacqueline O'Dell noted of the reception to *10:04*, critics such as Tom Evans lauded the novel as 'revolutionary' while others such as Jon Baskin dismissed it as a 'novel of detachment'. She rightly points out that:

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[542] Baskin, 'On the Hatred of Literature'.

[543] Davis Smith-Brecheisen, 'Ben Lerner's Theater of Dissent', *Nonsite.Org*, 2021 <https://nonsite.org/ben-lerners-theater-of-dissent/> [accessed 23 March 2021].

These contrasting assessments speak not only to the undecidable quality at new sincerity's core—is the novel able to build community or isolate readers, for example —but also to the diegetic levels on which such conclusions are contingent. On the one hand, Baskin argues that the protagonist (who, admittedly, is little more than a version of the author) is alienated from other characters, while Evans identifies a sincere connection between text and reader.[544]

It should be clear by this point in my thesis that I am primarily concerned with the latter diegetic level, which is why I find Smith-Brecheisen's point ultimately short-sighted. My own point is not ultimately to do with whether Lerner's novel has the political efficacy to dismantle structures such as ICE, but rather whether it achieves something in terms of making his readers feel less alone, and fostering this sense of connection does appear to achieve that. Moreover, Smith-Brecheisen's assessment overlooks forms of the political which might be less overtly concerned with the pragmatics of governmental legislature. Lauren Berlant, for instance, has claimed that 'reinforcing intimate binding' might constitute 'the main function of avant-garde counternormative political work', and that 'preaching to the choir is always undervalued… as a world-confirming strategy of address that performs solidarity and asserts righteousness, [which] is absolutely necessary to do'.[545]

Instead of viewing Lerner's work as politically quietist, therefore, we should consider whether one aim of politically charged art might not be to foster a sense of community, in which 'one "does politics" to be in the political with others, in a becoming-democratic that involves sentience, focus, and a comic sense of the pleasure of coming together once again' and in which 'achieving and succeeding are not the measures for assessing whether the desire for the political was ridiculous: a kind of affective consonance is'.[546] This 'affective consonance', Berlant tells us, is best fostered by the creation of an 'intimate public', where 'collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or at least some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together'.[547] I want to posit that Lerner's texts, and perhaps especially *The Topeka School* which preaches so overtly to the choir, establish just such an intimate public, in which readers feel themselves to be recognised, both by Lerner himself and by his fellow readers, and that this might in fact constitute political work in the contemporary novel.

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[544] O'Dell, 'One More Time with Feeling', fn. 11.
[545] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 238.
[546] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 260.
[547] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 226.

Of course, the idea of finding political efficacy (as it relates to citizens) in the text's supposed lack of political efficacy (as it relates to governmental rule) may seem, as one commentator deemed Lerner's works, 'tricksy'.[548] However, it might also be understood as the natural extension of a dialectical mode of enquiry that Theodor Martin argues Lerner first adopted in *10:04*, a work he called 'a thoroughly contradictory novel: a novel *about* contradiction that also makes contradiction the structuring secret of its narrative form'.[549] He points out that 'the content of [*10:04*] is… nothing but contradiction: between the political and the personal; between radicalism and liberalism; between the unrealized desire for collectivity and the incurable pathology of self-obsession', and that 'every moment of political epiphany in the novel… [devolves] into contradiction and self-negation'.[550] Crucially, Martin focuses specifically on what this tension reflects about Lerner's ideas about collectivity:

> There is… clearly a parallel between the damaged form of the novel and the 'bad' or damaged 'forms of collectivity' (108) that the narrator must constantly settle for—forms that inevitably collapse into their opposite: individual self-obsession, reproductive futurity, coupled domesticity. The novel that both is and isn't damaged (that subsumes its own damage) spirals out into the co-op that both is and isn't 'morally trivial'; the cuts to the *New Yorker* story that both are and aren't unacceptable; the 'bad forms of collectivity' that both are and aren't collective. This series of *both/and*'s shows how the novel is structured by contradiction: the contradiction between the commitments Lerner's narrator *wants* to have (to the collective) and the commitments he *does* have (to himself).[551]

What is particularly notable about these contradictions, which abound in the novel, is that they often serve not as a brick wall that confounds logic but as a catalyst for transcending an ostensibly impossible paradox. As an example, consider the doctor's assurance that a different heart reading to an earlier measurement in fact signified no change, something which prompts Ben to claim he is 'relieved he had said there'd been no change, scared because the numbers expressed one'.[552] This contradiction is resolved only by one's acceptance of the fact that life itself is founded on contradictions and that if one accepts this then there is ultimately more to be gained than lost. In this sense, Lerner's text performs something not unlike what I termed the horoscope paradox in Wallace's work. In *The Topeka School,* Lerner even goes so far as frame this contradiction in explicitly palliative terms, noting that 'through a fake stethoscope, you can still hear a real pulse; through her

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[548] Gibbs, '10:04 by Ben Lerner, Book Review'.
[549] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.
[550] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.
[551] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.
[552] Lerner, *10:04*, p. 207.

fake doctoring, Sonia provided some real comforts'.[553] As with Wallace's horoscope paradox, this is analogous to the act of reading for Lerner – if one chooses to accept that his works might offer community then they can; if one cannot, then they will do nothing to alleviate one's loneliness.

Lerner himself seems all too aware of the role of contradiction in his works, and the close tie between this and a perceived lack of political efficacy. He claims that 'good novels don't resolve contradictions... [but] can sharpen and exacerbate and make felt [those] contradictions'.[554] He acknowledges that this is 'not an efficient political practice… [but] novels provide a class history, or dramatize a disconnect between the individual and the social, [and] that can have a critical function'. Again, Theodor Martin offers a useful summary on how this critical function might work, and what its value might be. He points out that:

> While the political dilemma of *10:04* is how to reconcile two opposing beliefs (are co-ops morally trivial or aren't they? is family a model of collectivity or a retreat from it?), the book's aesthetic dilemma is how to distinguish two seemingly identical forms: the compromised story from the subsumed one, damaged art from redeemed art. But where contradiction is clearly a problem for the narrator's compromised politics, it ultimately turns out to be a solution to the novel's damaged aesthetic. That's because the problem of indistinguishability is simply what contradiction looks like after it's been resolved… [and] these paradoxes only make sense once we see contradiction itself as a formal strategy for resolving contradiction.[555]

Of course, this approach inevitably risks readers not being able to distinguish the two readings of Lerner's novels. In Martin's argument this is the difference between 'a revolutionary novel (Ashton's *10:04*) and a reactionary one ([his] *10:04*)', and in my argument is the difference between an ineffectual and inescapably solipsistic novel (Baskin's and Smith-Brecheisen's reading of *The Topeka School*) and a novel which succeeds in making readers aware of their place in a collective network (my reading of *The Topeka School*).[556] In both cases, though, Martin is right about the potential reward, which is that 'it teaches us to see indistinguishability itself as the product of a deeper antagonism' and a reminder that 'under capitalism, there is nothing besides contradiction'.[557] This realisation allows Martin's reading – which is more critical of the novel's success than Ashton's – to still concede that its 'commitment to contradiction [is] an unsuccessful

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[553] Lerner, *The Topeka School*, p. 219.
[554] Lerner and Rooney, 'Theaters of Speech'.
[555] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.
[556] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.
[557] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.

but not necessarily unhopeful way of figuring the distance between the ambivalence it can't escape and the revolutionary politics it sincerely wants but most definitely does not have'.[558]

Finally, it could be argued that this desire for intimacy and connectivity is entirely aligned with what Rachel Greenwald Smith has called the 'affective hypothesis', whereby literature is viewed as being 'at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience'.[559] While neoliberalism therefore 'imagines the individual as an entrepreneur; the affective hypothesis imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return' and the act of 'feelings frequently become yet another material foundation for market-oriented behavior: emotions are acquired, invested, traded, and speculated upon'.[560] This contradiction between Lerner's works, which portray so intimately the loneliness of the alienated neoliberal subject, and the way that his books might be read as part of a neoliberal project that monetises the affective urge for togetherness seems like yet another unavoidable contradiction, but as O'Dell has already argued about Lerner's relationship to the New Sincerity, it might perhaps be through Lerner's frank acknowledgment of this that he redeems himself. Just as he distanced himself from the New Sincerity by laying bare his entanglement in the web of late capitalist structures, we might argue that he distances himself from the affective hypothesis by demonstrating his awareness of literature's potential lack of real-world political efficacy, while at the same time choosing to use literature as a vehicle for political mobilisation – in one form or another – regardless of this fact. Just as he made a 'kind of peace' with Whitman's desire to illustrate the universal through the particular, the good reader of Lerner is perhaps the one who acknowledges and finds productive the contradictions his work embodies, rather than fixating on them as points that negate its real-world political efficacy.

I began this chapter by stating that I hoped to illustrate that Lerner's autofictional trilogy is a work that constantly reinterrogates its own attitude towards loneliness, and I want to close by tracing some of the developments in his thinking as the trilogy progresses. In *LTAS*, Lerner implicitly criticises the idealised image of lonely men carrying out creative practices and demonstrates the political dangers involved in living a solipsistic life. At the close of that novel, he alludes to the importance of surrounding oneself with other people, a point that will then be further demonstrated in his two later novels. In *10:04*, Lerner again criticises the image of isolated men undertaking creative work, but also, crucially, shifts his thematic focus towards moments of collective action, meditating on various forms of collectivity (represented by food co-ops, the Occupy movement, and

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[558] Martin, 'The Dialectics of Damage'.

[559] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 1.

[560] Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, pp. 2, 6.

a united city preparing for environmental disaster). Although his narrator is still arguably detached from many of these systems, the novel formally suggests their importance, most clearly through its interrogation of poetic address. Finally, in *The Topeka School*, Lerner makes explicit many of the hitherto implicit points about the importance of collective action, drawing our attention to this both thematically and formally (again through his use of address but also through his use of narrative voice, which is used to show the emotional labour of empathising with others). Considered as a serial work of autofiction, the novels suggest that loneliness should not be romanticised, and stress that moments of togetherness (whether looking at art alongside another person or getting involved with political action) are absolutely crucial in resisting this. While they do not profess to solve political issues in the novel form, they perfectly illustrate Madeleine Watts' claim that 'an autofictional response to structural inequality, ecological crisis and political turmoil might be, in fact, a totally appropriate response', since it is 'the self, after all, that experiences all of these things at the same time'.[561] What Lerner's novels show, finally, is that an autofictional work might also constitute a space in which the self of the writer/protagonist can meet a reader, and that if a reader is willing to read 'generously', then it might also offer a place in which loneliness can be, at least temporarily, alleviated.

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[561] Madeleine Watts, 'On the Diaries of Helen Garner and the Quagmire of the Fictionalized Self', *Literary Hub*, 2020 <https://lithub.com/on-the-diaries-of-helen-garner-and-the-quagmire-of-the-fictionalized-self/> [accessed 20 July 2020].

Autofiction as Allofiction: Rachel Cusk and the Loneliness of the Domestic Sphere

While the first two chapters of this thesis focused on the work of male authors (who disproportionately dominate the landscape of American autofiction), this third chapter considers the work of Rachel Cusk, a British writer whose work closely examines the role of domestic structures in one's experiences of loneliness. Like Wallace and Lerner, Cusk has also found success writing in genres outside of autofiction but, unlike them, her most popular works were still explicitly autobiographical, taking the form of three memoirs (*A Life's Work, Aftermath,* and *The Last Supper*). This means that, for many of her readers, the establishing of an autofictional pact is undoubtedly inflected by the existence of an earlier autobiographical pact, something neither Wallace nor Lerner had to contend with. This means, too, that Cusk has had to contend with criticism of her work that is informed by problematic gendered assumptions, not only because of her decision to write about experiences that have historically been coded as feminine, but also for deciding to write memoirs at all, since memoir has 'long been identified as a women's genre'.[562] As Nancy K. Miller points out, it is 'difficult to think of a modern genre that has come in for the kind of rhetorical abuse that memoir seems to inspire', which has, as Miranda Purves notes, often resulted in criticism of Cusk's work that draws on 'weirdly sexist, retrograde adjectives', like calling it 'shrill'.[563] No wonder, then, that Cusk, who claims she 'internalise[d]' these criticisms, returned to the novel form after publishing her three memoirs, using autofiction as a new way to address 'exactly that school of thought, that air of response, that type of rejection'.[564]

The prevalence of derogatory language in criticism of Cusk's work stems not only from her decision to write memoirs, but also from her thematic interest in the domestic. As she herself points out, the mundane and the domestic was, for American – and largely male – writers 'the great subject of the 20th century'.[565] However, 'the American canon is indisputably male, [and] is saturated with the admission so absent from the works of the contemporary male English novelist: that men live in houses, in communities, that they live with women, that they father children, that they sleep and wake and love and loathe and suffer', whereas 'here in Britain, in literature as in life, the domestic

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[562] Leslie Satin and Judith Jerome, 'Introduction', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 10.1–2 (1999), p. 12.

[563] Nancy K. Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13.2.Fall 2000, p. 431; Miranda Purves, 'Rachel Cusk on Her New Novel, The Bradshaw Variations', *Elle*, 2010 <https://www.elle.com/pop-culture/reviews/book-release-a-life-s-work-on-becoming-a-mother-by-rachel-cusk> [accessed 14 September 2020].

[564] Purves, 'Rachel Cusk on Her New Novel, The Bradshaw Variations'.

[565] Rachel Cusk, 'The Outsider', *The Observer*, 20 August 2005, section Books <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/aug/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview2> [accessed 25 March 2020].

world is subjugated'. Where British writers do deign to write about the quotidian, she claims that 'we've invented a ribald category for them: lad- and chick-lit'. By addressing domesticity, therefore, Cusk's literature aims to work against exclusion on two levels. First, by destigmatising it as a topic in the landscape of British literary fiction. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, by attempting to illuminate the exclusion inherent in the domestic sphere itself, and in doing so to provide women with an opportunity to resist the loneliness of that position. Again and again in Cusk's work, she interrogates her own position as an outsider, and it is this perspective that makes her work such a rich exploration of varying types of loneliness, and ultimately what keeps readers coming back to her works. She often writes about exclusion: from the British publishing industry; from the communal (and, she would argue, dishonest) culture of motherhood; from a marriage. In each of these instances, Cusk offers her readers either the opportunity to find community in her words, or at the very least the assertion of what Denise Riley calls the 'right to be lonely'.[566]

In this chapter, I will begin by considering the intersection between gender and genre concerns in the reception of Cusk's work. In particular, I will examine the ways that literature about both loneliness and domestic experiences has historically been coded as feminine, and how these issues can be compounded by the use of the memoir form, which has, likewise, traditionally been viewed as a feminine form. I will then move on to consider the particular domestic experiences that Cusk addresses, which often trigger or significantly impact experiences of isolation and loneliness. The first of these is the loneliness of marriage, and the subsequent loneliness of divorce when the marital structure dissolves; the second is the loneliness of motherhood. One of the things that distinguishes Cusk's work from her peers is the way that she often frames the escape from these familial structures as belying another form of restriction; freedom is never easily obtained by walking away from a marriage, for instance. The chapter then moves on to consider how Cusk's work emphasises the agency of women, thinking particularly about her use of what she calls 'negative literature', which foregrounds the voices of characters other than Faye, the protagonist of the *Outline* trilogy.[567] By arguing that this constitutes an example of allofiction, and that Cusk's work aims to reframe silence as an active tool for women's agency, I will show that the ostensible silence of Faye should not be mistaken for passivity. Instead, Cusk's use of allofiction allows her to establish what Meg Jensen terms an 'aesthetic intimacy' with her reader, allowing them to position themselves as both protagonist and confidant.[568] In this way, she capitalises on the 'active readership' of autofiction, that is willing to perform the emotional labour that might appear to be

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[566] Denise Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13.1 (2002), p. 9.
[567] Rachel Cusk, *Kudos* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 182.
[568] Meg Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. By Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 67.

absent in the text itself.[569] The chapter ends by considering the ways that the texts evoke literary empathy, particularly through an emphasis on dialogue, and the ways that talking and writing might constitute a therapeutic act for both Cusk and her readers. Like Wallace and Lerner, Cusk repeatedly interrogates art's therapeutic potential, and while this often requires readers to wilfully suspend their disbelief, she ultimately sees this as a necessary step in making literature function reparatively.

Gender and Genre

As alluded to in the introduction, questions of form and genre have played a disproportionately large role in influencing the reception of Rachel Cusk's work. As Jenny Turner notes, until the *Outline* trilogy's publication, 'Cusk's biggest problem… [was] her very success. Because her early work looked a bit like chick lit and because she then moved on to write about being a mother, she attract[ed] lots of readers in search of something comfy who then [felt] cheated when they [didn't] get it'.[570] Similarly, Nicolas Boileau has noted that 'Rachel Cusk's first novels were published in the second part of the 1990s, at a time when British women's fiction was considered "parochial", "insular" and "piddling,"' and while 'at first reading, her texts may be unlikely to contradict the long-lasting view that women writers tend to write about women and for women', in fact they should have been celebrated, since 'her fiction is peppered with political, feminist views that use humour as a way of debunking the feminine ideal which is constructed in the text'.[571] Rather than viewing Cusk's early work as 'chick lit', therefore, it might be better to consider these texts as examples of what Cusk calls 'book[s] of repetition', which concern themselves with 'iterative female experience' and 'with what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity and motherhood and family life'.[572] As Clare Hanson writes, this language 'serves a rhetorical purpose in reminding us of what has been culturally disavowed, which is that the "work" of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding is inherently gendered, while the vast majority of childcare is carried out by women'.[573]

While her earliest fiction was often coded as women's fiction by way of marketing strategies, her more recent, autobiographical works, have often been considered feminine due to gendered

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[569] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 76.
[570] Jenny Turner, 'I Blame Christianity', *London Review of Books*, 4 December 2014 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n23/jenny-turner/i-blame-christianity> [accessed 25 March 2020].
[571] Nicolas Pierre Boileau, 'Not Feminine Enough? Rachel Cusk's Highly-Feminised World and Unfeminine Characters in Saving Agnes and The Country Life', *Anglistik : International Journal of English Studies*, Spring, 2013, p. 1.
[572] Rachel Cusk, 'Shakespeare's Sisters', in *Coventry* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 176.
[573] Clare Hanson, 'The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity', *E-Rea*, 10.2, 2013, p. 11.

assumptions about memoir as a genre.[574] Moreover, the negative press Cusk received following the publication of her memoirs speaks to a broader concern about women's literature and readers' desire to feel that they have the right to somebody's story. In one interview, Cusk claimed that 'there is always a danger, I think, when you write a memoir because then readers think they know you… [as] readers, we think we have the right to know things'.[575] This means that writers often receive contradictory feedback on their non-fiction work, being told that 'it's so terrible to make these things public', while also being chastised for having not 'told us enough! She hasn't given us the gory details'. In *Kudos*, Cusk parodies this by remarking of a male author – who seems curiously reminiscent of Karl Ove Knausgaard – that he is praised for being 'honest about his own life' in his books, before noting that 'of course if he were a woman… he would be scorned for his honesty, or at the very least no one would care'.[576] Rachel Sykes' point about the ways that what is taken for 'honesty' in the work of male authors is often deemed 'oversharing' in the work of female writers is sadly all too visible in such a paradox.[577] Also evident here is the drive of a literature market that demands writers disclose facts about themselves that will inevitably invite criticism from society. In no other genre is this paradox more heightened than in memoir, which perhaps partly explains Cusk's shift towards autofiction in recent years.

Moreover, Cusk's clever use of the paratextual elements that surround her autofictional books helps to avoid some of these issues. She has given, for instance, exceedingly contradictory comments over the degree to which she wants to invite an autobiographical reading, and in doing so, she manages to establish a protective distance between her literary persona and her real self. In one interview, for instance, she claimed that the *Outline* trilogy generated the assumption that Faye was based upon Cusk more than any of her other works. Reflecting on this, Cusk claimed that she 'really wanted them to look like that. So I sort of don't mind. You know, I didn't want the reader to feel... that these books were being sort of made up by someone, that there was any sort of pretending going on. So, I sort of count that as a success'.[578] In an interview conducted just a few months earlier however, in answer to a question about why the books feature sons instead of daughters, as Cusk herself actually has, she said that she 'didn't want it to be mistaken for autobiography… it's a novel so I just did that to… try and, I suppose, interfere as little as possible

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[574] It is perhaps interesting to note, also, that these marketing strategies have been updated since the *Outline* trilogy's publication. Faber and Faber have now reissued most of Cusk's early fiction with covers that contradict a 'chick lit' reading much more directly than their first editions did.

[575] CCCB, *Rachel Cusk. Autopsy of a Marriage*, online video recording, YouTube, 30 May 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9o7QJ-OzFeg> [accessed 24 November 2020], 19:18.

[576] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 146-7.

[577] Rachel Sykes, '"Who Gets to Speak and Why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43.1 (2017), p. 162.

[578] CCCB, *Rachel Cusk. Autopsy of a Marriage*, 21:47.

with the reader in terms of who they thought I was and how much they were likely to think that Faye was me'.[579] The desire to simultaneously encourage and discourage a reading that seeks a correlation between Cusk and Faye might reflect Cusk's tentative desire to seek a communion with her readers. This desire, however, has been unavoidably tempered by the negative press that met her earlier memoirs, hence her oscillation between the two stances.

All of which perhaps begs the question of why Cusk ever chose memoir as a form in the first place - knowing as she surely did that it was a genre fraught with gendered issues. First, and of central importance, is the way in which the genre, like autofiction, sits at the interface of the private and the public, which is of great concern for Cusk not only as a writer, but specifically as a writer of feminist texts. This also, of course, makes it a perfect vehicle for exploring loneliness, which is so often concerned with one's public and private relationships. Secondly, it allows her to draw attention not only to her given topic – divorce, or motherhood, for instance – but to the act of writing as a *response* to that experience. As Nicolas Boileau has pointed out, 'even if Cusk uses her own life as the conscious material of her text in *A Life's Work*, she is not concerned with the morally and socially acceptable reactions she should promote, but with the literary innovations that she is forced to devise in order to counter the impossibility of conveying that which she is seeking to express'.[580] He points to her introduction to *A Life's Work* as evidence of this fact, where Cusk writes that 'the values of literature and the values of life are to the novelist what the chisel and the block of stone are to the sculptor'.[581] This image, Boileau claims, 'emphasizes... the process of creation' as the central act of her text, in much the same way as her decision to make the protagonist of the *Outline* trilogy a writer does.[582]

Moreover, Cusk has claimed that her decision to write a memoir as opposed to fiction is usually informed by the realisation that her topic is 'things that are deeply... individual female experiences. There's no general truth about them. They're not shared, they're experiences in which your aloneness is paramount'.[583] This is not to say that women cannot then go through a process of identification when they read these works, but that the initial conception of them does not stem from the desire to write a collective experience. Instead, the gathering of collective experience occurs in the act of creation and its reception: a process which Nancy K. Miller argues is integral to

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[579] London Review Bookshop, *Rachel Cusk and Chris Power: Coventry*, online video recording, YouTube, 16 January 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC3w2tkVKUU> [accessed 26 November 2020], 50:50.
[580] Nicolas Pierre Boileau, 'A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography', *E-Rea*, 10.2, 2013, p. 2.
[581] Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 1.
[582] Boileau, 'A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography', p. 3.
[583] CCCB, *Rachel Cusk. Autopsy of a Marriage*, 24:39.

the very form of memoir. As she notes, 'in postmodern culture the writing autobiographical subject—female or male—always requires a partner in crime' and it is therefore better to frame the writing of memoir not as the making of an autobiography but instead as the performing of 'an autobiographical act'.[584] This is reflected in Cusk's desire for readers to find 'companionship', when she writes that 'however solitary, memoir reading, like memoir writing, participates in an important form of collective memorialization', which is 'the record of an experience in search of a community'.[585] Contrary to the conventional portrayal of memoir as solipsistic navel-gazing, therefore, critical readers would do well to remember that 'the purely personal is not the stuff of the memoir but its enemy', but that this is dependent on understanding memoir as an autobiographical act between two people.[586] Only when we understand it as such, will it offer a form that might have an impact on readers' and writers' loneliness.

Many of these ideas are echoed in the supposed benefits of autofiction as a mode that this thesis has already recounted. Christian Lorentzen, for instance, argues that autofiction as a term 'refers to the way the self is made but also to the way the book itself is made', and that 'these books have captured our attention and held it not for the lives they expose but for the novel ways in which they're put together'.[587] Likewise, Catherine Cusset's writings on autofiction focus heavily on its ability to take a personal experience and translate it into a universal truth. Truth, in this context, she says, is the 'capacity to go back inside an emotion, to erase anything anecdotic that wouldn't be part of that emotion and would water it down, in order to offer it to the reader in a bare form… so that he can claim it as his own'.[588] In doing so, Cusset claims - in a stark echo of Nancy Miller's arguments about memoir - that in reality, and perhaps paradoxically, 'the "I" of the autofiction writer [becomes] anything but egocentric'.[589] As an allegory for the way this functions in Cusk's writing, let us consider the images of glass and transparency in *Transit.* In one of the longest meditations on this, there is a description of a home with floor-to-ceiling windows that Pavel, Faye's builder, has built for his family in the woods. Upon seeing this house, Pavel is ridiculed by his father for forgetting to build the walls, telling everyone in the local town that they can 'watch Pavel shitting' in his own house.[590] In Melinda Harvey's review, she puts forward the idea that this might reflect the fact that

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584 Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', pp. 422-3.
585 Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', pp. 424, 432.
586 Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', p. 431.
587 Christian Lorentzen, 'Tell Me Everything', *Bookforum*, Summer 2019 <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2602/fiction-in-the-age-of-radical-transparency-21977> [accessed 18 December 2019].
588 Catherine Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction' (presented at the Autofiction: Literature in France Today, New York University, 2012).
589 Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction'.
590 Rachel Cusk, *Transit* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 182.

'when Cusk was writing memoir she was shitting behind glass', whereas 'in the *Outline* trilogy she has built some walls'.[591] While I agree that there are new boundaries established in her autofiction that do not perhaps exist in her memoir, I would argue that the motif reflects more than simply Cusk's desire to keep readers out (as the image of the walls might suggest). First of all, it is important to note that Pavel's house is – in the eye of its creator – beautiful. The story is perhaps best read as a vengeful allegory about misinterpretation by audiences who do not appreciate the aesthetic parameters of what they are commenting on. Pavel's father disdains the house since he does not understand the cultural references that guided Pavel's construction, perhaps reflecting the way that Cusk's memoirs were misinterpreted by those who came to them expecting something closer to the chick-lit books the covers suggested lay inside. In turning to autofiction, however, Cusk still wants to invite readers in, or she would have left out the personal details altogether; instead of walls, then, she has perhaps simply made the glass translucent.

If *Transit* begins to offer a metacommentary on Cusk's turn towards autofiction, this is taken further in *Kudos.* In that novel, a television presenter with whom Faye strikes up a conversation, claims that for women artists, 'there are as yet only two roles… that of model and that of artist and the alternative… is to disappear into some belief or philosophy and find a shelter that way'.[592] In the *Outline* trilogy, Cusk appears to have had her cake and begun to eat it too: she has become both artist, model, and in the process managed to 'disappear' to a degree that other autofiction writers have not. She achieves this, firstly, by using a protagonist named 'Faye' rather than 'Rachel', but also, more importantly, by deciding to foreground the narratives of characters other than Faye herself. In doing so, Cusk's work resists the typical critical description of autofiction as a genre. Christian Lorentzen has argued, for instance, that for writers of autofiction, 'their job has ceased to be distinguished from self-promotion', a point he justifies with reference to the fact that 'Knausgaard's face started appearing on his books, something that usually happens to novelists only after they die'.[593] Cusk, on the other hand, bucks this trend 'by making her trilogy about everything but herself'.

Cusk's decision to use a name other than her own allows her to capitalise on what Lorna Martens has argued is an advantage of autofiction, which is that because 'the author or narrator is ostensibly not talking about him or herself… [a] possible advantage has to do with taking or asserting

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[591] Melinda Harvey, 'Verisimilitude', *Sydney Review of Books*, 10 March 2020 <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/cusk-outline-trilogy-coventry/> [accessed 30 September 2020].

[592] Cusk, *Kudos*, p. 197.

[593] Lorentzen, 'Tell Me Everything'.

internal distance from one's former self'.[594] We might see this attitude embodied in Cusk's statement that while she has 'gone into some fairly sort of self-exposing territory writing about things that to me have to be owned personally like motherhood… this time I thought actually it would be interesting to tell your tale through others and via others'.[595] Moreover, it perhaps dovetails with Celia Hunt's idea that 'looking at [autofiction] from the perspective of writers in the process of writing reveals it to be a cognitive– emotional tool', from which they 'derive therapeutic benefit'.[596] Cusk might therefore use Faye as a way to suggest an implied author figure which distances itself from the figures established in her other, nonfiction, texts. More importantly, this might then offer her a therapeutic way to cope with the exposure that accompanied those texts, and which became such an isolating experience for her. Just as Wallace tried to distance himself from the persona that readers imagined when reading his non-fiction, Cusk adopts what Celia Hunt calls a 'reflexive authorial stance…[which] involves creating an internal space, distancing oneself from oneself, as it were, so that one is both inside and outside of oneself simultaneously'.[597] Overall, therefore, the removal of onomastic correspondence both resists the tendency to read all women's texts as representative of their own autobiographies, while also functioning as a get-out clause for Cusk to write about her own experiences without the subsequent vilification that accompanied the publishing of several of her memoirs.

Moreover, if it is true that Cusk's work is about everything but herself, then we might see the drive to use it as a much more outwardly reaching act, that attempts to draw the reader in to the experience of artistic creation and emotional expression, thereby offering them an escape from their isolation and loneliness. As Renée Larrier has written, autofiction is a mode which allows for 'the possibility of multiple subjectivities and positionalities' that cannot be expressed in autobiography, and that this allows authors to 'position the I as a witness and/or performer'.[598] Crucial to this dissolving of authorial power is Cusk's awareness of the way in which autofiction also functions differently to memoir in its requirement for the reader to take on an active role. Responding in an interview to a question about why she chose to write memoirs, Cusk once remarked that she considered it 'morally a really sort of excellent form in that it doesn't require the reader to do

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[594] Lorna Martens, 'Autofiction in the Third Person, with a Reading of Christine Brooke-Rose's Remake', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 50.

[595] Beyond Borders Scotland, *Beyond Borders - Rachel Cusk Outline - BBIF 2015*, online video recording, YouTube, 3 September 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yyU4ZPTur0> [accessed 10 February 2021], 9:35.

[596] Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 179.

[597] Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development', pp. 185-6.

[598] Renée Brenda Larrier, *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), pp. 124-5; 148.

anything, to suspend disbelief or to sort of enter a state of... imaginative sort of coercion'.[599] Autofiction, however, functions in entirely the opposite manner, by the willed suspension of disbelief which requires a reader's active participation.[600] In an essay on the suspension of disbelief, Cusk wrote that 'it's never been altogether clear to me whether our disbelief is something that ought to be suspended for us, or whether we're expected deliberately to suspend it ourselves. There's an idea that a successful narrative is one that gives you no choice in the matter; but *mostly I imagine it's a question of both sides conspiring to keep the suspension aloft*' (emphasis mine).[601] As Melinda Harvey notes, this lines up with Coleridge's original conception of the idea, which - it is often overlooked - 'did contend that the suspension of disbelief should be "willing"... fiction doesn't trick us into believing anything; rather we elect to engage with something as if it were real' and that in doing so 'there's something to be gained and nothing to be lost'.[602] Like Wallace with his horoscope paradox and Lerner with his meditations on worlds in which 'everything will be as it is now, just a little different', Cusk realises that the willing suspension of disbelief is a necessary component of reparative reading.[603] This is because suspending one's disbelief necessitates moving away from a paranoid position, forgoing suspicious reading in favour of a reading in which we attend to the ways that people might 'succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture'.[604] Indeed, Rita Felski says that postcritical reading demands that we pay specific attention to processes such as suspending our disbelief. She suggests that we '[turn] to novels that represent and think through processes of readerly recognition, analyzing how formal devices encourage or attenuate such processes', a fitting description of what Cusk performs here.[605] She dramatises and thereby 'thinks through' her readers' process of recognition, modelling the postcritical disposition in the hopes of encouraging it in the process. Cusk gives her readers regular reminders of the importance of this: as Harvey notes for instance, at the outset of the trilogy, Faye tells her neighbour on the plane that she does not entirely believe the narrative he relays about his wife. In spite of this, Faye continues to engage with the neighbour and indeed he is the character who reappears most often in that first book. Faye functions, therefore, not only as a model for Cusk the writer, but also as the model reader, willing to suspend their disbelief for the greater gift of sharing experiences. Faye realises, as any good reader of autofiction does, that autofiction behoves us to 'ask the right

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[599] London Review Bookshop, *Rachel Cusk and Chris Power: Coventry*, 1:50.

[600] See: Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Literary Empathy, and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 76.

[601] Rachel Cusk, 'Coventry', in *Coventry* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 28.

[602] Harvey, 'Verisimilitude'.

[603] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. i.

[604] See: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 151.

[605] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 32.

questions[:] "Did this happen?" won't lead us very far, while "why does he say that it does?" might'.[606] We might note that this mirrors the reparative impulse - to move away from suspicious reading, which Sedgwick reminds us is defined by asking whether 'a particular piece of knowledge [is] true', towards questioning what knowledge *does*, questioning how knowledge is itself performative.[607] In these ways, autofiction thereby provides Cusk with a vehicle to resist loneliness, by establishing the sense of intimacy and collaboration with her readers that was absent from her earlier work.

Structural Breakdowns: Marriage and Divorce

The loneliness that Cusk writes about, and attempts to assuage, is often that which results from the societal constraints surrounding marriage or parenthood. The escape from, or dissolution of, these structures (through, say, divorce) often leaves her characters alone and disoriented, but this is usually shown to be a necessary step in obtaining one's freedom. The first structural breakdown that I want to examine closely in this chapter is that of marriage, which features heavily in Cusk's fiction, but perhaps most prominently in *Aftermath*, the account of her divorce published in 2012. In that work, she writes about the ways that her marriage failed to live up to her ideals of what qualified as equality. She writes that:

> I earned the money in our household, did my share of the cooking and cleaning, paid someone to look after the children while I worked, picked them up from school once they were older. And my husband helped. It was his phrase, and still is: he helped me. I was the compartmentalized modern woman, the woman having it all, and he helped me to be it, to have it. But I didn't want help: I wanted equality. In fact, this idea of help began to annoy me. Why couldn't we be the same? Why couldn't he be compartmentalized too?[608]

What is striking here is the insistence not that they both be free, but that her husband be as 'compartmentalized' as she was. Equality is not utopian here, and freedom for the wife seems to be dependent upon a dividing of the spheres of one's life. What is also of note is the importance of naming, since much of the anger behind this passage lies in the frustration that her husband

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[606] Sarah Foust Vinson, 'Lives in Story: Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 150.

[607] Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', p. 124.

[608] Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 22.

considers his role to be 'helping', which Cusk feels does not sufficiently connote the ideal of equal and shared support. These differences in the experience and perception of marriage are absolutely crucial to how Cusk believes women become estranged from the marital unit, and will be recurring problems for the female characters throughout her work.

Moreover, this realisation in *Aftermath* is only one of the many epiphanies in Cusk's work that serves to undermine the mainstream narrative of what constitutes an equal marriage. In *Outline*, she writes that 'marriage is a system of belief, a story', emphasising its fragility, and the need for both parties to suspend their disbelief to keep it alive.[609] If marriage is shown to only be a system of belief, however, the question remains of quite what to believe in when your faith in marriage falters. In *Aftermath*, Cusk considers this question with reference to her widowed grandmother, about whom she had imagined that 'she must be relieved to be alone, after all those years. Though I had loved my grandfather I saw it as a disencumbrance, a liberation, like taking off shoes that hurt. Marriage appeared to me as a holding-in, a corseting, and it seemed to my eyes that the force of constraint was male; that it was men who imposed this structure, marriage'.[610] On realising in fact that her grandmother was deeply upset about losing her husband, and more specifically about the prospect of being left alone, Cusk decides that it must be because, historically, 'men provided shelter, and money'. However, this cold and objective analysis of her grandmother's situation does little to explain the fear that overcomes modern women who, like Cusk, can provide 'shelter and money' for themselves. There are perhaps two key explanations here: the first is that, as Denise Riley notes, even in the more progressive world of contemporary society, 'the financial respectability of a joint household is opposed to the assumption of transient entanglements for the single mother and her lesser capacity to earn'; the second is more existential, which is the question of what happens when women feel that not only that their financial stability is inextricably bound up in a marriage but also their actual sense of identity.[611]

Outline in particular is full of characters feeling that they have lost their identity once they are separated from their partner. The first of these images comes at the beginning of the text, and is narrated not by a woman at all, but by Faye's male neighbour on the plane. It seems important, however, that before we learn about his loss of identity, he describes his childhood growing up in the matriarchal society of a small Greek island, where 'his hair was kept in long ringlets; he was clothed in dresses and called by the girl's name his parents had chosen in expectation of being given

[609] Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 12.
[610] Cusk, *Aftermath*, pp. 68-9.
[611] Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', p. 8.

at long last an heir'.[612] Thus, before the man can describe his own disorientation after divorce, he must first be established as a character who can empathise with female experiences. He goes on to claim that in a phone call with his ex-wife, he felt that 'she could not be called upon to recognise him, and this was the most bewildering thing of all, for it made him feel absolutely unreal. It was with her, after all, that his identity had been forged: if she no longer recognised him, then who was he?'.[613] This image is later reimagined by a female character, who complains that 'she had become, through [her ex-husband], someone else. In a sense he had created her, and when she phoned him… she was, she supposed, referring herself back to him as his creation'.[614] These are undoubtedly images of loneliness, which Karen Rook points out arises when we feel 'estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others'.[615] That both the examples involve the character phoning their former partner serves to heighten this estrangement, mediating the communication in such a way as to further emphasise the disconnect.

It should be noted, however, that there are also characters in the later books for whom divorce does not seem as destabilising and life altering an experience. In *Kudos* for instance, one woman declares that she has 'met people who have freed themselves from their family relationships. Yet there often seems to be a kind of emptiness in that freedom, as though in order to dispense with their relatives they have had to dispense with a part of themselves', something she is adamant that she does not intend to do, and will not in fact be forced to. The character in question here is a woman who considers leaving her husband to explore the 'pleasures and freedoms' that might 'lie outside the circumscribed world of my marriage'.[616] This image of escaping marriage to unfettered freedom however, is tempered by a desire to 'win the game once and for all; to show a woman like my sister that it was possible to gain freedom and self-knowledge without having to smash up the whole world in public in the process'. It is important that the audience for this feat is another woman (her sister) since it demonstrates that the supposed freedom of divorce often belies another form of constriction – namely, that other women might accuse you of needless, and needlessly public, destruction – as was the case with Cusk's own entry into the public discourse of divorce with the publication of *Aftermath*. Cusk is careful, therefore, to show that the escape from a marriage does not guarantee immediate freedom from the husband, and to believe that it does

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[612] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 9.

[613] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 23.

[614] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 237.

[615] Karen S. Rook, 'Promoting Social Bonding: Strategies for Helping the Lonely and Socially Isolated', *American Psychologist*, 39.12 (1984), p. 1389.

[616] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 76-7.

leaves one open to the criticisms of other women for publicly destroying institutions held precious. *Aftermath* addresses this by reconciling itself to a kind of stoic belief that:

> darkness and disorganization were not mere negation, mere absence. They were both aftermath and prelude… Civilization, order, meaning, belief: these were not sunlit peaks to be reached by a steady climb. They were built and then they fell, were built and fell again or were destroyed… In the life of compartments lies the possibility of unity, just as unity contains the prospect of atomization. Better… to live the compartmentalized, disorganized life and feel the dark stirrings of creativity than to dwell in civilized unity, racked by the impulse to destroy.[617]

In this way, *Aftermath* refuses to – perhaps insists that it is impossible to – frame the leaving of marriage as an experience of pure freedom. Instead, there is always the possibility of disunity lurking behind the veneer of unity, and knowing this, it purports that one should continue to live a life that accepts this. This passage also, crucially, echoes the earlier quotation from *Aftermath* in which Cusk lamented that her husband was not 'compartmentalized', as she herself was. Here, such a compartmentalization is reframed as a necessary disunity since it functions as Cusk's source of creativity, thereby transforming a disempowering impulse into an empowering one.

The way that this lack of unity manifests itself after marriage is portrayed particularly hauntingly in *Aftermath*, where Cusk writes that 'there is at first a consumptive glamour to suffering'.[618] Gradually, however, Cusk says that after her divorce she became 'conscious of a vast cold, a silence, advancing across it like a shadow', and we learn that the consumptive glamour of suffering suddenly makes the supposed health of marriage seem 'as inaccessible as a locked house to which the keys have been mislaid'. This image of exclusion is rife in Cusk's discussions of marriage, and it seems to be the central explanation for her feeling of loneliness. In *Outline*, for instance, Faye observes a family on a boat adjacent to hers while she is out at sea, writing that 'when I looked at the family on the boat, I saw a vision of what I no longer had: I saw something, in other words, that wasn't there. Those people were living in their moment, and though I could see it I could no more return to that moment than I could walk across the water that separated us'.[619] Likewise, in *Aftermath,* we can see this narrated explicitly from Cusk's own perspective – she writes that as 'an outcast from marriage, I look at other marriages with a different eye. Silently I congratulate the couples I pass in the street, while at the same time wondering why they are together and I am

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[617] Cusk, *Aftermath*, p. 5.
[618] Cusk, *Aftermath*, pp. 65-6.
[619] Cusk, *Outline,* pp. 74-5.

alone', and that she looks 'around at my family as though through a million-splintered pane of glass. The world on my side of the glass is as white and cold and silent as an Arctic plain'.[620] These images exemplify the exclusion that Denise Riley proposes defines women's relation to the modern family. Examining the role of marriage in Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Riley reflects on the:

> affective topography of being excluded: you are where I myself would prefer to be: that is what I would like to have. 'So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball' (Woolf 114)… perhaps just such a 'looking on' might constitute more or less everyone's relation to the family, irrespective of whether they actually inhabit one.[621]

This 'affective topography' is displayed all across Cusk's works, and what is particularly interesting is the shared image of being behind glass that both she and Riley use to describe it. Riley writes that in the 1990s, the arrival of the term 'single parent family' in social discourse allowed her to 'detach [herself] from pressing [her] nose flat against the glass of the familial shop window and be ushered inside, tolerated now as nothing more noxious than a variation on a norm'.[622] This image of being behind glass has long been associated with expressions of loneliness, as Olivia Laing also notes in her analysis of Edward Hopper's work. There, Laing writes that this stems from the fact that 'one of the central experiences of being lonely [is] the way a feeling of separation, of being walled or penned in, combines with a sense of near-unbearable exposure'.[623] Loneliness is, in this instance, defined by both the idea of being seen and yet not meaningfully communicated with, as well as the act of seeing others and being unable to connect with them; it is thus doubly unsettling.

Cusk's response to this issue is to try and culturally validate artistic representations of this so-called 'affective topography'. She suggests that the disorientation her grandmother and her generation felt after structures like marriage dissolved was largely due to a lack of cultural precedents. In her own writing, therefore, she attempts to establish a reference point for other women to return to. Reflecting on her decision to write and publish *Aftermath*, Cusk claimed that:

> There was nothing to say for a little while and when there was something to say it was so... formless, and sort of new, and strange, and without precedent that I thought: 'How can this be said?... [and] the reason I had to think that was, I guess, because these are radically new ways of living. There is no particular history of a woman sort of coming out of... long-established structures of femininity: marriage, motherhood, home, able to support herself,

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[620] Cusk, *Aftermath*, pp. 56, 71.
[621] Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', pp. 6-7.
[622] Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', pp. 7-8.
[623] Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2017), p. 17.

able to carry on living in the world, not scorned and reviled by society… How are you meant to be? These are new things to describe… It was no longer about the individual person in these structures, it was about... a complete lack of structure, lack of identity.[624]

Cusk's writing therefore aims to intervene in a new and emerging discussion about how women should be allowed to frame their experiences as they break out of these historical structures of living. As Denise Riley reminds us, even in much of contemporary society, 'as households of single people grow, the admission of even occasional loneliness remains taboo, while to be without visible social ties is inexcusable… a taint of vice always clouds it'.[625] This must be resisted, and our 'right to be lonely' must be asserted, she says, and not merely subsumed into a newly reconfigured image of the modern family. She hopes that if we can 'recast that desolate and resentment-prone metaphoricity of social exclusion', it might 'allay the burden, or at least the embarrassed self-reproach, of those who may find themselves living in solitude at the very same time as they live within the family'.[626] Cusk partly achieves this goal through her literature; readers may in fact find the right to be lonely asserted in these texts. However, as both Cusk and Riley's observations remind us, the loneliness of contemporary family life extends far beyond the image of the divorced woman, and in Cusk's work there is another image which is inextricably tied to loneliness and which requires closer examination: that of the mother.

Motherhood and Loneliness

The question of what a woman is if she is not a mother has been superseded for me by that of what a woman is if she is a mother; and of what a mother, in fact, is.[627]

- Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work*

If the isolation of the recently divorced was defined for Cusk by the sensation of being behind glass, the isolation of new motherhood is often described in her work more coldly, as an imprisoning within walls. In *A Life's Work*, she illustrates this idea: first by claiming that 'motherhood, for me, was a sort of compound fenced off from the rest of the world'; and then later

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[624] CCCB, *Rachel Cusk. Autopsy of a Marriage*, 27:49.
[625] Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', p. 8.
[626] Riley, 'The Right to Be Lonely', p. 9.
[627] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, pp. 63-4.

by describing her home as the 'lonely place [in which] I am… not free: the kitchen is a cell, a place of no possibility'.[628] The shift from feeling as though one is imprisoned in glass to the more isolating description of a 'cell' is important: it suggests something about the increased invisibility of a mother's isolation, as well as something about their decreased exposure to that which might constitute a healthy life. We can see this illustrated when Cusk writes about briefly escaping the cell, by reading or listening to music, which she claims 'is like a ray of light coming in from outside, bright and painful, making me screw up my eyes'.[629] Not only this, but the lack of visibility thus transforms women's own conception of themselves:

> Birth is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them.[630]

This particular idea explains why motherhood is a uniquely isolating experience for Cusk. First, it precludes the father from any similar experience (since the child never existed in them) and therefore negates their ability to truly empathise. Secondly, since it also 'divides women from themselves', it means that mothers can take solace neither in other women nor in their own quiet moments of self-reflection. Thus, motherhood seems to present an unpassable object to Denise Riley's notion of the 'right to be lonely', proposing as it does that as a mother, one cannot even be happily alone with one's self.

It is perhaps to be expected, then, that Cusk fills her novels with male characters who fail to empathise sufficiently with the mothers of their children. Tony, for instance, in *Transit*, who is otherwise presented as a sympathetic character who wants to work hard and provide for his family, scorns his wife for not involving herself more in their wider community, in spite of a language barrier. He says that having more Albanian family around her 'stops her getting used', a Freudian slip which Faye corrects to 'stops her getting used to it'.[631] Elaborating further on his worries about his wife, he confesses to Faye that 'she had made no friends and was frightened of going anywhere on her own. She wouldn't even go to their daughter's school: it was Tony who dropped her off and picked her up and went to the assembling'. The wordplay here is telling: perhaps 'getting used to it [life in England]' is first and foremost not in fact what the wife – who is left unnamed – wanted to

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[628] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, pp. 8; 144.
[629] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 144.
[630] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 13.
[631] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 154.

begin with, and in fact she is therefore ironically being 'used' by Tony as a prop to help fulfil his own life fantasies. Moreover, there is the implication in Tony's confession that he sees the dropping off of their children as her job – that he even brings it up suggests he sees it as a remarkable occurrence. It is with Tony's closing comment, however, that she does not even attend the 'assembling' – corrected by Faye to 'assembly' – that we glimpse his largest misunderstanding of his wife. Tony claims to 'love…the assembly', since it is clear he has positioned himself as the sociable one in their relationship. He cannot seem to comprehend however, that his wife feels lonely – and that engaging in large assemblies of people with whom she does not share a language might be a further isolating experience for her. He worries that surrounding her with more Albanian family might not be good for her, but neglects to consider that the anxieties he worries about might pre-date that state of affairs, might even have begun with her entering the state of motherhood.

Elsewhere, Cusk even depicts men having to physically learn (since it was not ingrained in them by society at a young age) how to be fathers, and more specifically how to sacrifice something of themselves in order to fulfil that role. In *Transit*, one character declares that:

> He had often been lonely, looking after Clara in the early days… Diane had returned to work full-time, and while sometimes he was surprised by her unsentimentality about motherhood and her aversion to maternal activities, he gradually came to understand that this knowledge – of nurture and its consequences – was not something she required for herself. She knew as much about being a woman as she needed to: it was he who had to know, to learn. He needed to know how to care for someone else, how to be responsible, how to build and sustain a relationship, and she had let him do it.[632]

Here is the explicit reference to the loneliness of parenthood, but it is important to note that this is narrated only through reported speech, perhaps indicating that this is Faye's word and not his – an allusion, perhaps, to the potential taboo of admitting such a thing as a man. What is most interesting, however, is the framing of what he has learned – about caring, nurturing, building and sustaining relationships – not simply as the work of motherhood, or of parenting, but about 'being a woman'. The need to sacrifice something of your own identity for the betterment of others is presented as not only the work of mothers but the work of all women. This forms an interesting counterpoint to the closing image of that particular novel, where Faye's brother Lawrence, is having a disagreement with his new partner, Eloise, over how to treat their children. Eloise, teary-eyed and desperate, remarks to Faye that 'I say to Lawrence, honey, we've just got to love them… It's true, isn't it? They just need you to love them', a point which Faye refuses to agree with for the sake of

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[632] Cusk, *Transit*, pp. 17-8.

Eloise's comfort.[633] Faye instead declares that 'for someone like Lawrence that kind of love was indistinguishable from self-abnegation'. What is culturally understood as a necessary sacrifice for one's children when it comes to women is therefore termed, and implicitly criticised as, 'self-abnegation' for men.

Through this and numerous other portraits, therefore, Cusk presents motherhood as a state of perpetual sacrifice (in the instance of Tony's wife, for example, she has sacrificed the comfort of both her geographic and emotional home for the family). Motherhood, Cusk claims, required her 'to suspend my own character, which had evolved on a diet of male values' and 'demanded a complete surrender of identity to belong to it'.[634] In an article written in the same year as *A Life's Work*, Cusk relates a story about meeting another mother, who tells her that 'for her the most amazing thing about motherhood was that now there existed a person who was more important than herself'.[635] Cusk's response is, of course, to question the logic behind this statement, concluding that:

> I don't think that my children are more important than I am, any more than I think I am more important than the person next door; but the way we live dictates that we usually only experience ourselves sacrificing things - time, freedom, pleasure, sleep - for our children. And it is still so widely regarded as women's work that the job of looking after children continues to feed our image of what a mother is: nurturing, loving, self-deprecating, patient, unegotistical. We believe these are 'natural' qualities... and yet it was my experience of motherhood that this script had to be forcefully learned.

The issue then is not simply that motherhood requires a sacrifice of identity but that modern society perpetuates the narrative that the value of a mother is dependent on her ability to face that sacrifice quietly. What is more, this suggests that the patriarchal values of society have been so fully subsumed by women that the mainstream cultural narrative surrounding motherhood is perpetuated as much by them as it is by men; it is women themselves who are often found extolling the virtues of motherhood, shying away from any honest account of its difficulties. Cusk's work is particularly attuned to these instances of women policing other women. In her contemplation on the history of feminist writing, 'Shakespeare's Sisters' she reflects on the fact that many of the best passages in *The Second Sex* detail the ways that women 'seek to protect their privileges and property under patriarchy by condemning or ridiculing the honesty of other women', a fact which she says

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[633] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 232.
[634] Cusk, *Aftermath*, p. 18.
[635] Rachel Cusk, 'The Language of Love', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2001, section Books <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/12/familyandrelationships.society> [accessed 14 September 2020].

remains true today and which is a 'scarifying prospect' for the woman writer.[636] She refers in particular to the ways that a woman writer 'can find herself disowned in the very act of invoking the deepest roots of shared experience. Having taken the trouble to write honestly, she can find herself being read dishonestly' – something which she says occurs most troublingly when the writing concerns the domestic sphere. As Cusk puts it in her memoir, *Aftermath*, 'sometimes feminism seems to involve so much criticism of female modes of being that you could be forgiven for thinking that a feminist is a woman who hates women'.[637]

In *Kudos*, a character even remarks ahead of an all-female panel discussion that 'it might simply be the case that female truth – if such a thing can even be said to exist – is so interior and involuted that a common version of it can never be agreed on', and that 'it's a saddening thought... that when a group of women get together, far from advancing the cause of femininity, they end up pathologising it'.[638] The irony of this being narrated to us in a 'conversation' throughout which Faye has been almost entirely silent perhaps plays into this idea – Faye is reluctant to comment since she doesn't wish to play into this narrative, or perhaps her silence constitutes a metaphorical conversational 'dead-end' to mirror the intellectual one that feminism is presented as finding itself in here. As Cusk puts it in 'Shakespeare's Sisters', 'there is currently no public unity among women, because since the peak of feminism the task of woman has been to assimilate herself with man', and that although 'superficially this situation resembles equality... it occurs within the domination of "masculine values"', meaning that 'hers is still the second sex, but she has earned the right to dissociate herself from it'.[639] As Pieter Vermeulen points out, however, even this 'right' might be viewed as nothing more than an illusion of autonomy, since 'the fantasy of being able to just walk away from an oppressive structure is an eminently masculine one... [whereas] *Outline...* show[s] that walking away from the adults in the room is hardly an option for those who have to fight their way into the room to be heard'.[640]

Much of Cusk's early writing perfectly illustrates these difficulties, and highlights the many ways that women might, and yet often do not, find connection with each other. Consider the close of *Arlington Park*, which many critics argue echoes *Mrs Dalloway*, inasmuch as the central character,

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[636] Cusk, 'Shakespeare's Sisters', pp. 175-6.
[637] Cusk, *Aftermath*, p. 13.
[638] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 131-2.
[639] Cusk, 'Shakespeare's Sisters', p. 174.
[640] Pieter Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation: Gender, Empathy, and Austerity in Rachel Cusk and Katie Kitamura', *Cultural Critique*, 2019, p. 22.

Christine, appears to have had an epiphany much like Clarissa's.[641] What these arguments overlook, however, is the fact that for many of the other women, there has been no great epiphany at all. Indeed, Christine wonders at her dinner party - which closes the novel - why the others did not simply:

> come and sit down at the table, where the wine was flowing freely and Christine had lit a scented candle; where she was trying to build up a warm core of female association, a little warm fire out of the fact of them all being women, in it together while the men sat upstairs? Instead, Maisie and Juliet stood by the kitchen units, as far away as they could get. They stood there conversing like people at a convention, not touching, not warm, not clinging together on this raft of life as it went over the black waves of oblivion.[642]

Mere proximity does not breed intimacy, and the wives and mothers shown here express little interest in trying to establish it. While many of these early works therefore focus on illustrating the difficulties for establishing connection between women, Cusk's later works instead attempt to overcome these same issues, asking how literature might resist loneliness in its very form.

Cusk's work is also more specifically attuned to the difficulties of being a mother who is also an artist or a writer. In her essay 'Making Home' she writes about how 'the artist in me wanted to disdain the material world, while the woman couldn't'.[643] To become a writing mother, she tells us, she would need two separate consciousnesses, one capable of working and one of fulfilling maternal obligations. Alice Braun points out that this is illustrated in *A Life's Work*, where Cusk's 'identity as a well-off writer is supplanted by her role as a mother and bearer of another life', and that since motherhood precludes her from working, 'her life story is as it were broken, in the sense that it does not coalesce into a clear and definite narrative... she is unable to work, and as a result her story does not "work" anymore either'.[644] If this is true, then I would argue that the *Outline* trilogy offers her a way to break free of this, first of all by detaching herself so explicitly from the narrative, but also by creating a platform through which she can imagine the existence of other mother/writer figures who can approach the problem from different angles.

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[641] See, for example: Monica Latham, 'Variations on "Mrs. Dalloway": Rachel Cusk's "Arlington Park"', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 19, 2013; Elke D'hoker, 'Linked Stories, Connected Lives: The Lucky Ones as Short Story Cycle', *E-Rea*, 10.2, 2013.

[642] Rachel Cusk, *Arlington Park* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), pp. 221-2.

[643] Rachel Cusk, 'Making home' in *Coventry* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 80-1.

[644] Alice Braun, '"A Compound Fenced off from the Rest of the World": Motherhood as the Stripping of One's Self in Rachel Cusk's A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother', *Études Britanniques Contemporaines.*, Bare Lives/Virginia Woolf: Becoming Photographic, 53, 2017, pp. 17-8.

The first of these writer/mother figures appears in *Outline*, and it is the fellow writer called Angeliki. In a mirroring of Faye/Cusk, she says that she is writing a novel in which 'the character is compromised by her desire to be free on the one hand and her guilt about her children on the other', and that 'all she wishes is for her life to be integrated, to be one thing, rather than an eternal series of oppositions that confound her whichever way she looks'.[645] One solution, Angeliki offers, is for her to dedicate her passion to children – and this is ultimately the path which she has her character take, although, she admits 'it is not what I feel myself'. Here then, the motherhood bind is presented as particularly thorny for the writer figure, since they are faced not only with the question of what to do in their own lives, but also with how to narrate that same issue in their literature. One solution might be, as Cusk does, to narrate multiple positions and to thereby implicitly promote the idea that there is no one ideal way to be a writer and a mother. In another scene, Cusk presents a mother in Faye's writing class coming to the realisation that 'it was not possible… for a person in her position [i.e. a mother] to be a writer, someone whose time was not their own'.[646] However, she then confesses that she did manage to write something, but that it was a rather spiteful piece. It emerged from the fact that her family had proved that they did not remember having let her down in the past, and ended with her sending 'the children to their rooms, without finishing their supper, and with my hands trembling [she] sat at the kitchen table and began to write'.[647] In this instance, the act of creativity is explicitly sparked by the realisation that she perhaps ought *not* to dedicate her life to her children, as Angeliki's character did. Moreover, Faye herself clearly struggles to detach her working life from her motherhood, as evidenced by the fact that the narrative is intermittently interrupted by phone calls from her children.[648] It is interesting to note, too, that these calls tend to arrive during moments of working or teaching, perhaps illustrating Cusk's own difficulties in textually integrating her two lives.

Although Cusk presents a number of ways of being a writing mother, therefore, they all stand in stark contrast to the figures of creative fathers in her works. In *Outline*, the character Ryan demonstrates the difference between what solitude means for men and women. He talks at great length to Faye about how glad he is to not have his wife and children with him in Athens, since it meant that:

> first thing this morning he'd walked up to the Acropolis, before the heat got too intense, and he couldn't have done that with them in tow, could he? And even if he had, he'd have spent the whole time worrying about sunburn and dehydration, and though he might have seen

[645] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 129.
[646] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 212.
[647] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 214.
[648] See, for example: Cusk, *Transit*, p. 133.

the Parthenon sitting like a gold and white crumbling crown on the hilltop with the fierce

pagan blue of the sky behind, he wouldn't have felt it, as he was able to feel it this morning,

airing the shaded crevices of his being.[649]

As Fay Bound Alberti reminds us, traditionally, 'choosing to be alone for artistic purposes was an educated middle-class activity, requiring physical space as well as time away from economic and domestic affairs… [and] was also traditionally a male activity, since women have long been identified through family structures rather than in terms of their individual accomplishments'.[650] Ryan's belief that he could not go up the Acropolis alone if he was mired in his 'domestic affairs' perfectly encapsulates this, but it is the specific framing of it as an artistic and emotional pursuit that is most interesting: not only are women denied the experience of doing these things without their family in tow, but they are therefore also denied the vague, Romantic notion of what Ryan calls feeling 'it… airing the shaded crevices of his being'. It would be easy to see this as satire – Cusk certainly deliberately makes Ryan sound pretentious here – but the point she is making is serious: women must be allowed the same physical experiences as men, in order to facilitate the same emotional experiences as well. If this is not the case, what constitutes the healthy experience of solitude for men can only ever be experienced as its less healthy counterpart - loneliness - by women.

In order to analyse how Cusk's texts work to undermine this process, it helps to consider her claim in both the reissued introduction to *A Life's Work* and in articles written since its publication that her purpose in writing the text was to 'put into words an experience - new motherhood - that seemed to me to be utterly beyond the reach of language'.[651] This experience beyond language is explicitly discussed in relation to loneliness: 'when people speak of the isolation of motherhood', she writes, 'this is what I suspect they mean: a loneliness that is not so much physical or practical as linguistic, a loneliness that derives from losing the right to self-expression and the ability to make yourself understood'. Moreover, in motherhood, Cusk believes that 'a woman exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings, and like sounds outside a certain range they can be very difficult for other people to identify. If one listened with a different part of oneself, one would perhaps hear them'.[652] Her memoirs are not, therefore, only about the therapeutic process of writing for herself, but also in tutoring her readers in a new way of listening and reading, which might better allow them to be heard.

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[649] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 33.
[650] Fay Bound Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic": Loneliness as an Emotion Cluster and a Neglected Subject in the History of Emotions', *Emotion Review*, 10.3 (2018), p. 247.
[651] Cusk, 'The Language of Love'.
[652] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 9.

It has been argued by Nicolas Boileau that Cusk's use of the memoir form to achieve this goal left many readers unsatisfied or unconvinced by her efforts to narrate the 'truth' of motherhood. He writes that she exhibits a 'constant hesitation between the personal and the political, between the essay and the memoir' in an attempt to undermine the scientific discourses which mothers are bombarded with, but that ultimately 'her memoir is nothing but the fabrication of yet another text adding itself to pre-existing discourses'. [653] Since 'she desires to know something that, she feels, has never been expressed... [but which] cannot be easily described… the novelist is left with no other option but to half-say the truth of it, as Lacan would say, through metaphors'. Cusk's work fails in this endeavour because, Boileau argues, it cannot help but have recourse to fictive techniques, since 'truth, for Cusk, can only be said through fiction'. It is important to note that Boileau's article was published prior to the *Outline* trilogy, a series whose very publication might be taken as evidence of his claims – and indeed Cusk's turn to fiction to write about motherhood can be seen as another way of approaching the idea of writing as therapy. In *Kudos,* for instance - the closing book of the trilogy - Cusk has a character declare that having a child is fundamentally the experience of 'surviv[ing] your own death… and then there's nothing left to do except talk about it'.[654] Through its reliance on dialogue, the *Outline* trilogy places the emphasis not only on writing, but on talking and establishing community as the way to escape the linguistic loneliness of motherhood – in whatever medium that may take.

This emphasis on community has often been overlooked in Cusk's writings about motherhood, since it is often derisively and misleadingly framed as an anti-feminist opposite to the ideal of self-reliance. In Jenny Turner's review of *A Life's Work*, she argued that it 'was published in 2001, towards the beginning of a second baby boom in Britain, and early in a wave of new-mummy books', and that 'alone among them, Cusk's did not take the having of a baby as an excuse for banal chumminess'.[655] While I agree that the call for community that Cusk's book advocates could hardly be called 'banal chumminess', Cusk's relationship to this type of social situation is far more nuanced than Turner presents it as being. *A Life's Work* in particular portrays the frustration of being someone for whom antenatal groups seem inherently ridicule-worthy and yet also being someone who feels isolated and keenly aware that community groups may be the best antidote to that loneliness. At the beginning of the memoir, for instance, Cusk observes that 'joining groups, attending classes and courses, enlisting the help of your partner or a friend in the business of preparation are all recommended means of curing yourself of the faults of hubris, terror and

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[653] Boileau, 'A Novelist in Changing Rooms: Motherhood and Auto/Biography', pp. 7, 9.
[654] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 59-60.
[655] Turner, 'I Blame Christianity'.

independence of mind before labour commences', but that 'the literature tactfully tones down references to the ultimately solitary nature of childbirth, and to the fact that attending classes for it is like attending classes for death'.[656] A few pages later, however, attending the first of these classes, Cusk admits that she 'feel[s] a certain relief at our communality, a sense of assuagement. I wonder why I have ridiculed and resisted it'.[657] As with the portrayal of rehabilitation clinics in Wallace's work, these communities are often presented as ridicule-worthy but earnestly necessary.

Perhaps the most vulnerable admission about the need for community comes near the end of the memoir, when Cusk is describing another woman, Miranda, who was pregnant at the same time as her, and with whom she had developed a friendship. Cusk writes that 'when Miranda and I were pregnant I thought that we were in it together, that we were somehow doing it together, but in fact it hasn't turned out like that', as Miranda now seems cold and distant whenever they chat.[658] In spite of this, however, Cusk writes that 'I still phone her most weeks, whether I think she wants me to or not. The stark bond of our common predicament is enough for me. Like immigrants from the same tiny, distant island, it seems to me that we're stuck with each other'. In this way, Cusk has essentially adopted the role and mindset of those – like the healthcare visitor – who proclaim community as the solution for those who seem to shun it. Therefore, while Jenny Turner argues that Cusk's book attempts to portray the ease with which maternal loneliness is often soothed by 'exchanging the discomforts of adult public life for a cosy cocoon of cupcakes and school-gates bitching, like Betty Friedan never happened', we might instead reconsider whether Cusk is as dismissive of the importance of these communities as this makes it appear. Rather, it might be the case that she simply found that her own personal need for this community was not always satisfied by those efforts brought about by the existing social welfare structure. Instead, she attempts to establish a new community among her own readers, who might be able to take solace in portrayals of motherhood that eschew the dominant narrative of it as an exclusively positive experience. What is more, we might see the tentative steps that Cusk makes towards admitting the need for community in *A Life's Work* as being formally manifest in the reliance upon dialogue in the *Outline* trilogy; it is a way of textually enacting what that book recommends.

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[656] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, pp. 33-4.
[657] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 38.
[658] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, pp. 201-2.

Autofiction as Allofiction: Silence, Negation and Agency

While the *Outline* trilogy is constructed from a series of dialogues, it is important to remember that the overwhelming emphasis is always placed on narratives other than Faye's. By seemingly minimising the narrative agency of Faye, it is therefore possible to interpret Cusk's authorial decisions as showing women's voices as perennially silenced (even by the voices of other women) and therefore powerless. However, in her essay 'Shakespeare's Sisters' Cusk explores the importance of silence as an active agent, taking as her example Anton Chekhov's work. In *Three Sisters*, Cusk writes, 'it is the silence itself which interests [Chekhov], and it interests him not as an absence but as a presence'.[659] Silence might likewise be considered an active presence in Cusk's work, rather than a passive absence, and her novels might therefore be interpreted as interrogations of the efficacy of silence in women's writing. In another essay, titled 'Coventry', for instance, Cusk describes how she had previously watched couples eating in silence, and decided that this meant they were in failed relationships, but she comes to see it in a new light when her husband points out that 'his parents… would often spend the evening in silence. They took pride in it; for them, he said, it signified that their intimacy was complete'.[660] She describes how, earlier in her own life, she had been afraid of silence, of 'its vastness and bleakness and loneliness, and of what it represents, which is ejection from the story'.[661] But on realising that this is only her perception of it, Cusk is freed to understand that to others silence might connote greater intimacy; while she grew up 'among noisy people, laughers and bellowers', she admits that 'in such company there were words that often got drowned out, shy words like empathy, mercy, gentleness, solicitude'.[662] These qualities are all nurtured by Cusk's work, and form an integral part of her attempt to resist loneliness. Silence therefore becomes a way to contemplate the qualities that actually increase intimacy, rather than a stifling of communication that leads to the disintegration of intimacy.

Cusk does suggest therefore that silence can sometimes serve as a tool for political agency in women's writing. We might see one of the closing scenes of *Transit* as a testament to this fact, when Faye finds herself arguing with her brother, Lawrence, about his belief that she can never accept that femininity has always 'entailed certain male codes of honour'.[663] Faye concludes her argument by saying that she had 'found out more… by listening than I had ever thought possible'. When

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[659] Cusk, 'Shakespeare's Sisters', p. 171.
[660] Cusk, 'Coventry', p. 41.
[661] Cusk, 'Coventry', p. 38.
[662] Cusk, 'Coventry', p. 40.
[663] Cusk, *Transit*, pp. 242-3.

Lawrence replies rather cynically that you have to live – implying that you cannot adopt silence as a position of agency forever – Faye replies that 'there [is] more than one way of living', suggesting instead that her silent listening has given her access to other ways of being, and that this is the ultimate benefit of silence itself. Moreover, this insight into other ways of living is linked closely to the female experience itself; in *Kudos,* at the end of a discussion about Louise Bourgeois, a television presenter remarks that she:

> came to see… that in fact there was nothing worse than to be an average white male of average talents and intelligence: [because] even the most oppressed housewife… is closer to the drama and poetry of life than he is, because as Louise Bourgeois shows us she is capable at least of holding more than one perspective.[664]

Cusk seems to suggest that if women's writing is fundamentally different to men's, then the distinguishing factor might lie in this capacity to dramatise the multiplicity of women's lives and existence. It ought to be a celebration of other perspectives, which is precisely what Faye, as an active agent of silence, allows Cusk to produce with the *Outline* trilogy, by presenting a wide array of female subjectivities.

The ability of writing to incorporate these perspectives might also explain Cusk's decision to create literature in the first place. Although much of her work is interested in other art forms (especially the visual and musical), her characters most often return to novels to experience a sense of what Rita Felski calls 'attunement'.[665] In *Arlington Park*, for instance, as Maria Tang has pointed out, many of the epiphanies that the characters seem to experience are 'short-lived and abortive'.[666] Tang gives as an example a passage where Juliet listens to the music of Ravel, which was 'so solitary and powerful, so—transcendent', but which moments later leaves Juliet feeling 'transcendent [not] any longer'.[667] However, later in the novel, Juliet claims that 'never did she feel in life the sense of recognition, the companionship, the great warm fact of solidarity that she found between the covers of a book'. [668] Again, as with Ravel, the sense of transcendence emerges from the way that the art expresses something about solitude – 'she wondered whether the books she loved consoled her precisely because they were the manifestations of her own isolation' – but here the transcendence is not swept away as it is with the music. In fact, its solace is highlighted by a contrast with the fleeting nature of transcendence that she manages to feel in the classroom, where she manages to put on 'a

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[664] Cusk, *Kudos*, p. 192.
[665] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 41.
[666] Maria Tang, 'Bodies at Risk: Ambiguous Subjectivities in Arlington Park: A Beauvoirean Perspective', *E-Rea*, 10.2, 2013, p. 11.
[667] Cusk, *Arlington Park*, pp. 31-2.
[668] Cusk, *Arlington Park*, p. 158.

show… just to make them act for an hour as if she and they [her students] did speak it, the same language'.[669] While Juliet struggles to verbally convey the transcendence books have given her to her students, she takes refuge in her own knowledge of how they have spoken to her at her most private, solitary moments. Reading constitutes an act of networked solitude for Juliet, which she struggles to translate to a more conventional social situation, but this is nevertheless enough for her to find solace in moments of loneliness. Moreover, while Juliet struggles to convey this to her students verbally, the character of Faye can be interpreted as Cusk's attempt to formally demonstrate the importance of this. Her silent listening ('I had found out more… by listening than I had ever thought possible') is the nearest thing that Cusk can portray to the act of reading, and it functions as both an allegory for, and testament to, the importance of this reparative function of art.

Having addressed the role of silence in Cusk's work, it now seems appropriate to closely examine the importance of the *Outline* trilogy's focus on characters other than the narrator, Faye, given that this constitutes one of the most immediate effects of those novels' interest in silence. For many critics, this is the most distinctive (and controversial) aspect of the novels themselves, as Sheila Heti alludes to when she praises *Transit* for the way in which it allows 'you [to] see everyone except the narrator — which is really true of life'.[670] In foregrounding the experiences of characters other than the protagonist, we might see Cusk's trilogy as an example of what Armine Kotin Mortimer terms 'allofiction'.[671] Allofiction, Mortimer writes, is a way to understand how:

> the autofictive "vréel" determines and is determined by the portraits of nearby others…
> [which] are passed through the portrait of the self; they stand in relation to the self; they
> affect the self; the self affects them. Yet the writer of the auto-fiction does not claim to
> propose the biography of these nearby others; rather, they contribute to the portrait of the
> self'.

In this way, a portrait of the true self is presented by a sort of negation, and this is an image which Cusk explores repeatedly throughout the trilogy. In *Outline*, for instance, one female character describes a moment of self-revelation when meeting a man who appeared to be her opposite in almost every conceivable way:

> He was describing, in other words, what she herself was not: in everything he said about
> himself, she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for

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[669] Cusk, *Arlington Park*, p. 158.

[670] Heidi Julavits, 'Rachel Cusk's Many Selves', *The Cut*, 2017 <https://www.thecut.com/2017/03/rachel-cusk-novelist-transit.html> [accessed 18 September 2020].

[671] Armine Kotin Mortimer, 'Autofiction as Allofiction: Doubrovsky's L'Après-Vivre', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 49.3 (2009), p. 25.

want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she now was.[672]

What Mortimer's notion of allofiction allows us to see is that we should not mistake Faye's apparent passivity for an indication that her story is unimportant – while she may appear to be absent, we come to understand that it is through the stories of others that she truly comes into view. It is for this reason that comments such as Pieter Vermeulen's assertion that Faye is 'a facilitator of other people's stories rather than an instance worthy of her own story' must be questioned.[673] In *Kudos*, Cusk might be seen as alluding to this in a story about the importance of negative space. There, a character remarks upon the removal of statues from a public space and the recent installation of new lights which 'illuminated the empty spaces… [which] had the strange effect of making you see more in the empty space than you would have seen had it been filled with a statue'.[674] This effect, the character recounts, made her understand that the removal of the statues had not been a crime against culture – as she had first assumed – but rather 'the work of an artist', trying to show the beauty in the negative space. Likewise, Cusk's work as an artist is to shine a light on the empty niches of Faye's character, and we must resist the temptation to view her removal from our immediate line of sight as what this character calls 'the result of some monstrous neglect or misunderstanding', instead seeing it as a way of highlighting her interactions with others.

Interpretations that emphasise Faye's passivity therefore risk undermining the reality of her agency as a narrator, a role that is undeniably more active than it first appears. Much of the discussion about Cusk's use of Faye in the novels centres around this question, with Heidi Julavits' description of her as 'a cipher… a zero, a naught, a nothing' perhaps being typical in its dismissiveness.[675] Contrary to this, it might be better argued that Faye – albeit in a less explicit way – demonstrates her agency almost from the very beginning of the trilogy. This manifests itself both at the level of character and also in terms of her narrative control; in fact, we might see her response to her first conversational partner as a demonstration of her willingness to assert herself. Following a description of her interlocutor's wife, Faye actively disagrees with his presentation of her as 'an all-purpose villain', and eventually is met by an admission of bias from the man himself.[676] In this

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[672] Cusk, *Outline*, pp. 239-40.
[673] Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation', pp. 8-9.
[674] Cusk, *Kudos,* p. 213.
[675] Julavits, 'Rachel Cusk's Many Selves'.
[676] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 25.

exchange, it becomes clear that Faye actually does occasionally demonstrate her assertiveness, and it seems no accident that her first demonstration of this is to take issue with the man's misuse of his own narrative agency, portraying another person (notably a woman) in an unfairly negative light.

The degree to which Faye asserts her control over the narrative might be debated, but to claim that she demonstrates no control over it – as a cipher – is to entirely misunderstand Cusk's point in allowing her to let the stories of other characters dominate the narrative. Melinda Harvey has noted, for instance, that since the narrative relies predominantly upon indirect speech, it means that we receive the stories of other people always in her words.[677] Similarly, Sally Rooney has noted that the tension 'between Faye as the passive protagonist on one hand, and the selective and discriminating narrator on the other… might be the chief animating force of the trilogy'.[678] Francine Prose goes even further, arguing that the other characters in the trilogy function like Dostoevsky's Marmeladov, a character whose monologue at first appears irrelevant and slowly grows to prophetically mirror the most pressing concerns of *Crime and Punishment's* narrator, Raskolnikov.[679] Prose argues that as this phenomenon extends, 'we sense that Faye is making rather than listening to many of the confessions that she is presumably hearing from others'.[680] Whether or not the stories are 'fictional', our concern with this fictionality and the question of the homogeneity of her partner's conversation leaves us at Faye's mercy, narratively speaking.

Cusk's decision to portray Faye in this particular way is therefore perhaps best understood as a testament to the ways in which something that at first appears to be an absence (in this case, the negated self at the heart of the books) can in fact prove to be the exact opposite, or as she puts it in *The Last Supper*, 'I am nothing, I am everything'.[681] In *Outline,* Faye seems to struggle to reconcile herself to this notion of the self-effacement of the artist when she looks at the record collection of her (unseen) host, Clelia. Remarking on Clelia's preference for works which negate the role of the artist, Faye ponders whether 'it was, perhaps, a form of discipline, almost of asceticism, a temporary banishing of the self and its utterances', which Faye believes ironically that she can only hope to obtain.[682] In *Kudos* however, we come to understand that this negation of the artist's hand in the work can never take away from the work itself, since we are told that 'a work of art could not, ultimately, be negative: its material existence, its status as an object, could not help but be positive,

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[677] Harvey, 'Verisimilitude'.
[678] Sally Rooney, 'Buried in Bourgeois Life', *Slate*, 25 May 2018 <https://slate.com/culture/2018/05/rachel-cusks-kudos-reviewed-by-sally-rooney.html> [accessed 25 February 2022].
[679] Francine Prose, 'Real Talk: Rachel Cusk's Kudos', *Sewanee Review*, 126.3 (2018), p. 528.
[680] Prose, 'Real Talk: Rachel Cusk's Kudos', p. 532.
[681] Rachel Cusk, *The Last Supper* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 79.
[682] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 54.

a gain, an addition to the sum of what was'.[683] Cusk's decision to adopt a form which appears to function by negation is therefore an illustration of the ways that art always manages to transfigure negativity into positivity, and implicitly the way it moves us away from loneliness and towards community.

Moreover, it cannot be avoided that the subtle indication of Faye's agency is likewise a reminder of Cusk's ultimate agency over the narrative. Faye's role as an easily forgotten presence who really is in control of everything that we receive entirely mimics the role of the author, and it might be in this sense that the trilogy most radically expands the horizons of how autofictional works might enact their own autofictionality. Merve Emre's review highlights this, when she notes that 'by the time we reach *Kudos,* Faye is no longer a teacher gently guiding her students' craft; she has become Cusk's propagandist', and that Cusk should not be mistaken as being '"objective" or "modest" or "passive" or any of the other humble words reviewers have used to describe her prose'.[684] Moreover, Cusk herself has argued that the style of the trilogy forces readers themselves to adopt a more active stance, since 'what happens is not in the hands of the book, and that becomes apparent at a certain point… when you're reading it and you think: "This lift-off into suspended disbelief is not going to happen"'.[685] The homogeneity of the stories resists our ability to relax and accept their own veracity and thus we too have to be more active; the suspension of disbelief, as in Lerner and Wallace's work, must be willed. The supposed passivity of Faye ultimately prompts us, therefore, to reflect on both Cusk's, and our own, agency, and the need for what Meg Jensen calls the 'active readership' of autofiction.[686] Autofiction therefore becomes the product of collective processes, achieved not only by Cusk but also by her readers, involving them in the production of meaning and assuaging their loneliness in the process.

Another, final way in which agency is asserted is through the shift in Faye's own character throughout the novels. In fact, Cusk herself has described her confusion at the fact that many reviewers seem to discuss the three works as if Faye exhibits no changes between them.[687] Instead, Cusk claims that she 'realized at a certain point in "Outline" that it was all very well to say these things about passivity and disappearance, but the fact was that this person had to actually live'.[688]

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[683] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 181-2.

[684] Merve Emre, 'Of Note: Among the Bitcoin Maximalists', *Harper's Magazine*, 1 June 2018 <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/06/of-note/> [accessed 19 February 2022].

[685] CCCB, *Rachel Cusk. Autopsy of a Marriage*, 36:02.

[686] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 76.

[687] Alexandra Schwartz, '"I Don't Think Character Exists Anymore": A Conversation with Rachel Cusk', *The New Yorker* <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/i-dont-think-character-exists-anymore-a-conversation-with-rachel-cusk> [accessed 18 September 2020].

[688] Schwartz, '"I Don't Think Character Exists Anymore": A Conversation with Rachel Cusk'.

This perhaps explains the increased activity of Faye in the later works – most obviously in the form of her house renovation in *Transit* – and we can see this reflected explicitly in the way that those later novels discuss the role of passivity. The Faye of *Outline*, for instance, claims that she 'had come to believe more and more in the virtues of passivity, and of living a life as unmarked by self-will as possible' and that 'there was a great difference… between the things I wanted and the things that I could apparently have, and until I had finally and forever made my peace with that fact, I had decided to want nothing at all'.[689] By *Transit*, however, Faye appears to have reviewed this stance, declaring that:

> For a long time… I believed that it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there. But my decision to create a disturbance by renovating my house had awoken a different reality, as though I had disturbed a beast sleeping in its lair. I had started to become, in effect, angry. I had started to desire power, because what I now realised was that other people had had it all along, that what I called fate was merely the reverberation of their will, a tale scripted not by some universal storyteller but by people who would elude justice for as long as their actions were met with resignation rather than outrage.[690]

We see here not only the importance of emphasising agency, but also the idea that it ought to be framed as an ethical concern; to misunderstand Faye as an entirely passive narrator is therefore to cede all control to other characters with the power to harm her. Instead, therefore, it becomes of paramount importance that we emphasise her agency, in order to not view her as simply another example of a woman whose story and control is entirely subordinate to others.

Moreover, this question of agency is entirely bound up in the question of loneliness for Cusk. Again and again throughout the trilogy, characters who feel overlooked or unseen are framed as undergoing painful experiences of loneliness. In *Outline,* for instance, Faye recounts the pain she experiences when a student from her writing class violently criticises her at the end of the session, claiming that 'the worst aspect of [it]… was its element of impersonality, which had caused me to feel like nothing, a non-entity, even while she was giving me, so to speak, her full attention', a feeling which amounted to 'being negated at the same time as I was exposed'.[691] Here, then, the question of feeling unseen links directly back to the question of exposure which Denise Riley and Olivia Laing have argued is so critical to the experience of loneliness. At the end of the trilogy, Faye's son echoes this sentiment, claiming that he feels 'so lonely', since 'people just act as if I'm not

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[689] Cusk, *Outline*, pp. 170-1.
[690] Cusk, *Transit*, pp. 197-8.
[691] Cusk, *Outline,* p. 167.

there'.[692] In *Transit*, another character explores the experience of feeling unseen in a sexual relationship, claiming that she very often felt that 'she was invisible and that everything he did and said to her he was in fact doing and saying to someone else, someone who wasn't there, someone who may or may not even have existed', and that this feeling 'nearly drove her mad'.[693] Each of these stories functions as a cautionary tale for how *not* to read the trilogy and interpret Faye's apparent passivity. To render her invisible, and to take agency away from her control over the narrative becomes tantamount to sentencing her to a lonely existence, and as the builder in *Transit* puts it, when people forget you are there, it 'the loss of fellow feeling… [can] make you a dangerous person'.[694]

The Importance of Empathy

'Fellow feeling' is an important affective product of the novels themselves, and I want to now consider the important role of empathy in the *Outline* trilogy. In doing so, I will follow Meg Jensen's lead by applying James Dawes' concept of 'literary empathy' to Cusk's autofiction. Literary empathy, Dawes writes, is that which does not necessarily advance human rights or overtly political goals, and 'does not point past the reader… [but instead] points to the reader'.[695] Meg Jensen has since argued that 'a similar construction of empathy might be said to inform contemporary works of autofiction'.[696] Linking these concerns with Cusk's work, I aim to build upon Elke D'hoker's observation that in Cusk's earlier text, *The Lucky Ones*, her depictions of empathetic relationships might constitute a literary response to 'sociological accounts of contemporary society in terms of [what Manuel Castells calls] a "network society"'.[697] Fundamentally, the affective politics of Cusk's work are founded upon fostering connection and a sense of identification which are crucial to her work's ability to function reparatively.

That others have read Cusk's work in this same way is clear from the reviews, which often emphasise this sense of empathetic identification, such as Miranda Purves' claim that when she

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[692] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 229-30.

[693] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 172.

[694] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 54.

[695] James Dawes, 'Human Rights, Literature, and Empathy', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*, ed. by Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (Routledge, 2018), p. 431.

[696] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Literary Empathy, and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 67.

[697] Elke D'hoker, 'Linked Stories, Connected Lives: The Lucky Ones as Short Story Cycle', *E-Rea*, 10.2, 2013, p. 14.

reads Cusk's books, she finds the 'true escapism of finding points of identification'.[698] The importance of empathy is stressed throughout the *Outline* trilogy, and Cusk makes a point of demonstrating that this might be constituted by something other than in-person contact, as if to pre-emptively justify the degree to which her works might achieve the same thing. In *Transit* for instance, one character:

> depressed in the wake of his divorce… admitted that he often felt moved to tears by the concern for his health and well-being expressed in the phraseology of adverts and food packaging, and by the automated voices on trains and buses, apparently anxious that he might miss his stop; he actually felt something akin to love, he said, for the female voice that guided him while he was driving his car'.[699]

By recounting a story about the emotive force of adverts and service announcements at the start of *Transit*, we might view Cusk as inviting – or even daring – her readers to believe that a work of fiction could achieve the same thing. Similarly, her books repeatedly emphasise the importance of shared experiences, as something which might establish the opportunity for this sort of empathetic identification. In *Transit*, for instance, a character explains their interest in a particular breed of dog by describing a moment when they witnessed two dogs of this breed hunting together. What attracted the man was not simply the efficiency of their hunting, but what it said about the idea of cooperation, since 'it suggested that the ultimate fulfilment of a conscious being lay not in solitude but in a shared state so intricate and cooperative it might almost be said to represent the entwining of two selves'.[700] As has been pointed out already by Melinda Harvey, Cusk underscores the importance of this anecdote by later repeating it, this time narrated by Faye to a man she is dating and whom she will later go on to marry.[701]

It is also important to note that Cusk's works equally explore the pain of feeling that you are unrecognised or not empathised with. To a certain degree, this issue has been addressed by critics of her earlier works with great success, but I believe that this thematic concern is best addressed formally in her most recent autofictional works.[702] In *Outline*, for instance, one character relays a story which at first appears to be a declaration of her ability to empathise with her sister, declaring that 'when I am with my sister I see things from her point of view rather than my own, am compelled

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[698] Harvey, 'Verisimilitude'.

[699] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 3.

[700] Cusk, *Transit*, pp. 192-3.

[701] Purves, 'Rachel Cusk on Her New Novel, The Bradshaw Variations'.

[702] See, for example: Tang, 'Bodies at Risk: Ambiguous Subjectivities in Arlington Park: A Beauvoirean Perspective', p. 17; Boileau, 'Not Feminine Enough? Rachel Cusk's Highly-Feminised World and Unfeminine Characters in Saving Agnes and The Country Life', p. 5.

to enter her vision'.[703] Moments later, however, this positive reading disintegrates, when she declares that she 'was suddenly filled with the most extraordinary sense of existence as a secret pain, an inner torment it was impossible to share with others, who asked you to attend to them while remaining oblivious to what was inside you', and she 'felt this compelling pain of loneliness'. It is worth noting that this story is recounted in a creative writing class, suggesting that narration might offer some therapeutic benefits against this vision of loneliness, but at the heart of this would-be writer's concern is a problem echoed in both Faye, and Cusk's own project.

In emphasising the importance of empathy, Cusk also seems to resist what several commentators have argued is an apathetic tendency in contemporary autofiction. Nicholas Dames, for instance, has claimed that contemporary autofiction is dominated by 'undramatic monologue', which sets out largely to 'reject… the goal of generating empathy'.[704] While this is certainly something that much autofiction toys with, I want to posit that Cusk's texts work entirely against this urge.[705] While certainly it could be argued that in one sense her novels function perhaps unmercifully and unabashedly via 'undramatic monologue', it is important to remember that it is, unlike typical autofiction, the monologues of numerous characters, and characters who are never the narrator themselves, which serves to re-emphasise, rather than reject the 'goal of generating empathy'. Just as Lerner drew our attention as readers to the importance of listening carefully to others, Cusk too emphasises the need to pay close attention to those we address. Even where Cusk's work has been criticised for the way that Faye manipulates the narrative - making implicit authorial judgments that are far from empathetic - it could be argued that the imperative to empathise is only displaced on to a reader. Sally Rooney, for example, claimed in her review that she felt that the moments 'in which authorial judgment appears to be withheld but isn't really, represented a weakness in *[Kudos]*'.[706] It is possible, however, to frame her response itself as the affective product that emerges from the novel, rather than relying on representations of model empathetic behaviour in the texts themselves. In this way, readers become 'active' and are encouraged to perform the emotional labour needed to assuage their loneliness.

Moreover, Pieter Vermeulen has helpfully pointed out that the urge to empathise has long been viewed as part of the 'traditional gendered association between femininity and sentiment', and

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[703] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 218.

[704] Nicholas Dames, 'The New Fiction of Solitude', *The Atlantic*, 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-new-fiction-of-solitude/471474/> [accessed 17 November 2019].

[705] See, for example, Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?,* in which one character declares that they consider it 'sort of wonderful to… lack an overwhelming empathy'. Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (London: Vintage, 2014), pp. 106-7.

[706] Rooney, 'Buried in Bourgeois Life'.

that because of this Cusk's use of undramatic monologue might be seen as a critique of 'the gendered imperative to feel and feel for others'.[707] He argues that her works 'bracket empathy […] in ways that resist […] baneful gender politics'.[708] While it is true that we ought to be wary of gendered associations when examining the imperative to empathise, I want to challenge Vermeulen's assessment that in her attempt to resist this, Cusk creates in Faye a 'quasi-invisible narrator [who] does not become available for empathetic identification'.[709] The refusal to make Faye's back story the central plot of the novel does not necessarily mean that she is unavailable for empathetic identification, especially since, as Francine Prose points out, the other characters' stories seem to deliberately mirror Faye's own worries and concerns.[710] Furthermore, alongside the idea that Faye herself is hard to empathise with, Vermeulen claims that Faye evinces 'a certain lack of empathy for and connection to [her] surroundings', but the absence of Faye's response to many of these monologues does not necessarily mean that she herself is devoid of empathy, since the absence of narrated empathy does not denote the absence of empathy itself.[711] Nor does this preclude readers from empathising with characters other than Faye; the absence of her own empathetic response might instead be seen as an invitation for readers themselves to perform the affective work of empathising, as in the Sally Rooney example above. Thus, Cusk's texts offer a platform for readers to practice the construction of literary empathy, even if they might struggle to empathise easily with the narrator of the text before them.

The importance of empathetic identification is reinforced again and again in Cusk's work. In *The Last Supper,* Cusk even goes so far as to assert that the main purpose of engaging with art is to experience an empathetic moment of identification: 'to look at a painting', she tells us, 'is to feel looked at, comprehended, yourself. It is to experience empathy, for what is art but the struggle to acknowledge the fact that we ourselves were created?'.[712] As this quote implies, the experience is catalysed by a moment of recognition, by our feeling that we ourselves have been 'comprehended', and throughout the *Outline* trilogy, moments of recognition such as these occur repeatedly. In the first novel, for instance, Faye states that her students 'wanted something from me; that though they didn't know me, or one another, they had come here with the purpose of being recognised'.[713] This desire for recognition is, Meg Jensen argues, integral to autofiction itself, which as a mode aims to 'formulate a distinct kind of human subject… whose inter subjectivity (I, me, us) generates a kind of

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[707] Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation', pp. 6-7.

[708] Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation', p. 7.

[709] Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation', pp. 9-10.

[710] Prose, 'Real Talk: Rachel Cusk's Kudos', pp. 526-7.

[711] Vermeulen, 'Against Premature Articulation', p. 7.

[712] Cusk, *The Last Supper*, pp. 177-8.

[713] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 133.

aesthetic intimacy'.[714] This aesthetic intimacy is what Faye's students desire, and it is emphatically highlighted throughout the trilogy. In *Outline*, one of Faye's students describes the experience of returning to a favourite D.H. Lawrence story in the hope of feeling this moment of recognition. The character claims of Lawrence that 'even though he's dead, in a way I think he is the person I love most in all the world. I would like to be a D. H. Lawrence character, living in one of his novels... [because] life seems so rich, when I look at it through his eyes, yet my own life very often appears sterile'.[715] She turns to one of his stories, *The Wintry Peacock*, noting that it is an autobiographical story, but realises that when she lingers on the exact details of the story – the weather, the noises - to which she cannot relate, she felt 'for the first time... that Lawrence was going to fail to transport me out of my own life'.[716] It is important that it is the consideration of these details that discourages this woman from suspending her disbelief successfully, since it suggests something about the mindset that the reader of autofiction must bring to the work. If emotions are to be universal, the reader must be willing to approach them as such, in spite of circumstantial details that differ – or in Nancy K. Miller's terms they must let disidentification affect them as much as identification.[717] The inclusion of this Lawrence text also serves to highlight something about the unique way that Cusk makes use of autofiction as a mode. It is not merely the inclusion of autobiographical details that allows Cusk's text to successfully evoke feelings of empathy and soothe feelings of loneliness – or Lawrence's work would achieve it too – but perhaps instead the importance it places on interactions with others, a point which autofiction encourages readers to meditate on by positioning them as slower, 'active' readers.[718]

In *Transit*, this is approached overtly, through numerous images of characters identifying strongly with the creator of an artwork. An audience member at a talk Faye gives, for instance, declares in tears that in the story Faye read 'it was me you were describing, that woman was me, her pain was my pain'.[719] Perhaps the most striking declaration of identification, however, comes from a character called Jane, who asks Faye to help her write a text about her sense of identification with the painter Marsden Hartley, who, she insists is her: 'I'm him... we're the same... [and his artworks] were more like thoughts, thoughts in someone else's head that she could see. It was seeing them that had enabled her to recognise that those thoughts were her own'.[720] Faye, in disbelief, tries to

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[714] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Literary Empathy, and the Interesting in Autofiction', pp. 69-70.
[715] Cusk, *Outline*, pp. 209-10.
[716] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 210.
[717] Miller, 'But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?', p. 429.
[718] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Literary Empathy, and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 76.
[719] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 121.
[720] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 134.

rationalise this declaration, arguing that 'if she was talking about identification, she was right – it was common enough to see oneself in others, particularly if those others existed at one remove from us, as for instance characters in a book do', but Jane insists that this is not the case. Rather than identification, she believes that she shares a consciousness with Marsden Hartley. In fact, she explicitly explains that it is not the facts of his life that seem to mirror her own – not then, the literal truths which the character could not get beyond when reading Lawrence's work – but the way that these things are told and shown: 'rather than mirroring the literal facts of her own life, Marsden Hartley was doing something much bigger and more significant: he was dramatising them'.[721] What makes Cusk's work so affectively productive for readers, then, is not merely the biographical details that she includes, but the way that she uses autofiction to dramatise interactions with others. As in the work of Ben Lerner, it is the close attention that Faye pays to those around her that constitutes the real empathetic heart of the trilogy, even when Faye's external responses might not easily be read as empathetic, as is the case here, where she displays few signs of empathy for Jane. In this way, Cusk's texts perhaps illustrate Hywel Dix's point that autofiction 'is less concerned with faithfully reporting what its protagonist did, or even how that person thought and felt, and […] more concerned with the speculative question of how that subject might respond to new and often imagined environments'.[722]

It could, of course, be argued that simply by including these moments in the novels, Cusk does not necessarily endorse this particular idea about art's ultimate purpose, but if we use her own non-fiction works as paratexts (which autofiction arguably encourages us to do) we can see yet another example of this image taken from her own life. She writes in her essay 'The Outsider' about taking a friend to the theatre to watch a production of *Three Sisters*. At the play's close, her friend declares, 'that's me… That woman, Masha. She's me'.[723] Cusk's response to this is to consider the moment 'a victory', a judgment that serves as a fitting testament to the importance of empathy in her works. As such, while the issues of the network society that Elke D'Hoker argued were being responded to in Cusk's earlier work have only worsened over time, Cusk's way of textually responding to those issues has itself matured. She has moved beyond conventional novelistic representations of empathy to instead draw on autofiction as a mode to encourage readers to interrogate their own capacity for empathy, making productive use of what Meg Jensen terms

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[721] Cusk, *Transit*, pp. 137-8.
[722] Hywel Dix, 'Introduction: The Story So Far', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 7.
[723] Cusk, 'The Outsider'.

autofiction's encouragement of an 'active readership'.[724] In dramatising and emphasising the interactions between Faye and her interlocutors she resists the tendency observed in many works of autofiction towards apathy, and instead offers a way for readers to perform the affective work of empathising themselves, offering them a route out of their own loneliness.

The Talking Cure: Dialogue and Therapy

The other, perhaps more immediately obvious, way in which Cusk's late works attempt to represent the central importance of empathy is through an emphasis on dialogue. It would, however, be a mistake to believe that simply by representing dialogue the texts manage to present a way out of loneliness. Instead, as in the work of Ben Lerner, Cusk suggests it is the portrayal of careful attention being paid to narratives, rather than simply the inclusion of them, that is important. Much has already been made of the importance of dialogue in the novels and the precedents for this, including a particular focus on the ways that novels borrow from classical stories such as the *Odyssey*.[725] Cusk herself acknowledges this debt, but she frames it in a very particular way; when asked about the central ideas that underpin the *Outline* trilogy she replied that:

> There's the idea of this sort of communal storytelling… [and] I was thinking about the *Odyssey* and about foundational narrative ideas and their relationship to therapy—people telling things after the thing has happened to them—and how that became a sort of basic therapeutic position that also evokes some commonality in experience.[726]

It is important to note that it is not simply the act of narration here that is therapeutic but that it is done with the purpose of evoking 'commonality in experience'. If people do not seek responses from others, or seek to respond to others in an empathetic manner, then the dialogue in these novels stands no chance of being reparative. It is because of this that therapy itself – predicated upon the telling of traumatic events – is not itself always framed as a positive experience in Cusk's works. Indeed, in *Aftermath,* Cusk writes that her experience of therapy was that it made her 'feel like a lonely man visiting a brothel, the money changing hands, paying for understanding as some people

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[724] Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Literary Empathy, and the Interesting in Autofiction', p. 76.

[725] See, for instance: Niall McArdle, 'Telling Tales Untold', *Canadian Literature*, 227.Winter (2015), 163–65; and Harvey, 'Verisimilitude'.

[726] Schwartz, '"I Don't Think Character Exists Anymore": A Conversation with Rachel Cusk'.

pay for love. And just as that is not love, so this cannot be understanding'.[727] In fact, to state simply that Cusk's novels promote empathy simply by virtue of relying so heavily on dialogue is to overlook the fact that much of this dialogue is, in a sense, a failure at communicating anything real. As in Wallace's 'The Depressed Person', Cusk repeatedly presents us with ostensibly therapeutic exchanges in which words are conveyed but emotional meaning is apparently not. Early in *Outline*, for instance, Faye remarks that her neighbour 'began to ask me questions, as though he had learned to remind himself to do so, and I wondered what or who had taught him that lesson, which many people never learn'.[728] That this is remarkable to Faye suggests something of the people with whom she surrounds herself; though they may talk, they do not converse, and this sort of talk will do nothing to alleviate one's loneliness.

This image of dialogue failing to foster empathy recurs again and again in the novels, and might actually best function as a cautionary tale of how not to create intimacy and connection between people. Once again, it would be remiss to overlook the role that gender plays in this, as it is notable that most of the instances of characters neglecting to ask Faye's opinion come from men. This perhaps reflects Melinda Harvey's claim that 'conversation for men is adversarial: the whole idea behind it is to assert status', meaning that 'the problem is not that Faye is unwilling to self-disclose but that she struggles to find a listening ear'.[729] We can see a glaring example of this in *Kudos,* when a male interviewer asks Faye a question, then at great length gives his own answer to it, until finally being interrupted by a publishing assistant, who remarks that he always 'seemed to take such a long time to get round to asking a question... [that] when he did, [he] discovered that he himself had the best answer for it'.[730] This acts, then, as a dramatization of the difference between hearing and listening, and its effect is to lead us to understand the difference between disengagement and true empathy.

If conversation is not inherently reparative, then one must consider quite what Cusk's novels posit is, or under what circumstances conversation might prove to be. The answer lies, perhaps in the novel itself – as an artistic work whose very production functions as a testament to Faye/Cusk's careful consideration of other perspectives. It is notable, for instance, that the trilogy ends with Faye meeting the next writer who is to take up residency in the flat in Athens. This woman has recently experienced a trauma, but feels that the event now evades conversation. She says that 'she couldn't describe what had happened, to herself or to other people. She talked about it, O sure enough,

[727] Cusk, *Aftermath*, pp. 127-8.
[728] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 11.
[729] Harvey, 'Verisimilitude'.
[730] Cusk, *Kudos*, p. 186.

talked about it incessantly – but in all her talk the thing itself remained untouched, shrouded and mysterious, inaccessible'.[731] The novel threatens, therefore, to end with an image highlighting the insufficiency of conversation, but is rescued by the woman's assertion that she has now decided to *write* about the experience, and, perhaps even more notably, that her decision to do so was sparked by a discussion with the man sat next to her on the plane, whose 'conversation… had set her mind to work around these themes'.[732] The novel therefore ends where it began (*Outline* opens with Faye chatting to a man sat beside her on a plane); an almost metafictional portrayal of Faye meeting herself, just as Cusk 'meets' herself in the text. And just as Cusk described herself before the *Outline* trilogy as having 'nothing to say for a little while', it is the act of writing around and about the conversations that follow a silence that ultimately constitutes the creative (and therapeutic) act itself.[733]

Finally, I want to end by considering precisely how Cusk sees her work as recuperative, and for whom, beginning with a consideration of her readership. Throughout the *Outline* trilogy, Cusk leaves what amounts to a trail of breadcrumbs signifying how a writer's work might affectively transform her readers. In *Kudos*, for instance, Cusk uses the act of translation as a way of drawing our attention to the importance of reading. There, a translator tells Faye that they had read 'a passage in one of your books… where you describe enduring something similar, and I translated it very carefully and with great caution, as if it were something fragile… and afterwards I felt that while you had legitimised this half-reality by writing about it, I had legitimised it again by managing to transpose it into another language'.[734] The act of translation here seems to function as a metaphor for the act of careful and emotionally open reading. A similar situation is described, this time by Faye, in *Transit*, when she relates an exchange she had with the translator of a Polish edition of her book: 'talking about certain passages in the book, I would feel her creation begin to supersede mine, not in the sense that she violated what I had written but that it was now living through her, not me. In the process of translation the ownership of it – for good or ill – had passed from me to her'.[735] That this image is repeated suggests something of its importance to Cusk, and it is an image which affects even the other writers in the series, not only Faye, as for instance, when Angeliki remarks that she 'was surprised by the numbers of women who attended my readings – it almost seemed as though my work was more important to them than it is to me'.[736] These readers, it is worth noting,

[731] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 238.
[732] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 238.
[733] CCCB, *Rachel Cusk. Autopsy of a Marriage*, 27:49.
[734] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 223-4.
[735] Cusk, *Transit*, pp. 179-80.
[736] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 108.

Angeliki claims need her books because they are people 'who feel very much alone in their daily lives', and so once again the therapeutic function of reading is framed in terms of it being an escape from loneliness.[737] It is in this sense that Cusk's works, too, might be seen as consolatory. While they have been criticised for offering little hope to readers (Francine Prose, for instance, cites the lack of a happy ending in the trilogy as a reason that people don't 'go to Cusk's novels for consolation or uplift'), it might be the case that the consolation is simply not to be found in the narrative arc at all, but instead in what Cusk tries to demonstrate about our capacity for connection.[738] As Cusk herself puts it, 'the idea that… anyone could find a different way of living, by a different way of inquiring and listening—that's an idea that I have, of not necessarily what my book could do, but what any book could do'.[739]

The question of what one decides to take from Cusk's works also returns us to the question of for whom they might be therapeutic. At its broadest level, this is perhaps only for the readers who are open and willing to suspend their disbelief sufficiently to believe that literature *can* in fact offer something therapeutic, unlike the cynical literary agent in *Kudos*, who declares that 'he didn't set much store by [literature's] morally beneficial qualities, other than to raise the game… of someone correspondingly slightly inferior'.[740] Like Wallace's references to horoscopes and how they might offer benefits for readers who understand the fraudulent mechanism behind them but who wilfully suspend this thought, Cusk chooses to illustrate this with the anecdote of a psychic at the beginning of *Transit.* The psychic emails Faye, explaining that they could sense that 'I had lost my way in life, that I sometimes struggled to find meaning in my present circumstances and to feel hope for what was to come; she felt a strong personal connection between us, and while she couldn't explain the feeling, she knew too that some things ought to defy explanation'.[741] As if to pre-empt Faye's cerebral response to the email, she goes on to say that 'she understood that many people closed their minds to the meaning of the sky above their heads, but she firmly believed I was not one of those people'. It is possible to interpret this as an echo of Cusk's own project; the scam email is in reality only a variation on Cusk's declaration in *A Life's Work* that her book 'is a letter, addressed to those women who care to read it, in the hope that they find some companionship in my experiences'.[742] Whether Faye believes in the psychic powers of her correspondent is beside the point, it is what she can gain from the experience if she chooses to believe that is truly important.

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[737] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 104.
[738] Prose, 'Real Talk: Rachel Cusk's Kudos', p. 534.
[739] Schwartz, '"I Don't Think Character Exists Anymore": A Conversation with Rachel Cusk'.
[740] Cusk, *Kudos*, pp. 41-2.
[741] Cusk, *Transit*, p. 1.
[742] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, p. 16.

If we turn now to the other side of the therapeutic coin – the ways in which writing might prove to be a recuperative experience for Cusk herself – it might seem much easier to make this argument with reference to her memoirs. While *Aftermath* and *A Life's Work* are books which critics have read as 'trauma narrative[s]… [in which] writing the narrative is for her a way of healing the wound', the same is also true of her later autofictional works.[743] What all Cusk's works share is a belief in the power of storytelling; in the same way that a reader must wilfully suspend their disbelief to find solace in Cusk's literature, likewise a writer must believe in the agency of their own narrative. In *Kudos*, Faye tells another writer that she is wrong to believe that she played a part in another couple's divorce, but that instead it is 'her own capacity for storytelling – which, as I had already told her, had affected me all those years ago – that made her see her own hand in what happened around her'.[744] Here, Faye embodies both the reader – admitting to being affected and moved by a story told by a writer – and the writer themselves, who must acknowledge that their own power to craft a story gives them the agency to process traumatic events. The need for both reader and writer to be open to this way of thinking might also be represented by an image which Cusk chooses to include early on in *Outline*. There she describes the intimacy of her two children when they were young, which was fostered by their shared belief in the imaginary worlds of their play. It was, she writes, 'a kind of shared trance in which they created whole imaginary worlds… [which] brought home to me how much of what was beautiful in their lives was the result of a shared vision of things that strictly speaking could not have been said to exist'.[745] Later, she writes this is perhaps 'one definition of love, the belief in something that only the two of you can see', and it seems easy to translate this same idea to the process of reading as Cusk imagines it applying to her work. If both reader and writer only choose to believe in the transformative power of literature, then that power can become real.

What is even more poignant, perhaps, is the description that follows this of the point at which Faye's two sons ceased to believe in the same vision, a point at which 'there was no longer a shared vision, a shared reality even. Each of them saw things now solely from his own perspective: there was only point of view'.[746] The danger of this mindset is the fundamental mechanism underpinning the novels – they are about resisting any single point of view; like Clelia, whose apartment Faye lives in during the first novel, there exists for Cusk a 'marked prejudice against compositions that glorified the solo voice or instrument'.[747] It is important to stress at this point that

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[743] Braun, '"A Compound Fenced off from the Rest of the World"', p. 26.
[744] Cusk, *Kudos*, p. 71.
[745] Cusk, *Outline*, pp. 80-1.
[746] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 83.
[747] Cusk, *Outline*, p. 53.

I do not believe that Cusk is advocating for perpetual dialogue between people as the only solution to loneliness, but rather that she sees the existence of shared experience as the platform from which people might progress to a healthy state of solitude. In her essay 'How to Get There' she argues that the primary benefit of a writing class lies in its ability to provide such a social space while thereby facilitating healthy time spent alone (in the act of writing). She writes that:

> what is interesting about the writing workshop is its communality... Alienation produces loneliness, for which, as Marianne Moore said, solitude is the cure. The writing workshop posits a non-alienating social space, and as such creates the possibility of solitude as its sequel; the student who comes to the workshop lonely will leave it, one hopes, ready to be alone.[748]

What is crucial to note here is the idea of solitude as the 'sequel' to a social experience, not its opposite. What Cusk implies is that while loneliness might constitute the opposite of community, community and solitude are in fact mutually sustaining states, and the difference between them may at times be only a matter of perception. It is no accident that *Outline* ends with a character claiming that he will 'spend the day in solicitude', only to have his word choice corrected by Faye to 'solitude'; sometimes the difference can appear as small as that malapropism suggests.[749] Likewise, it can at times be hard to mark the distinction between silence and non-communication in Cusk's work. While Faye's silence has often been read as a sign that she does not engage with others, if we instead view Cusk's work as an example of allofiction then we come to understand that Faye's silence is anything but a representation of her passivity. Instead, it encourages readers to take on a more active role, performing the emotional labour that Faye apparently does not. In doing so, Cusk positions us as the 'active readership' of autofiction, establishing a connection between reader and writer that could not be achieved in her earlier memoirs.

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[748] Rachel Cusk, 'How to Get There', in *Coventry* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 182-3.
[749] Cusk, *Outline*, pp. 248-9.

Therapy or Branding Exercise? Tao Lin, Digital Loneliness, and the Remarketing of Autofiction

So far in this thesis I have outlined the impact of domestic, political and affective structures on our experiences of loneliness. In the following chapter, I primarily want to consider the impact of digital networks, and, in particular, to interrogate the ways that Tao Lin's work represents the impact of digital mediation on our ability to communicate meaningfully with others. More than this, however, I also want to argue in this final chapter that contemporary authors are growing increasingly aware of the general trends that this thesis has so far recounted. Using Lin as a case study, I will demonstrate that authors are able to use the association between autofiction and community-building to not only sell books, but also to reimagine their public selves. While Lin's attempt to reconcile a personal image of his self with a more public one is, in many ways, a highly self-conscious continuation of the project that Wallace began twenty years ago, it differs in two distinct, but vitally important ways.[750] First, in its interest in digital media, which, as I will show, constitutes both a thematic concern and stylistic element of Lin's work, and secondly, in its increased need to be deployed as a tool for recovering Lin's public image. Following public accusations of both statutory rape and emotional abuse, Lin continued to publish autofictional texts, and this chapter seeks to explore the extent to which his decision (and ability) to do so might be informed by an understanding of autofiction's shifting associations in the twenty-first century. In doing so, the chapter will therefore shed an important light on the ideas explored throughout the project as a whole.

This chapter will also show that the 'tone' of loneliness that is examined earlier in the thesis is especially present in the works of Lin and his Alt-Lit peers, and that this is precisely because their work often grapples with the omnipresence of technology in contemporary life, a world in which we are constantly, in Sherry Turkle's words, 'alone together'.[751] Lin's engagement with online media are in no small part responsible for his fame, because as Justin Russell Greene notes, Lin 'saw the Internet as a place to publish his works, to perform his authorial identity, and to generate attention'.[752] This has implications for our understanding of genre in this chapter, because much of Lin's work was either republished or repurposed from earlier online sources in printed form, and our consideration of Lin's audience must necessarily shift accordingly. The popularity of his online

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[750] In fact, some critics have noted stylistic similarities between Lin's work and the New Sincerity. See: Aislinn Clare McDougall, 'What Is Cyber-Consciousness?: The Digital Mediation of Sincerity and Parody in Tao Lin's Taipei', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 7.1 (2019).

[751] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

[752] Justin Greene, 'Tweeting the Author: Tao Lin's Performance of Authorial Identity on Twitter', *Authorship*, 7 (2018), p. 3.

writing is evident in the establishment of what came to be known as Alt-Lit, which, as Rachel R. White defines it, is a 'community of (hundreds, if not thousands, of) writers who publish online and have been connected to Lin'.[753] The fact that Alt-Lit is often defined specifically as a community, rather than as a literary movement, illustrates the extent to which literature for Lin and his peers is inextricably bound up in these questions of engagement and meaningful connection. In their work, they interrogate a link between increased technological presence and loneliness, while trying simultaneously to leverage that same technology to resist this loneliness.[754] As Fay Bound Alberti has noted, this dovetails with a 'pressing consideration in loneliness interventions… [which is] how to utilize social media in successful and collaborative ways' in spite of the fact that 'some forms of social media in the early twenty-first century can be seen as evidence of modern isolated individualism'.[755]

This chapter seeks to understand the ways that Lin's work both reinforces and undermines this idea of modern society being defined by isolated individualism. I will begin by considering the role of the internet in Lin's success, examining the ways that Alt-Lit utilised social media to not only publicise the work of Lin and his peers, but also to establish a community among its readers by capitalising on the increasingly participatory nature of the internet itself. Following on from this, I will briefly consider how Lin's experiences as an Asian American might mean that his experiences of loneliness differ from other authors considered elsewhere in this project, and more widely how Alt-Lit offered a space for other minorities to establish a sense of community. I will then consider Lin's portrayal of lonely figures in his novels, questioning the extent to which his work suggests that digital mediation might offer a useful way for people to connect when face-to-face communication is a struggle. As in the other chapters, I will also consider what exactly it is about autofiction that appeals to Lin, and the ways that writing is presented as therapeutic in both the novels themselves and in paratexts by Lin. Unlike Lerner, Lin's early novels do not appear to sufficiently trouble the presentation of men needing solitude and loneliness to stimulate creative productivity. The chapter then asks whether the deliberate establishment of a teenage aesthetic that privileged the disclosure of secrets - a hallmark attribute of Lin's earlier autofiction - might have played a role in his, and others', ability to continue working and publishing in the wake of the allegations made against him. After the publication of his novel *Taipei*, Lin's work moved away from this aesthetic, instead

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[753] Rachel R. White, 'Staying Up All Night With an Adderall'd Tao Lin', *Vulture*, 2013
<https://www.vulture.com/2013/06/tao-lin-profile-taipei-drugs-adderall.html> [accessed 1 December 2021].
[754] It is interesting to note here that both early blogging culture and Alt-Lit share a thematic interest in loneliness. Consider, for instance, what is widely understood to be the first hit youtube series, *Lonelygirl15,* or Alt-Lit texts such as Michael Inscoe's *Don't Die Alone* or Gabby Bess's *Alone With Other People*.
[755] Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 135.

emphasising the need to embrace communal values. The chapter closes by asking whether this shift might be a product of the allegations made against Lin and several of his Alt-Lit peers, and whether his decision to adopt an autofictional mode that is much more overtly interested in community could be interpreted as a co-opting of the form to rebrand himself in the wake of the accusations made against him. It therefore prompts us to consider the ethical implications of autofiction as a form when it is able to be co-opted by writers whose problematic lives can be validated by the publication of work rooted in those same lives.

Online Communities and Social Exclusion

The term 'Alt-Lit' has been used variously to designate a genre, a style, and a community itself, but what most definitions share is an emphasis on the central role of the internet in establishing it. In particular, the internet offered these writers alternative routes to publication that allowed them to make their work quickly and widely available to a global audience, in much the same way that autofiction itself benefitted.[756] For Lin and his peers, the central mechanism for circumventing these gatekeeper roles was the blog, and it is integral to this discussion that the blog be understood as both a literary and a social technology.[757] Lin himself has repeatedly emphasised this aspect of blogs, explaining that blogging feels both 'literary' to him but that his engagement with blogs also prompts him to ask 'social things like "how can I 'connect' with this person[?"]'.[758] Blogs were at the forefront of what has come to be called Web 2.0, the moment at which the internet became increasingly participatory, emphasising user-generated content in a way it had not previously done. As Jia Tolentino puts it, 'this new internet was social… in a way that centered on individual identity' and 'the blogosphere was also full of mutual transactions, which tended to echo

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[756] See Hywel Dix's claim that 'the growth of self-publishing… meant that some of the traditional gatekeeper roles in the publishing industry such as agent and editor have started to become obsolescent', in: *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 11.

[757] Consider, for instance, the fact that Lin's own publishing house did not take open submissions, instead asking authors to 'find a person who has been published by or is associated with Muumuu House and read their blog. If you like their blog make a comment in their comments section in a sincere and natural manner, expressing your feelings', a process which might or might not lead to them being contacted by Muumuu House. See: Blake Butler, 'Muumuu House', *HTMLGIANT*, 2008 <http://htmlgiant.com/web-hype/muumuu-house/> [accessed 1 December 2021].

[758] Tao Lin, 'Only Connect', *Poetry Foundation* (Poetry Foundation, 15 May 2009), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69308/only-connect> [accessed 2 December 2021].

and escalate'.[759] In this respect, Lin's treatment of the so-called blogosphere reflected a broader tendency in the ways that the public began to use online media and the emergence of what Lee Humphreys has called the 'qualified self'.[760] With the emergence of the 'qualified self', our focus shifted away 'from intrapersonal communication and toward interpersonal communication… [which in turn] privilege[d] the exchange, the audience, and the social relations of the qualified self'.

As Humphreys' argument suggests, an understanding of Lin's work that considers the role of the qualified self must also therefore revise its understanding of audience. What online writing facilitates is perhaps best understood as what Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd call 'the networked audience… [which] consists of real and potential viewers for digital content that exist within a larger social graph. These viewers are connected not only to the user, but to each other, creating an active, communicative network'.[761] This audience, they argue, 'is unidentified but contains familiar faces; it is both potentially public and personal. Like the broadcast audience, the networked audience includes random, unknown individuals, but, unlike the broadcast audience, it has a presumption of personal authenticity and connection'. As with autofiction's encouragement of a so-called 'active readership', the networked audience is more heavily invested in – and more likely to directly engage with – the author around whom they have constellated, ultimately offering them a magnified sense of community that is unavailable to conventional readers of fiction. Before considering whether Lin's work truly offers this to his readers, however, I want to begin by considering the factors that may have contributed to Lin's own experiences of loneliness, since they directly impact what his readers may hope to find addressed in his work.

Lin's novels are filled with characters who might be described as loners, such as Ellen in his first novel, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, who 'some nights, now, in bed, feeling very bored and a little lonely… [would] have imaginary conversations with kids at school she wished she were friends with', conversations that made her 'feel so yearning and friendless and unhelpable… that she would squeak a little'.[762] While Ellen is not an obvious portrait of Lin himself, the protagonists of his two most recent novels certainly are. Take Paul, from *Taipei*, who dwells on the fact that of 'fifteen hundred classmates only two others, that he'd noticed, were as socially inept as he'.[763] Or Li, the protagonist of *Leave Society*, who describes himself in high school and college as being 'a frail,

[759] Jia Tolentino, 'The I in the Internet', in *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019), p. 6.

[760] Lee Humphreys, *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 23.

[761] Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, 'I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience', *New Media & Society*, 13.1 (2011), p. 129.

[762] Tao Lin, *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2007), pp. 123-4.

[763] Tao Lin, *Taipei* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013), pp. 40-1.

gloomy, awkward, anxious, troublingly shy loner'.[764] While this could be taken as more evidence of the pervasive tone of loneliness that dominates contemporary society, Frank Guan argues convincingly that this might also be understood as a reflection of Lin's own societal exclusion because of his race.[765] The matter of Lin's race also directly intersects with his exclusion from the literary mainstream, since, as Tope Folarin points out, 'writers of color are sparingly featured in appraisals of autofiction'. [766] Just as Cusk felt excluded from the British publishing industry because of her gender, Lin too was long ignored by mainstream publishers, and as Frank Guan has noted, it was not until his sixth book was published that his work was discussed in prestigious literary magazines, even then being met by negative reviews in both the *New York Times Book Review* and *Bookforum*.[767]

In particular, Guan argues that the racism Lin must have experienced as a child not only heightens his sensitivity to broader forms of exclusion (represented most obviously by his repeated depiction of loners) but that it also explains the importance he consequently places on literature and imaginary escapes from the world of exclusion. He argues that for those who experienced racism in their childhood, literature often constitutes:

> the sole space in which he can, in spite of the tremendous, wholly justifiable mistrust and pessimism that his experiences have instilled in him, establish some form of free identity, perhaps even a gentle one. Language will simply mean more to him than it does to people fortunate enough to have a social life to fall back on; writing is his social life, or dream of one, and he will not hesitate to create it, and improve his chance of finding an audience who understands it, any more than he would hesitate to breathe.[768]

Taipei gives us evidence to support this interpretation, in a moment where Paul expresses his reluctance to attend a party, leading to an argument with his girlfriend, Michelle. They conclude, we are told, by agreeing that 'Paul had his writing, Michelle her friends'.[769] Similarly, in Lin's memoir, *Trip*, he describes himself as being both 'touched and startled' as a teenager, discovering music that he knew his peers would hate, 'feeling more and less alone - more because I had no one to share the

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[764] Tao Lin, *Leave Society* (New York: Vintage, 2021), p. 4.

[765] For more on the presentation race in Lin's work, see: Frank Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel', *N+1*, 2014 <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-20/reviews/nobodys-protest-novel/> [accessed 1 October 2021], and Stephanie Hsu, 'Tao Lin's Taipei as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic Jouissance', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 27.3 (2016), p. 192.

[766] Tope Folarin, 'Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction?', *The New Republic*, 27 October 2020 <https://newrepublic.com/article/159951/can-black-novelist-write-autofiction> [accessed 4 January 2021].

[767] Frank Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel', *N+1*, 2014 <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-20/reviews/nobodys-protest-novel/> [accessed 1 October 2021].

[768] Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.

[769] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 7.

song with, less because the song indicated people existed who felt similarly as me'.[770] As Guan sees

it, this desire to replace friends with writing, as well as the heightened sense of attunement that

accompanies adolescent experiences are both hallmarks of minority experience.[771] As with the other

writers examined in this thesis, therefore, art constitutes a therapeutic escape from the harsh

realities of life, but in Lin's case this is explicitly linked to his experiences as an Asian-American

writer.

Lastly, I want to consider one final way that Lin and his works are often situated outside the

mainstream literary canon, which lies in the description of either Lin himself, or his works, as

autistic. This point is in fact to some degree entwined with the racial stereotypes that plague critical

readings of Lin's work, since, as Guan points out, critics' tendencies to label 'his talent for evoking

human feeling as mathematically inhuman, his attempts to be accessible as ignorant, his fidelity to

detail as autism' echo 'the same slurs typically aimed at Asian males by white Americans to deface

and devalue them socially'.[772] Stephanie Hsu builds on this, noting that the stereotype of 'Asian

American men as affectless geeks combines with the narcissistic chic of literary genius in a manner

which catalyzes public attempts to "out" [Lin's] autism'.[773] Hsu's reading is a sensitive exploration of

the ways that *Taipei* 'subsume[s] what we might otherwise recognize as racial anxiety under the

signifier of autism', and more importantly, how Lin's excessive detailing of ASD-related behaviours

might be read as an example of what Žižek calls 'autistic jouissance'.[774] Hsu's interpretation sees this

jouissance as a radical way of resisting ableism and thus implicitly racism, but it arguably ignores

another aspect of the presentation of autistic behaviours in Lin's works, that might more simply be

understood as a way for Lin to directly address his experiences of loneliness and isolation.[775] Hsu

herself acknowledges that early diagnoses of autism depended on the shared 'characteristic of

extreme loneliness', and Lin's earlier portrayals of behaviours associated with autism might more

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[770] Tao Lin, *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change* (New York: Vintage, 2018), p. 54.

[771] It is perhaps also interesting to note that Guan posits literature did in fact constitute an alternative society for Lin and other Alt-Lit writers from minority backgrounds. He argues that Alt-Lit provided 'a platform from writers belonging to social strata that fell outside the purview and the audience of "literary fiction" — Asian males, Hispanic females, poor Appalachian whites, the Chicago underclass… [and] was the rare non-identity-politics-based literary grouping whose most prominent members (Tao Lin and Mira Gonzalez) were non-white'. See: Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.

[772] Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.

[773] Stephanie Hsu, 'Tao Lin's Taipei as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic Jouissance', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 27.3 (2016), p. 194.

[774] Hsu, 'Tao Lin's Taipei as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic Jouissance', pp. 192-3; 202.

[775] In this way, Lin's work might be seen as a continuation of the modernist experimentation which Patrick McDonagh argues created a literary analogue for early autism diagnoses. See: Patrick McDonagh, 'Autism and Modernism: A Genealogical Exploration', in *Autism and Representation*, ed. by Mark Osteen (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 107–24.

readily be understood as illustrations of this characteristic.[776] In a story from *Bed*, for example, one character is said to have 'made the effort to speak more. He bought books on how to improve his social skills. One book said to address people by their names. It would be interpreted as friendly'.[777] Rather than a radical undoing of racial stereotypes, what seems to be being illustrated in Lin's earliest works is instead a plain comment on the distressing and alienating experience of loneliness and isolation, and in particular the difficulties of maintaining face-to-face communication.

The Struggle to Communicate

Examples of what might be considered poor social interactions abound in Lin's works, but what is notable about the majority of them is that they largely take place face-to-face. In the abstract, the thought of face-to-face social interactions appears to instil a sense of dread in most of Lin's protagonists. In *Richard Yates*, for instance, Haley believes that he 'fear[s] social interaction… probably more than anyone I know', and at various points in the text he seems physically incapable of making conversation, as when he describes how he 'think[s] about talking and then I don't talk'.[778] Likewise, in *Taipei*, Paul is said to have 'committed to not speaking in almost all situations' two years into college due to his awkwardness, meaning that 'when he heard laughter, before he could think or feel anything, his heart would already be beating like he'd sprinted twenty yards'.[779] When characters do speak, these fears often appear woefully justified, as illustrated by numerous awkward interactions marked by the obsessive cataloguing of bodily gestures. Take, for example, Paul's two attempts to make a joke in *Taipei*, which both end in him having to painfully over-explain what he meant. After pretending to receive a phone call mid-conversation with someone, he backtracks:

> 'Just kidding,' said Paul. 'No one called me.'
>
> Amy had a glassy, disoriented expression.
>
> 'I don't have a phone call,' said Paul.
>
> 'That was good,' said Amy looking away.

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[776] Hsu, 'Tao Lin's Taipei as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic Jouissance', p. 200.

[777] Tao Lin, 'Suburban Teenage Wasteland Blues', *Bed* (Hoboken, N.J: Melville House Publishing, 2009), p. 65.

[778] Tao Lin, *Richard Yates* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2010), pp. 12, 98.

[779] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 40.

'Just kidding,' said Paul grinning weakly.[780]

At a later point in the novel, he likewise attempts to make a joke out of mishearing someone saying they want to eat better as 'eat butter':

Paul… grinned while saying 'you've been trying to eat butter?' twice, during which Laura began to blush.

'I thought you said "butter,"' said Paul grinning.

Laura looked at her hand touching a fork on the table.

'I thought you said you're trying to eat butter.'

'Stop,' said Laura moving the fork slowly toward herself.[781]

In both of these interactions, it is Paul's inability to understand that repeating himself is not going to suddenly illuminate the joke for his partner that renders them so painful, and this is in large part due to his inability to read physical cues. Laura's blushing, inability to meet Paul's eyes, and nervous hand gestures make it clear to a reader how this interaction is progressing, as do Amy's expression and her attempt to turn away. In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that so many of Lin's characters retreat to the digital realm, in the hopes that these issues might be less pronounced or debilitating in online interactions.

In their attempts to emphasise the vital role of digital media in Lin's work, critics often mistakenly assert that his texts seem to make no distinction between online and physical interactions. Emily Witt, for instance, claims that Lin 'makes little distinction between the parts of his life that are mediated through his computer and the parts he experiences physically'.[782] Digital mediation does, however, appear to offer something unavailable to Lin's characters in face-to-face contact, and it is for this reason that they so often turn to digital communication in an attempt to resolve conflicts and assuage their loneliness. Indeed, research into social inhibition and computer-mediated communication has indicated that '[social] cues indicating negative evaluation and scrutiny are attenuated or absent in an online environment… [so] there are fewer cues that shy individuals could interpret as indicative of rejection or as reactions to their perceived

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[780] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 25.
[781] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 50.
[782] Emily Witt, 'The Gpistolary Novel: Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The Daily Beast*, 18 June 2013 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/18/the-gpistolary-novel-tao-lin-s-taipei> [accessed 14 December 2021].

incompetence'.[783] What this ultimately means is that shyness is often 'diminished in an online environment'. In *Taipei*, we can see this illustrated when we learn that during arguments Paul and Erin 'communicated by email' because 'they'd agreed to type, not talk, whenever one of them… felt unable to speak in a friendly tone'.[784] While digital mediation does little to fix the communicative issues that beset Paul and Erin's relationship, however, it is most effective as a tool for resolving familial tensions. In *Taipei*, for instance, we learn that as a child, 'if for whatever reason [Paul] felt significantly, temporarily happier — he would get an urge to talk to his mother… knowing he was making her happy, for a few minutes, before running back to the TV, Nintendo, or computer'.[785] Paul's mother, however, scolds Paul for his behaviour, telling him that 'he shouldn't only talk to her — to his "poor mother," she'd say — when he felt like talking'. Reflecting on this advice in his college years, Paul then explains how:

> In college, junior and senior year, when he'd deliberately remained friendless… he would force himself to email his mother (his only regular communication, those two years, once every two to four days) even when he felt depressed and unmotivated. He would always feel better after emailing, knowing his mother would be happy and that, by mastering some part of himself, he'd successfully felt less depressed without bothering, impeding — or otherwise being a distraction in — anyone's life.[786]

It is indicative of the emotional progress between this novel and Lin's follow-up, *Leave Society*, that the primary emphasis here is on what emailing his mother did for Paul himself and not for his mother, but this does nevertheless serve as evidence of online communication facilitating good. In *Leave Society*, this is developed further, and evidence of email playing a mediatory role in familial tensions is visible nearly everywhere. Throughout the book Li repeatedly quarrels with his brother, Mike, but at one point he reveals that 'in emails, Mike was remarkably friendly. Except for verbal speech to nuclear kin when not in a good mood, the four of them (Li, Mike, their parents) seemed to be this way—courteous, considerate, positive, sensitive'.[787] At another point in the novel, we see this point illustrated after an argument erupts between Li and his parents in their house. Attempting to resolve the situation later, Li's mother sends Li an email in which she says that they 'must try using other methods to settle disagreements and love one another more'.[788] Li replies to his mother

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[783] Werner Stritzke, Anh Nguyen, and Kevin Durkin, 'Shyness and Computer-Mediated Communication: A Self-Presentational Theory Perspective', *Media Psychology*, 6.1 (2004), p. 4.

[784] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 242.

[785] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 227.

[786] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 227.

[787] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 143.

[788] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 127.

via email before leaving his room to resolve matters with his father verbally: '"I shouldn't have closed your computer," said Li, approaching his dad. "It's okay," said Li's dad. "Nothing was lost"'. It is as though Li had to work through his emotions textually, in the email exchange with his mother, before he could then more calmly approach the same problem face-to-face with his father. It is also striking that in this verbal exchange the emphasis on awkward non-verbal cues from Lin's earlier works (Laura's blushing, Amy's refusal to meet Paul's eyes) are now largely absent, replaced instead with direct communication that resolves the conflict tidily. In this situation, therefore, digital mediation appears to have allowed Lin's characters to avoid loneliness and isolation from their families.

An understanding of the differences between written and verbal communication is also therefore crucial to understanding why both Lin's characters, and by extension Lin himself, so regularly turn to digital media for meaningful connection. Clive Thompson's term 'digital intimacy' might usefully be employed here to describe what both Lin himself and his characters seek in their use of social media, which, via 'incessant contact' establishes a sense of 'ambient awareness… very much like being physically near someone and picking up on his mood through the little things he does - body language, sighs, stray comments'.[789] By establishing a sense of co-presence, he tells us, 'ambient intimacy becomes a way to "feel less alone"', something which Lin's phatic tweets also arguably try to capitalise on.[790] In an obvious echo of the claim in *Taipei* that Paul had his writing instead of friends, for instance, Lin once tweeted that 'instead of friends I have multiple twitter accounts'. The joke is telling not only in that it alludes to the ways that Twitter – like writing – allows Lin to cultivate a sense of intimacy (whether digital or analogue) but also in that it refers specifically to the importance of having multiple Twitter accounts. What this suggests is that it is not only the availability of a networked audience that allows Lin to feel less alone, but also the possibility of engaging in identity play. Sherry Turkle borrows Erik Erikson's notion of a 'moratorium' to describe this phenomenon, a term originally applied to the period of adolescence in which we are given 'new possibilities for experimenting with identity'.[791] Social media extends this period indefinitely, and Lin's refashioning of himself through the use of different Twitter accounts might be considered a perfect example of it, having maintained as many as seven different Twitter accounts throughout his

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[789] Clive Thompson, 'Brave New World of Digital Intimacy', *The New York Times*, 5 September 2008, section Magazine <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html> [accessed 26 October 2021].

[790] For more on Lin's use of Twitter, see: Justin Greene, 'Tweeting the Author: Tao Lin's Performance of Authorial Identity on Twitter', *Authorship*, 7 (2018).

[791] Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 178. See also: Erik H. Erikson, 'Youth: Fidelity and Diversity', *Daedalus*, 117.3 (1988), p. 3.

career.[792] Moreover, just as both tweeting and writing allow Lin to cultivate a sense of intimacy with his readership, this idea that identity play might assuage Lin's loneliness also accounts for Lin's choice to write autofiction specifically, since it, too, facilitates identity play perhaps more than any other literary genre.

In this respect, we might see both writing (and more specifically life writing) and social media as what Michel Foucault called technologies of the self.[793] What both life writing and social media facilitate is a process of what Lee Humphreys calls 'reckoning', in which 'we use media to better know ourselves so as to "improve" ourselves toward more normative expectations or ideals'.[794] This is not, Humphreys emphasises, a new phenomenon that arrived with social media, but is one of the ways that writing has constituted a technology of the self for centuries, including the act of diary writing. Accordingly, many of the descriptions of writing functioning therapeutically that appear in both Lin's novels and his tweets emphasise the ways that the process allows him to know himself better and therefore improve, helping him to 'learn and change', as he puts it in *Leave Society*.[795] In that novel, Lin frames the structuring of autobiographical writing as the culmination of many years not of writing, but of living: 'everything prior was preparation, he'd realize in fall 2019, for the lesson-like experience of repeatedly reading and revising a prose model of his life from 2013 to 2018—studying and shaping the story; researching, writing, and weaving in the self-targeted spells of the larger-perspective passages'.[796] The reference to the 'self-targeted spells' indicates the desire for change, but what is perhaps most interesting about this passage is that it is the experience of crafting a story out of his life that is 'lesson-like', not the experiences themselves, demonstrating that the processing that occurs during the writing of an autobiographical work is always the most therapeutic aspect of it.

Lin reinforces this point by repeatedly emphasising the way that crafting a narrative might imbue his life with greater meaning, as in *Leave Society* when he declares that 'he'd considered abandoning autobiography, but… liked its self-catalyzing properties too much—how it made life both life and literature, imbuing both with extra meaning'.[797] This same idea emerges, too, in his more overtly non-fiction works, as in *Trip*, where he describes how:

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[792] Greene, 'Tweeting the Author', p. 6.

[793] Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick. H. Hutton. (Cambridge, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

[794] Humphreys, *The Qualified Self,* p. 92.

[795] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 265.

[796] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 268.

[797] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 14.

he'd called his book secondary, but sometimes he preferred viewing his life as secondary

and his books and other writing - the selective downloads of his life - as primary. Since

college, when he began creating linguistic, shareable, fractal microcosms of his life in the

form of short stories and poems, experience and literature had become increasingly

symbiotic for him.[798]

It is worth noting, here, the added integration of digital language (the 'downloads of his life'), which further alludes to the symbiotic relationship between both reality and fiction, and reality and digital existence. This also means that in studying Lin's work, we must not only account for his own sense of identity, but also the role of his own works in contributing to that identity. In this way, we can account for the fact that, as Paul de Man argued in *Autobiography as De-facement*, life does not only produce an autobiography, but 'the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life [of the writer]'.[799]

Moreover, as with the other writers whose work I examine, the material that Lin draws on to produce his autobiographical project is not limited to his own personal experiences, but also involves his reflections on writers who came before him. Consequently, his use of intertextual allusions also contributes to his ability to deploy life writing as a technology of the self. In a recent interview, he frames the act of writing both autobiographically and intertextually as an experience that might constitute what Lee Humphreys calls 'reckonings':

writing and editing sentences and paragraphs about books that I've read — and embedding

these sentences and paragraphs into my fiction and nonfiction books — helps me

understand and remember and integrate and deepen what I've learned. Writing and reading

chronological narratives of my own life helps me stay focused on and interested in my long-

term process of changing my mind and life.[800]

Contrary, therefore, to Stephanie Hsu's claim that Lin is 'difficult to locate within a field or canon', I would argue that Lin almost constantly alludes to the literary heritage he sees himself working in.[801] While critics have observed stylistic similarities between Lin and earlier writers, little academic attention has thus far been paid to the importance of intertextuality in Lin's works, which seems surprising given their overwhelming prevalence.[802] As with Lerner's discussion of Ashbery's work, Lin

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[798] Lin, *Trip,* pp. 252-3.

[799] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *MLN*, 94.5 (1979), p.920.

[800] Scott Burton, 'Have You Left Society Yet?', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2021 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/have-you-left-society-yet/> [accessed 3 February 2022].

[801] Hsu, 'Tao Lin's *Taipei* as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic Jouissance', p. 192.

[802] See: Benjamin Lytal, 'Gchat Is a Noble Pursuit: Tao Lin's Modernist Masterpiece', *Observer*, 5 June 2013 <https://observer.com/2013/06/gchat-is-a-noble-pursuit-tao-lins-modernist-masterpiece/> [accessed 17

foregrounds the intertextual references throughout his oeuvre. Take, for example, the title of his

novel, *Richard Yates*, which extends a literary homage that Lin had been developing since his earliest

work.[803] Yates' influence is also evident in works by other Alt-Lit writers, as in Megan Boyle's

Selected Unpublished Blog Posts of a Mexican Panda Express Employee, where she writes that 'lately

I kind of feel like a Richard Yates character all of the time'.[804] These repeated references to works by

the same authors come to seem like part of the community-building process of Alt-Lit, functioning as

important shibboleths. More than this, however, these writers they reference are often those who

are revered by Lin and his peers specifically for the ways that they write about loneliness; with Yates

having even published a collection notably titled *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. Boyle, for instance,

claims that what makes her feel like a Yates' character is her tendency to 'half-jokingly over-share

thoughts about loneliness'. [805] In *Trip*, Lin explains his admiration for writers who engage with

loneliness as a topic, describing how he 'discovered [his favourite writers] by Googling variations of

"depressing lonely novel" at night in New York University's library'.[806] Intertextuality therefore

becomes a way for Lin to offer help and guidance for readers who approach his own work looking for

what he himself found in the works of Richard Yates, Lydia Davis, Jean Rhys and the other authors he

praises explicitly for the ways they write about loneliness. As he writes at the end of *Taipei*, 'he

uncertainly thought he'd written books to tell people how to reach him, to describe the particular

geography of the area of otherworld in which he'd been secluded', suggesting that writing functions

primarily as a way for Lin to describe his seclusion.[807] More importantly, however, it also implies that

situating himself in a form of networked audience might constitute an effective way to resist the

loneliness that so often accompanies that seclusion.

In this sense, Lin's use of autofiction implicitly aligns with the other authors whose work I

examine, but what is particularly interesting about Lin is the explicitness with which he discusses his

use of autofiction as therapeutic. Just as the title of *Richard Yates* alerts us to the importance of

intertextuality in Lin's work, his early poetry collection, *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, highlights the

importance of therapy. That collection, as Frank Guan notes, stresses 'the capacity to reduce one's

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January 2022]; Zach Baron, 'The Problem With Tao Lin', *The Village Voice*, 2010
<https://www.villagevoice.com/2010/09/08/the-problem-with-tao-lin/> [accessed 7 January 2022].

[803] See, for example, *Hikikomori*, where Lin writes that he has 'bought the rights to richard yates' novels the easter parade and revolutionary road on ebay and… changed my legal name to richard yates [sic]'. Tao Lin and Ellen Kennedy, *Hikikomori* (Bear Parade, 2007) <http://www.bearparade.com/hikikomori/> [accessed 17 January 2022], ch. 28.

[804] Megan Boyle, '10.19.09', *Selected Unpublished Blog Posts of a Mexican Panda Express Employee* (New York: Muumuu House, 2011).

[805] Boyle, '10.19.09'.

[806] Lin, *Trip,* p. 56.

[807] Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 246-7.

misery by conditioning one's mind to view that misery from a different, vastly more distant, perspective', a theme which runs throughout all of Lin's works.[808] In Lin's most recent novel, he actually refers at one point to what he calls 'the saddest thing he'd ever owned—a set of twenty tapes for reducing social anxiety through self-directed cognitive-behavioral therapy'.[809] The tapes, he notes, 'helped a little', but this reminiscing comes at a moment in the novel when Li is contemplating the transformative power of writing itself, describing to his mother how 'everything I do now is to try to change. Even writing'.[810] In interviews to publicise *Leave Society*, Lin is frank about using his writing as therapy; when asked why he writes autofictional novels rather than entirely fictional stories, he replied that it was 'because I want my writing to help my life and to be like therapy. I don't want to make stuff up to entertain people. I want the writing to be helpful to me'.[811] In a follow up question on how Lin views autofiction as functioning therapeutically, he responded that 'it gives me a place to talk like I might talk to a therapist. I talk about my past and things I don't usually talk about. It lets me think about these things in an organized, sustained way'.[812] In this sense, Lin perfectly encapsulates what Élisabeth Roudinesco has called 'the cult of autofiction', which has replaced psychoanalytical therapy, along with 'the Internet and mass communications… [by] making it possible for an author to take herself for the clinician of her own pathology'.[813]

The idea of art functioning therapeutically, and specifically helping to assuage loneliness, is also emphasised in the paratextual documents by and about Lin, many of which were shared widely on the internet platforms where he first found success. As early as 2006, in a satirical interview with himself published on his blog, responding to the question 'how can writing reduce pain/suffering?', Lin wrote that among other things it can 'make a person feel less lonely'.[814] In 2010, again in a satirical op-ed piece written by Lin about himself he claimed he was 'lonely and friendless but mutedly excited about autobiographical narratives featuring characters with low serotonin'.[815] That each of these instances not only references loneliness but is an example of Lin metafictively corresponding with himself becomes a way of illustrating both his own isolation and what Lin

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[808] Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.

[809] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 130.

[810] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 130.

[811] 'Interview with Tao Lin: Chadded Out of Society and Into Sincerity', *Interview Magazine*, 2021 <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/tao-lin-chadded-out-of-society-and-into-sincerity> [accessed 7 December 2021].

[812] 'Interview with Tao Lin: Chadded Out of Society and Into Sincerity'.

[813] Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*, trans. by Gregory Elliott. (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 44-5.

[814] Tao Lin, '~11,000-Word Post with Tao Lin & Kevin Sampsell Emails & Thoughts Re Editing', *Reader of Depressing Books*, 2006 <http://reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/2006/07/11000-word-post-with-tao-lin-kevin.html> [accessed 3 February 2022].

[815] Tao Lin, 'Great American Novelist', *The Stranger*, 2010 <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/great-american-novelist/Content?oid=4940853> [accessed 7 January 2022].

believes to be the only appropriate response to that, which is to write about himself. It is also worth noting that the first example is about writing more broadly (rather than life writing) and coincides roughly with the conception of Lin's earlier, less overtly autobiographical work. In those early texts, Lin often details moments of imaginative escapism that function as therapeutic aids to his characters. In 'Sincerity', for instance, Lin writes about one character's 'small talent for meaningfulness', by which they could 'take a thing from the world and fold it over, like a handkerchief, make a little wad of it, and then pack it inside of his own heart, as a staunching thing… and it was in this way that he was okay, he felt, at living; he was pretty good at it, probably as good as he would ever be'.[816] The talent for remaking the world creatively seems to be a sustaining force for this character but the nervous qualifications that end the sentence seem to negate any real confidence in this belief. In his later, more overtly autobiographical works (published after Lin claimed he was 'mutedly excited about autobiographical narratives'), Lin's fiction shows art to be a much more sustaining and supportive force in one's life. As in Lerner's texts, the moment of artistic production seems to constitute a moment of peaceful solitude, as when the existence of a sustained artistic project gives meaning to Li's isolation: 'his old hermitude, lacking a contracted, long-term art project, had often felt lonely and demoralizing. His new one, working on his nonfiction book around seven hours a day, felt meaningful and satisfying and sustainable'.[817]

As in Lerner's earlier works, however, this solitude is never presented as a sustainable way of existing long term. To read Lin's most recent work, one might mistakenly assume that all his fiction is filled with naively optimistic depictions of the therapeutic role of autofiction. Not only is this not the case, however, but Lin himself has admitted that the writing of autofiction has not always had a positive impact on his own wellbeing. Asked whether he believed that the process of writing *Taipei* had helped him, Lin replied that '*Taipei* may have brought [him] deeper into a bleak worldview where everything was centered around drugs', and that he 'didn't like to promote it that much, because it seemed to promote reckless drug use'.[818] Lin's struggles with addiction were by no means helped by the writing of that novel, a point which is reflected by that novel's inability to represent or imagine anything beyond the bleak representation of a lonely protagonist. In fact, that novel perhaps best illustrates Zach Baron's criticism of Lin's early work, that in those books 'the motivation and technique behind successful human connection—friendship, love, small talk—elude [Lin's characters], and they make no effort to learn'.[819] Baron goes further, arguing that:

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[816] Lin, 'Sincerity', *Bed*, p. 104.

[817] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 137.

[818] 'Interview with Tao Lin: Chadded Out of Society and Into Sincerity'.

[819] Zach Baron, 'The Problem With Tao Lin', *The Village Voice*, 2010 <https://www.villagevoice.com/2010/09/08/the-problem-with-tao-lin/> [accessed 7 January 2022].

Lonely people are Lin's primary subject, a distinction he shares with practically every other novelist currently working… But where most writers see an abyss to be bridged, Lin confronts a set of limits faced by nearly every human on the planet, and reflexively affirms those limits. All of his tricks—singling out words that feel foreign or vernacular ('I thought they were going to "jump" us'); reducing human interaction to a series of quantifiable exchanges ('After the giant email she sent three short emails.'); repeating variants of the same meaningless phrase ('We are fucked')—boil down to a passive acceptance of the default wasteland that exists between us and other people.

Although this characterisation perhaps overlooks some of the more nuanced portrayals of loneliness and community in Lin's early works, it does broadly alert us to a shift that occurs in Lin's work at some point after *Taipei* where a more sustained effort appears to be made to resist, rather than romanticise, loneliness. As he writes in *Leave Society*, he no longer wanted 'to specialize in embodying and languaging confused alienation anymore, as he had for a decade, writing existential autofiction', echoing Lerner's similarly epiphanic declaration in *10:04* that art ought to offer something other than 'stylised despair'.[820] Before examining what came after in greater detail, however, it is worth addressing the various ways that those early works of Lin's seem to portray loneliness as either a state that must be passively accepted, or worse, as a state that is mistakenly idealised.

The Early Texts: Wallowing in Loneliness

[I] felt an urge to go back and relive ~1998-2006, the most obscure lonely private period of my life.[821]

- Tao Lin, *Selected Tweets*

In the early work of Tao Lin, loneliness is often portrayed in a romantic, idealised way, and even occasionally as something which appears to be necessary for the production of meaningful art. In his first short story collection, *Bed*, for example, a character in the story 'Sasquatch' fetishizes her past experiences of loneliness and despair as heightened emotional states, describing how she

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[820] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 8; Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 93.
[821] Tao Lin and Mira Gonzalez, *Selected Tweets* (Ann Arbor: Short Flight / Long Drive, 2015), p. 162.

'found her social anxiety tapes, and listened to them, more out of boredom — or nostalgia, even, as sometimes she missed her teenage emotions, those moments when, alone, in her room, in the morning or at night, something in her would deepen'.[822] Likewise, in Lin's first novel, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, the protagonist Andrew realises that he misses the experience of loneliness and despair, claiming that:

> if he wrote lucidly enough, Andrew would feel, in a way that momentarily made him believe despair was a mistake, that he missed those times, that there was a yearning, really, to his prose; and would try, then, to desire, in this missed and wanting and therefore nostalgic way, the present moment, when feeling lonely or sad; to experience it while it was happening as the thing he would later yearn for.[823]

It is interesting that it is through writing about this despair that he comes to this realisation, as it suggests that his art emerges directly out of not only the experience of, but the desire for, loneliness. Moreover, the winding, paratactical sentences seem designed to echo the sensation of endlessness that partly defines the despair Andrew is romanticising; as if he can conjure up the experience by writing about it. Remarking on this passage in a later interview, Lin called it 'the main thing of [*Eeeee Eee Eeee*]', because, he claimed, if he thinks about 'any time that I've ever felt depressed in the past, I feel like I actually miss it… And if you can while you're feeling upset realize that in the future when you're actually going to miss this, you're going to feel something different'.[824] In this way, Lin seems to offer a way to transform your present experiences, or imbue them with meaning, even when they ostensibly appear to be unfulfilling. It is perhaps only by adopting this view that one of the final lines of that novel makes sense, where Andrew declares with seeming earnestness that he 'felt a little lonely. He felt good'.[825]

In this respect, Lin's early work seemingly endorses the pervasive image of the typical lonely male genius for whom the experience of loneliness is necessary for the production of art. In *Taipei*, for instance, Paul establishes an 'interim period' for himself, beyond which he 'relocates… [his] urges to socialize, [or] to meet a romantic prospect', in order to facilitate his being 'productive in a low-level manner'.[826] As with Ben's stint in Marfa in *10:04*, however, this interim period is ostensibly established to facilitate the completion of an artistic project, but just as Ben ended up suffering from

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[822] Lin, 'Sasquatch', *Bed*, p. 270.

[823] Lin, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, p. 103.

[824] Chandler Levack, '~2.5-Hour/IRL Interview with Tao Lin on MDMA: The 11,810-Word Transcript', *Thought Catalog*, 2010 <https://thoughtcatalog.com/chandler-levack/2010/11/an-interview-with-tao-lin-on-mdma-the-unedited-transcript/> [accessed 1 December 2021].

[825] Lin, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, pp. 210-1.

[826] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 22.

the isolation, so too does Paul. After avoiding conversations for a week, he describes himself as 'settling, if precariously, with two days spent mostly eating, into a somewhat productive, loneliness-free routine'.[827] In spite of his claims that the routine was 'loneliness-free' the behaviours exhibited in the two days of eating and the reference to his routine as only 'somewhat' productive suggests that all is not as well as it seems.

What is more, the gendered aspects of this retreat to solitude for the sake of artistic production are perhaps more visible than ever in Lin's work. In *Richard Yates* in particular, the protagonist regularly cites his need to be alone, at one point in the novel telling Dakota that he 'want[s] to go somewhere to be alone… I just want to be alone for a few days. I just want to focus on other things for a few days'.[828] When Dakota, however, expresses the same desire, claiming that 'she needed to go somewhere by herself', Haley is dumbfounded, questioning her and asking 'why?' in a way that suggests he does not recognise the need in others.[829] The one-sidedness of this dynamic is also illustrated in the competitive way that Haley discusses his loneliness with Dakota, complaining to her that he is 'more alone than you. My cell phone broke. I sit alone in my room. There is no way to communicate with me'.[830] Viewed alongside the more general controlling behaviour exhibited by Haley in that novel, the image of the lonely male genius is rarely challenged in these early texts.

Even when loneliness is not explicitly glamorised, these earlier texts also seem to offer little to a reader in terms of an emotional counterbalance to this despair, instead veering between an idealised conception of loneliness and complete emotional detachment. As Alex Perez puts it, 'Lin wrote in a detached style about detached characters whose only goal, it seemed, was to maximize their detachment continually until they reached a state of unfeeling Zen'.[831] This state of affectlessness, Perez claims, constitutes 'the only escape… [in Lin's work] from the anxiety-inducing tribulations and psychic assaults of mainstream society'. Indeed, emotions are shown to be almost universally fleeting in these novels and characters seem perpetually unmoored from the world around them, as in *Eeeee Eee Eeee* when Andrew suddenly catches himself 'thinking, "I don't know how to feel happy," or "I am fucked," or, more recently, "I___ ___,"'.[832] It is telling that 'what frightened him (though sometimes calmed him) was the first of those thoughts, about not knowing how to be happy', in part due to the fact that it lacked 'any pleasant summations of long periods of

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[827] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 23.

[828] Lin, *Richard Yates*, p. 117.

[829] Lin, *Richard Yates*, p. 61.

[830] Lin, *Richard Yates*, p. 39.

[831] Alex Perez, 'The Dao of Tao Lin', *Washington Examiner*, 22 July 2021 <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/the-dao-of-tao-lin> [accessed 21 February 2022].

[832] Lin, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, p. 182.

despair, loneliness, and ennui. It just didn't seem good, or allowed. It felt offlimits'.[833] While despair, loneliness and ennui are framed in retrospect as 'pleasant' the inability to feel happiness is what truly frightens Andrew. While Perez is therefore right to point out the presence of affectlessness in Lin's early novels, this hardly appears to offer a viable 'escape' from the difficulties of life; rather, it all too often appears to present further horrors for Lin's characters.

Moreover, this waning of affect is not the only aspect of Lin's early works that seems to resist a reparative reading. So, too, does the portrayal of relationships, which are repeatedly shown to be insufficient for meeting the needs of his characters. *Bed* is the collection that perhaps best represents this thwarted desire for connection with others, with stories such as 'Suburban Teenage Wasteland Blues', which opens by describing how the 'kind of gnawing *offness* that Greg always felt, that constant knowledge that he was doomed in small but myriad ways, intensified in the presence of people'.[834] Later in the same story, we learn that 'Greg began to feel that things weren't okay. A numbed sort of restlessness started in his chest, a lame and disfigured yearning, some mangled need to do something drastic, to get out of himself' but that he has no recourse to lessen the feeling.[835] He begins to experience outlandish urges, such as when his colleague speaks to him through a car window, putting her head all the way in, at which point Greg 'thought of grabbing it and kissing it, clutching it like a football and taking it home, sleeping nightly with the looted person of it, like some kind of illegal but straightforward substitute for companionship'.[836] This is a far cry from the romanticised vision of loneliness that we have seen elsewhere – indeed it reveals a desperate desire for company – but there is little actually offered to these characters as an escape from their loneliness. In another story from that same collection, 'Insomnia for a Better tomorrow', Lin tentatively suggests that while other people might not offer comfort, art might. He writes that:

> These moments would last seconds, minutes, or maybe an hour, and they were euphoric. They could happen from reading, looking at a painting, from music — from any kind of art, really, or from witnessing or experiencing something startling or strange; but never from other people. These moments you could almost cry. Life was simply, obviously, and beautifully meaningless.[837]

Just a few lines later though, this epiphany is shown to be tragically, almost laughably, false:

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833 Lin, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, p. 182.
834 Lin, 'Suburban Teenage Wasteland Blues', *Bed*, p. 61.
835 Lin, 'Suburban Teenage Wasteland Blues', *Bed*, p. 70.
836 Lin, 'Suburban Teenage Wasteland Blues', *Bed*, pp. 72-3.
837 Lin, 'Insomnia for a Better Tomorrow', *Bed*, pp. 254-5.

These moments would end, though, when you realized that all that amorphous mass stuff was, well — bullshit. Was good on paper, maybe, but in real life was impossible. Unlivable. Something only a philosopher, a paid one — a philosopher that received cash for what he or she did — would benefit from. Things weren't connected. Not really. You were one person alive and your brain was encased inside a skull. There were other people out there. It took an effort to be connected. Some people were better at this than others. Some people were bad at it.[838]

From this woefully cynical perspective, even Lin's works that might ostensibly encourage connection – such as his co-authored texts – take on a new light. In *Hikikomori*, for example, the closing line – written from Ellen Kennedy to Lin – reads 'dear tao[,] i feel lonely too. ellen'.[839] Their correspondence – and the production of a work of art – appears to have done nothing to assuage Kennedy's loneliness, in turn doing little to encourage a reader of Lin's works to find solace in them.

In *Taipei*, the work that Zach Baron so harshly criticised for doing so little to offer an alternative to loneliness, even the very desire for connection appears to have been stunted. Early in the novel, Paul realises after his friends have left that he had finally 'gotten what from elementary school through college he often most wanted — unambiguous indications of secure, mutual friendships — but [it] was no longer important to him'.[840] Later in the novel, he declares that 'he'd begun to worry, some days, for hours at a time, that he was permanently losing interest in Erin, despite earnestly wanting, he felt, the opposite, if that were possible'.[841] That Paul is not even sure about the *possibility* of wanting to be interested in Erin speaks volumes about these characters' capacity for connection. When they do try to resolve issues directly relating to their relationships they quickly realise they are incapable:

'I just feel... depressed,' said Paul, and weakly grinned.

'Is there anything I can do to make you feel less depressed?'

'I don't think so,' said Paul. 'You're depressed.'

'What can I do, at this point, to help our relationship?'

'I don't know'.[842]

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[838] Lin, 'Insomnia for a Better Tomorrow', *Bed*, p. 255.
[839] Tao Lin and Ellen Kennedy, *Hikikomori* (Bear Parade, 2007) <http://www.bearparade.com/hikikomori/> [accessed 17 January 2022], p. 99.
[840] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 64.
[841] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 212.
[842] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 215.

The incongruence of the weak grin that Paul gives as he declares he is depressed demonstrates the disconnect between internal and external realities in this text, which contributes to characters' inability to develop meaningful, intimate connections. This is a world in which loneliness and affectlessness dominate, and little is done to encourage the characters that there is anything to be done about it; there does, as Baron puts it, only appear to be a 'passive acceptance of the default wasteland that exists between us and other people'.[843]

This bleakness could hypothetically be redeemed by viewing it as an illustration of a space for criticism, as indeed Miriam Fernández-Santiago has suggested. She claims that *Taipei* employs a 'poetics of imperfection', which 'instrumentalizes failure in order to create a space of critical articulation against universalist conceptions of beauty'.[844] She recounts the various ways that Lin's text incorporates so-called 'failed' techniques, including 'neutrality of expression' and 'affectlessness', before concluding that the text embodies what Sara Jane Bailes calls the 'idea of a current poetics of failure [which acts] as a countercultural space of critical articulation'.[845] Certain episodes in the novel could undoubtedly be cited as evidence of this mechanism at work; for instance, in the final pages of the novel, where Paul appears to have overdosed and is trying to calm himself down:

> 'I just have to deal with it,' he said in reference to being permanently alone, with only his weak projections of Erin and his room — requiring an amount of effort to sustain that was immense and debilitating, which was probably why, he realized, he couldn't sate his breath, feel comfortable, think coherently — to occupy himself forever. 'It's okay,' he said, to begin some process of consolation, but felt only more despair and a panicked suspicion that he'd barely comprehended the terribleness of his situation. 'This will go on for twenty years,' he said vaguely, and stood and slapped his thighs with both hands, then held the bathroom door's frame with his arms in a V and his head hung down and repeatedly said 'oh my god'.[846]

It is possible to read this passage as a comic episode, evidence only of Lin's mastery over the drug narrative and the recounting of an unavoidable bad trip. In Santiago's view, however, this functions as a form of cautionary tale, capable of redeeming the emphasis on aloneness only as an illustration of how not to live. Just as Lerner appeared to disavow such a political approach in *The Topeka*

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[843] Baron, 'The Problem With Tao Lin'.

[844] Miriam Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors: The Transhuman Poetics of Failure in Tao Lin's *Taipei*', *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*, 43.1 (2021), p. 27.

[845] Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors', p. 29.

[846] Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 245-6.

School, however, the tonal shift in Lin's later work like *Leave Society* could be viewed as an implicit criticism of this approach – a disavowal of this poetics of failure, and an embrace of the process of maturation whereby he realises that he does not 'want to specialize in embodying and languaging confused alienation anymore… writing existential autofiction'.[847]

Moreover, it is possible that the answer to the question of what leads Lin to such a shift lies in the way that his texts engage with his readers. As my thesis has demonstrated so far, one of the reasons authors turn to autofiction at all is because of the intensified relationship that it encourages between readers and writers, but as has been observed by numerous critics, these early works of Lin's often seem to aggressively reject the advances of keen readers. Lydia Kiesling, for example, in her review of *Taipei,* recalls wondering '*why does [Lin] hate me?*', while Frank Guan, in his defence of Lin's work, admits that *Taipei* evokes a 'swarming density… [so] that even the most perceptive reader is left disoriented after first reading'.[848] So, too, concludes Miriam Fernández-Santiago, when she writes that *Taipei* 'articulates a strategic misanthropy… [since] readers need to make a considerable effort in order to identify with the calculated risk of Paul's inconsequence, selfishness, boredom, manias and addictions'.[849] Instead of 'promising transcendence' above this discomfort, 'the novel simply accounts for it'.[850] It can occasionally seem then, that rather than working to offer a way out of loneliness, Lin is, in his own words, 'creating the opposite of community'.[851]

We might see this refusal to allow his readers to find community in Lin's early works as a textual reflection of the internet's ultimate inability to facilitate the same. As Clive Thompson notes, although social media promises to facilitate 'digital intimacy', it more often helps us to establish 'weak ties… leaving less [emotional energy] for true intimate relationships'.[852] As such, many early internet users, including Lin, became disillusioned with the ability of Web 2.0 to truly establish a community. In Lin's case, this disillusionment is visible both in a thematic interest in digital mediation (and the representation of its failures) but also in a stylistic shift, the development of an aesthetic that is defined by what Ian Chang has called 'cyber-consciousness'.[853] This aesthetic is partly explained by Lin's decision to incorporate and republish different internet sources both by and

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[847] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 8.
[848] Lydia Kiesling, 'Modern Life Is Rubbish: Tao Lin's Taipei', *The Millions*, 2013 <https://themillions.com/2013/06/modern-life-is-rubbish-tao-lins-taipei.html> [accessed 14 February 2022]; Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.
[849] Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors', p. 25.
[850] Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors', p. 36.
[851] Lin and Gonzalez, *Selected Tweets*, p. 108.
[852] Thompson, 'Brave New World of Digital Intimacy'.
[853] Ian Chang, 'Dramatizing the Effects of the Virtual Life', *Frieze*, 11 January 2013 <https://www.frieze.com/article/books-27> [accessed 5 February 2023].

about himself in his texts, but it increasingly became a defining feature of his written style, even when not directly repurposing works that had originally been intended for internet publication.[854]

Digital Mediation and 'Cyber-Consciousness'

The impact of the internet on Lin's prose style has already been examined in detail by Miriam Fernández-Santiago and Chingshun Sheu, but I want to draw particular attention to a shared aspect of their analysis, which is the way that his integration of the digital works to resist readers.[855] Fernández-Santiago points out that Lin's use of 'proleptic subordination extended by juxtaposition, parenthetical clarifications and coordination delay the main content of the sentences beyond the reader's skill to retain information'.[856] These tendencies emerge, she argues, out of Lin's attempts to mimic the 'exhaustive and exhausting accuracy' of digital forms.[857] Sheu, likewise, argues that Lin's 'rigidly grammatical deployment of commas… creates a staccato effect that has almost no consideration for the rhetorical impetus or even the breathing rhythms of the reader'.[858] He also points out that the digital seeps into the text via 'the profusion of binary thinking' and 'digital-technology metaphors'.[859] The process of reading *Taipei* becomes 'akin to deciphering computer code: The whole, which is more or less comprehensible on an everyday level, becomes unrecognisable when looked at in parts… [revealing] a logic that is… alienating. On a phenomenological level, then, the novel manages to not just represent but directly convey a digital worldview'.[860] This fusion of digital and analogue subjectivities embodies 'cyber-consciousness', which Aislinn McDougall says 'explores the ways in which [the] intermediation between human and machine is transmitted… through character consciousness and narrative strategy' and 'the ways in

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[854] See, for example, the discussion about Lin/Paul's closest friends in: Levack, '~2.5-Hour/IRL Interview with Tao Lin on MDMA: The 11,810-Word Transcript', and Lin, *Taipei*, p. 127. This also presents a difficulty for establishing source texts when studying many of Lin's works, meaning it is sometimes more appropriate to consider the texts jointly as an example of what Lauren Berlant calls a 'supertext'. See: Lauren Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: "Mysterious Skin"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28.3 (2015), p. 192.

[855] See: Miriam Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors: The Transhuman Poetics of Failure in Tao Lin's *Taipei*', *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*, 43.1 (2021), 20–38; Chingshun J. Sheu, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About New Media: Digital Subjectivity and Tao Lin's *Taipei*', *Textual Practice*, 34.8 (2020), 1269–84.

[856] Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors', p. 30.

[857] Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors', p. 30.

[858] Chingshun J. Sheu, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About New Media: Digital Subjectivity and Tao Lin's *Taipei*', *Textual Practice*, 34.8 (2020), p. 1276.

[859] Sheu, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About New Media', pp. 1279-80.

[860] Sheu, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About New Media', pp. 1267-7.

which human consciousness, as depicted in twenty-first century fiction, functions like the digital technology that so heavily mediates it'.[861] It manifests itself most visibly in what Sheu calls 'mindlessness', which is constituted in *Taipei* by the 'confused continuation of an expired action…[;] befuddlement…[;] an active refusal to think… [or] confusion over one's own emotions'.[862] One particular moment in *Taipei* that highlights this 'mindlessness' is the point at which Paul begins a reading only to discover that the text in front of him is unfinished:

> He continued reading the sentence—
>
> The transparency and total effort, with none spent on explanation or concealment or experimentation, of what the universe desired — to hug itself as carefully, as violently and patiently, as had been exactly decided upon, at some point, with gravity — was [something].
>
> — until getting to '[something],' which he remembered using as a placeholder after trying combinations of synonyms for 'affecting' and 'confusing' and longer descriptions like 'an actualized ideal, inside of which any combination of parts could never independently attain.' He stared at '[something]' and thought about saying 'Klonopin' or 'Xanax.'[863]

While Fernández-Santiago might deem this a moment of 'glitch' which hints at the 'aesthetics of imperfection' that underpin the novel, it could instead be argued that this particular instance of mindlessness suggests that there is something very wrong with the novel as a form for critical articulations.[864] That it occurs during a reading of Paul's (and implicitly, therefore, Lin's) work suggests that these texts themselves have failed to signify, but what is even more troubling is the incoherence of the concept that Paul is trying to articulate. 'Affecting', 'confusing', and 'an actualized ideal, inside of which any combination of parts could never independently attain' are by no means all synonyms, but they could all conceivably be used to describe Paul's relationship to digitality. These are not so much critical moments that indicate the underlying 'aesthetics of imperfection', as they are woeful illustrations of the inability of the cyber-conscious novel to signify.

In this respect, the cyber-conscious style of the novels perhaps reflects a wider disillusionment with the power of the internet to produce a meaningful alternative to loneliness. Fay Bound Alberti is particularly attuned to this disillusionment and the role that social media – the key mechanism of much of Lin's success up to this point - has played in it. She argues, firstly, that 'in a

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[861] Aislinn Clare McDougall, 'What Is Cyber-Consciousness?: The Digital Mediation of Sincerity and Parody in Tao Lin's Taipei', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 7.1 (2019), p. 6.

[862] Sheu, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About New Media', pp. 1278-9.

[863] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 139.

[864] Fernández-Santiago, 'Accountable Metaphors', p. 29.

postmodern landscape characterised by instability, competition, and consumerism, the idea of loneliness as a chronic, destabilising force has been… reinforced', particularly by social media, which functions paradoxically, since it 'produces the same isolation and loneliness that it seeks to overcome'.[865] This makes sense, of course, because 'individual needs and affiliations searched for online are not separate from the needs sought offline… [and] the shape of those needs and the ways in which desires are met are not separable from, but related to, the ways individuals communicate in offline, social relationships'.[866] What is most alarming about Alberti's work, however, is her reference to a study by John Cacioppo which demonstrated that 'the risks of being lonely are increased for people who know others who are lonely' and that 'the diffusion of loneliness [on social media] was stronger than the spread of friendship'.[867] So-called communities like Alt-Lit that glamorised experiences of loneliness are therefore unlikely to offer a remedy; instead, they will only further cement the societal issues that Lin describes.

This belief that technology will never provide a sufficient solution to loneliness can also be inferred from the texts themselves. Take this moment of communicative breakdown in *Taipei*:

> To an increasingly frustrated and, he sometimes suspected of himself, paranoid and distrustful Paul, the emails had begun, at some point, to tactically operate on, at the least, a base of reverse-reverse psychology, which was a cause of despair for Paul, who throughout had tried to stress — but seemed to have failed to convincingly convey — that their relationship would only worsen if they couldn't communicate directly, without strategy or hyperbole or deception, while aware of himself often not communicating directly.[868]

For the reader who, as already shown, has had little incentive until now to find Paul a sympathetic character, the isolation of the narrative at this point becomes almost unbearable. The suspicion of paranoia, the hypocrisy of the accusation of communicating indirectly, and the recursive imagery all serve to demonstrate the absolute failure of digital mediation in helping Paul to communicate better and therefore save his relationship.

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[865] Fay Bound Alberti, 'This "Modern Epidemic": Loneliness as an Emotion Cluster and a Neglected Subject in the History of Emotions', *Emotion Review*, 10.3 (2018), p. 250.

[866] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* p. 123.

[867] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* pp. 124-5; John T. Cacioppo, James H. Fowler, and Nicholas A. Christakis, 'Alone in the Crowd: The Structure and Spread of Loneliness in a Large Social Network', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97.6 (2009), p. 977.

[868] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 143.

It appears, therefore, that the dream of the internet had, for Lin and many of his peers, become a nightmare along the way.[869] Moreover, the excitement promised by the so-called moratorium space of the internet appeared, too, to have been a lie. As Clive Thompson notes, 'when cyberspace came along in the early '90s, it was celebrated as a place where you could reinvent your identity - become someone new… [whereas] if anything, it's identity-constraining now'.[870] With the permanence of digital archives that supposedly catalogued ourselves, we became, instead, '*chained* to ourselves online… [and] platforms that promised connection began inducing mass alienation'.[871] This alienation stemmed also from the nature of the relationships that were fostered online. Rather than supporting meaningful relationships, digital correspondence instead favours the establishment of parasocial relationships, where the audience of mass media mistakenly position themselves as the friends of those they supposedly interact with but with whom the relationship is not reciprocated.[872] On Twitter, for instance, this relationship is encoded in the very platform – in which there is 'a directed friendship model… [with] no technical requirement of reciprocity, and often, no social expectation of such'.[873] The overall result of these issues is that digital natives experience the profusion of what have been called 'weak ties', rather than developing meaningful relationships.[874]

Without offering a basis for meaningful relationships, digital spaces also resist the establishment of what we might truly call community. As Ben Agger has pointed out, 'the difference between connection and community is that the former is only contact, an acknowledgement of one's existence… [whereas] community is not only acknowledgment but reciprocity based on dialogue'.[875] Therefore, parasocial relationships, which privilege contact over reciprocity, can never really truly constitute a community. Sherry Turkle, too, emphasises the distinction between online groups and true communities, criticising her own earlier assertion that online spaces might be understood as communities: 'I used the word "community" for worlds of weak ties. Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common

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[869] It may be worth noting that a similar process of disillusionment also occurs regarding the consumption of pharmaceutical drugs in Lin's early works, which is the other primary way his characters mediate their experiences. In *Taipei* in particular, Paul consumes numerous drugs in pursuit of a better life only to find that they do little to ease his social anxiety. For more on this, see: Audrea Lim, 'The Drugs Don't Work: Tao Lin's "Taipei" and the Literature of Pharmacology', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2013 <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-drugs-dont-work-tao-lins-taipei-and-the-literature-of-pharmacology/> [accessed 21 September 2021].

[870] Thompson, 'Brave New World of Digital Intimacy'.

[871] Tolentino, 'The I in the Internet', pp. 7-8.

[872] Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction', *Psychiatry*, 19.3 (1956), 215–29.

[873] Marwick and boyd, 'I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately', p. 116.

[874] Thompson, 'Brave New World of Digital Intimacy'.

[875] Ben Agger, *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 58.

responsibilities'.[876] Fay Bound Alberti offers a useful distinction between online communities that are identity-based (and therefore dependent on personal interests and aspects of what we understand to be our identities) and bond-based communities, which 'share an interest in the wellbeing of the members of a group as individuals, rather than merely a shared interest in norms, goals, activities, and beliefs'.[877] The Alt-Lit community, with its focus on shared identities rooted in literary and cultural allusions, if it ever truly constituted a community at all, was by this definition only ever identity-based, and subject therefore to an issue which Alberti argues ultimately besets all online communities: the 'watering down of the essence of accountability as a precondition of belonging'.[878]

Trust Issues: Accountability and the End of Alt-Lit as a Community

That the Alt-Lit community lacked reciprocity and an attendant sense of accountability is sadly all too easily proved by the allegations that dismantled it in 2014. The community was shaken 'first by provocative instances of sexist and misogynistic writing from prominent male figures and then, more alarmingly, by allegations of sexual assault from women writers in these communities', including against Lin himself.[879] To many, this was a shock, because, as Peart and others have observed, 'sexual assault in the bicoastal epicenters of American innovative writing… [meant that] the radical and forward-thinking culture of progressive, hip young literary artists, living in the hippest and most progressive places in America, had proven itself to be all too typical in its antagonism toward women's rights'.[880] Others, however, argued that the Alt-Lit project, and Lin's writing specifically, have always been troublingly directed towards this goal, particularly in its deployment of a particular kind of teenage aesthetic, which Mara Iskander has termed his 'grooming style'.[881] Reviewers of Lin's work have for years observed its tendency towards the juvenile, as, for instance, when David Haglund pointed out that '*Eeeee Eee Eeee* seems vaguely adolescent; its ideal reader is probably 18 or 19 years old…[and] The New York Public Library shelves the book in the "Young

[876] Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 268.
[877] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* pp. 133-5.
[878] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* p. 134.
[879] Andrew Peart and Chalcey Wilding, 'Sexism and Sexual Assault in Literary Communities', *Chicago Review*, 59.1/2 (2014), p. 191.
[880] Peart and Wilding, 'Sexism and Sexual Assault in Literary Communities', pp. 191-2.
[881] Mara Iskander, Alpha Goddess Ashley Olson, and Alex Karsavin, 'Grooming Style', *The New Inquiry*, 2019 <https://thenewinquiry.com/grooming-style/> [accessed 11 March 2022].

Adult" section'.[882] As one writer, using the pseudonym Alpha Goddess Ashley Olson, points out, however, this aesthetic becomes deeply problematic in light of the allegations made against Lin and his peers. Alt-Lit 'grooms', they argue, because it 'mimics a teenaged affect, establishes a more infantile or youthful voice to use as a vehicle for sometimes very violent or disturbing ideas, and presents these ideas alongside ones that are relatable to adolescents with total indifference'.[883] Worse than this, by 'simulating teenage vernacular, these men simultaneously embody their victims, ventriloquizing through their mouths as they render the qualities that separate them as children, as women—mute'. In this respect, the Alt-Lit community profited disturbingly from the emotional search for community online, which Fay Bound Alberti points out is 'most profound at the early and mid-adolescence stage'.[884] By deliberately targeting their work towards teenagers who were 'particularly vulnerable to negatively perceived judgements and exclusions' and ostensibly offering a safe community where they could bond over shared cultural interests, the male writers were given a space in which they could safely groom potentially lonely teenage readers.[885]

To read Lin's work as an example of literary grooming drastically changes our understanding of the tone that dominates his early works. Poems such as '4:30 a.m.', which might once have seemed like a vulnerable confession of anxiety suddenly appear emotionally manipulative in their desperate need for the reader's attention: 'I am fucked existentially / I am not an okay person / I am nervous in my bed alone in my room / I am fucked existentially / … please keep reading / I am fucked existentially / … thank you for reading my poem'.[886] In fact, Lin's attitude towards winning over others is nothing short of aggressive at times. In *Bed*, for instance, one character encourages another to simply impose their love on a stranger, in what now reads as a comment on the underlying logic of Lin's own writing: 'that's what you have to do. Pretend you know these people. Pretend they love you. They *can* love you'.[887] While it could be argued that these moments function in the same way as Wallace's pulling back the curtain on how to seduce his readers (by using the 'lingua franca of the Inward Bound'), the tone of them is more overtly forceful and desperate, making it unlikely that they will facilitate the kind of connection that might soothe a reader's loneliness.[888] It is as though Lin had answered Wallace's calls but without the self-awareness that Wallace used to create a sense of 'credibility'. Moreover, in light of the allegations, these moments inevitably become retrospectively problematic, an issue which is compounded by the fact that the scenes of manipulative transparency

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[882] Haglund, 'A Kind of Gnawing Offness'.
[883] Iskander, Olson, and Karsavin, 'Grooming Style'.
[884] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* pp. 120-1.
[885] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* pp. 120-1.
[886] Tao Lin, '4:30 a.m.', *You Are a Little Bit Happier Than I Am* (Action Books, 2006).
[887] Lin, 'Love Is The Indifferent God Which The Universe Is The Church', *Bed*, p. 141.
[888] David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men (*London: Abacus, 2001), p. 248.

in Wallace's work were rarely spoken by characters who might be considered analogues for Wallace himself, whereas Lin's work is much more explicitly autobiographical. What this means is that readers have, on one level, always known that the worst behaviours exhibited in Lin's work (such as his treatment of Erin in *Richard Yates*, which fictionalises his emotionally abusive treatment of E.R. Kennedy), might reflect his own behaviour, and so they are subsequently faced with a moral dilemma on how to approach the work in light of these new disclosures. More than this, it has been argued that Alt-Lit managed to make the open secret of Lin and others' behaviour into a form of initiation test, whereby one's attitude towards that knowledge guaranteed one's place in the community itself:

> In Alt Lit a secret became an induction into a new form of sociality, redrawn along the lines of the acquiescent and the excluded. By ensuring the men's predation became a shared, guarded object of semipublic knowledge, Alt Lit made its readers not only privy to but active participants in its writers' illicit confessions.[889]

By rooting so much of its aesthetics in a culture of disclosures, Lin and his peers managed to profit from the open secrets of crimes, and offer a misguided sense of community to an audience that was itself, to a large degree, juvenile.

Their ability to do so was aided by the fact that internet culture during this time actively encouraged people to make confessions and disclosures. Laura Bennett, in an essay on what she called the 'first-person industrial complex' claimed that by 2008 we had entered a 'new age of digital self-disclosure' that privileged narratives that included confessions.[890] Bennett also pointed out that digitally published confessional writing appeared to have moved quickly beyond 'shock jock' tactics and instead was experimenting with 'building relationships with readers via self-exposure'.[891] This confirms Ben Agger's theories about oversharing, which he argues is often performed by those who 'seek connection and community', since 'oversharing in writing is [often] a way of obtaining intimacy'.[892] Lin was aware of this tendency in online writing, and actively cultivated a persona that seemed to place importance on honest disclosures. Take the blog post that he wrote about Kevin Sampsell's editorial notes – itself a perfect example of oversharing online – in which he claims that 'releasing information that is true, making it public and easily accessible, will probably always reduce

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[889] Iskander, Olson, and Karsavin, 'Grooming Style'.

[890] Laura Bennett, 'The First-Person Industrial Complex', *Slate*, 14 September 2015 <http://www.slate.com/articles/life/technology/2015/09/the_first_person_industrial_complex_how_the_harrowing_personal_essay_took.html?via=gdpr-consent> [accessed 8 May 2020].

[891] Bennett, 'The First-Person Industrial Complex'.

[892] Agger, *Oversharing,* pp. 3, 13.

pain/suffering in the world'.[893] The post almost reads like a manifesto of new confessional writing, in which honesty equates to both moral and aesthetic value.

His writing style, too, deliberately tries to mimic a candid and confessional style, for instance through what Benjamin Lytal has called his 'staccato honesty… [and the] almost ironic slavishness to spontaneous thought' that dominates his sentences.[894] But, as Sherry Turkle points out, the obsession with disclosures that spread across the internet had little to do with actually engaging with or even acknowledging one's mistakes; instead, online confessions '[kept] us busy with ways to externalize our problems instead of looking at them'.[895] This, too, was used to the advantage of several Alt-Lit writers, who, as Mara Iskander points out, tried to regain control over the narratives that condemned them by pre-emptively confessing to sexual misconduct before they were accused: 'Confession is another hallmark of Alt Lit style. It's also a hallmark of Alt Lit rapists… *Qui s'accuse, s'excuse*, goes the old French proverb: who self-accuses, self-excuses'.[896] By making confessionalism a central tenet of the Alt-Lit style, male writers, including Lin, managed to essentially provide themselves with a way of minimising reputational damage when they were accused. By taking control of the narrative through confession, they attempted to bestow on it the ostensibly noble characteristics of their own art form. It hardly needs pointing out that this is made even more problematic by the gendered associations that often plague confessional writing and so-called 'oversharing', which Rachel Sykes points out means that while 'critics associate Tao Lin with the act of oversharing', they tend to label him as 'culturally significant in ways that critics of Dunham, Heti, and Gould [female writers accused of oversharing] have not'.[897] The issues with the Alt-Lit community that undermined it were not only limited, therefore, to the behaviours exhibited by Lin and his peers, but also by the ways that they attempted to regain control of that negative narrative by leaning on the values they had essentially groomed their audience to respect.

I mention these issues not only because it would be remiss not to, but because it also impacts one's ability to connect with Lin and the presentation of his self in his autofictional works. Critics such as Frank Guan have historically defended the problematic behaviour detailed in the texts themselves, arguing for instance that a text's political flaws do not take away from the fact that a work like *Richard Yates* is 'a total aesthetic success'.[898] This in spite of acknowledging that the text

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[893] Lin, '~11,000-Word Post with Tao Lin & Kevin Sampsell Emails & Thoughts Re Editing'.
[894] Lytal, 'Gchat Is a Noble Pursuit: Tao Lin's Modernist Masterpiece'.
[895] Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 270.
[896] Iskander, Olson, and Karsavin, 'Grooming Style'.
[897] Rachel Sykes, '"Who Gets to Speak and Why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43.1 (2017), p. 162.
[898] Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.

itself prompts us to consider 'whether this success is worth so much irremediable suffering and revulsion—and whether someone clearly weaker than the author, even assuming her consent, should be exploited and exposed so mercilessly for the sake of art'. Guan ultimately argues that Lin's work is a raw exploration of power imbalances, and that 'if [Lin] embodies, to some extent, in his person and his art, this tyranny, he also makes it, through the window of his being in the text, available for criticism and destruction', but a position such as this becomes increasingly untenable when allegations like those made against Lin come to light.[899] Unlike Santiago's argument about the 'poetics of failure', it is harder to uphold an idea that negative aspects of a text might be redeemable when the failures are moral rather than aesthetic, and overtly rooted in real-life experiences. Lin's 'being in the text' does little to redeem his work if he refuses to acknowledge or engage with the worst of his behaviours, and when the texts are so abundantly full of examples of imbalanced power dynamics between men and women this makes it harder for a reader to connect with Lin in a way that allows them to take solace in the connection typically sought in autofiction, meaning they cannot find an escape from their loneliness in his work. To apply the terms that I used in the start of this thesis, the real-world considerations that a reader must acknowledge when approaching Lin's work potentially threaten to undermine his 'credibility' to an unprecedented, and potentially unrecoverable, degree. In *Richard Yates*, for example – a text Lin originally proposed be called 'Statutory Rape' – it becomes increasingly difficult to empathise with Haley as he wields his power to bully Dakota, attacking her for 'say[ing] you don't want to be obese. But eat[ing] more obesely than I do', or telling her during an argument that 'he had to think about different people to stay aroused for a long time'.[900] Moments like these reoccur in the texts, and while the autofictional pact does not provide a sufficient contract to establish a clear connection between Lin and these narrative perspectives, certain paratexts do appear to make explicit Lin's condoning of these ideas. Take Lin's own optimistic interpretation of the end of *Richard Yates:*

> Dakota Fanning seems to have stopped lying and is eating healthier, exercising regularly, on her way to defeating bulimia, and closer to habitually matching her actions and words; Haley Joel Osment has vowed to himself to help Dakota Fanning recover, perhaps viewing himself as the cause, to some degree, of her bulimia and lies (though also her raised expectations of herself).[901]

His implicit condoning of Haley's treatment of Dakota again makes it extremely difficult to empathise not only with Lin himself but also with the authorial stand-ins in his texts that Guan argues are

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[899] Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel'.
[900] Lin, *Richard Yates*, pp. 66, 129.
[901] Lin, 'Great American Novelist'.

redeemable by virtue of their being available for criticism, making it difficult to feel less lonely by engaging with Lin and his works.

It seems unlikely, in light of these observations, to be a mere coincidence therefore that the tonal shift alluded to earlier in this chapter between Lin's first works and his two most recent texts (*Trip* and *Leave Society*) coincides with the allegations against Lin being made public. While several critics have commented on Lin's apparent ability to rebrand himself in the wake of the scandal, scant attention has been paid to the way that his newfound emphasis on finding community – and abandoning his specialism of 'embodying and languaging confused alienation' – helped to facilitate that rebrand.[902] By vocally and insistently distancing himself from *Taipei* both in interviews and in his texts published subsequently, Lin attempted to re-establish his own public persona, without ever having to directly acknowledge the allegations that were made against him.

Beyond *Taipei*: 'The Unalienated Novel'

On the publicity tour for *Leave Society*, eight years after *Taipei's* publication, Lin repeatedly emphasised the ways in which he had progressed both as a writer and a person from that earlier time. In an interview with Seth King, for instance, he claimed that 'after… *Taipei*, I felt like I'd reached a kind of bottom with all the drugs. I also connected the drugs with a certain world—a bleak one, bleak and pessimistic'.[903] With Sheila Heti, he claimed that he now saw *Taipei* as having 'a really specific style and tone that now I feel like I was addicted to using… where life is just bleak and dark but it's also funny or the narrator is partly amused by it… [and] writing in that tone, it can also make me have that tone in real life and after that book I tried to get away from that'.[904] By linking the tone of the novel to Lin's own outlook, and the drug use portrayed in the text to his own drug dependency in real life, Lin seeks to imply that he was himself in some respects a different person at the point of *Taipei's* publication, a move that consequently allows him to distance himself from his public persona around the time the allegations were made, without ever having to explicitly address the allegations themselves. While the idea of distancing one's self from a public persona is common to many of the

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[902] For an analysis of Lin's 'comeback', see: Jakob Maier, 'What Are We To Make Of Tao Lin's Comeback?', *BuzzFeed News*, 2018 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jakobmaier/what-are-we-to-make-of-tao-lins-comeback> [accessed 17 March 2022].

[903] Seth King, '"Leave Society": An Interview With Tao Lin', *Countere Magazine*, 2020 <https://www.countere.com/home/tao-lin-interview-leave-society> [accessed 1 October 2021].

[904] Powerhouse Arena, *Virtual Book Launch: Leave Society by Tao Lin in Conversation with Sheila Heti*, online video recording, YouTube, 7 August 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxS2pSWcAjM> [accessed 14 April 2022].

authors whose work I examine (for Wallace it was the persona that emerged from his nonfiction; for Cusk, her memoirs), Lin's adoption of what Celia Hunt calls the 'reflexive authorial stance' is unavoidably more complex and problematic.[905] In what Mara Iskander calls 'a quintessentially American narrative, [Lin] reemerged years later in the media a new man, enlightened by psychedelics'.[906] Alex Karsavin points out that *Trip* perfectly encapsulates this branding move, claiming that 'the Tao Lin brand is [now] about green, healthy living while the whole world lies to you… [In] *Trip*, Lin advocates psychedelic psychotherapy as the cure to cultural alienation'.[907] It is no accident that this rebrand – which they rightly point out focuses on psychedelics and healthy living – is centred on connection and the rejection of 'cultural alienation'. What these remarks overlook, however, is the specific role of autofiction in allowing Lin to achieve this rebrand, having by now established itself as a genre that is explicitly concerned with establishing community and resisting loneliness.

This emphasis on community has been remarked on repeatedly by critics of Lin's most recent work, *Leave Society.* Christine Smallwood, for instance, claimed that while 'the novel is, historically speaking, a form of alienation… with "Leave Society" Lin has set himself the project of writing an unalienated novel', something he achieves by portraying a narrator who 'has more compassion and sensitivity than Lin's protagonists have previously mustered'.[908] Alex Perez, likewise, has observed that '*Leave Society…* is a book about recovery. Lin's earlier work was about anesthetizing oneself, while his later work, starting with *Trip* (2018)… is about transcending alienation and finding solace in nature and family'.[909] The novel even appears to reimagine certain scenes from *Taipei* with the substitution of a more compassionate, sensitive protagonist. In *Taipei*, for instance, Paul's mother suggests that he move to Taiwan to teach English, suggesting that 'Paul would benefit, as a writer, from the interesting experience'.[910] Paul, however, rejects the idea, saying that he 'would benefit by being in America, where he could speak the language and maintain friendships and "do things," he said in Mandarin, visualizing himself on his back, on his yoga mat, with his MacBook on the inclined surface of his thighs'. Paul, as the reader well knows, does little to either maintain friendships or indeed keep himself occupied beyond staring at his MacBook. In *Leave Society*, we see a near

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[905] Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 185-6.

[906] Iskander, Olson, and Karsavin, 'Grooming Style'.

[907] Iskander, Olson, and Karsavin, 'Grooming Style'.

[908] Christine Smallwood, 'Tao Lin and the Grueling Art of Self-Healing', *The New York Times*, 3 August 2021, section Books <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/books/review/leave-society-tao-lin.html> [accessed 25 March 2022].

[909] Perez, 'The Dao of Tao Lin'.

[910] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 14.

identical moment reimagined: 'Li's mom said Li could live with the Bunun for two months—teaching English, learning Bunun, practicing Mandarin'.[911] The difference lies entirely in Li's response, which is simply to reply that 'he'd like that'. The novel imagines, then, what Paul might have been like if he had been less selfish and insular, a point which Lin emphasises again and again in the novel. The novel ends on an unapologetically positive note, with Li looking 'out his window at rain and verdure, dwelling on how happy he felt compared to how hopeless he'd been in Taiwan'.[912] Although much of the novel is centred around Li's visits to Taiwan, it is hard not to read the reference to time spent in Taiwan as a metatextual comment on the time span of *Taipei* itself.

Dean Kissick argues that this shift from pessimism to optimism also correlates to a broader affective shift that has taken place over the last decade. He claims that Lin:

> seems to channel, and perhaps helps to manifest through his writing, a tragic (in the classical sense) generational arc of Millennials over the 2010s, from the hopeful and sincerely optimistic promise of alt-lit, right at the start of a bright new decade, to the bleak, wandering pharmaceutical interzone of *Taipei*, to dandelion-patch foraging and fennel stalks in the bed, and the rejection of and escape from society; a story of healing and recovery, and with it the possibility of redemption and transcendence.[913]

That Kissick suggests Lin may not only have catalogued this shift but made it manifest through his writing alludes to the enormous cultural influence that Alt-Lit had in the early 2010s, but what this also suggests is that Lin's ability to influence the cultural zeitgeist has waned only marginally in spite of the allegations made against him. In part this is achieved by his co-opting of ideas common to the wellness industry ('dandelion-patch foraging and fennel stalks in the bed') but it is also by his detachment from many of the ideas that were central to his earlier writing; namely, the potential for the internet to facilitate connection, and the potential for pharmaceutical drugs to improve one's life.

In *Leave Society*, Lin's understanding of the internet as a place to assuage his loneliness appears to have altered dramatically. It is not a complete abandonment, but he does noticeably move away from using the internet as a medium for public communication and more commonly uses it for private communication with Li, the protagonist, himself. Consider Li's realisation late in the novel that:

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[911] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 61.
[912] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 349.
[913] Dean Kissick, 'The Downward Spiral: Leave Society', *Spike Art Magazine*, 14 July 2021 <https://spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/dean-kissick-downward-spiral-leave-society> [accessed 25 March 2022].

> 'I need friends,' thought Li, lying on his back in his room with Dudu on his chest in Sphinx
> position. He had friends, but he rarely communicated with them. He was a loner. A loner
> who felt lonely. Loneliness was unhealthy, he knew. Talking only to his parents in a stunted
> vernacular seemed adverse to mental health.
> 'Thought "I need friends" while feeling unhappy,' he emailed himself, and, gaining some
> distance, felt a little better.[914]

The first thing that strikes a reader of Lin's other works about this passage is his explicit acknowledgment that loneliness is unhealthy. This physiological understanding of loneliness as an affliction and the earnest acknowledgment of it as such is a far cry from the attitude Lin's earlier narrators adopted towards equally unhealthy lifestyles. Consider, for instance, Paul's realisation in *Taipei* that he has been 'attending fewer social gatherings and ingesting more drugs, mostly with Daniel and Fran, or only Daniel, or sometimes alone', something which seems to him to be 'classically "not a good sign," he sometimes thought, initially with mild amusement, then as a neutral observation, finally as a meaningless placeholder'.[915] Even in the moment of first realisation Paul is said to treat this as mildly amusing before quickly demoting it to a piece of 'meaningless' information that serves only as a placeholder. That we are never told what it is a placeholder for further emphasises the quickly deteriorating mental acuity of Paul himself. In the example from *Leave Society* however, it is possible that the meditation on loneliness does become a meaningful placeholder, in the act of being emailed to himself. It is striking that email is the medium chosen here by Li, and that the recipient is himself, because again it contrasts the conventional response that we might expect from Lin's earlier works, where he more typically voices such ideas on Twitter. The syntax of the sentence strongly echoes the structure of many of Lin's tweets, especially in its inclusion of 'thought' at the beginning, a point Lin himself has noted in interviews, claiming that 'Twitter has changed my brain… I'll think in tweets now. I'll think like, "I thought, 'It's hot'"'.[916] That it is *not* a tweet, though, speaks to Lin's desire to no longer publicise his every thought – it attests to the insufficiency of social media for providing real solace in moments of loneliness. Instead, the email seems to function as a placeholder for Lin's own writing. That he is himself the recipient emphasises that what is important about the thought is its function as an ur-text for later work (the novel we are now reading which is partly compiled from emails to Lin himself), not its function as a facilitator of correspondence with a digital audience. Beyond the fact that Lin chooses email and not social media to write down this thought, this moment could be interpreted as being most tragic in its

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[914] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 214.
[915] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 74.
[916] Emilie Friedlander, 'Interview: Tao Lin', *The Fader*, 4 June 2013
<https://www.thefader.com/2013/06/04/interview-tao-lin> [accessed 5 February 2023].

refusal – or inability – to find a recipient other than Li himself. It is a moment of acknowledging loneliness, framed as a visceral demonstration of that loneliness itself. The relief from this tragedy, however, comes in Li's assertion that in writing the thought down he manages to acquire some distance and thereby feel a little better – once again emphasising the importance of the act of writing itself in assuaging loneliness.

Later in *Leave Society*, Li again tries to track his mental wellbeing, claiming that he has spotted several 'signs of "insanity," as he thought of it, that week', including 'feeling his leg touched at night, making him twitch fractionally awake… [and finding] himself involuntarily sighing and closing his eyes while engaged in mundane tasks, like checking his email'.[917] He attributes these issues to four things, the last of which is:

> Isolation. When not immersed in book-writing, he functioned better, he knew, when he was in one social situation per five to eight days, but he was letting himself go longer. Since visiting Kay seven weeks earlier, he'd been in two social situations, after ten and sixteen days alone. He'd begun to feel isolated even virtually because of an old problem he had where he fantasized about sending an email, mentally drafted it, and lost interest.[918]

Again, there is an understanding here of isolation as something which has physiological implications, as in the sensation of his leg twitching. This corresponds to the emphasis Lin places in the novel as a whole on somatic responses and therapies for various afflictions, including his tentative belief, also espoused in *Trip,* that alienation might be 'overcome with regular exercise and more social contact'.[919] Earlier in the novel he describes how a routine consisting of 'nutrition, detoxification, practice, and cannabis' allowed him to become 'less autistic'.[920] In this, Lin perhaps harks back to earlier, 'non-pharmacological interventions [prescribed for loneliness] prior to the twentieth century', which included 'fresh air and exercise…, nutritious food and drink, sufficient sleep, staying connected to people, and developing a balanced way of being in the world rather than withdrawing from it'.[921] This holistic and somatic understanding of treatments for loneliness indicates a more mature understanding of wellness than the earlier, naïve hopes espoused in Lin's works that the internet or pharmaceutical drugs might offer the answer.

While Li does make an exception for times when he is 'immersed in book writing' - romanticising creative solitude as in his earlier works - his awareness of its unhealthiness beyond

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[917] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 241.
[918] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 243.
[919] Lin, *Trip,* p. 24.
[920] Lin, *Leave Society*, pp. 279-80.
[921] Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness,* pp. 198-9.

those periods indicates a more mature understanding of solitude and its relationship to loneliness. There are references, again, to the insufficiency of the internet for helping to resolve these issues, as in Li's surprise that he feels isolated 'even virtually', a point he makes with reference to his inability to draft and send an email. The act of checking his email also frustrates Li, causing him to sigh and close his eyes, suggesting that it is not only Li's capacity for communicating himself but also receiving communications that has been depleted by his prolonged isolation. Loneliness therefore becomes self-sustaining, since isolation serves as both its cause as well as the reason for one's inability to engage meaningfully with others to escape it. That Li considers this evidence of 'insanity' serves as both a hyperbolic illustration of the importance of email for Li's working practice as well as a very real reminder that Li's mental health is intimately tied to his ability to communicate with others.

Li's exception for times when he is 'immersed in book writing' also reflects the representation of reading and writing in these texts as moments of what Sherry Turkle calls 'successful' solitude – that which 'refreshes and restores' - as opposed to moments of loneliness, which represent 'failed solitude'.[922] We can see a perfect example of this when Li explains that he 'enjoyed working [on his book] most on holidays, when people were doing things that alienated him, making him feel closer to himself'.[923] Without the purpose of editing his manuscript, this alienation might be disheartening, but with the prospect of productive, creative work before him, Li realises that the process actually makes him feel 'closer to himself', proving that the cure for loneliness is perhaps to be found in solitude. Writing also becomes a space for Li to work out his thoughts before putting plans into action. After a momentary doubt over his relationship with Kay, he writes a draft message to her and then deletes it unsent. He then writes another message, reflecting on this process: 'he typed, "Let myself consider not having a long future with Kay and felt calmingly unworried. I feel calm framing low-hope, blame-focused thoughts within expectable times of despair that I shouldn't trust and am trying to reduce." He reread his text and was glad he hadn't sent it'.[924] Writing alone in his room, Li becomes a character who appears better suited to, and ready for, interactions with those around him. In the passage immediately following this, he reflects on the way that his book – the one we are now reading – seems to be guiding him towards a healthier relationship: 'imagining what his novel would be like if the relationship ended, he felt like he was asking a friend for advice. His novel seemed to think the relationship should continue'.[925] This is no doubt a vision of the 'unalienated novel' that Christine Smallwood referred to – not only inasmuch as it does not romanticise loneliness but also in the way that it actively prompts Li/Lin to engage

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[922] Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 320.
[923] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 164.
[924] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 282.
[925] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 282.

with those around him. Therein, perhaps, lies the irony of Lin's title – that, as Timothy Wilcox points out, although 'the titular imperitive [sic], "leave society," carries hints of escapism and isolation… the story largely focuses on time spent with his parents… [and how] he is again drawn toward others'.[926]

While I agree with Wilcox's interpretation, it should not be mistaken, as it has by some, for a novel reimagining of the autofictional form. Dean Kissick, for instance, writes that 'rather than retreating into ourselves and our emotional subjectivity, which is the dominant approach in autofiction, social media, and the general contemporary condition, Lin writes to destroy the ego, to escape the atomisation of modern man and the feelings of despair', which he then goes on to state 'might be the end of autofiction'.[927] I hope by this point in my thesis it is clear why and to what extent I believe this view to be misguided, since Lin's use of the form is in no way atypical in its ability to be outward looking. Rather, autofiction has always been a form which allows for the establishment of a new form of intimacy between reader and writer and is thus in its very foundations about escaping atomisation. What is perhaps new, however, is Lin's use of these aspects of the genre to facilitate a rebranding of his public persona. He has tried to co-opt the form's interest in community in an attempt to reposition himself as a writer who cares about others, thereby avoiding the negative publicity that emerged after the accusations against him were made public. With a new-found emphasis on empathy and interactions with loved ones, Lin tries to redress issues from his personal life through the actions of his fictional counterpart – performing the 'public "working out" of a personal problem' that Hering once accused Wallace of.[928]

This emphasis on empathy manifests itself most notably in Li's interactions with both his family and his partner. Early on, for instance, Li watches his parents engage in small talk, noticing as he does so that 'their small talk moved Li, who'd recently felt more compassion toward his dad by considering how he seemed to have no friends'.[929] The realisation that his own father might also have experienced loneliness leads Li to actively work on feeling more compassionate towards him. Likewise, at a later point in the novel, Li learns that his mother had once been 'so afraid in college that she had to be taken around by people… [and] never went anywhere alone', a discovery that leads Li to feel 'closer to his mom'.[930] It is the realisation that she, who now seemed so 'confident and well-adjusted' perhaps had learnt to exist in the world without relying so heavily on other people that leads Li to re-evaluate his own feelings towards her. His mother, later in the novel,

[926] Timothy Wilcox, 'Tao Lin Emails His Parents and Cares for a Dog', *PreCursor Poets*, 2021 <https://www.precursorpoets.com/leave-society-review/> [accessed 25 March 2022].

[927] Kissick, 'The Downward Spiral: Leave Society'.

[928] David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 117-8.

[929] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 98.

[930] Lin, *Leave Society*, pp. 182-3.

actively links this more sociable behaviour to a better life, claiming that she 'must have done something good in my last life to have a son so good in this life… Ate healthy, exercised, climbed mountains, and most importantly we were together, we communicated, shared our thoughts and feelings'.[931] The list of behaviours that she thinks have rewarded her with a son as thoughtful as Li read much like Fay Bound Alberti's list of non-pharmacological loneliness interventions, and it is important that she emphasises their being together, communicating and sharing thoughts and feelings as the pinnacle of virtuous behaviours. In Lin's earlier books, the overwhelming tone of irony would make it hard to take this list in earnest, but the pages leading up to this declaration, that show Li treating his mother with careful compassion, instead encourage Lin's readers to accept this as a sincere comment on the privileged role communication takes in this novel.

Li's constant reassessing of his own and his family's behaviours might also constitute another form of what Lee Humphreys calls acts of 'reconciliation'.[932] As Alan Rossi points out, 'tracking these emotions section by section reveals both Li's patterned, habituated ways of being, and his increasing awareness that there is a way to steer his mind away from negativity and aggression, toward connection and intimacy'.[933] More importantly, however, this is an act of reconciliation that fundamentally depends on tracking not only Lin's changes but his changes in relation to others, leading Rossi to conclude that in *Leave Society, '*as separate entities this change is [shown to be] impossible, but as a unit… change becomes more possible… [b]ecause patterns become apparent'. He argues that 'the characters' negativities mirror each other in the same way their positivity does, and change is presented as a collective process', a point he makes by referring to the moment when Li realises he can 'see his actions in his father's—when he slams his father's computer (an outward, physical aggression), [because] we then learn that Li may have learned this violent petulance from his father, who hit his brother. Li's worry, likewise, is mirrored in his mother, who worries about her son'. By presenting this emotional tracking as a collective process, the novel manages to illustrate the social emphasis that Lin increasingly espouses in his mature works, moving away from the isolationism of his earlier work. As Alex Perez has pointed out, these moments ultimately culminate in a scene 'unlike any other in Lin's catalog, when Li says goodbye as he leaves Taipei after his last extended visit'.[934] Hugging his parents goodbye, he tells them that he will miss them, realising that 'he'd last told his mom he'd miss her when he was maybe ten. He couldn't

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[931] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 238.
[932] Humphreys, *The Qualified Self*, p. 102.
[933] Alan Rossi, 'A Nonlinear Process: On Change In Tao Lin's Leave Society', *X-R-A-Y*, 28 October 2021 <https://xraylitmag.com/a-nonlinear-process-by-alan-rossi/interviews-reviews/> [accessed 15 April 2022].
[934] Perez, 'The Dao of Tao Lin'.

remember ever telling his father'.[935] Not only is the scene unprecedented, but I would add to Perez's point that it deliberately echoes and juxtaposes an earlier airport scene, taken from *Taipei*, where Paul's mother 'turned, openly crying, toward [Paul] and said in a child-like but controlled voice that she was leaving before she started crying harder'.[936] Rather than console his mother, Paul responds to this by declaring that it made him 'aware, with momentary clarity, which did not elucidate or console, but seemed to pointlessly reiterate… how, in the entrance-less caves of themselves, everyone was already, always orphaned'. Paul's bleak insistence that everyone is 'already, always orphaned' implicitly condones his unsympathetic behaviour in response to his mother's sadness. Li, on the other hand, increasingly believes in not only the important bonds between a family, but also a wider societal bond that Paul cannot bring himself to unironically believe in. It is this belief that will ultimately sustain his social existence and stave off the loneliness.

These behaviours are also deliberately echoed in Li's interactions with his partner, Kay. In fact, Li frames his interactions with his parents as practice for improving his romantic relationships, trying 'in a general, unorganized way to practice partnership qualities—compassion, cooperation, listening, patience, gratitude, humility, mending—with his parents so he'd be better at those skills with Kay'.[937] Alex Perez notes that the portrayal of Li's relationship with his parents is unlike anything in Lin's earlier books, but it is equally difficult to imagine a moment such as the following occurring between Paul and Erin in *Taipei*, or Haley and Dakota in *Richard Yates*: 'in a dream that night, Li felt alienated at a high school reunion for what felt like hours, seated alone at a picnic bench, until remembering Kay and waking grateful'.[938] At the novel's close, an earnest declaration of love surprises both Li himself, and, perhaps, the serial reader of Lin's fiction, when we learn that 'Kay would say, "I love you," and Li would blush and realize he'd reddened from love, not awkwardness, and say, "I love you too"'.[939]

Li's burgeoning romance is also deliberately narrated in the novel alongside details of prehistorical cultures. At the moment when he and Kay first kiss, a reader is told that the 'Çatalhöyük, which had emerged probably between 1500 and 2500 AR, after the reset, had had around 0.015 percent of its time's people', before learning that 'Li accidentally grazed Kay's left hand with his right hand, saw her looking at their hands, and held her hand'.[940] Their conversation is interrupted by similar facts, ostensibly unrelated to their unfolding romance, most of which come

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[935] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 329

[936] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 209.

[937] Lin, *Leave Society*, 316-7.

[938] Lin, *Leave Society*, pp. 300-1.

[939] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 350.

[940] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 263.

from Riane Eisler's 1987 text *The Chalice and The Blade*, a book Lin references numerous times throughout *Leave Society*, *Trip* and in various interviews.[941] The key ideas that the book puts forward are that society **'**exemplified the partnership model until only around 6,500 years ago, when we began to overexpress the dominator model'.[942] The 'partnership model', Lin explains, 'is characterized by equality — beginning with the most fundamental difference in the species, between the two sexes — whereas in the dominator model, one sex is ranked above the other in a bias that then infects all other relationships'. The importance of such an understanding of the world for Lin is that whereas he 'used to be unsure if humans have always been as dysfunctional and irrational and sexist as we are now', he can now view 'the last 6,500 years… [as] an aberration'.[943] As he puts it in *Trip*, 'the past 4,800 years can be viewed as an inconsistent, unpredictable, many-threaded, unguaranteed but achievable recovery - instead of a hopeless continuation of a seemingly always cruel and violent human history'.[944] This emphasis on societal recovery perhaps indicates why Lin chooses to alternate the moments in *Leave Society* that allude to Eisler with the scenes between Kay and Li; the societal recovery that Eisler's book signifies for Lin mirrors the personal, emotional recovery that Li's successful interactions with Kay symbolise. In this sense, they function in much the same way as the references to geological time scales did in *10:04,* allowing Lerner to collapse the personal and the political scales that that novel was attempting to reconcile, allowing both readers and writers to escape their loneliness in the process.

The increasing interest in the connections between personal interactions and wider societal interactions in these later novels also leads to a renewed interest in social bodies, a point which perhaps makes it surprising how few overt references those novels make to contemporary politics. Indeed, much of the critical response to *Leave Society* emphasises its supposed apoliticism, as in Dean Kissick's claim that politics only exists in the novel as 'a source of familial arguments and conflict'.[945] It is broadly true that most of the overt references to politics in the novel emerge during family discussions, but there are of course ways for a novel to be political without explicit discussion about party politics.[946] Indeed, it could be argued that in Lin's portrayal of ideal relationships, *Leave Society* becomes much more covertly political than any of his other works. Take the moment in

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[941] See: Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 130; T Lin, *Trip,* pp. 174-82; Sott Burton, 'Have You Left Society Yet?'.
[942] Burton, 'Have You Left Society Yet?'.
[943] Burton, 'Have You Left Society Yet?'.
[944] Lin, *Trip,* pp. 181-2.
[945] Kissick, 'The Downward Spiral: Leave Society'.
[946] Consider, for example, the argument between Lin's father and mother that begins because 'his dad supported a liberal party in Taiwan and a conservative party in the States, and… his mom preferred the opposite in both countries'. Lin, *Leave Society*, pp. 178-82.

Taipei, when Paul struggles to articulate what he finds so discomfiting about the visibility of ethnic minorities in Taipei:

> 'I don't like places … where everyone working is a minority … because I feel like there's, um, too many different … I don't know,' said Paul with a feeling like he unequivocally did not want to be talking about what he was talking about, but had accidentally focused on it, like a telescope a child had turned […] toward a wall.
>
> 'Like, visually?'
>
> 'Um, no,' said Paul. 'Just that … they know they're minorities …'
>
> 'That they, like, band together?'
>
> 'Um, no,' said Paul.[947]

The moment, Audrea Lim points out, 'reveals how embarrassingly inarticulate [Paul] is about politics'.[948] In *Leave Society*, however, Li appears to be far more invested in the people surrounding him, and acutely aware of the social hierarchies that divide them. Observing a homeless man on the Taipei metro system, Li's mother callously remarks that 'nothing is wrong with him… [h]e could get a job'.[949] This time, however, politics is not so easily dismissed for the sake of familial harmony:

> 'You don't know what's wrong with him,' said Li.
>
> 'Looks like nothing's the matter.'
>
> 'If you didn't have family or friends, you could be him.'
>
> … Li's mom touched Li's shoulder as they got off the train. She began to say something reconciliatory, but Li callously turned away, and she went home.[950]

Undoubtedly there is a political edge to this scene, even if it is not overtly framed as such. Unlike Lerner, whose work was criticised for professing to be political but only embodying gestural politics, Lin's text ostensibly professes to be apolitical while all the while embodying a political ethics. *Leave Society* contains no rallying cry for collective action in the way that *The Topeka School*, for example, does, but it does still contain a glimmer of this political ethical position, and it would be unjust to

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[947] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 187.

[948] Audrea Lim, 'The Drugs Don't Work: Tao Lin's "Taipei" and the Literature of Pharmacology', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2013 <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-drugs-dont-work-tao-lins-taipei-and-the-literature-of-pharmacology/> [accessed 21 September 2021].

[949] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 225.

[950] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 225.

emphasise the text's ostensible apoliticism at the expense of concealing this fact. Although Lerner and Lin approach the political in different ways, they are united in their belief that the political work of the novel itself is best attributed to the relationship between readers who feel themselves to be addressed and recognised, and the author themselves, and their shared belief that this relationship can have a real and meaningful impact on one's experiences of loneliness.

It could be argued, therefore, that if the New Sincerity encouraged us to risk 'accusations of sentimentality, melodrama… [and] overcredulity', Lin's politics encourage us to risk the accusation of naïve optimism.[951] He writes in *Trip* that his decision to be optimistic about the future stemmed from Terence McKenna, who 'despite being extra-rational… was also optimistic', something which surprised Lin, who 'associated rational thinking with pessimism, or at least a wan, slightly feigned sort of optimism'.[952] Paratextually, Lin is insistent that his texts be interpreted accordingly, claiming in a conversation with Sheila Heti that he believes the ending of *Leave Society* is 'a very optimistic, sort of very subtly transcendent end'.[953] As with the emphasis on collective hope in the endings of Lerner's texts, therefore, Lin suggests that his texts are ultimately optimistic in their outlook. Both *Trip* and *Leave Society* even contain within them an epiphanic moment of realisation as to how they might themselves end, and the importance of this optimistic thinking is transparent in both iterations. In *Trip*, Lin writes that he:

> focused on what he felt, and the feeling seemed surprisingly subtle. 'I'm happier than I've ever been,' he thought calmly. 'Happier and healthier.'
>
> A few seconds later, he realized both how he would write his book's epilogue and how it would end, simultaneously and with clarity. He'd write it, he realized, as a short story – like the ones that had moved and consoled and inspired him in and after college – ending with him in bed thinking he was happier and healthier than he'd ever been! He'd quote his internal monologue, braiding life and literature for a long moment, a small paragraph.[954]

It is important that at the close of this memoir Lin describes what he is metafictively performing as being more akin to a 'short story', and more importantly one which braids 'life and literature for a

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[951] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer, 13.2 (1993), 193.

[952] Lin, *Trip,* p. 16.

[953] Powerhouse Arena, *Virtual Book Launch: Leave Society by Tao Lin in Conversation with Sheila Heti*. For more on this, see Lin's reply to Christine Smallwood's review of the novel, in which she claimed the ending of *Leave Society* did not make it clear that Li would recover: Tao Lin, 'Leave society, my optimistic novel about recovering from dominator society, is out today. The New York Times reviewed it. Thank you Christine Smallwood, though I disagree with the last two sentences.' (*@tao_lin*, 3 August 2021) <https://twitter.com/tao_lin/status/1422589867213541379> [accessed 22 February 2022].

[954] Lin, *Trip,* p. 283.

long moment, a small paragraph'. Form is not neutral in Lin's eyes, and the blurred line between life and literature that autofiction so clearly straddles is synonymous in his new mentality with both happiness and healthiness, and the accurate portrayal of those states. Not only this, but Lin realises a few days later that 'his sleepily stoned internal monologue had murmured language he'd in part absorbed, it seemed, from his mum, who in her email three days earlier had wished him "the best, healthiest and happiest birthday ever"'.[955] Like *The Topeka School*, the voice of the text suddenly becomes polyvocal, drawing in other perspectives to embody its newfound collective politics. He considers the 'myriad seeming pros of this epilogue form – its holding capacity for a range of information, the option of third-person perspective, that he could insert ideas that didn't fit elsewhere, and the opportunity to end in a narrative, nonrhetorical, emotional moment'.[956] That the genre's ability to incorporate other forms of knowledge – like Eisler's ideas – is framed as a positive also indicates the collective urge of this new utilisation of autofiction. Moreover, the shift in narrative from the first person to the third in *Trip's* epilogue emphasises the decentralising and deprivileging of his own voice. In *Leave Society*, a very similar moment occurs midway through the novel, when Paul suddenly 'thought of a way to end his novel. Within the nested fluctuations of gradual, fractal change—rising, falling; rising, falling, like in a stock market for life—he could end on an uptick'.[957] The ending we are given – the supposed 'uptick' – again makes manifest this emphasis on the collective by its use of the collective voice. As Alan Rossi has observed, at the end of the novel, 'the singular third-person pronoun dramatically shifts to third person plural: "they smelled each fruit, suckled their juice," "they made a smoothie," "they fed some chickens," "they spoke a narrative about their day"'.[958] In both texts, therefore, Lin, like Lerner, attempts to deprivilege his own perspective in an attempt to embody the collective politics that the texts themselves celebrate, thereby resisting the loneliness his earlier texts romanticised.

Of course, the success of such an endeavour ultimately depends on a reader's views about the ethical implications of such a braiding of life and literature. Just as the cynical reader of Lerner's texts might point out that his interest in collective politics actually positions his work as part of a more recent neoliberal trend to incorporate these ideas, the cynical reader of Lin's work might point out that he only adopts such a collective ethical-political stance in order to recover his own public image after the high-profile allegations made against him. Moreover, Lin's project too, co-opts recent neoliberal market trends, grounding itself in, and capitalising on, the enormous popular interest in the so-called 'wellness industry'. My point here, however, is not to argue whether readers

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[955] Lin, *Trip,* p. 283.
[956] Lin, *Trip,* p. 283.
[957] Lin, *Leave Society*, p. 230.
[958] Rossi, 'A Nonlinear Process: On Change In Tao Lin's Leave Society'.

ought to be able to wilfully suspend their knowledge of Lin's personal flaws, but to interrogate whether autofiction as a form has reached a point where it might be co-opted by those who want to present themselves as embodying collective, communal ideals – those that of course resist loneliness – at the expense of a potentially hollowed-out political underpinning. It is true that all of the authors whose work I examine require a suspension of disbelief of some sort – to unabashedly accept that fiction might be able to assuage one's loneliness – but in Lin's work the real-world concerns surrounding the author's own life arguably risk intruding on one's ability to do this to such a degree that it becomes indefensible. Moreover, while Wallace's legacy is now being reconsidered in light of allegations about his personal behaviour, these allegations were not made widely public during his lifetime, and therefore his works do not wrestle with this reputational damage in the same ways that Lin's overtly do. While Wallace's suspension of disbelief necessitated that his readers wilfully disregard the knowledge they were being manipulated, this manipulation was largely concerned with the potentially embarrassing admission that you were not as unique as you hoped, a far cry from Lin's attempt to collude readers into overlooking his past misconduct. As autofiction is increasingly deployed as what Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons have claimed is a 'marketing tool' for the publishing industry, we must now consider to what extent authors might also be turning to the form as a way of marketing their public selves.[959] In a world where the line between marketing one's self and one's work becomes increasingly blurred, Lin constitutes a potentially disconcerting case study of how autofiction (and its interest in forms of community building) might be drawn upon by authors wishing to rebrand themselves in the wake of bad publicity.

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[959] Alexandra Effe & Alison Gibbons, 'A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading', in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), p. 61.

Concluding Thoughts

This thesis has now shown that contemporary literature is taking an unprecedented interest in loneliness as an affective structure, and, moreover, that this constitutes a direct response to an affective shift that has occurred in recent years. This is reflected in not only the thematic interests of a wide range of contemporary fiction but also in the increased popularity of autofiction as both a genre and mode that is adopted in the anglophone world. The project has therefore made an original contribution to the field of literary studies by extending a conversation that had hitherto been taking place largely in history of emotions discourse, and by specifically arguing that this affective shift has catalysed a stylistic and formal change in the landscape of modern literature. The renewed interest in loneliness as a topic worthy of academic study has occasionally considered how this is reflected in literature, but has thus far largely restricted this discussion to considering the ways that the emergence of our modern understanding of the term was partly dictated by literature of the past (in particular the work of the Romantics), or by analysing the symptoms of loneliness in figures from popular literature (such as King Lear).[960] What this thesis has achieved is to show that the modern interest in loneliness as a topic is also reflected in literature of the moment, and, more importantly, that this manifests itself in an abundance of ways that extend well beyond the inclusion of characters who appear to be lonely. Instead, the texts that I have discussed represent loneliness on the page both formally and stylistically, as well as invoking critical models of reading that might offer answers to questions about how and whether reading itself can assuage loneliness. In doing so, it draws on the work of four modern and contemporary authors, whose work I have argued is indicative of a broader affective shift that has taken place in the last two decades, and which is rooted in the affective structures that define what has been called 'metamodernism'.[961]

The thesis is original in its scope, not only by comparing the work of four authors not previously considered together, but by adding to scholarly research on recent – and, therefore, as yet understudied - authors and their texts (in particular, Lerner, Cusk and Lin), as well as by offering a new perspective on authors whose works have already been discussed at great length by academics (e.g., Wallace). While there is a burgeoning canon examining autofiction in the anglophone world (which has been invaluable for laying the conceptual groundwork for this project),

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[960] See: Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Thomas Dumm, *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[961] See: *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. by Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, and Alison Gibbons (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

studies of loneliness as it is represented and textually embodied in fiction – especially contemporary fiction – are few and far between. The academic work on autofiction that has been most productive for this thesis is that which emphasises an understanding of reader-writer relations and which considers how the existence of the so-called autofictional pact contributes to a specific mode of both autofictional reading and writing.[962] This work, which might be considered part of the legacy of reader-response theory, has been applied here in a very specific context: considering how this model of autofiction might be drawn upon to argue that autofiction itself offers an ideal form for those wishing to textually address, and ultimately assuage, the loneliness that is endemic in contemporary life.

Before considering autofiction's efficacy as a medium for addressing and alleviating loneliness, however, I want to first highlight some of the common themes that emerged during the chapters. In doing so, I want to consider what these might imply about the cultural moment at which these texts were being created, as well as offering some suggestions for further study that might follow on from the research presented here. First, I want to consider the importance of the New Sincerity to the project's roots, which I have shown directly impacts the way that these texts choose to reflect and embody the concerns of the contemporary moment. The New Sincerity's role in what has come to be called post-postmodernism is critical, and, in particular, it helped to cement the idea that the post-postmodern condition is defined by paradoxes.[963] While Charles Reginald Nixon has applied this idea to Wallace's work, arguing that it places 'central importance on the paradox as a signifier of the post-postmodern in its multiple aspects', my study extends this idea to demonstrate the significance of the paradox in a broader sample of texts that could be considered post-postmodernist, in spite of not typically being canonised as works of the New Sincerity.[964] One of the central paradoxes of this study is the presentation of loneliness as both necessary for, and an obstacle to, artistic creativity, with writers occasionally romanticising it as a creative stimulus, and at other times denouncing its unhealthy role in inhibiting creativity. Oftentimes this emerges out of the long, gendered history of loneliness as a topic, but even in the work of Cusk we see a clear tension between the desire to assert one's right to be lonely and the need to seek community. Within the chapters, other paradoxes emerge, too: how to believe in literature's capacity for addressing the

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[962] In particular: Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development', and Todd Womble, 'Roth Is Roth as Roth: Autofiction and the Implied Author', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 179-96 and pp. 219-36 respectively; and Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons, 'A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading', in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 61-81.

[963] Charles Reginald Nixon, 'The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-Postmodernism' (University of Leeds, 2013), p. 90.

[964] Nixon, 'The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-Postmodernism', p. 90.

individual while acknowledging the theoretical obstacles in the way of adopting such a belief; how to use literature as a political tool in spite of acknowledging its lack of efficacy; how to advocate silence as an agent of power without problematically representing marginalised voices as silent. In each of these instances, some aspect of the post-postmodernist condition is apparent, and in each of these paradoxes lies the potential for further study – both in the work of the authors already examined here but also in the works of other writers performing similar feats.

Each of the chapters here ultimately makes a case for the necessity of overlooking these paradoxes, arguing that in order to maintain hope for the future, we ought to wilfully suspend our disbelief somehow. Often, this is modelled in the texts themselves through a representation of the author/character engaging in reading, demonstrating their own capacity for networked solitude. Intertextuality therefore functions in these texts as much more than homage; rather, it represents a postcritical disposition, the attitude adopted by various writers (who are themselves steeped in theory that tells them they should believe otherwise) engaging directly and emotionally with authors who came before them. In Wallace's work, for instance, his admiration for John Barth, Jerzy Kosinski and David Markson is made implicit throughout the texts. In Lerner's work, however, he explicitly represents his own engagement with poets such as Robert Creeley, Walt Whitman and John Ashbery, and more importantly, he models his own willingness to engage with their use of poetic address, even while acknowledging theoretical barriers to this engagement. In Cusk's work, she uses intertextuality in her memoirs to highlight the *lack* of literary models for what she hopes to achieve, but in her works of autofiction, she repeatedly includes anecdotes about characters identifying emotionally with the creator of an artwork, experiencing what Rita Felski has called a moment of 'attunement'.[965] Finally, in Lin's work, the shift from romanticising loneliness to espousing ideas of communal engagement is accompanied by an intertextual shift, away from referencing authors whose work he admires for the ways they write about loneliness (for example, Richard Yates, Lydia Davis and Jean Rhys) and towards non-fiction writers who champion much more overtly optimistic ideas (such as Terence McKenna and Riane Eisler). As such, these autofictional works reflect and embody the postcritical shift in criticism (towards, for instance, reparative reading) that has taken place in academia in the past few decades.

The emphasis in this project on emotional intimacy between writers and their readers is also reflected in the importance each author places on empathy and communication. This study should be understood as a defence of autofiction's outward-looking nature, and could be extended by other scholars hoping to examine the ways that autofiction extends its concerns beyond its 'auto' prefix to

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[965] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, *Hooked* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 41.

explore other selves. Many of these writers inherit an emphasis on dialogue from earlier life writers (W.G Sebald is a clear influence on Lerner for instance, and Linda Rosenkrantz's influence on Cusk's work can also be clearly traced) but by adopting a similar mode in more overtly autofictional works, these writers have laid the groundwork for others to do the same. By deploying a wide range of techniques (including, but not limited to: allofiction, a refusal to maintain onomastic correspondence, intertextuality, direct address, polyphony, shifts in perspective, and a thematic interest in empathy that often encourages readers to perform the emotional labour absent from the books themselves), these texts imagine the innumerable ways that autofiction might reinvent itself as a genre not only about the self, but also about the self's relation to, and engagement with, others.

In framing these texts as works of outward-looking autofiction, I have also demonstrated the implicit (and occasionally explicit) political ambitions of the texts. Wallace scholars have often wrestled with the conservative nature of his works; critics of Lerner have argued that his works embody gestural politics, and several critics of Lin have argued that his works are in fact entirely apolitical.[966] In spite of this, it is possible to frame the endorsement of communal goals, and representations of the ills of loneliness as a political ideal that the texts uphold, even if this is rarely couched in overtly political terms. As such, I would also suggest (as I have elsewhere in the project) that these works are part of a contemporary literary trend that embraces these political values, and that this is often pinned to the biographies and paratexts of the writers themselves. Other examples include Valeria Luiselli's work of autofiction, *Lost Children Archive* and Jenny Offill's *Weather,* which is accompanied by a website detailing causes that Offill urges her readers to take an interest in.[967] While these works most clearly align themselves with the more overtly political works of autofiction examined here (in particular Lerner's later novels), they are indicative of a political current that flows through the project at large, and scholars would find much fertile ground here in considering how this fiction represents the political concerns of the current moment.

A final, crucial theme that has reappeared throughout this project is the idea of writers turning towards autofiction to assert distance from their own public image. In particular, I have shown how Wallace tried to distance himself from the image that emerged out of his non-fiction; how Cusk tried to distance herself from her audience's idea of her from her memoirs, and in Lin's

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[966] See: James Santel, 'On David Foster Wallace's Conservatism', *The Hudson Review*, Winter 2014, 2014 <https://hudsonreview.com/2014/02/on-david-foster-wallaces-conservatism/> [accessed 6 February 2020]; Davis Smith-Brecheisen, 'Ben Lerner's Theater of Dissent', *Nonsite.Org*, 2021 <https://nonsite.org/ben-lerners-theater-of-dissent/> [accessed 23 March 2021]; Dean Kissick, 'The Downward Spiral: Leave Society', *Spike Art Magazine*, 14 July 2021 <https://spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/dean-kissick-downward-spiral-leave-society> [accessed 25 March 2022].

[967] Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019); Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends* (London: Fourth Estate, 2017); Jenny Offill, *Weather* (London: Granta, 2020).

case, I have shown how he attempted to distance himself from his public image after numerous allegations were made against him. I want to suggest here that the rise in popularity of autofiction in the anglophone world over the last decade is perhaps due specifically to the ways that the modern, digital world makes the lives of authors (and indeed, everyone) unprecedentedly public. In a world where readers can Google an author's name and not only verify the biographical details in a work of autofiction but also arrive at a judgment on the writer based on public discourse, writers are increasingly turning towards forms that allow them to adopt the 'reflexive' position that Celia Hunt has argued is so important to autofiction.[968] Of course, these decisions to use the form in such a way are not all equal, and Lin's decision to make use of autofiction as a public relations tool, for instance, is very different to Cusk's. As such, I want to end with a consideration of some of the problematic notions that have occurred throughout the project, and suggest some further work that scholars could address in the future that seems to me to be of vital importance.

Firstly, there is room to expand the diversity of writers examined within this project. Although the narrow scope of the study is a product of both restrictions on this project's length, and the scarcity of published works by minority writers, future work could focus more specifically on addressing these issues. I have already mentioned several writers in this conclusion whose work bears further study, such as Teju Cole, whose work has been widely discussed by scholars but as yet with no specific focus on the ways that he addresses loneliness, which I would argue is a key theme in his work. A project that specifically examined the work of female writers of autofiction would do well to consider Joanna Walsh's work, which picks up numerous strands of both Cusk's, and the wider project's, concerns.[969] In particular, she has much to say about the impact of domestic roles in affecting the loneliness of women, and also more overtly addresses ideas about the reception of women's fiction in the UK (her work, as well as Cusk's and other contemporary writers such as Olivia Laing's is often notably set in Europe, perhaps aligning it with continental autofiction, in response to the scarcity of women's autofiction in the UK).[970] An emphasis on the domestic would also allow scholars to examine the work of Meena Kandasamy, whose *When I Hit You* directly tackles many of the issues about the subjection of women and the loneliness of marriage that are covered in this project.[971] In studying authors such as these, scholars would be performing the work of reckoning

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[968] Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development' in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 179-96.

[969] See, in particular: Joanna Walsh, *Hotel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), and Joanna Walsh, *Vertigo* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2016).

[970] See: Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018).

[971] Meena Kandasamy, *When I Hit You* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017).

with the legacies of problematic men, work that Wallace himself highlighted the importance of, but of which he has now ironically become a symbol.

Finally, I want to end with a consideration of where we might go from here, and I would posit that future studies of this topic might do well to introduce new periodic boundaries to shed light on aspects of this project that would bear further examination, including, but not limited to, a consideration of autofiction in the post-#MeToo era. Imposing such a boundary would foreground the importance of the gendered aspects of both loneliness and autofiction, including Marjorie Worthington's claim that autofiction has prospered as a genre in recent years precisely in response to the supposed diminishing authority of straight, white, male authors.[972] It would also necessitate a closer examination of the role of disclosures in contemporary society, questioning how male writers manage to portray their confessions of problematic behaviours in a positive light, by deploying the logic of 'qui s'accuse, s'excuse'. The memoir boom of the 1990s, followed by the introduction of Web 2.0 have fostered a society in which disclosures are commodified as the most interesting aspects of our selves, and yet women are often derided for oversharing when they tell truths that might otherwise be welcomed with open arms.[973] These questions are made all the more pressing in a context such as this study's, because it also necessitates the asking of difficult questions about the ethics of autofiction as a form, since it encourages us to invest in the lives of writers we might take issue with, arguably implicating us in their behaviour by culturally validating the experiences detailed in the works. These questions emerge throughout my project, but would no doubt bear further exploration, and so constitute one important avenue of future study that could emerge from the work I have presented here.

The final periodic boundary that I would argue future scholars must account for is not covered by the historic period studied here, but it did define the period of the project's completion. Several months into this project, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the world, and in doing so irreparably changed both our understanding, and experiences, of loneliness. Countless episodes in these texts appear retrospectively prescient in light of the last few years, not least of all Lerner's depiction of shopping ahead of a storm, or Lin's depictions of characters sitting stupefied in front of computer screens. But there are already, at this early stage, a number of important texts that more directly respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, which I believe are worthy of analysis and which might constitute a cultural descendant to the research I have presented here. I am thinking in particular of

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[972] Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of Me: Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 21.

[973] For more on this, see: Rachel Sykes, '"Who Gets to Speak and Why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43.1 (2017), 151–74.

works such as *Bo Burnham: Inside*, which, although a television special, arguably adopts an autofictional mode to explore the loneliness and isolation that beset the protagonist during the pandemic.[974] The collection *Tools for Extinction*, edited by Denise Rose Hansen (which includes work by the aforementioned Joanna Walsh) also includes a number of pieces that shed light on the relationship between the current moment and our experiences of loneliness.[975] The musical project *Touch: Isolation* constitutes another example of different forms trying to directly address the isolation of the moment with a renewed focus on the relationship between the creator of an artwork and its audience, albeit in a different field altogether.[976] Critically, too, there is an awareness that this affective shift might necessitate a change in both our understanding of art, or the types of art that are created.[977] As such, it seems clear that contemporary culture, both literary and otherwise, is, and will be for the foreseeable future, having to respond to the drastic rise in our experiences of loneliness in the present moment.

The final chapter of this project seems like a particularly crucial touchstone for these conversations since it is so keenly interested in the role of the internet in fostering new kinds of intimacy, a question which has hovered over so many discussions of the last two years. Of course, in one sense, there is evidence in this project to suggest that the internet does help foster communities (most obviously in the form of Alt-Lit, but also, arguably, in helping to establish anglophone autofiction as a grouping distinct from, say, American or Canadian, or British autofiction).[978] On the other hand, many of these texts, in particular Lin's, question the capacity of the internet to establish true, meaningful communities, asking instead whether it only creates parasocial ties. There is social research that suggests that loneliness as an affect might spread faster on social media than feelings of intimacy, and so the question becomes how to make use of these tools in such a way as to capitalise on their ability to bring people together.[979] Clive Thompson's research on ambient awareness, and digital intimacy, for instance, became newly relevant to my own work as

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[974] 'Bo Burnham: Inside' (Netflix, 2021).

[975] *Tools for Extinction*, ed. by Denise Rose Hansen (London: Lolli Editions, 2020).

[976] *Touch: Isolation* (London: Touch, 2020).

[977] See, for example: Pablo Larios, 'Why Covid-19 Might Be Our Chance to Reimagine the Arts', *Frieze*, 2020 <https://www.frieze.com/article/why-covid-19-might-be-our-chance-reimagine-arts> [accessed 28 August 2022]; Olga Tokarczuk, 'A New World Through My Window', *The New Yorker*, 8 April 2020 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-new-world-through-my-window> [accessed 28 August 2022].

[978] See: Hywel Dix, 'Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story So Far', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 11.

[979] See: John T. Cacioppo, James H. Fowler, and Nicholas A. Christakis, 'Alone in the Crowd: The Structure and Spread of Loneliness in a Large Social Network', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97.6 (2009), p. 977.

departments across the country introduced online working groups in an attempt to replicate the atmosphere of an office, with its accidental encounters and opportunities for small talk.[980]

I was often struck while working on this project by the ways that many of the ideas it contained were being lived and tested as I wrote it. The completion of the project itself arguably attests to what Meg Jensen has called the 'active readership' of autofiction; certainly I have felt throughout that I was in some form of conversation with the writers whose work I examine (in spite of a clear understanding of why that might appear such a woefully naïve notion to some).[981] The idea that appears throughout this project that autofiction encourages readers to perform the emotional labour that the narrators often appear unwilling to engage in, means that the reading of these works does often emulate the ways that we engage with other, 'real' people. Subsequently, I have, thankfully, found myself sharing the optimistic belief of many of these authors that, in writing about loneliness, one can imagine ways back to community, and I hope that this study proves a suitable tribute to that fact.

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[980] Clive Thompson, 'Brave New World of Digital Intimacy', *The New York Times*, 5 September 2008, section Magazine <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html> [accessed 26 October 2021].

[981] Meg Jensen, 'How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. By Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 76.

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