# ‘A Dense Tangle of Logically Interacting Illusions’:

# Suspicion in the Post45 Novel

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## ABSTRACT

Suspicion has received a lot of attention in recent criticism, often portrayed as an illness which infects a reader who is obsessed with interpretation. This thesis shifts focus from criticism to examine suspicion as a vernacular sensibility in the postwar novel, not borrowed from theory but born out of fiction. Grappling with the long history of the affects, politics, and ethics of suspicion, it offers a reassessment of metacritical arguments which see suspicion either as pathological, dangerously apolitical, or even irrelevant. Engaging with the cultural history and critical literature of suspicion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this thesis examines how suspicion is exuded from the formal mechanisms and devices of the novel, shedding light on suspicion’s aesthetic and political potential.

Establishing a transhistorical and transatlantic dialogue to model suspicion in a variety of novels, this thesis draws a casting of suspicious characters who perform suspicion and embody wariness in different ways. In doing so, it examines the intersection between suspicion and race, gender, capitalism, and mental illness, as well as suspicion’s intrinsic coexistence with trust. Taking as case studies Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957), Siri Hustvedt’ *The Blazing World* (2014), Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island* (2015) and Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout* (2015) the thesis suggests that suspicion in the novel does not entail detachment but demands interaction—not devoid of tension and contradiction—and illuminates how suspicion makes the reader committed and wary, reluctant but intimately involved.

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## DECLARATION

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

All sources are acknowledged as references. All emphases in citations belong to the original texts.

The total wordcount of this thesis—minus the title page and bibliography—stands at 77,017 words.

# Introduction

# IF YOU SEE ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS

## An Art of Interpreting

In ‘Signs and Symbols’ (1948), Vladimir Nabokov introduced us to the typical malady of suspicious reading: ‘referential mania’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this short story, the protagonist, a patient of an asylum, ‘imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Due to his condition, his parents struggle to buy a gift for his birthday, since any object could be deemed by him ‘vibrant with a malignant activity’, threatening and hiding a meaning he will be obsessed about uncovering.[[3]](#footnote-3) Searching for clues and hints in all that surrounds him, the protagonist of Nabokov’s story believes that ‘[e]verything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme’ and that he, thus, ‘must always be on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Being aware of a ‘dense tangle of logically interacting illusions’ makes him suffer deeply, to the point that he tries to jump out of a window, so as to ‘tear a hole in his world and escape’.[[5]](#footnote-5) As the story concludes with an attempted suicide, this young suspicious interpreter remains isolated from society. The referential maniac is not a hero but a paralysed sufferer.

A cautionary tale, Nabokov’s story suggests the fatal consequences of an obsessive search for meaning beyond appearances, beyond what is visible and immediately graspable. Who or what had caused such mania to spread? What offenses was Nabokov writing against? It is possible to discern, in a *maniac* fashion, echoes of a variety of interpretive methods whose shared goal was that of finding and ‘decoding’ signs, an intellectual climate which dominated the twentieth century, and which developed towards the last decades of the 1800s. Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise made him wonder in 1873 ‘about these conventions of language’[[6]](#footnote-6) and argue that ‘truths’ were no more than ‘illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Karl Marx’s political analysis in *Capital* (1867) followed, too, the logic of uncovering, as his conceptualisation of ‘commodity’ regarded it ‘a mysterious thing’ by which the ‘qualities’ of the ‘products of labor’ turned ‘at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Like the crystalised illusions Nietzsche uncovered, Marx conceived commodities as having ‘acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life’; while ‘money’ was a ‘form’ which ‘conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labor, and the social relations between the individual producers.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Sigmund Freud’s call in 1900 to undertake the ‘new task’ of ‘investigating the relations between the manifest content of dreams and the latent’ constituted an interpretive method which would transcend psychoanalysis and serve as a model for critical enterprises in the twentieth-century.[[10]](#footnote-10) Freud’s search for the ‘complex web of associations’ between signs and ‘the contexts from which they emerged’, and of their ‘multiple and hidden significations’, as Peter Loewenberg put it, were drawn out through the psychoanalytic hermeneutics.[[11]](#footnote-11) Prefiguring a Nabokovian referential mania, Freud sought to ‘make sense out of nonsense’ and, in the words of Lis Møller, of ‘that which appears to be purely random or marginal’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, psychoanalysis found ‘an immensely powerful interpretive method’, which eventually extended onto ‘all kinds of semiotic practice’ and, as this thesis explores, prompted an enriching dialogue between literary criticism and fiction.[[13]](#footnote-13)

At the heart of the thought of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud was a notion of reality as that which is not immediately graspable, and thus in need of interpretation. The three ‘masters’ of the ‘school of suspicion’, as Paul Ricœur baptised them in 1961, created across the domains of philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis a way of looking and of hunting for meaning.[[14]](#footnote-14) In their ‘search for a more authentic world’, Ricœur argued, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud did not practice ‘a “destructive” critique’ but were responsible for ‘the invention of an art of *interpreting*’, that is, the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Why was such a hermeneutics—the ‘exegesis of meanings of a communication, sign, or behavior’—*suspicious*?[[16]](#footnote-16) Etymologically related to the action of *looking*, suspicion became a standard English word in the 1830s, having evolved from Late Latin’s *suspicio*, *suspicionem*. Suspicion provides the interpreter with an awareness of the unknown and entails scepticism—rather than naivety—in order to find truth. Indeed, suspicion’s *look* is more than a mere glance: we look to get ahead of bad outcomes, and yet, suspicious expectations do not guarantee safety nor certainty. As it *looks for* that which must be uncovered, suspicion presupposes a guilt in that which is covered. However, if ‘[s]uspicion always haunts the guilty mind’, as Shakespeare put it, a display of suspicion will always be looked at *suspiciously*, in its characteristic doubleness: suspicion cannot but be suspected.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Far from the societal isolation of the protagonist of Nabokov’s ‘Signs and Symbols’, suspicious interpreters thrived throughout the twentieth century. Their methods were not rooted only in Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, but another ‘event’, as Jacques Derrida explained in ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, occurred ‘in the history of the concept of structure’ when ‘the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought’ (1966).[[18]](#footnote-18) Within structuralism and poststructuralism, in the work of thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958)[[19]](#footnote-19), Jean Baudrillard (1981)[[20]](#footnote-20) or Derrida himself, methodological suspicion was associated too to Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course of General Linguistics* (1916).[[21]](#footnote-21) As Saussure’s linguistics focused on the ‘sign’ and its division in signifier and signified, he influenced other disciplines to follow the path of semiotics—the science of signs. Before Saussure embarked on his ‘classification of signs’, Barthes explained, the ‘nature of language’ appeared ‘at first sight as an unclassifiable reality’.[[22]](#footnote-22) In ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’ (1966), Barthes presented linguistics as the ‘founding model’ of structuralism; for the structuralist ‘analyst’, he explained, ‘finds himself in more or less the same situation as Saussure’ who was ‘confronted by the heterogeneity of language’ and sought ‘a principle of classification’.[[23]](#footnote-23) As a science of signs[[24]](#footnote-24), semiotics was deeply entangled with suspicion as a methodology: to be trained in perceiving signs—perceiving meaning—in *unclassified* phenomena, the reader had to remain alert, attentive, wary and dedicatedly—although not *delicately*—suspicious. The reader had to become a referential *maniac* and could not avoid being suspected for it.

If suspicion was a methodology for obtaining knowledge, for finding meaning, in what ways did it assimilate to a mania? Despite Ricœur’s denial of suspicion being destructive, its’ inevitable self-annihilation was at the heart of the discussion. For example, in 1966 Derrida’s aim at defining the notion of *structure* was framed within the characteristic ‘structural—or structuralist thought’ of having ‘to reduce or to suspect’ its ‘meaning’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Nabokov’s warning could be, then, one against the methodological trap of suspicion, which prided itself on ‘uncovering the logic that holds… together’, as Rey Chow put it, ‘all human social phenomena’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Although ‘thinking the structurality of structure’ was ‘no doubt part of the totality of an era’, the contributions of Nietzsche and Freud, who Derrida cited, and others such as Marx, were crucial.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, unlike Ricœur, Derrida pointed to their ‘destructive discourses’ that were ‘trapped’ in a ‘circle’ of self-annihilation: ‘we cannot pronounce not a single destructive proposition’, he explained, ‘which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Once everything is potentially the object of suspicious interpretation, even such interpretation is doomed to be suspected. A guilty party disguised as innocent, suspicion camouflages as neutral and impartial while it predisposes readers to be wary of texts—to ‘decode’ and ‘decipher’—and infects them with a fatal addiction to search for meaning. Suspicion, as Nabokov warned, makes it impossible to *stop* *interpreting*.

Across a variety of metacritical arguments[[29]](#footnote-29), critics have continued to wonder whether the *art of interpreting suspiciously* is the appropriate way to read a text and whether the reader must *suspect* the text of hiding, covering, and veiling a truth that, through analysis and examination, can be uncovered. Here, suspicion is not the subject to yet another trial, but examined within the art of *creating suspiciously*, that is, the novelistic mode of suspicion. By putting different textual and contextual aspects at play within the particularities of the novel form, this thesis asks what the novelistic mode of suspicion is and how can the novel embody a state of wariness and distrust, one which is not borrowed from theory but born out of fiction. To conceptualise suspicion in the novel, this research grapples with the long history of the affects, politics, and ethics of suspicion, and develops via an analysis of the wider critical literature of suspicion. Acknowledging critics who have proposed a turn away from the hermeneutics of suspicion—namely, those who participated in the ‘method wars’[[30]](#footnote-30)—this thesis will examine the rejection to suspicion’s detachment and its critical alternatives—such as postcritique or surface reading—as well as the work of critics who defend suspicion’s relevance and continue to practice it.

By examining the role of suspicion in the novel, this thesis’ aim is in part to remedy the shortcomings of such metacritical discussions, which have recently deemed suspicion dangerously powerful, as well as irrelevant and lacking any critical functionality.[[31]](#footnote-31) It also redeems suspicion from accusations thrown by critics who are bothered by the excessive and arrogant cleverness of *suspicious* *novels*, which are ‘already doing the work of suspicion for us’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Such novels corrupt innocent readers, pushing them ‘to take on an inquisitorial role and to *query* the trustworthiness’ of the text (Felski 2015, 43). Although suspicion is often portrayed as a hypertrophic obsession with interpretation, this thesis argues that while fictional characters may perform suspicion—for example, engaging explicitly crime, guilt, concealment, and conspiracy—the novel can call for close attention and wariness so that the reader is irremediably attached to the text. The following chapters, then, will not answer to the question of what suspicion may *look* like in the novel, but, beyond that, what a novel *does* to be *suspicious*. To do so, this thesis establishes a transhistorical and transatlantic dialogue between fiction from the 1950s—by Ralph Ellison and Muriel Spark—and the 2010s—by Siri Hustvedt, Tom McCarthy, and Paul Beatty. In their novels, suspicion will be traced as the prevailing framework conditioning the nature, composition, and structure of the texts, as well as of the reading experience, with a shared context of a reception of suspicion via ‘theory’, whose ‘rise’ was ‘intricately connected’ in Britain and United States.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The proposed corpus of works in which this thesis deems suspicion as central does not aspire to be a catalogue nor an inventory of suspicious novels, nor it proposes a uniform analytical model of novels which perform the same type of suspicion. In proposing novelistic suspicion, however, this thesis explores specifically, case by case, the intertwinement of the two terms of the formula—how suspicion is exuded from the mechanisms and characteristics of the novel. In this exploration of suspicion in the novel, a series of questions will inevitably appear, such as, what is at stake politically when a novel is suspicious? Does suspicion necessarily hinder political impulse, as some of its opposers claim? In answering them, political potency will be found in suspicion’s novelistic aesthetics which do not damage the reading experience but grow the reader closer to the text. Suspicion in the novel, it will be shown, does not entail detachment but demands an interaction not devoid of tension and contradiction, in which we are committed, close and wary, reluctant but intimately involved.

## It’s Been a (Guilty) Pleasure

The characterisation of suspicion as an illness, as a malady which can be remedied, is a constant presence in literary criticism, where suspicion has received a lot of attention of late. Most notably, in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski described suspicious criticism in similar terms to Nabokov’s description of referential mania: reading suspiciously means that ‘[n]othing is random or accidental’, and that ‘every textual detail harbors a hidden purpose and pulsates with fateful meaning’ (96). Portraying suspicion’s danger as a pathology that has too long infected readers and critics, Felski diagnosed a critical addiction ‘to the charge of narrative suspense and revelation’ (111), which had taken over universities in the second half of the twentieth century and had increasingly preoccupied critics, whose ‘eyes’ were ‘trained to draw connections’ (66). This critic had arisen out of the ‘theory wars’ of the second half of the twentieth century, when, as Peter Boxall explained, a ‘struggle’ took place, one which was ‘truly won by theorists’ such as ‘Derrida, Barthes and Foucault’ whose work ‘became a new kind of orthodoxy’.[[34]](#footnote-34) A ‘“post-theory” era’ in which there was a ‘growing desire for a new means of articulating a set of values’ was the perfect battle-field for the ‘method wars’ to break.[[35]](#footnote-35) Seeking to abandon the practice of ‘reading suspiciously’, certain critics sought to develop methods of ‘reading from a more receptive, generous, or postcritical standpoint’, as Felski explained.[[36]](#footnote-36) For Boxall, in a context where it was a ‘challenge’ to assert ‘the value of arts’, it was urgent to rethink—and not merely dismiss—‘the legacy of theory, without betraying its spirit.’[[37]](#footnote-37) As this thesis posits that suspicious criticism and fiction cannot be understood separately, it becomes crucial to examine what the fate of critical suspicion has been in the past decades so as to move forward onto novelistic suspicion.

Although the hermeneutics of suspicion has been a staple of literary criticism—its predominance increasing steadily from philosophical to literary suspicion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—, critics have not always read suspiciously, nor everyone has agreed to do so—nor accepted its natural fit within the discipline.[[38]](#footnote-38) Suspicion has not only been a method to *read* texts, but also to think about literature and about the worth of humanities. As Boxall put it, ‘the last generation practised a thoroughgoing scepticism about the validity of literature as an object of study’, deeming the discipline of literary criticism a destructive enterprise, and thus subjecting it to its own suspicious criticism.[[39]](#footnote-39) As this resulted in ‘the current generation’ being wary ‘about the possibility of criticism as an autonomous activity’, literary criticism has become a victim of its own suspicious methods while trying to move away from them.[[40]](#footnote-40) This is not, however, a novelty in the field. In her well-known essay ‘Against Interpretation’ (1964), Susan Sontag rejected the ‘Western’ idea of art based on ‘content’, which forces the reader to embark on the ‘never consummated project of *interpretation*’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Although she did not refer explicitly to suspicion, her description of interpretation as ‘a conscious act of the mind’ which ‘presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of… readers’ proposed a model of criticism which relied on such a sensibility, on the belief that the text does not provide meaning but veils it.[[42]](#footnote-42) Warning of the dangers of suspicion and its ‘open aggressiveness’—which, although is not ‘erasing or rewriting the text, *is* altering it’—Sontag’s argument called for an urgent defence of the text under attack.[[43]](#footnote-43) Her condemnation of interpretation as an act which ‘destroys’ and ‘digs “behind” the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one’ would be echoed by critics decades later.[[44]](#footnote-44) Readers, then, have often been warned about suspicion’s naturalisation, its ability to appear as the only option with which to read a text. As Sontag explained that interpretation came to appear as ‘*the* modern way of understanding something’,[[45]](#footnote-45) about fifty years later Felski continued the call for interpretation to be ‘itself evaluated’ and to strip suspicion off its supposed impartiality.[[46]](#footnote-46) Felski’s own ‘first forays into theory’ followed the ‘model of symptomatic reading’, her work framed within feminist criticism which saw the literary text as ‘restrictive and repressive, closed, claustrophobic and exclusionary’, and, thus, in need of unveiling (19). What was, then, the alternative? Portrayals of suspicion as *aggressive* eventually led to attempts at finding new ways of reading which would solve and alleviate criticism’s out-of-date state of alert and its destruction of the text.

As suspicion is embodied in a variety of forms, it is also enunciated differently by different critics. While Sontag criticised *interpretation* other critics such as Felski and Bruno Latour—whose arguments Felski followed closely—sought to move on from *critique*.[[47]](#footnote-47) For them, *critique* was defined by the critic’s wary ‘orientation’ and guilt-driven ‘constellation of attitudes and beliefs’ (21). Drawing a line that separates criticism—a practice which could take on many forms—from the practice of *critique*, these critics emphasised that suspicion is, as Sontag had claimed, *one way of doing things*, but by no means the only one. In one of the most influential pieces among metacritical work on the limits of suspicion Latour wondered ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?’[[48]](#footnote-48) Once it became mainstream, Latour argued, critique could not retain the novelty nor the effectiveness it once held, for it had reached a point of exhaustion and expiration, but also of danger. Focusing on the consequences of excessive critical deconstruction, once sponsored by critique and then taken over by ‘dangerous extremists’ with politically threatening ideologies, Latour argued that the danger did not come ‘from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact’ but from ‘excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact’ which, critique argued, were ‘disguised as bad ideological biases’.[[49]](#footnote-49) It was not only suspicion’s irrelevance but its danger as a tool for extreme right ideologies which became a common argument, one repeated by Felski, who stated suspicion was central to ‘right-wing populism; hostility toward big government, grassroot opposition to multiculturalism’, ‘scapegoating of migrants’, and ‘disdain for out-of-touch intellectuals’ (45). Suspicion could dangerously take ‘hard-won evidence that could save our lives’ as a ‘social construction’, Latour explained, thus being a tool for misinformation.[[50]](#footnote-50) What had once been at the heart of a politically engaged criticism of the world had turned against political progress, and it was up to critics to devise appropriate alternatives.

If suspicion was no longer politically powerful, if it had reached a point of exhaustion, how could it be so damaging? Arguing that ‘history changes quickly’, Latour considered the prevalence of critique’s ‘critical equipment’ was the ‘greater intellectual crime’ a critic could commit.[[51]](#footnote-51) However, such a demise of suspicion had already been pointed at by Sontag in 1964, who claimed that although ‘once upon a time’ it was ‘a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art’—that is, to look at them *suspiciously*—‘now it is not’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Was there a moment, then, when *deciphering* a text stopped working? Could suspicion have expired twice, forty years apart? For Latour suspicion was not degenerated but an intrinsically flawed method: originally, critique had defined ‘its main target wrongly’, luring critics to go ‘down the wrong path,’ fight the ‘wrong enemies’ and get close to the ‘wrong sort of allies’.[[53]](#footnote-53) Critique, thus, did not guarantee the ‘reign of Truth’ which Ricœur associated with suspicion, but, for Latour, it involved getting ‘*away* from facts’ rather than ‘*closer* to them’.[[54]](#footnote-54) Following the footsteps of Sontag and Latour, Felski aimed to prove that suspicion ‘offers no special guarantee of intellectual insight, political virtue, or ideological purity’ (115), and warned not against ‘its murderous brutality’ but against ‘its potential banality’ (51). *Post-critique*, then, could serve as an alternative for having to be ‘on the lookout’, for curing the mania of ‘scrutinizing, scanning searching, surveying, gazing, examining’ (Felski 2015, 37). It was time for suspicion’s negativity to give way to new ways of reading.

Hardly irrelevant, suspicion has remained at the centre of criticism and of the ‘method wars’. Following examinations of ‘interpretation’ and ‘critique’, in ‘The Way We Read Now’ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus wondered what the alternatives to ‘symptomatic reading’ were, as well as they prescribed that ‘the way’ to read was *no longer* a suspicious one. As they firstly explained that ‘We’ were the ‘scholars who received doctoral degrees’ in disciplines such as ‘English or comparative literature after 1983’, Best and Marcus pointed to suspicion’s prevalence in their formative years, particularly within the institutional context of American academia and the development of literary theory as a discipline.[[55]](#footnote-55) The 1970’s philosophical ‘linguistic turn’ and the consequent ‘acceptance of psychoanalysis and Marxism as metalanguages’ was the basis, Best and Marcus explained, for ‘symptomatic reading’—the method of interpretation which ‘took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection’.[[56]](#footnote-56) However, almost a decade into the twenty-first century, suspicion had lost its novelty, its potential to be a force for political resistance and, even, its attractiveness. It was time to realise that only so much could be done with suspicion.

The ‘method wars’ created a division between politically engaged—non-suspicious—literary practices and ironic and arrogant—suspicious—ones.[[57]](#footnote-57) Although, as it is clear in the work of Latour, some critics lamented suspicion’s arrogance and the distance it created between literary criticism and readers, suspicion was not demanded to be accessible but rather its popularisation was rejected. As Latour warned against uneducated people reaching out to suspicion, for their reasonings end up ‘resorting automatically to power, society, discourse’ and result in ‘the most gullible sort of critique’, he implied that critique once was sacred.[[58]](#footnote-58) Although he refused to engage in ‘wars’, Latour was concerned about how, in the wrong hands, suspicion generates ‘conspiracy theories’, that is, ‘weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Latour denied falling for a ‘patrician spite’—that suspicious criticism ‘should be reserved’ for academics—nonetheless he seemed to mourn a time in which only experts were suspicious.[[60]](#footnote-60) Why not, then, admit that critique should be a licensed practice? ‘What would be so bad with critique for the people?’, Latour asked rhetorically, only to answer with more analogies: it would be like ‘a revolution’ that ‘swallows its progeny’; a ‘virus… out of the confines of… laboratories’; or a proof of the ‘famed power of capitalism for recycling everything aimed at its destruction’.[[61]](#footnote-61) As he was ‘humiliated’ because ‘military personnel are more alert, more vigilant’ than critics, Latour could not but exude a feeling of nostalgia for a time when suspicion was only accessed by the educated, the ‘pride of academia, the crème de la crème’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Following Latour’s path, Best and Marcus’ questioned the intrinsic value of suspicion’s ‘autonomy, self-reflexiveness’ and ‘detachment’[[63]](#footnote-63) in favour of the surface—that is, the ‘evident, perceptible,’ and ‘apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding’ and thus covers ‘no depth’.[[64]](#footnote-64) The ‘freedom’ of the critic to be ‘attentive’ to the text without ‘a political agenda that determines in advance’ its interpretation, Best and Marcus argued, had been halted by suspicion.[[65]](#footnote-65) Surface reading could leave behind the ‘excessive emphasis on ideological demystification’ by refusing to engage with hidden and repressed meanings which turned the critic into an investigator.[[66]](#footnote-66) The exaggerated importance of the suspicious critic was contested with surface reading’s ‘paradoxical space of minimal critical agency’, achieved through *impartial* ways of looking at literature—such as ‘computers, databases, and other forms of machine intelligence’ which are ‘potent describers, anatomizers,’ and ‘taxonomists’.[[67]](#footnote-67) In line with Best and Marcus, in ‘Close but not Deep’ (2010), Heather Love advocated for metaphors of the surface and for ‘description rather than interpretation’, as she proposed ‘a method of textual analysis’ which followed ‘observation-based social sciences’, which although practiced ‘close attention’, were based on looking at—*describing*—‘surfaces, operations, and interactions’.[[68]](#footnote-68) In the case of Timothy Bewes (2010), it was about devising a reading style which could go ‘with the grain’ rather than against it, and which ‘suspends judgement’ and ‘commits itself… to the *most generous reading possible*’.[[69]](#footnote-69) For these critics, suspicion’s uncovering of depth was not the best nor the most enriching way of reading texts.

Throughout criticism, suspicion has also been linked with paranoia. Although this thesis grapples with paranoia as a particular form of pathological suspicion—mainly in the second chapter—suspicion and paranoia have often been used as interchangeable terms. One of the most notable challenges to ‘the intellectual baggage’ of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ was Eve Kosofky Sedgwick’s famous essay on ‘paranoid reading’ and ‘reparative reading’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Sedgwick argued that ‘in the hand of thinkers after Freud, paranoia’ had ‘become less a diagnosis than a prescription’, and caused the ‘methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Like suspicion, the ‘imperative’ of paranoia worked in two opposing directions, it was used to ‘pathologize homosexuals’ as well as a tool for evidencing—and thus resisting—‘the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it’.[[72]](#footnote-72) ‘Reparative reading’, however, allowed to ‘surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination’ that no horror, ‘however apparently unthinkable’ could ‘come to the reader *as new*’.[[73]](#footnote-73) ‘Hope’ was proposed as ‘among the energies involved in reparative reading’ to ‘organize the fragments and part-objects’ encountered when reading.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Advocating for positively oriented ways of interacting with literature, reparative readers after Sedgwick, such as Heather Love or Dorothy J. Hale, turned to recognising and engaging with feeling and emotion.[[75]](#footnote-75) Love found a middle ground between paranoid and reparative reading and argued that in order to be reparative, the critic must leave ‘the door open to paranoid reading’, for ‘love means trying to destroy the object as well as trying to repair it’.[[76]](#footnote-76) Similarly, Timothy Lem-Smith argued that reparative reading does ‘not simply function as a salve to paranoia’, but it ‘may actually *require* paranoia’.[[77]](#footnote-77) Aware of the importance of the concept within the genealogy of non-suspicious criticism, Felski felt conflicted with using the term, as it had become a ‘ready-to-hand label for obsessive-fatalistic styles of interpretation’ (34). Despite the term’s ‘metaphorical’ sense, the notion of paranoia applied to criticism ‘conjure[d] up the picture of a clinician peering suspiciously into the soul of a recalcitrant patient’ and thus, Felski explained, it ‘cast[ed] a pathological shadow’ (35). In this sense, Felski differentiated—and distanced herself from—two layers of paranoia. In first instance, she refused to participate from paranoid criticism’s ‘clear-eyed refusal of hope’ and its ‘stoic awareness of connections and consequences invisible to others’ (35). Secondly, Felski refused to engage in criticism *of* paranoia, since by ‘imputing paranoia to others’ means ‘mimicking the very process’ which is being questioned (35).

Arguments against suspicion and its mood of wariness have taken place within a semantics of guilt, blame, and moral evaluation. For Sontag, ‘interpretation’ was rooted in the reader’s ‘dissatisfaction’ and responded to a ‘wish to replace’ the literary work: the interpreter, thus, was the one who ‘violates art’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Similarly, Latour claimed suspicion’s attempts at critical thoroughness resulted in an unpleasant intimidating behaviour. Suspicion, Latour argued, humiliated ‘naïve believers’ in their appreciation of their ‘cherished objects’.[[79]](#footnote-79) In other words, suspicion mocked us and ridiculed our favourite novels, and the suspicious critic—with the wariness and destructiveness inherent in their preferred methods—‘turn[ed] all of those attachments into so many fetishes’.[[80]](#footnote-80) How could we support such aggressive methods, Latour wondered, if ‘not one of us readers would like to see *our* own most cherished objects treated in this way’?[[81]](#footnote-81) Was suspicion detaching us from our attachments? Could it never allow us to get *close*? Suspicion’s distance was no more than a series of strategically used linguistic devices which did not hide, however, that the suspicious critic had an affective agenda too, that every critic was close to its object of study—even the suspicious one. A professionalised academic reader was not more scientific than ‘lay audience’, in Felski’s words, thus it was not a matter of ‘detachment versus attachment’ but a difference between ‘attachment to a method’—suspicion—and ‘attachment to an object’—the literary text.[[82]](#footnote-82) Suspicion was then criticised for both distancing the reader from the text— reading it destructively—as well as for being too invested in it—searching for its hidden meaning.

Such accusations are not only applicable to the *referential maniac*—the suspicion-sick reader—who negatively makes sense of the world via suspicion, but to the detective too. In fact, part of the danger of suspicious reading was that it could turn into policing, readers dangerously imagining themselves as detectives who search for a guilty criminal. D.A. Miller analysed in *The Novel and the Police* (1989) the ‘radical entanglement between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police’ in Victorian fiction, associating narration, criticism, and *suspicious* *investigation*.[[83]](#footnote-83) Following his steps, Felski pointed to the detective as a ‘critic in another guise for whom the world of mundane objects and everyday actions’—similarly to the suspicious *maniac*, but without a pathology—‘serves as a primary text’ and for whom ‘silences can be made to speak’ (99). In this sense, when wondering ‘[w]hat are the guiding affinities between suspicion and storytelling’, Felski touched on the ethical dimension of suspicion paralleling it with the functioning of narrative as a ‘mechanism of cultural coercion’ which conditions readers ‘into certain ways of acting and thinking’ (88). In this sense, narrative was as understood as an aesthetic and cognitive order which gives meaning and *makes sense* of ‘the chaotic swirl of the phenomena we encounter’ (87). Suspicion—with its luring nature, addictive appeal and danger—creates patterns as well as it undertakes the noble—though self-appointed—duty of discovering them. Easily frameable within the rhetoric of guilt which suspicion purports—making everything fall into the logic of detection and diagnosis—suspicion is attacked with its own weapons, that is, criticised as *guilty*, as criminal, and as ill, as neurotic. Suspicion commits and condemns the crime in the same breath, it suspects others of being unwell as it is diagnosed. As the serial killer who approaches his own crime scene, revelling in the excitement of investigating his own murder; as the neurotic who thrillingly suspects everyone to be ill, suspicion lures the critic and drags the reader.

A crucial weapon for non-suspicious criticism has been the construction of new vocabularies which move away from suspicion—from its metaphors of depth, of uncovering, of veiling, and of guilt. Sontag’s concern about the damaging division of the work of art in form and content—and the prioritisation of content—prompted a call in her essay for an ‘erotics of art’[[84]](#footnote-84), a new ‘vocabulary’ which could precisely *describe* ‘form’ rather than *interpret* content.[[85]](#footnote-85) Criticism that moved away from suspicion and attended to what Eve Kosofky Sedgwick referred to as the ‘reader’s reparative motive’, was discussed with ‘sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary’ language.[[86]](#footnote-86) Revisiting Sedgwick’s critical propositions, Hale proposed ‘a critical vocabulary of space and texture’ in her work on the novel’s ethics.[[87]](#footnote-87) For Latour it had also been a matter of language, as he looked for ‘positive metaphors’ which could be ‘associated with *more*’, that is, ‘with *multiplication*’.[[88]](#footnote-88) Building ‘a language of attachment as robust and refined as our rhetoric of detachment’, Felski sought to move from questions such as ‘What does this text undermine?’ to another such as ‘What does this text create, build… ?’ (180-82). In the case of Best and Marcus, their preference for the ‘present’, ‘manifest’ and ‘surface’ in opposition to the ‘absent’, ‘latent’, and ‘depth’, inevitably entailed the existence of both sides of the binary division.[[89]](#footnote-89) Although, as Felski argued, the ‘antidote to suspicion’ was not ‘a repudiation of theory’ but rather ‘an ampler and more diverse range of theoretical vocabularies’ (181), the ‘attachment to metaphors of surface or depth’—that is, the use of one critical language or another—did not entail a particular critical praxis (55). Surface reading, Felski claimed, ‘can be just as suspicious—indeed, more suspicious that—digging for hidden meaning’ (56). How was it possible to escape the trap of suspicion, the fact that to question and move away from it, the critic had to *suspect* it? Was it a matter of the metaphors which critics used?

As critics sought to invert the logic of the imperative way of reading suspiciously, many could not but remain within its precepts, conforming to the much-criticised suspicious enterprise taken in the twentieth century, unable to stop suspecting suspicion. The argument for new vocabularies, for example, assimilated to the openly suspicious precepts of ‘linguistic philosophy’, which was defined by Richard Rorty as the ‘view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use’.[[90]](#footnote-90) Although for many critics the antidote was a matter of vocabulary, Felski made it clear that language ‘does not conjure people, animals, things, out of thin air’ (23). Thus, if we abandon linguistic determinism and language does not rigidly structure our reality—instead being ‘an array of devices that connect us to other things’—the danger of suspicion is to be found beyond the critical vocabulary used when reading.[[91]](#footnote-91) Surely, if language is ‘more like an interface than a firewall’, its power to condition criticism was not that strong and, more importantly, a switch in metaphorical structures could not structurally nor paradigmatically condition how we read fiction.[[92]](#footnote-92)

The question of critical vocabularies was central too for critics such as David Kurnick, who saw Sedgwick’s ‘terminological doublet’ of ‘paranoid/reparative’ as no more than a ‘dramatically moralized’ substitution of the ‘paranoid/depressive’ opposition.[[93]](#footnote-93) By substituting the ‘psychic state’ for a ‘project’ of reparation, Sedgwick ‘encourage[d] the confusion of psyche and method’ which, for Kurnick, influenced ‘method conversations’[[94]](#footnote-94) undertaken under ‘the burgeoning tradition of disciplinary self-scrutiny taking up ever more space in… literary study’.[[95]](#footnote-95) As these conversations are crucial in the current understanding of criticism, this thesis does not shy away from terms such as paranoia, which some critics have sought to leave behind due to its ‘reflexive and mimetic’ nature as well as due to its obvious connection with psychoanalysis—via Freud (Felski 2015, 35). Precisely because of these reasons, the following chapters will directly grapple with the fictional instances in which suspicion is mediated by a diagnosis of paranoia, and will pay attention to the novel’s ‘performative ability to convert suspicious aesthetic discernment into social action’, as put by Merve Emre.[[96]](#footnote-96) For example, Sinéad Moynihan argued that, in the context of racial passing, ‘making the reader self-conscious regarding the racialized structures’ can ‘render paranoia both strategic and necessary for nonwhite subjects’.[[97]](#footnote-97) Lem-Smith also explored the ‘useful paranoiac modes for critiquing the structures of racial capitalism’[[98]](#footnote-98) and encouraged critics to ‘attend to the subtle and multifaceted styles of paranoia that are being deployed in paranoid literature itself’.[[99]](#footnote-99)

Suspicion comes across particularly illuminatingly in the novel. The novel, as Boxall argued, ‘harbours new ways of experiencing embodiment, new ways of experiencing space and time, under an emerging global regime that is almost unreadable to us’, experiences that when mediated by suspicion, find a fertile ground in the possibilities of the novelistic genre.[[100]](#footnote-100) As the novel ‘allows us to imagine and to make new worlds, to fashion new forms of accommodation between art and matter, or even to live in a condition of wordlessness’, in Boxall’s words, it allows for suspicion as the sensibility which can involve the reader and the novel and create attachment and awareness: in order to be suspicious, one must pay attention.[[101]](#footnote-101) Furthermore, the novel participates in the self-reflexive effects of suspicion—which is highly contagious—, having, as Boxall put it, an ‘uncanny capacity to animate voice, to capture the rhythms and modulations not only of the voices of others, but of our own voice as it sounds in our head’.[[102]](#footnote-102) For Felski, the difficulty to abandon suspicious reading is related to certain novelistic devices which prompt us to read warily and which are narrowly associated with ‘the experimental ferments’ and ‘classic themes of literary artistic modernism’ (42). Novels are seen as victims of criticism’s obsession with suspicion and as ‘signposts for a virtual armada of deceptive or self-deceiving narrators who school readers to… delve behind obvious meanings’ (43). As much as the *art of interpreting suspiciously* has been examined, then, this thesis remedies shortcomings in conceiving novelistic suspicion as more than a second-degree attempt at echoing criticism’s endeavours. Rather than lamenting or warning against literary works as ‘active instigators and perpetrators’ of suspicion, as Felski put it, the following chapters will explore the possibilities of such instigations—where do they push the reader to and what for (42).

## The Monstruous Semblance of a Novel

Critical portrayals of suspicion suggest that in the wrong hands, it represents the ultimate carelessness for literature, the ironic detached reign, the elitist domain. But such warnings turn readers into naïve victims by the critics who want to protect them from suspicion, a tool which shall be removed from clumsy hands: ‘you’re not ready for this’, critics seem to tell them. As if dealing with children—less savvy, less smart, less aware than an informed critic—they must be kept out of bad company. Have we not seen the disastrous consequences of being constantly wary? As in Nabokov’s story, referential maniacs not only read but they inhabit literature and suffer an addiction to suspicion which often drives them to insanity. Whether they are diagnosed with paranoia—or neurosis, or obsession—or whether their suspicion is a mere quirky taste for wariness, these characters, however, have long taken over fiction and drawn readers to suspiciously wander around the text with them. This cast of suspicious characters—absorbed in their wariness—will be then examined in a variety of forms—they are literary critics, political activists, detectives, artists, or ethnographers.

As the suspicious character embodies a variety of figures and, thus, a variety of types of suspicion, this thesis shows how suspicion is materialised beyond literary criticism and appears as a vernacular literary sensibility and method—or often both—when thinking race, gender, capitalism, and mental illness. Its appearance in the novel is not a thematically uniform one, for the suspicious character is not always the *same* suspicious character, however, the novel is imbued with a traceable and recognisable suspicious mood. As this thesis explores, suspicion’s political potential is theorised as a novelistic potential: it arises from the novel’s negotiations with suspicion both as a political tool and as a detrimental and destructive sensibility. In order to examine suspicion in the novel, the following analyses engage closely with the overlooked ‘mundane particulars’ of textual suspicion, which Felski referred to as the ‘hotchpotch of figures of speech, turns of phrase, moral dramas, affective nuances, stylistic tics and tricks’ of critical suspicious language (117). In a mutual enriching relation, critical and novelistic suspicion share an aesthetic of wariness, the first one not subjecting the latter but rather developing through the literary tropes of suspicion.

As the following chapters will explore the variety of shapes suspicion takes in the novel, it is worth remaining close to Nabokov for the moment, particularly to his novel *Pale Fire* (1962), concerned as it is with suspicious interpretation. In *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote, the character who interprets, is not—apparently—a victim of illness but a literary critic. Kinbote closely and corruptly analyses a poem, ‘Pale Fire’, authored by his friend John Shade. The poem ‘being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work’, he explains, has no ‘human reality’ without his notes[[103]](#footnote-103) which work as an ‘attempt to sort out’ the ‘echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints’ in the poem.[[104]](#footnote-104) A power-hungry and delirious suspicious critic, Kinbote puts himself on the spotlight and shamelessly admits that the actual author of the poem, Shade, ‘would have probably not subscribed’ to his annotations, but that ‘for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word’.[[105]](#footnote-105) An early invective against suspicion, *Pale Fire* is not merely censoring but revelling in it, suspecting suspicion’s self-appointed importance. These caricature and mockery do not, however, cancel out the novelist’s own suspicious sins, but ask whether laughing at Kinbote when he denies his intention to ‘twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel’ makes the reader any less suspicious of the text.[[106]](#footnote-106) Suspicion, then, is evidenced as a trap, for one that some critics, such as George Steiner, did not fall. For Steiner, Nabokov turned himself into a ‘victim’ of precisely what he was trying to parody: the ‘cobwebbed self-indulgence of the academic milieu’.[[107]](#footnote-107) *Pale Fire* made us inevitably and unrepentantly suspicious of the suspicious critic, a trap characteristic of suspicion itself. Indeed, for Felski self-reflexivity was the holy grail of contemporary thinking: widely hailed as an unconditional good’; however, she argued, this self-awareness did not make suspicion any less damaging (135). Tragically tyrannical, suspicion absorbed the reader, even when criticising it, for, Felski lamented, ‘[t]he more vigorously critique is interrogated’—questioned and mocked, as Nabokov does—‘the more we seem to reinforce the very style of thinking we are trying to avoid’ (107). A novelistic or a critical device, suspicion’s dominance seems inescapable.

However, what does it mean to claim that suspicion is intrinsically negative and disengaged? Can there not be a connection in suspicion? Is suspicion’s seemingly inescapable presence truly a dangerous one? If, as Ricœur warned, ‘[g]uile *will be met by double guile*’, it seems impossible to be an external observer of suspicion: one is always inscribed in its logic, even—or especially—when looking at it critically, that is, when *suspecting* it.[[108]](#footnote-108) However, rather than proposing ways to escape suspicion, to undercut it, this thesis delves into its logic to see not the ways in which it has failed or has been exhausted, but to examine its functioning. Its portrayals as a virus, an illness or a threat rely on exaggeration and caricature and have situated metacritical discussions on suspicion on the ethical plane, dividing criticism between evil and moral. Such critical vocabularies which hint at suspicion’s threat are central too to Kurnick’s thesis in ‘A Few Lies’. Kurnick examined how ‘uncomfortable truth-telling’ is at the heart of ‘queer culture’[[109]](#footnote-109) and asserted the ‘seriousness’ of queer theory which had been ‘slighted’ by its ‘trivializing’ and ‘too-hasty assimilation’ to the ‘post-structuralist or deconstructionist skepticism about truth’.[[110]](#footnote-110) In order to examine the way queer theory continued to be portrayed, Kurnick looked back—and around—to the ‘inattention’ to the ‘seriousness of queer theoretical critique’ exuded by some critics, and thoroughly examined critical pieces from the method wars.[[111]](#footnote-111) Kurnick was sceptical of anti-suspicious critics, who, according to him ‘offer not new ways to interpret texts’, but instead ‘new ways to feel about ourselves when we do’.[[112]](#footnote-112) Examining a rhetoric which relies on caricaturising, Kurnick pointed to the ‘character sketches’ which anti-suspicious critics draw to portray suspicious critics—those who abide by a *hermeneutics of suspicion* or *critique,* or who read *against the grain* or *symptomatically*—, who are portrayed ‘melodramatically’ and in a ‘binarized’, ‘misguided, pop-psychologized way’.[[113]](#footnote-113) An evident example, Kurnick believed, was Best and Marcus’ opposition between ‘violence, aggression, mastery’ and ‘delusions of grandeur’ of symptomatic reading and the ‘modesty, openness, attention, curiosity’ and ‘receptiveness’ of ‘surface reading’.[[114]](#footnote-114) With a similar mocking tone, non-suspicious critics portray the suspicious reader as a ‘a self-aggrandizing killjoy, a downer, a pariah’ and ‘a total bore’, as Emre put it.[[115]](#footnote-115) For these critics, the ‘aggressive critique-mongers, depth-obsessed symptom hunters, paranoid pattern-makers’ are to blame for the ‘loss of prestige’ of literary studies and of the humanities.[[116]](#footnote-116)

As suspicious devices, novels can suspect and are inevitably suspected upon. In this double-movement, then, caricatures are absorbed onto the novel’s own discourse, exploited as part of the many ways in which suspicion can be portrayed novelistically. This thesis does not conceive the novel as an ‘*object-of-knowledge*’, in the words of Anna Kornbluh, but as a ‘*mode of knowing*’—which, for her, is at the root of ‘the tradition of critique’.[[117]](#footnote-117) In this sense, the novels will be provided with full attention as creators and prompters of suspicion—as works which, as Kornbluh put it, ‘demand theory’—and thus there will be a departure from the rigid division between critical and creative suspicion so as to trace the relationship between criticism and fiction as two retroactive practices.[[118]](#footnote-118) This thesis, then, departs from the idea of suspicion as an alien discourse or as a method forced onto the literary text—disrupting, disrespecting, destructing it—which is present in anti-suspicious criticism. It also departs from critics who conceive the enriching relationship between theoretical and fictional suspicion, but which nonetheless see the novel as a mere receptor of critical discourse. Although in *The Novel After Theory* (2011) Judith Ryan did not argue that theory *infects* fiction and instead paid attention to the ‘complex intertextual relation between narrative fiction and poststructuralist ideas’, she saw novels ‘as a response to the charge that theory is inevitably ponderous and jargon ridden’.[[119]](#footnote-119) For Ryan, novels could *correct* or *improve* the expression of such theory, and in their *theory* novels, writers were ‘reworking’ theory ridden with obscure suspicion.[[120]](#footnote-120) A ‘kind of lingua franca capable of bringing scholars together’[[121]](#footnote-121), theory was often negatively perceived as ‘obscure, turgid, or prolix’ and rejected as it ‘turned the familiar world upside down’.[[122]](#footnote-122) Ryan examined a ‘strain’ within ‘postmodern fiction’ of novels which ‘might be said to “know about” literary and cultural theory’[[123]](#footnote-123) and argued that novels can ‘urge us, implicitly, to think theory through and identify parts of it that need to be adjusted, overhauled, or outright abandoned.’[[124]](#footnote-124) Although for Ryan the novel could not only to ‘incorporate theory, reflect on it’ or ‘complicate it’ but even ‘go beyond it’, there is in her work a notion of theory existing before the novel, which simply novelises theory’s precepts.[[125]](#footnote-125)

In Ryan’s argument, there is a sense of correction and improvement once theory goes through the filter of fiction, that is, once the novel offers its ‘rich detail’ and overcomes the ‘stark abstraction’ of theory.[[126]](#footnote-126) In a makeover of sorts, the unattractive difficult and even boring theoretical writing turns into its fictional version, more seductive and attractive.[[127]](#footnote-127) Ryan’s metaphors expand on this, arguing such novelists were ‘clothing theory’ with the narrative tools available to them: ‘details of material, social, and psychological life’.[[128]](#footnote-128) Fiction can ‘fill’ theory’s ‘gaps, complete it where it stops short’ and even provide it with complexity ‘when it appears too reductive’, making it ‘vivid’.[[129]](#footnote-129) Fiction, in a way, does not only aestheticise theory; by making it more appealing and *readable*, Ryan seemed to argue, fiction makes theory more effective. Novels implemented theory onto their fictional discourse as an addition, improving it but nonetheless, Ryan argued, ‘“aware of, and anxious about,” theory’.[[130]](#footnote-130) Departing from a view of novels arriving to theory, this thesis allows novels to *speak for themselves*,seeing suspicion as emerging from the novel and conceiving its fictional devices not as a correction but as the origin of wariness and distrust. As Kingston-Reese proposed to read ‘with writers rather than against them,’ emphasising ‘interconnected critical and novelistic praxes’, this thesis situates fictional suspicion at the forefront of any theoretical propositions.[[131]](#footnote-131)

Indeed, the historical gap in the corpus of novels this thesis deals with—around five decades of literature—coincides precisely with the thoroughly explored period of postmodernism, the one in which Ryan’s *theory novels* thrived. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, suspicion was at the centre of literary fiction, celebrated but also rejected, in the ‘aesthetically all-inclusive’ form of the postmodern novel, whose ‘material effects’, David James argued, ‘continue to reverberate through our postmillennial present’.[[132]](#footnote-132) In *Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2013),Boxall linked ‘intellectual formations’ of the twentieth century—‘the theorisation of the postcolonial condition; the understanding of the politics of race, gender, sexuality, class; the perception of later historical conditions’ or the general emphasis on the textuality of our environments’—‘with the thinking of postmodernism’ which, nonetheless, would become a ‘kind of empty, static constant’.[[133]](#footnote-133) Indeed, suspicion was embraced by postmodern authors in novels written in close dialogue with literary theory. Postmodernism’s love affair with suspicion was particularly obvious in metafiction, that is, ‘fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity’, as Linda Hutcheon put it.[[134]](#footnote-134) However, writing which ‘self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact’, Patricia Waugh explained, soon lost its novelty, a loss of interest which would be echoed in critics’ departures from suspicion.[[135]](#footnote-135) The return to ethics called for by critics was linked with the abandonment of postmodernism’s ‘always ironic attitude’, in the words of Hale, its ‘constant critique’ and ‘endlessness of deconstructive play’, which gave space to literature’s ‘serious… engagement with ethical values’.[[136]](#footnote-136) Once postmodernism’s suspicion became predictable, a hypertrophy of a once celebrated taste for textual cleverness, alternatives were searched for. By the 1990s, reports of a turn towards ‘sincerity’ reflected the appearance of ‘something different from the sort of high postmodernism’ of authors which cultivated the suspicious irony and self-reflection of metafiction.[[137]](#footnote-137)

One of the most notable attempts at defining this change was Adam Kelly’s work on ‘New Sincerity’, a term which conveys the growing ‘impatience with the rhetorical innocence and self-justificatory claims of detachment and transcendence’ of postmodernism, an impatience particularly shown in the work of David Foster Wallace.[[138]](#footnote-138) Offering a ‘critical alternative’ to Ricœur’s ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, Foster Wallace did not consider suspicion appropriate for the times of media, television and advertising, times in which, as Best and Marcus would argue, ‘truth’ was not ‘beneath the surface’ but could be found ‘uncannily on the surface’.[[139]](#footnote-139) Wallace feared that what was ‘been passed down from the postmodern heyday’ was ‘sarcasm, cynicism’ as well as ‘suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct’.[[140]](#footnote-140) The problem with suspicion, Wallace warned, was that its ‘ambition’ was not to ‘redeem’ but to ‘diagnose and ridicule’.[[141]](#footnote-141) Although proponents of New Sincerity maintained suspicion’s ‘love of truth’, they shifted from a focus on ‘metaphysics’ towards ‘sincerity’, a sincerity which although unable to be clearly identified as such—no linguistic form can assure that the author is being sincere—sought to refocus on neglected ‘love, trust, faith and responsibility’.[[142]](#footnote-142) Without participating from ‘former critical battles over postmodernism’ in regards to ‘its subversive political powers’ and ‘its pernicious effects on young minds’—which, as Lee Konstantinou argued, ‘today seem dated’—this thesis engages with postmodernism inasmuch it helps—but not limits—the examination of suspicion in the novel.[[143]](#footnote-143) As Savvas and Coffman stated, ‘contemporary fiction offers a development of or refocusing on certain neglected aspects of postmodernist literature, but not a radical break with it’.[[144]](#footnote-144) What this thesis explores, then, is suspicion beyond postmodern forms, that is, a translucent continuation—one which allows part of the postmodern and poststructuralist light to come through.

Critics who refused to abandon suspicion and argued the persistent relevance of *critique* did not dismiss its political dimension, but rather emphasised it. Kurnick believed that anti-suspicious critics felt ‘the pressure’ to appeal to ‘a broader public’ and allowed ‘that public’s anticipated indifference or hostility’ to affect ‘their style and rhetoric’, trying, that is, to be less threatening or boring.[[145]](#footnote-145) Indeed, for Kurnick it was not about changing method, but about a different way to ‘fantasize about what we do with texts’.[[146]](#footnote-146) For Kornbluh, the need to defend literary critical methods responded precisely to the dependence of ‘our knowledge paradigms’ on ‘science’, in other words, due to the insecurity caused by humanists’ failure ‘to champion literature as more than evidence, more than information, more than data.’[[147]](#footnote-147) Anti-suspicious critics’ relation with *scientific* neutrality, then, appears as a contradictory one. As much as new methods sought to demystify suspicion’s impartiality, scientific traits were searched for by those who advocated for descriptive methods—such as Best and Marcus aspiration to literary taxonomy and their reliance on ‘machine intelligence’.[[148]](#footnote-148) How could suspicion in literature, then, hold onto its political value? It was not a matter of assimilating to the scientific method, but of reinforcing the potential of critique’s suspicion. Kornbluh’s advocation for critique contradicted the idea that it had been exhausted, and she rather argued that it had not yet been truly effective. ‘Marxist theories of the novel’, she argued, ‘continue to frame urgent questions for the study of the novel and continue to illuminate avenues for future study’, therefore, it was necessary ‘tackling the contemporary repudiation of Marxist literary theory’ present in ‘postcritique’.[[149]](#footnote-149) Suspicion, then, was not seen as an alien force applied to destruct or deconstruct the literary text, but part of literary aesthetics, and it was the duty of the critic to draw out—not to apply—the ‘novel’s immanent critique’ so as to read its self-generated suspicion.[[150]](#footnote-150) It is this call for criticism to read the novel *as* theory as well as reading the novel *as it is*, that the examination of novelistic suspicion can respond to.

This thesis argues that the novel does not *allow* suspicion but actively *constructs* it and, in doing so, it develops an ethical stance. Although the ‘paranoid reader is no longer an unequivocally good reader’, as Emre put it, I purport that suspicion—‘under certain local and contingent conditions’—can indeed ‘do more than what Felski and others ascribe to it.’[[151]](#footnote-151) This is a question which Moynihan sought to answer: ‘[w]hat forms of privilege enable a reader to relinquish her attachment to paranoia, suspicion, and vigilance’ and instead ‘opt for openness rather than guardedness, submission rather than aggression?’.[[152]](#footnote-152) Moynihan’s resistance to abandon suspicion responded to her concern that ‘discussions of race are conspicuously absent’ from ‘postcritique’; which, as in Kurnick’s demand of the examination of queer theory in all its complexity, has often been portrayed as too simplistic in its attacks to suspicion.[[153]](#footnote-153) What non-suspicious critics have failed to see, Moynihan argued, is how ‘reparative reading practices are not available to all subjects at all time’, and, thus, that there is a necessary reliance on the political potential of suspicion.[[154]](#footnote-154) If suspicion can do more, then, it is not only because it is still relevant in current criticism but because as it emerges from the novel, its possibilities have not been fully drawn yet. If ethics is searched for not in the critic’s duty but in novelistic suspicion, it is possible to respond to the question, as put by James, of ‘whether contemporary writers *need* to take on war or corrupt churches or foreign atrocities in order to address worldly issues about right, wrong, meaning, and beauty’.[[155]](#footnote-155) If the novel’s ‘ethical charge’ goes beyond its ‘principle utopian function’— ‘offering fictional solutions to real problems’—as Boxall argued, it is because it allows the ‘expression of the unknowable itself as a form of ethical thinking’.[[156]](#footnote-156) Beyond ‘establish[ing] the truth of things’ or ‘eliminat[ing] the uncertain, the impossible’, suspicion works as a novelistic device because it participates in the novel’s own attempts at giving ‘expression to unknowing as a kind of condition’.[[157]](#footnote-157) The ethical stance of the novel, then, follows the intrinsic ethical logic of the genre, the novel having a tendency to question itself and to ask questions which, in not being answered, hold the reader attentive with the promise of deterred knowledge.

Conceiving suspicion in the novel, then, entails seeing the novel as a fertile ground for suspicion to grow and develop: suspicion exploits novelistic traits of openness and unknowing, precisely in the delayed promise of knowledge and in the state of alert it provokes on the suspicious reader. Suspicion exploits the novel’s ‘unpictured future, the latent possibility’ that it offers, the ‘space between a completely revealed world and a world that is yet to come’, in Boxall’s words.[[158]](#footnote-158) In line with Hale’s argument that novels can be *ethical* because they facilitate an ‘encounter with alterity’, this thesis purports novelistic suspicion as that which makes the reader experience the unknown, the unfamiliar, which is, for Hale, precisely what makes the genre ‘inherently politicized’.[[159]](#footnote-159) Rather than enclosing, framing or providing *limited* and *limiting* knowledge—a parcel of truth—for Hale, the novel ‘frees us from our usual epistemological limits’, a positive ‘experience’ which shall be ‘undergone again and again’.[[160]](#footnote-160) In this freeing of the knowing, thus, in allowing the reader not to know, the novel is not only ethical but pleasurable too, a pleasure which resides precisely in the appeal of suspicion in the novel. Suspicion, I argue, takes the novelistic experience of the unknown to its most exponential level, as it holds us in the promise of achieving knowledge through suspicion. The attraction of suspicion for the suspicion-sick and for the detective, as well as for the critic, is in the promise, the wait, which holds us suspiciously attentive, and which far from detaching us from the literary work, keeps us close, only if to keep looking.

## Suspicion and its Novels

As this chapter has drawn a path of the evolution of critical suspicion, it is the turn for the following chapters to draw attention to the entanglement that constitutes novelistic suspicion; and to the different ways in which suspicion materialises in the novel. Although discussions around suspicion have mostly remained within its role in criticism—the novel involved only as a depository for theory—this thesis purports that suspicion, more than a critical method, is a literary sensibility and novelistic method. As suspicion became associated with irony and detachment in the postmodern novel, and with a celebrated loss of ‘the capacity to accurately represent the world’—celebrated in modernism too—its momentum expired, however the novel, as Boxall explained, ‘outlived the excitement that the recognition of this loss occasioned’.[[161]](#footnote-161) According to this history of suspicion, suspicion had dragged the novel to be a mere container; and criticism to become obsessed with reading warily and obsessively—maniacally. Through a transhistorical critical framework which establishes a dialogue between a moment previous to suspicion’s hypertrophy—via two mid-twentieth century novels—and in the aftermath of the declaration of suspicion’s death—via three novels published after 2010—this thesis pushes the notion of the contemporary to grasp, in Kingston-Reese’s words, the ‘age of uncertainty and anxiety’ for which novelistic suspicion becomes an enriching form with which to write.[[162]](#footnote-162) In the following chapters, suspicion grapples with the ‘pursuit of happiness and beauty’ and ‘the dissonant feelings’ associated with the experience of ‘living and working today’ but also with the well-documented political and artistic anxieties of the aftermath of the Second World War.[[163]](#footnote-163)

The structure of this thesis, then, points to the different ways in which authors originate suspicion in their novels, ranging from the variety of ways in which the novel form can embody suspicion, allowing for its contradictions as well as its political potential to develop. In the first part of the thesis, ‘Haunting Suspicion’, I examine Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957), which put suspicion at play in the context of the Second World War and the Cold War, at a time where suspicion is deemed necessary as a political tool in culture—before accusations of hypertrophy of the method—and seen as a necessary response—a haunting one, difficult to ignore—to a failed project of modernity. On the other hand, as the *contemporary* is ‘reshaped’, as Kingston-Reese argued, ‘by the hyperaestheticized, hypercommodified, and hypermediated nature of contemporary life’, suspicion continues to be a relevant novelistic form. [[164]](#footnote-164) The triad of twenty-first century novels analysed in the second part of the thesis, ‘Suspecting Trust’, is inscribed within a context in which suspicion’s methods that remain at the heart of social criticism are highly questioned. These novels, however, continue to literarily trust and to dialogue with master-discourses of suspicion, such as psychoanalysis and feminism—in Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* (2014)—corporate capitalism and ecocriticism—in Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island* (2015)—and social sciences and critical race theory—in Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout* (2016).

The first chapter focuses on Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Playing on the idea of suspicion as a *disembodied* presence materialised in the invisible protagonist of the novel, this chapter examines Ellison’s suspicious mode of narration as a first unconscious and then fully embraced strategy to deal with the post-war cultural context, one which was complicated by Ellison’s complex relation with his political positioning as a Black American writer and his novel’s quick canonisation. The first part of the chapter concerns ideas about representation and Ellison’s own search for the appropriate literary form which could hold the experience he sought to literalise, particularly the dichotomy between the novel’s affirmation of historical reality and its ability to aestheticise the historical sense of loss. By reading Ellison’s essays alongside the novel, this chapter reassesses the light under which *Invisible Man* has been examined and redirects such light to suspicion in Ellison’s work. Throughout the chapter, I perform a close analysis of some key episodes in the novel. Such analysis is framed within a wider consideration of the role of the narrative voice in constructing the novel’s suspicion, in order to draw out the novel’s aesthetic proposal and the novel’s spectral political implications.

In Chapter Two, I move to Scottish novelist Muriel Spark, and particularly to her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957). Through a critical approach which combines close reading of Spark’s autobiography—*Curriculum Vitae* (1992)—alongside her novel, this chapter examines how Spark constructed a novel in which ‘everyone falls under suspicion from everyone else’ and ‘everyone is suspected… of being other than they are’.[[165]](#footnote-165) In presenting the novel’s cast of suspicious characters, this chapter demonstrates clear differences in how suspicion can be materialised narratively and reads Spark’s fiction alongside her theory of ridicule—‘the only honourable weapon we have left’, according to her—which is crucial in the suspiciousness of her fiction.[[166]](#footnote-166) Firstly, I analyse how Spark utilises the conventions of detective-fiction and how she takes such devices to their bare means, so as to construct a character whose only motivation is suspicion for suspicion’s sake. Secondly, the chapter moves to problematise the external perception of suspicion in introducing a character whose suspicion is presented both as an illness as well as a weapon for literary and political emancipation. In seeking to reassess the pathologisation of suspicion, this chapter grapples with theorisations of literary and psychoanalytical paranoia, as well as puts Spark’s novel in dialogue with Henry James’ novel *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Shoshana Felman’s essay ‘Turning the Screw of Interpretation’ (1977). By examining how *The Comforters* metafictional devices advance a continuing dialogue between theories of postmodernism and the theorisation of suspicion, I argue that suspicion originates in the novel not only as a peripheral sensibility, but as its central language. Precisely because it tends to self-examination and self-annihilation, suspicion exudes political potential beyond the novel’s realms.

Within a contestation to postmodernism’s suspicion, this thesis is interested in how authors of the twenty-first engage with and try to rely on forms of trust and *sincerity*[[167]](#footnote-167), while not being able to fully disassociate from the suspicious potency of the novel. Performing a chronological jump, Chapter Three opens the second section of the thesis, titled ‘Suspecting Trust’. In this chapter, I examine suspicion in Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* (2014). The first section of the chapter concerns Hustvedt’s non-fiction writing and her interest in psychoanalysis, feminism, and politics, and their relation to the novel form. The chapter then leads onto *The Blazing World*’s suspicion which problematises the role of ambiguity in the world of art, and its complex relation with feminist quests for the recognition of female authorship. Asking whether a woman who signs her works of art with men’s names—hiding with metaphorical masks—can reclaim authorship over her work, this chapter closely examines how suspicion’s political potential is closely related to the dangers of irony and cynicism, resulting in a literary ‘sinister ambiguity’. Relating theory of sinister aesthetics; studies on the role of the mask in classical theatre; William Empson’s analysis of ambiguity; as well as scholarship on literary authorship and narrative, the chapter examines the aesthetic and political stakes of suspicion. Materialised in novelistic ambiguity, suspicion is shown to have a troubled relation with feminism, a relation which, nonetheless, is not to be dismissed.

Examining suspicion’s ties with capitalism in Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island* (2015), Chapter Four traces the stakes of suspicion once it is absorbed into the world of corporativism. The main character’s job as an ‘in-house ethnographer for a consultancy’ makes him a suspicious professional, who examines the world as an interpreter not to make sense of it but to help his company sell its products.[[168]](#footnote-168) The first part of the chapter traces McCarthy’s novel as one informed by his interest in literary theory and by his conception of the novel as originating theory in itself, allowing for suspicion not to be read as an incursion of criticism but as novelistic. The chapter then examines corporate capitalism within the novel in relation to Marxist ideas about commodity and reification, via the work of Lukács. The chapter explores how, for *Satin Island*’s protagonist, suspicion is not only a professional tool but inseparable from his anxiety regarding his writing.The novel’s self-reflection upon the threads between narrative storytelling and suspicion push this chapter onto the question of form and of how the novel can enact and embody methodological suspicion and for what purpose.

Chapter Five reads Paul Beatty’s novel *The Sellout* (2016) as a novel which relies on satirical devices while displaying ambivalence towards its supposed political potential, exploring, thus, the possibilities novelistic suspicion offers to achieve such potential. Reassessing the novel as a satire within the frame of suspicion, this chapter first presents Beatty’s interest in being and making the reader *uncomfortable* as an aesthetic but also a political gesture of attentiveness towards veiled injustice—which in the novel consists of racism in a ‘post-racial’ world. Exploring then, the stakes of suspicion in relation to the post-racial as defined by authors such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, this chapter reads *The Sellout* alongside criticism of satire to explore how much the novel moves away from it and how much it retains. *The Sellout*’s novelistic suspicion takes the novel beyond satire and seeks to resolve the author’s anxiety regarding the possibility that humour veils the crucial denunciation needed in a supposed post-racial world. Avoiding the possibility that the novel is merely read as humorous, this chapter purports, Beatty problematises the idea that things can be seen *as they are*, and that readers will grasp them in all their complexity. Suspicion, then, becomes central to the reading of the novel to assure an appropriately engaged interaction between reader and text, one which is not relative but can hold onto the novel’s political intent.

By taking a broad chronological approach, this thesis allows for suspicion to be traced in the novel in a coherent and nuanced manner, while it remedies the shortcomings of exploring suspicion exclusively in metacritical discussions. In considering the potential of suspicion to generate a waiting stance in the reader, looking at suspicion in the novel also shifts from existing critical readings of suspicion as a rationalising force—which removes ambiguity and indeterminacy of the text. Novelistic suspicion, this thesis purports, revels in unknowing and in the possibility that, through wariness, knowledge can be achieved. What is at stake is the reader’s awareness, attention and care while engaging with the novel, as they appear as prerequisites for any political involvement.

# I

# HAUNTING SUSPICION

# 1

# WORLD OF ILLUSIONS

# Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

## A Haunting Voice

In the 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison explained how he intended to write a novel about the war, a project which started in 1945 after he had left the merchant marine and the conflict had come to an end.[[169]](#footnote-169) In his account of how he started working on the novel, Ellison described how his thoughts were interrupted by the voice of the future protagonist of the book, a character who did not suit the writer’s early intentions but who the writer was nonetheless unable to ignore, as it ‘moved in’ and ‘proceeded to challenge’ his ‘imagination’.[[170]](#footnote-170) Such a ‘voice’ was embodied—or rather, *dis*embodied—in the figure of an Invisible Man, who, from the very beginning, demanded to be the protagonist and the narrator of the novel and whose narration turned into a ‘self-willed and self-generating piece of fiction’.[[171]](#footnote-171) Seemingly appearing out of nowhere, Ellison explained, the character ‘announced itself’, and said, ‘I am an invisible man’, demanding his story to be told. As Ellison doubted his creative intentions, he was haunted by ‘nothing more substantial’ than this ‘taunting, disembodied’, ‘ironic, down-home voice’, and felt ‘annoyed’, but willing to listen.[[172]](#footnote-172) But what was the story that Invisible Man wanted to tell? The striking confidence with which the character declared his identity to the novelist contrasted with the starting point of the novel: that of a character who had realised he had always been invisible, inconsistent, and difficult to perceive.

In his flimsy existence, his other-worldly nature, Invisible Man appeared, nonetheless, as a fully formed character, one which expressed feelings of loss and instability that grounded the novel within post-war segregated America. Five years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, in 1957, Ellison acknowledged a series of historical events which influenced any novelist working at the time—‘World War I, the Depression, World War II and Korea, the Cold War, the threat of the atom, our discovery of the reality of treason’—a time, that is, in which ‘reality, which during Dickens’ time seemed fairly stable, ha[d] broken loose from its old historical base’.[[173]](#footnote-173) Indeed, as Mark Greif pointed out, it was common for ‘American intellectuals’ of the time to ‘recite a continuous list of crises’ that led to the turbulent post-war mid-twentieth-century.[[174]](#footnote-174) Although they were ‘intellectuals of manifold types’, Greif explained, they shared an inevitable and lurking ‘perception of danger’ which was concentrated in the idea that ‘“Man” was in “crisis”’.[[175]](#footnote-175) Such wariness and suspicion towards an undefined potential threat—physical and ideological—that conditioned the mid-century post-war intellectual climate, was crucial in Ellison’s creation of the character of Invisible Man as well as in his feelings towards his creation. In ‘Society, Morality and the Novel’ (1957) Ellison wondered how ‘do we affirm that which *is* stable in human life, beyond and despite all processes of social change?’.[[176]](#footnote-176) It is precisely this dichotomy which seems to be at the heart of Ellison’s vacillation from his initial idea to the novel he ended up writing, a dilemma between *affirming* and grounding experience—particularly of war—and acknowledging and embracing the historical feeling of loss of stability. Such a dilemma would come to be resolved in suspicion as the state of alert and wariness amid threat.

This chapter explores how the potential threat that characterised the post-war era was embodied in *Invisible Man* through Ellison’s literary ‘taste for undefinition’, one which shapes the novel’s literary suspicion and its suspicious politics. The lack of stability and uncertainty of the 1950s resulted, this chapter argues, in the novelistic aesthetics developed in *Invisible Man* as a text which revels in narrating the character’s suspicion prior to realising his undefinition and invisibility while asserting the need for such narration as a literary intervention which can provide him with the voice he is otherwise denied. This chapter establishes a dialogue between the novel’s suspicion and Ellison’s own as a writer—starting with the account of his abandonment of a war novel and his choice instead for the story of Invisible Man—who was not only pushed to *write about* suspicion but to *generate* the feeling of suspicion he had felt while coming up with the story. Invisibility, this chapter purports, defines the protagonist’s undefinition and prompts the novel to suspiciously wonder how can the unseen and *unseeable* be narrated. As this chapter undertakes an attentive analysis of how suspicion is built from within novelistic devices, it will follow the novel’s plot as one which thematises suspicion—the character’s narration of his life in New York City and his eventual arrival to a hole where he ‘hibernates’, from where he is able to embrace his invisibility—as well as it will examine it suspicious formal devices. Embracing the suspicious traits of the novel, this chapter examines how although Invisible Man claims he cannot be *seen*, his suspicious narration—and his invitation to the reader to be suspicious—guarantees him being *heard* and *read*.

More than a mere anecdote, Ellison’s account of his creative process established a dichotomy which would continue to be reproduced in criticism of his work, that between novels which directly addressed the historical and political reality, often in a realist fashion, and those which in prioritising novelistic aesthetics sacrificed any political engagement. Indeed, Ellison’s work has often been read alongside the evolution of the author’s political thought from the late 1940s to the 1970s. As Maryemma Graham and Jefferey Dwayne Mack explained in their brief biography of the writer, although Marxism’s ‘promise of equality’ had attracted ‘black intellectuals’, towards the 1940s many ‘began to question the party’s commitment to the black community’, a doubt which was further emphasised by the fact that, during the war, Black Americans in the US Army were called to ‘fight against fascism abroad’ while ‘defend[ing] a segregated America’.[[177]](#footnote-177) It was, for Ellison, ‘an American archetypal dilemma’: ‘[h]ow could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality during times of peace?’.[[178]](#footnote-178) In his 1948 essay ‘Harlem is Nowhere’, Ellison had already established a link between the ‘vast process of change’ that Black Americans ‘historically’ experienced—from ‘slavery to the condition of industrial man’[[179]](#footnote-179)—and the lack of a ‘stable, recognized place in society’. [[180]](#footnote-180)This meant that ‘[o]ne’s identity’ inevitably ‘drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable’, that is, suspected.[[181]](#footnote-181) In this sense, the novel could be a response not to resolve the questions but to prompt them and reflect the state of *drifting* in doubt.

As a key work of American Literature—even considered the ‘best-regarded novel of the entire postwar period’—‘a stature’ which, according to critics such as Greif, ‘has never seriously been challenged’—*Invisible Man* has continued to be read through the lens of suspicion, for, althoughthe novel quickly reached a canonical position—or precisely because of it—the novel was and continues to be the object of constant tension between axes of critical opposites, the same ones within which Ellison had first divided his options—that of writing a novel about the war or a novel about the character of Invisible Man.[[182]](#footnote-182) Critics who valued the form of the protest novel—explicitly political—formulated an exclusionary classification of the novel as either an aesthetic-focused product or as a product rooted in its historical and political context—the ‘anti-communism of the McCarthy era, the postwar emergence of the Civil Rights era’, ‘the upheaval of assassinations’ in the US, ‘the rise of the Black Power movement’ and ‘the trickle-down conservatism of the Reagan years’.[[183]](#footnote-183) Part of the reason for Ellison’s novel being tied to taxonomic criticism was the simplified corpus of African American fiction handled by criticism, which Stephanie Brown denounced in *The Postwar African American Novel* (2011). Two novels had come to define the state-of-the-art of African American literature in the first half of the twentieth century: Richard Wright’s protest novel *Native Son* and ‘the anomalous masterpiece’ of *Invisible Man*.[[184]](#footnote-184) As Brown explained, scholars of the ‘paradigms privileging self-contained and self-conscious models’—such as New Critics—strengthened the idea of *Invisible Man* ‘as a brilliant modernist outlier’ in opposition to ‘the “authentic” postwar African American novel as racial protest presented in the social realist model’.[[185]](#footnote-185)

Although dominant critical accounts oppose the protest novel to Ellison’s technically sophisticated fiction, this chapter argues that novelistic suspicion problematises and complicates this dichotomy. Suspicion allows the novel to hold onto its protesting spirit while aesthetically challenging the assumption that in order to *protest* a novel had to be written following certain formal precepts—aligned with realism—as well as moral and political ones—containing a straightforward denunciation of injustice. Ellison’s accusations of abandoning himself to the pleasure of aesthetics—thus sacrificing politics—were also entrenched in his own belief in the idea of universalism as opposed to an identitarian position, for Ellison claimed that although being ‘without a doubt a Negro and a writer’, he was ‘also an *American* writer’.[[186]](#footnote-186) A source of suspicious discomfort for many critics who demanded straightforward political commitment of him, Ellison’s universalism was explained, according to Greif, by the writer’s conviction ‘that there was no white American culture without its black movement, and no black culture in America apart from white involvement’, thus he aimed at unifying a history that had been separated but which, for Ellison, ‘was mixed in its essence, as all “Americans” were so mixed’.[[187]](#footnote-187)

Ellison’s knowledge of his own identity, then, was not achieved by recognition but by the generalisation of literature, as he believed that if he could ‘understand a bit more about’ himself ‘as a Negro’ it was ‘because literature has taught me something of my identity as a Western Man’.[[188]](#footnote-188) Resisting to be paired with other Black American writers, Ellison argued his ‘cultural heritage’ had been ‘shaped by the American experience’ and by its ‘social and political predicament’.[[189]](#footnote-189) The novelist’s rejection of being read as an ‘American Negro’—instead considering himself a ‘Negro American’—Greif explained, was heavily criticised as the ‘doctrine that all men “are the same under the skin”’ and denounced as ‘an Old Left antidote to today’s identity politics or disparaged as unquestioned and old-fashioned assimilationist baggage’.[[190]](#footnote-190) Nevertheless, Ellison’s universalism is not to be disdained without exploring the interest in the ‘human being outside of social types’ present in the intellectual context of the 1950s.[[191]](#footnote-191) According to Greif, Ellison’s ‘suspicion is that between the philosophical’ and ‘ideological tradition of claiming to be wholly individual and wholly free… any single person may very well fail to be recognized correctly at all.’[[192]](#footnote-192) Refusing to take on what he believed to be a narrow and limiting identity, Ellison aspired to the universalism of the literary canon, that is, a white literary canon which claimed universality. In Ellison’s words, ‘the great masters’ were‘the ones I have to measure myself against, not because I want to but because that’s what is stuck up there’.[[193]](#footnote-193) It was not a choice: ‘*I*’, he explained,‘didn’t create them; they were there.’[[194]](#footnote-194) For Ellison, the novel allowed ‘black kids’ to not be ‘choked off from knowing how society operates’ and to learn about ‘areas of American life’ which were inaccessible to them.[[195]](#footnote-195)

The novel, then, was for Ellison an aesthetic and political proposal, one, this chapter purports, of suspicion. Rather than conceiving it as a receiver of alien critical discourse, this chapter offers a reading of how *Invisible Man* generates and prompts suspicion with the novel’s aesthetics as a political device, and, in doing so problematises dichotomic critical enclosures which reduce its politics to the realist model of the protest novel. Ellison’s own experience of suspicion when he began working on the novel, then, appears as a crucial element in the theorisation of the novel’s suspicion as it presents a duality which would imbue the scholarly reception of *Invisible Man* and also the novel’s negotiation with its stakes. Although Ellison’s sought-after stability was to be achieved within the ‘safe historical grounds’ of the war novel, Ellison’s project was interrupted, haunted, by the suspicious voice of Invisible Man.[[196]](#footnote-196) Despite being ‘inclined to close’ his ‘ears and get on’ with his original idea, as persuasive as the voice was, Ellison could not refuse its appeal and surrendered to its—somewhat sinister—charm, in the same way in which the novel surrenders to its suspicion so as to exist through it.[[197]](#footnote-197) Examining the tension between Ellison’s desire for stable narratives—in the turbulence of the post-war years—and his creative displays of scepticism, this chapter traces the novel’s suspicion scholarship and, crucially, suspicion in the novel’s form—that is, in the inseparable aesthetic and political stance such suspicion effectively provides.

## Simply a Phantom

One of the most defining traits of suspicion is its self-awareness and its characteristic self-examination, one which has often been taken for self-annihilation. If the novel suspects itself, it risks its existence and relevance. The suspicious novel, in other words, can cancel itself out. However, self-awareness is at the heart of the novel’s ability to reflect on its novelistic existence. For the character of Invisible Man, achieving a fully suspicious existence allows him to be conscious not only of himself but also of his own suspicion. This self-awareness is consistent too when characterising himself, as his roles of character and narrator allow the reader to notice how Invisible Man perceives himself. The prologue of the novel, which is chronologically situated at the end of the story, shows a character who has already achieved and embraced invisibility as a trait which shall not be fought. Although he is aware that invisibility can cause ‘resentment’, he is not ‘complaining’ nor ‘protesting’.[[198]](#footnote-198) As he is openly communicating that his narration will *not* be a *protest* novel, he states he could ‘strike out with’ his ‘fists’, ‘curse’ and ‘swear’, however, he has realised it is ‘seldom successful’ (4). If Invisible Man is not angry, his laughter does however sustain a suspicious undertone which has prompted the novel to be read within concepts such as irony or ridicule. Lee Konstantinou’s *Cool Characters* (2016) framed *Invisible Man* as ironic, explaining that although the novel ‘was an extended meditation on the figure of invisibility as it related to African American life in the era of Jim Crow’, it also was ‘an effort to understand *what sort of voice* would be best suited to undertake such a meditation’—this is, an ironic voice.[[199]](#footnote-199) Although irony concentrates a difference between ‘what is said and meant’, and between ‘direct and indirect communication’, it does not intrinsically cause detachment.[[200]](#footnote-200) Irony can turn protest into ‘an attitude of ridicule towards oppression’.[[201]](#footnote-201) However, Konstantinou explained, in stopping us from being able to make statements it can also entail a paralysis and a lack of political potential.

Progressively more wary, the narrator’s suspicious detachment from the world materialises as he falls into the hole in the ground, from where he hides at the end and tells his story. It is then when the suspicion which has guided his life in New York is intensified, in the act of narration: he recalls his experience of suspicion *with* suspicion, situating himself further and further from the world and other characters. As Invisible Man recalls his arrival to New York and the difficulties he faced to find a job and a community, he describes how he had to become more wary and alert to survive;, in other words, how he had to embrace invisibility. It is the act of storytelling, of narrating how his suspicion progressively increases, that also emphasises the need for suspicion. As he narrates, he is looking back, from the vantage point of the present—while in the hole—and thus he can analyse what has happened to him. To reflect the doubleness of suspicion, Invisible Man must narrate his story from the furthest chronological point, the prologue of the novel: a fully suspicious and detached character, suspicion is what allows him to communicate his intentions and to address the reader as the recipient of his story. Although he is going to tell how he has become invisible, his first words are dedicated to assuring the reader that he is ‘a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids’, that is, to asserting and affirming his reality as a human (3). In order to assert that reality, he denies being a ghost of any kind—he is ‘not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe’, nor a ‘Hollywood-movie ectoplasm’ (3). Rejecting, thus, any possible super-natural interpretations to the story he is about to tell—this is not a science-fiction nor a fantasy story, he seems to say—Invisible Man makes use of the prologue as an introduction to begin his suspicious narration as well as to ask for his humanity to be trusted.

Even when affirming explicitly the materiality and physicality of his existence, Invisible Man likens himself to a ghostly figure. His invisibility is a matter of perception, of ‘a peculiar disposition of the eyes’, he explains: ‘people refuse to see’ him, and all they can perceive is the ‘surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations’ (3). Not knowing whether he ‘really exist[s]’, Invisible Man cannot keep suspicion of his own reality away, as he considers the possibility of being ‘simply a phantom’ (4). Regardless of the uncertainty regarding his nature—a spectral or human one—Invisible Man takes on the duty of telling his story and affirms his role as the main character and narrator. Being a narrator of his own story, Valerie Smith argued, Invisible Man is also an ‘artist’, his ‘product’ being the ‘novel’ we read.[[202]](#footnote-202) His narration becomes too a subversive act: by using ‘his literary talent’, in Smith’s words, he contests the ‘figures of authority’ he has faced in his life, and is able ‘to expand the overly restrictive conceptions of identity’ by which he had found himself constrained.[[203]](#footnote-203) Indeed, Ellison had ‘hoped the reader would view the actions which took place in the main body of the book’ from the perspective of the prologue, with the predisposition to suspicion which is installed in the first pages of the novel and with the idea that the character is providing his ‘memoir written underground’.[[204]](#footnote-204) The prologue and epilogue, then, prompt the suspicion that conditions the whole novel while at the same time they assert the authorial authority of Invisible Man: if we are to be wary and alert, it is because we are guided to be.

The novel follows Invisible Man’s path to the hole, to his radical state of suspicion. As Invisible Man tells the story of how he has ended up there, the structure of the novel follows the progression from the character’s naivety towards knowledge, or, at least, towards the knowledge that he must remain suspicious and wary. Alongside this, the narrator’s critical view of society aligns *Invisible Man* with the picaresque novel as a genre in which the ‘prose autobiography’ accounts for how the character ‘strives by fair means and by foul to make a living’ in contact with ‘various classes of society’ as well as ‘points out the evils which came under his observation’.[[205]](#footnote-205) It is the quality of self-narrating one’s own story that, according to Henry Louis Gates, links Invisible Man’s intents to those of the picaresque, for ‘the foregrounded voice in the prologue and epilogue’ helps Invisible Man ‘frame’ the ‘picaresque account of his narrative’.[[206]](#footnote-206) In her analysis of the African-American documentary novel, Barbara Foley also found a ‘picaresque quality’ in ‘the episodic format of the fugitive slave narrative’ which Ellison’s novel employs.[[207]](#footnote-207) Invisible Man’s narration in the prologue and epilogue also responds to the picaresque’s characteristic telling of ‘the life of its protagonist in order to explain a final situation’.[[208]](#footnote-208) Furthermore, Invisible Man’s suspicion—involving detachment, a level of anger, and, as I will continue to explore, ridicule—also aligns with the genre, understood as the ‘anti-idealist other of the dignified *Bildungsroman*’[[209]](#footnote-209), in that it ‘offer[s] no alternative ethical principle’ to injustice.[[210]](#footnote-210) Invisible Man’s continuous shift from fitting societal norms and rejecting them also echoes the picaresque protagonist’s ‘traditional role as a half-outsider’[[211]](#footnote-211), evident in the character’s inhabitation of the hole and his ‘state of hibernation’, from where he can begin telling his story (6).

Despite being uncertain of his human reality, his isolation and invisibility, in becoming a narrator Invisible Man is able to disassemble the link between suspicion and paralysis, between suspicion and detachment. If Smith framed Ellison’s novel ‘in the tradition of Afro-American letters that originated with the slave narratives of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ it is because in Invisible Man’s narration the awareness ‘that the act of naming is linked inextricably to issues of power and control’ leads him ‘to the achievement of identity’, that is, it allows him to assert his story and draws the political attention not in his achievements—in the portrayal of a political solution—but in the act of telling one’s story and representing it in all of its complexity.[[212]](#footnote-212) Indeed, Invisible Man’s narration does not adjust to forms of political writing associated with genres such as the protest novel. Making use of the ‘interior monologue in modernist fiction’, Greg Chase explained, the novel could be ‘criticized as political aestheticism’ for enhancing individuality over ‘broader historical realities’; however, by allowing complex and sometimes contradictory ‘representations of black interiority’, the novel highlights how ‘formal issues are inextricable from political ones’.[[213]](#footnote-213) In a similar argument, Richard Purcell considered Invisible Man’s story-telling as aligned with a ‘confessional mode’ which ‘highlights the performative aspect of enunciation’.[[214]](#footnote-214) The novel’s form allows, then, for representation and creation to be simultaneous and inseparable. ‘Being invisible and without a substance, a disembodied voice’, Invisible Man wonders, in the closing remarks of the epilogue, ‘what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening…?’ (581). The quiet rest of hibernation allows Invisible Man to begin his ‘memoir’, in Ellison’s words, an enterprise which seems to not be a choice but a necessity, a duty, one to be undertaken narratively.

## What Lies Behind the Face of Things

Invisible Man’s own physical journey from the South to the North of the US materialises Ellison’s aspirations to achieve complexity in the novel—the journey becomes a metaphor for the novelist’s idea of literary progression from the naivety of the protest novel form to the complex formal possibilities his novel seeks to reach. Within the novel itself, Ellison explained, such a journey from South to North works as a metaphor for the character’s evolution ‘from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing’ as well as for the ‘step from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism’ which Black Americans took when ‘moving across the Mason-Dixie line’.[[215]](#footnote-215) Such a journey, however, is not undertaken voluntarily by the character, but imposed upon him. After being told to leave the campus for threatening its reputation by taking a trustee of the college to a brothel, Dr. Bledsoe, president of the college, is the first of many who advises the narrator to be attentive to what which surrounds him. Promising to help him get work in New York to fund his future return to studying, Bledsoe recommends Invisible Man to ‘use’ his ‘judgement’, as well as to ‘keep’ his ‘eyes open’ and ‘get in the swing of things’ (145). Stressed and anxious, Invisible Man does not believe these words to be particularly important, however, as he embarks on his trip, he is continuously told to be wary and alert: in the city, things may not be what they seem. Leaving the South behind, the geographical change acquires a broader meaning: in going to the North, the narrator progressively becomes more suspicious and wary. However, such change is not just metaphorical, for even in the North, the character continues to move, not up North but below, to the ground where he enters the hole.

Before achieving such a state of isolation and detachment, Invisible Man receives constant advice to be suspicious. When he is about to get on the bus to go to the city, he is told by other travellers that New York is ‘not a place’ but ‘a dream’ (152). However, as he does not respond to the exciting and inviting descriptions of the city, the advice turns serious: a fellow traveller tells him to ‘learn to look beneath the surface’ and to ‘come out of the fog’ (153). Using metaphors related to surface and depth and of sight and blindness, the traveller advises Invisible Man to be suspicious, which implies leaving behind the ‘fog’, that is, the state of pre-suspicion of his life in the South, where things are what they seem to be on the surface. Later on, Invisible Man fantasises about returning to college once he has earned enough money and imagines the appearance he will give out: ‘basically the same’ but ‘so subtly changed so as to intrigue those who had never been North’, that is, so as to be suspected by them (178). As he is told to look out for things which do not appear obvious, Invisible Man wants to prompt such suspicion in others and imagines a hypothetical conversation with his college peers, where he would ‘give them hints’ of his words as being ‘weighted with broad and mysterious meanings that lay just beneath the surface’ (178). He learns that ‘the vaguer you told things, the better’ to ‘keep’ others ‘guessing’ (178). The warnings he has received about his journey become part of his own speech, of his own consciousness, and although at this point he is far from fully detaching himself and entering the hole, he has already entered suspicion.

Invisible Man’s description of New York is increasingly filtered through his own growing suspicious point of view, perceiving the city as a place filled with mystery and making use of oneiric images to describe it. As he accounts for the difference in freedom which he experiments there—able to be ‘sitting on subways beside whites’ and ‘eating with them in the same cafeterias’—he sees this freedom as belonging to ‘the eerie, out-of-focus sensation of a dream’ (168). However, the oneiric character of New York is not tinted just with positivity but also with the uncanny, such as when he hears a strange song about a woman with animal features and, although he recognises the lyrics, ‘suddenly the strangeness of it’ seems stronger than its familiarity, making him wonder ‘[w]hat does it mean’ (177). The counterpart to the city’s strangeness and oneiric atmosphere is provided by the letters written by Dr. Bledsoe. According to the president of the college, such letters will help ‘introduce’ him to seven men with power and will ‘request them’ to assist him in finding work (149). These letters, almost a relic of the non-suspicious existence in the South, appear as straightforward objects of communications, ones which, at first, are not suspected, as Bledsoe seems to openly reveal what is inside them. Nevertheless, he warns the narrator that ‘it isn’t necessary… to open them’ thus maintaining the mystery of what is inside of the envelopes (149).

Trusting Dr. Bledsoe to be well-intentioned, Invisible Man saves the letters and carefully plans how to deliver them to the seven recipients. Not suspicious of their content, his feelings towards the letters seem positive and hopeful, such as when he observes the envelopes on his bed, he is drawn to a ‘feeling of importance from reading the important names’ (163). This scene acts as an exceptional moment of self-recognition amidst Invisible Man’s journey towards suspicion, but it is not long until wariness appears, as he asks ‘[w]hat was inside, and how could I open them undetected?’, and fears the consequences of trying to figure out what is in them, for ‘it would not be honorable or safe to tamper’ with them (163). Nevertheless, beyond his wariness, the narrator possesses in this scene a positive and affirmative feeling upon his still stable identity, as he fantasises about finding ‘someone to show the letters to’ to obtain ‘a proper reflection’ of himself (163). His pride is evident as the ‘reflection’ of his importance is portrayed as his actual reflection on ‘the mirror’ where he watches his own ‘admiring smile’, thinking of the letters as ‘a hand of high trump cards’ (163).

However, after delivering six of the seven letters and not receiving positive feedback, a job nor a reply, Invisible Man arrives at Mr. Emerson’s office, to whom the last of the letters is addressed. Unable to speak with him, Invisible Man gives the letter to Mr. Emerson’s son, who, after reading it privately, is disturbed and looks uncomfortable. Explaining to Mr. Emerson’s son that he expects to get a job ‘to return to college in the fall’ (182), Invisible Man is asked whether he has read Mr. Bledsoe’s letter, to which he responds that ‘naturally’ he did not (184). His interlocutor goes on to speak about ambition, which although ‘a wonderful force’, sometimes ‘blinds one to realities’ (184). Contributing to the metaphorical structure which relates seeing, perception, and knowledge, the narrator’s ingenuity is portrayed as blindness. Hinting at the narrator’s naivety and mistaken trust towards Bledsoe, Mr. Emerson’s son moves on to say, regarding the other six men who have received letters, that they will respond to the narrator since ‘[t]hey’re all loyal Americans’, a moment in which Invisible Man grasps the ‘unmistakable irony in his voice’ (185). He progressively becomes suspicious as he wonders ‘[w]hat on earth is this all about?’, but Mr. Emerson’s son only speaks in vague terms, saying that ‘[s]ome things are just too unjust for words’, pointing not only at the ill-intentioned actions of Bledsoe, but seemingly to a wider injustice, which can be ‘too ambiguous for either speech or ideas’ (185). Echoing the advice given by fellow travellers, Mr. Emerson’s son continues to instil a suspicious mindset on Invisible Man in the form of a warning.

Although there are several indications that he has been manipulated and lied to, Invisible Man still trusts Bledsoe. Reluctant to tell him the truth, Mr. Emerson’s son continues to speak about the narrator’s blindness, about his naivety. As Invisible Man claims that he ‘only want[s] a job’, Mr Emerson’s son is sceptical of such a simple wish—to work—and insists that he ‘surely’ must ‘suspect there is more to it than that’ (188). The ambiguous meaning of ‘it’ could entail life or existence—an existence which has more layers than the visible ones—something evident when Emerson asks Invisible Man whether he is not ‘curious about what lies behind the face of things’ (188). The narrator still sees no value in this, for he is ‘mainly interested in a job’ (188), however, as he reads the letter and learns Bledsoe’s intentions that he ‘never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student’ in the university again, Invisible Man comes across the strong realisation of betrayal and his mood switches from confusion and intrigue to disbelief and, of course, suspicion—linked once more with perception and sight when he ‘rubbed’ his ‘eyes, and they felt sandy’ (191). However, believing in his redemption, he resists embracing full suspicion and hopes to ‘return and help’ the university (192). After Mr. Emerson’s son tells him to ‘never return’ for ‘[t]here is no point in blinding’ himself ‘to the truth’ and he leaves the building, Invisible Man experiences a full change in perception (192). Just before a burst of anger, in the street, he realises ‘[t]he sun was very bright’ and he finds himself distanced from everyone else, since ‘people along the walk seemed far away’ (193). His mood moves onto laughter of disbelief, when he thinks ‘[i]t was a joke’, and he displays an awareness of the ridicule he has been a victim of. It is his anger and the desire to ‘go back and kill Bledsoe’ which makes him ‘move with decision’, as he is ‘dreaming with revenge’ (194-5). Although in this first realisation the narrator reaches high levels of anger, this first disillusionment works as an opening act of the loss of faith and the growth of suspicion he will continue to experience in New York, which only intensifies as he is involved with the Brotherhood and their political activism.

## Out of the Fog

Having been in New York for a while, the narrator is repeatedly told not to be blinded by appearances and warned about how life in the city is different from the South. Once involved with the Brotherhood, Invisible Man learns to be suspicious in a professional capacity, to achieve the liberation of the working class. After some time with them, he is called to a meeting which results in an intervention to reprehend and correct his methods. The narrator feels the analytical and mean gaze of the Brotherhood, as they ‘regarded’ him ‘silently’, Brother Jack, the leader, ‘studying’ him ‘with his penetrating eyes’ while the rest are ‘blank-faced, looking out of eyes that were meant to reveal nothing and to stir profound uncertainty’ (462). The leading members of the Brotherhood seem aware of the power of their gaze and of the feelings it can cause: one can be blind but can also choose to blind others and appear inscrutable. After telling Invisible Man he should not have agitated the crowds, the leaders of the Brotherhood tell him that he was ‘not hired to think’ (469). Hired, instead, to perform the duties he is told, they explain he lacks the ability and experience to be able to make decisions alongside them, that he lacks the necessary experience for ‘gaining strategical knowledge’, which ‘is necessary to see the overall picture’ (470). Repeating the advice given to the narrator by fellow passengers of the bus that takes him to the North, Brother Jack explains to him that ‘[m]ore is involved than meets the eye’ (470). In other words, Invisible Man should look beneath the surface, and be more wary and suspicious of that which surrounds him. In insisting that he is not doing that *yet*—that he has not *mastered* looking at things in such a way—his experiences in the city have not made him reach a full state of suspicion yet.

Invisible Man’s fault, then, is not making a mistake but lacking proper sight. He does not only feel that the Brotherhood cruelly watches him as he enters the room, but he is also told that he is not *suspicious* enough to be a leader, for he cannot *see* well enough. The apparent analogical simplicity of the metaphor of sight is complicated when, at the same time as he is being told that he does not *look* at things with enough attention, he is reproached that he is not blind. At this moment, the figurative speech around sight turns literal, for the blindness which Jack refers to is real physical blindness. As he is being scolded, the narrator sees the ‘object the size of a large marble’ falling into Jack’s glass (474). Shocked, the narrator cannot hide his ‘outrage’ as he feels disgusted at the ‘line of raw redness showing’ in Jack’s face, ‘where the lid refused to close’ (474). Immediately, the narrator feels distrust towards the apparent accident, believing that Jack has ‘disembowelled himself just in order to confound’ him (474). Although Jack’s blindness is real, when telling the narrator that he does not ‘appreciate the meaning of sacrifice’, the narrator immediately notices how Jack uses his blindness in his political discourse, ‘gloating’ and ‘holding up the eye in the glass as though it were a medal of merit’ (475). Finding it difficult to look at, the narrator agrees that the loss of an eye was Jack’s ‘heroic act’ but demands him to ‘hide the bleeding wound’ (475). In a similar formal deactivation of the figurative sense that appears at the beginning, when the narrator rejects any metaphorical or fantastic meanings of invisibility, blindness goes from being a metaphor to being a literal image of a physical condition.

Invisible Man’s visceral reaction to Jack’s blindness seems to be caused by more than just disgust towards the cavity in his face. Shocked, the narrator wonders about the meaning of Jack’s speech and, more generally, about the work expected from him in the Brotherhood. ‘Discipline is sacrifice’, and so is ‘blindness’, he tells himself, repeating Jack’s idea, who, he believes, is trying ‘to intimidate’ him (475). Finding it hard to control his anger, he feels rejection towards Jack and the Brotherhood, not engaging in any way with their words on sacrifice, not impressed about Jack’s blindness as a symbol of political sacrifice but merely disgusted by its appearance. The narrator, then, becomes fully distanced from the Brotherhood, suspicious of their discourse and their intentions, sceptical towards the moral superiority Jack believes to possess. Listening to Jack’s words with complete suspicion, Invisible Man engages with blindness as a metaphor, but instead of accepting the idea of sacrifice, he ridicules it. When Jack tells him that he ‘hope[s] it never happens to’ him—this is, losing an eye—the narrator replies that if that happened to him, ‘maybe you’ll recommend me to your oculist’ (477). During the argument with Jack and the other leaders of the Brotherhood, the narrator distances himself more and more from them. However, his thoughts and his behaviour do not match, for he manages to make it seem as if he is feeling upset and sorry for himself, rather than angry. As Jack tells him, ‘I know how you feel’, the narrator experiences distance and returns to the idea of Jack’s blindness to exploit once more its metaphorical nature (478). Realising Jack is not actually able to see beyond the surface, beyond his appearance of sadness and into his actual anger, he wonders ‘[w]hich eye is really the blind one’ (478). In this case, returning to the metaphorical value of blindness is intrinsically linked with distance, and literary language becomes a layer through which the narrator is able to take a step back from his professional and emotional involvement with the Brotherhood.

To escape paralysis, ridicule is a highly suspicious mode of being and behaving which, as suspicion, can also be self-reflective—in being ridiculed, Invisible Man feels the need to ridicule others and, to do so, he cannot help entering a state of heightened suspicion through which everything that surrounds him can be subjected to such ridicule. According to Smith, ‘characterizing them as buffoons and villains’, Invisible Man turns ridicule into a weapon against ‘those who ridiculed or deceived him’ first.[[216]](#footnote-216) In *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Michael Billig explained how ridicule, like irony, has often been conceived as a ‘darker, less easily admired practice’ than that of humour in more general terms, a practice that makes us aware of both humour’s ‘rebellious’ and ‘disciplinary aspects’.[[217]](#footnote-217) As Billig denied ‘that ridicule constitutes the unnecessary, subtractable negative of laughter’s positive value’, ridicule indeed can work to mobilise suspicion.[[218]](#footnote-218) Involving a degree of anger and detachment, ridicule does not capitulate towards injustice but relies on its own ‘rhetorical force’ and follows the logic of uncovering to be effective.[[219]](#footnote-219) The use of humour, then, can escape paralysis, as Ellison himself considered it a tool to confront ‘the persistence of racial violence and the unavailability of legal protection’, and defended his aesthetic choices when asking, ‘what else *was* there to sustain our will to persevere but laughter’, was it possible that ‘a subtle triumph hidden in such laughter’ could be ‘more affirmative than raw anger’?[[220]](#footnote-220) Although they have significant differences, ridicule and suspicion develop through the same dynamics in the novel, allowing the narrator to suspect and ridicule those around him.

After the tense meeting with the Brotherhood, Invisible Man is told to visit another member’s house—Hambro’s—and starts walking, a moment when it becomes clear there has been a significant change in his attitude. Although he has not yet learned to *look* properly, he realises that although the Brotherhood, and particularly Jack, base their leadership on the idea that they know more than the rest of people *because* they can *see* more than others, they are also blind to the true feelings and motifs of their own people. The narrator’s anger and desire for revenge are overlooked by Jack, who trusts him to follow orders and continue his work as a member of the Brotherhood. As he leaves, the narrator still feels the oppressive gaze he encountered when first arriving at the meeting, as if ‘they were watching’ him ‘from somewhere up the street’ (482). Nevertheless, in abandoning the meeting and during his walk to Hambro’s house, such an oppressive gaze dilutes. His walk becomes the closest point of encounter with Rinehart, a character crucial in the narrator’s embrace of his invisibility. For invisibility to become his reality and for him to consider himself an ‘invisible man’ he goes through a prior loss of identity and the undertaking of Rinehart’s. Furthermore, realising the potential of embracing others’ blindness, he goes through the adoption of suspicion as a mode of being and of being perceived.

As he walks to Hambro’s house Invisible Man notices ‘three men in natty cream-colored suits’ who are ‘all wearing dark glasses’, an image which gives him the idea of buying a pair for himself (482). After choosing ‘the darkest lenses’, made ‘of a green glass so dark it appeared black’, he ‘puts them on immediately’ and feels he is ‘plunging into blackness’, a blackness which acquires further meaning in the context of the recent meeting (482). As previously in the novel, in the moments in which the narrator comes closer to suspicion as a mode of being and looking, reality appears strange, inapprehensible, and unexplainable, and the glasses serve to reflect, once more, his change of perspective. The double meaning of his description of looking through the glasses is evident as his identity is shifting towards the unknown, as he describes waiting for his ‘eyes to adjust’ to the dark glasses, and experiences a ‘strange wave of excitement’ when looking ‘at the sinister light’ (483). Both looking at the sinister and exciting quality of the atmosphere which surrounds him, the narrator becomes wary and realises that reality—the streets of New York which he has come to know well—acquires an unknown layer, a character of mystery with which to continue interacting suspiciously.

## No Freer Than Society

As suspicion distances Invisible Man from those who surround him, Ellison’s relation to criticism has often been drawn under those terms too. Although he rhetorically wondered what an author could ‘say about his work that wouldn’t be better left to the critics’, Ellison’s engagement with critical concerns and discussions on the novel was present throughout his fiction and essayistic work.[[221]](#footnote-221) A prolific author, in his lifetime Ellison penned *Invisible Man* (1952), as well as the unfinished novel *Juneteenth* (published posthumously in 1999), alongside a large corpus of essays in which he established a close intellectual relationship with critics and literary discussions. Such a dialogue was characterised by the persistent suspicious attitude which underpinned a great deal of criticism of his novel, as well as by Ellison’s confrontation towards those who accused him of apoliticism and considered his work as selling out to the pleasure of aesthetics, in opposition to openly committed authors of protest novels. With no reservations when it came to arguing his positions or reviewing the work of other writers, Ellison’s essays shed light on the rigorous work he undertook to think and conceptualise what literature should do, what the duty of the writer—and particularly, of the Black American writer—was and how *Invisible Man’s* novelistic suspicion prompted and answered those critical questions and questionings.

Deeply uncomfortable with the path set for Black American writers, Ellison counteracted what he saw as defective novelistic devices. Suspicion, however, did not entail systematic scepticism for Ellison, for his distance and critical view of certain writers and novels were measured by his belief in the stability of the literary canon. Aware of the problematic and poor representation of Black Americans in the great works of the history of Western literature, he, nonetheless, claimed white writers such as Henry James, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway or T. S. Eliot as his literary ‘ancestors’.[[222]](#footnote-222) Nonetheless, stereotypical literary representations had provided a repetitive portrayal of Black characters without ‘the full, complex ambiguity of the human’, such a character instead portrayed as ‘an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel’.[[223]](#footnote-223) Rejecting fiction conceived as ‘case histories and sociology’—‘willing to compete with the camera and the tape recorder, and based on ‘concreteness’—Ellison was suspected of attending to the tenets of apolitical formalism.[[224]](#footnote-224) Nonetheless, in his formal preoccupations, he defended a moral search for the appropriate complexity to express the ‘implicit mode of Negro-American culture’, which was ‘abstract’.[[225]](#footnote-225) In the right form, Ellison thought, the writer could ‘explore the full range of American Negro humanity’—that is, by reflecting the tensions, ambiguities, and complexities of ideas and of character, for which suspicion was the most literarily effective device to construct.[[226]](#footnote-226)

Seeking distance from overused and exhausted literary forms—and concerned with being at the vanguard of writing—Ellison was wary of the limited representation of Black Americans in novels, whose image had been ‘distorted through the overemphasis of the sociological approach’ associated with the protest novel and its inability to express complexity.[[227]](#footnote-227) As Brown argued, the protest novel did not seek‘artistic innovation or philosophical complexity but simply the expression of the “black experience”’.[[228]](#footnote-228) For Brown, the protest novel’s search for ‘authenticity’ happened at the cost of such complexity, that is, simplifying the image of ‘the African American individual as the most uncorrupted, undiluted American of all’.[[229]](#footnote-229) Simplification happened too at the level of canonisation, as Richard Wright’s ‘gritty social realist novel’, Brown explained, became the ‘template for “authentic” work by black writers’, that is, the standpoint with which their work would be compared.[[230]](#footnote-230) Richard Wright, model author of the protest novel and of politically-committed fiction served as a model, too, with which to compare Ralph Ellison—who once admired and followed Wright’s advice, only to then shift away from it.

Ellison and Wright however coincided in their search to overcome simplified representation of Black American characters and to achieve the complexity of experience which had been ‘rigorously denied representation’.[[231]](#footnote-231) In ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing’ (1937), Wright stated that, as ‘a purposeful agent’, the writer had ‘a serious responsibility’ to ‘do justice to his subject matter’, that is, to ‘depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships’.[[232]](#footnote-232) Although ‘the life of the Negro people is not simple’, Wright argued, its ‘presentation’ had to be.[[233]](#footnote-233) For Ellison, ‘the terms with which we have tried to define ourselves have been inadequate’, and it was necessary ‘to affirm and to explore’ the complexity of experience ‘not as a social mission but as the stuff of literature’.[[234]](#footnote-234) The functioning of representation in fiction was complicated: the novel, he believed, ‘describes our experience’ while ‘it creates it’.[[235]](#footnote-235) If Black Americans’ experiences had not been sufficiently explored, representing and describing them equated to *creating* them. The novelist had to find a form beyond ‘what the Lost Generation novelists did’ and beyond ‘the nineteenth-century European novel of manners’ because those existing forms, had ‘little value in dealing with’ the twentieth-century ‘world of chaos and catastrophe’.[[236]](#footnote-236) Believing literature held responsibility for ‘contributing’ and ‘shaping’ culture, Ellison saw the morality of literature clearly linked to the craft of writing.[[237]](#footnote-237)

Critical analysis of *Invisible Man* has largely been focused on suspecting the novel’s politically slippery discourse, a constant in scholarship being the analysis of the political evolution of the writer throughout his career and the search for incoherence between his earlier texts—explicitly aligned with Leftist politics and communism—and his latter writing—apparently more detached and less openly committed. Such supposed incoherence is presented in the novel itself, not as a fault but as a legitimate feeling of distrust, particularly, Ellison explained, towards ‘the ambiguity of Negro leadership’ in ‘the late forties’.[[238]](#footnote-238) The idea that ‘Negro leaders did not represent the Negro community’ contributed to a ‘thick fog of unreality’, a metaphor which condenses precisely the feeling of suspicion which Invisible Man comes to acquire in the novel.[[239]](#footnote-239) Indeed, in the novel, the distance between Black Americans and ‘their leaders’ is evoked in Invisible Man’s own refusal to work with the Brotherhood and in his progressive detachment from political activism and his suspicion towards everything that surrounds him, moving not from one certainty to another but towards complete uncertainty and detachment.[[240]](#footnote-240) Due to this portrayal of detachment as an ultimately liberating stance, Foley explained, both Ellison and his novel ‘were reviewed with considerable skepticism in the black literary world, where he was frequently scorned for his depoliticized existentialism, Eurocentric notion of universality, and elitist detachment from the struggle in the streets’.[[241]](#footnote-241)

Ellison’s lack of interest in writing a protest novel did not stop scholars from demanding that *Invisible Man* adjusted to such paradigm, that Ellison explicitly committed his novel to a political message and that it represented such commitment through the conventions of realism. Ellison’s work was explicitly read through the paradigm of the protest novel in Irving Howe’s ‘Black Boys and Native Sons’ (1963), where the critic argued Ellison’s remarkable work in *Invisible Man* was achieved ‘only because Wright had been there first, courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger’ in works such as *Native Son* (1940)or *Black Boy* (1945).[[242]](#footnote-242) Although Ellison attempted to avoid the form of the protest novel, *Invisible Man*’s intentions of dealing with ‘Negro experience’ with ‘aesthetic distance’ proved to be a ‘moral and psychological impossibility’ since, according to Howe, ‘plight and protest are inseparable from that experience’.[[243]](#footnote-243) A lot of criticism, Robert Genter explained, ‘generally followed Howe’s framework’ which differentiated the ‘committed Marxist critic’ from Ellison as a ‘follower of a reactionary modernist aesthetic’.[[244]](#footnote-244) A perfect example was ‘Failed Prophet and Falling Stock’ (1990), where Houston A. Baker Jr. praised Wright as well as sought to prove everything *Invisible Man* had not achieved or had not fairly represented—arguing that, by focusing on the form of the novel, Ellison engaged in a ‘politics of silence’ and had ‘missed altogether the revolutionary possibilities of black life in America’.[[245]](#footnote-245) Arguing that Ellison’s novel displayed nothing more than complacent and defeatist pessimism regarding the possibilities for Black Americans to escape racism and white supremacy, Baker claimed that Ellison’s ‘colorblind, literarily–allusive prison house of language’ was actually a prison house of ‘white policing and surveillance’, irresponsibly portrayed by Ellison as ‘utterly inescapable’.[[246]](#footnote-246) The desire for clarity in the novel as well as the suspicion of its obscurity and formal difficulty appear as demands for what seems an altogether different book—one which Ellison was simply not willing to write. Such demands also evidenced the tension between *Invisible Man*’s lack of clarity in conveying the message and the unwanted suspicion this provoked.

Criticism did not only suspiciously trace Ellison’s apoliticism in his fiction but also searched for hints which could point at his carefully hidden politics which, despite being veiled, are textually present. Foley re-examined Ellison’s claims that although he felt ‘attraction’ towards Marxism, he ‘soon rejected it’,[[247]](#footnote-247) and argued that the writer, and especially his ‘publishers did their best, when *Invisible Man* first appeared, to efface traces of the author’s earlier connections with radical publications and organizations’.[[248]](#footnote-248) *Invisible Man* was, according to Foley, a portrayal of Ellison’s own mind, a ‘contradictory text bearing multiple traces of his struggle to repress and then abolish the ghost of his leftist consciousness and conscience’.[[249]](#footnote-249) As other critics had done, Foley too employed a suspicious approach towards Ellison’s writing and towards ‘literary critics’ who see in the novel a clear ‘anticommunist discourse’—paying attention to ‘its deconstructive indeterminacy’ or ‘its celebratory democratic universalism’—a tendency which ‘tells a good deal about the ideologies shaping the political unconscious of much contemporary criticism and theory’.[[250]](#footnote-250) In finding what Ellison was *truly* trying to hide, Foley lamented and contradicted critics who believed that, indeed, there was no trace of Marxism in the novel, her suspicion diagnosing Ellison with repression and uncovering the hidden truth of his political beliefs.

Readings of *Invisible Man*, then, share a suspicion of the novel’s own suspicion of existing modes of political writing—mostly associated with the protest novel—and in doing so critics contribute to the general state of novelistic suspicion. Reading for suspicion in *Invisible Man*, then, allows examining how the form of the novel is imbued with suspicion not to create distance but to generate the experience Ellison associated with being a Black American man in the post-war era—one of wariness against threat. The novel could guarantee complexity in that it demanded of its own form the logic it sought to construct—it did not *reflect* nor *represent* it—and thus Ellison demanded that his ‘fiction be judged as art’, and claimed that ‘if it fails, it fails aesthetically’ rather than because he ‘did or did not fight some ideological battle’.[[251]](#footnote-251) Ellison ‘agree[d] with Howe that protest is an element of all art’, not in ‘speaking for a political or social program’ but ‘as a technical assault against the styles that have gone before, or as a protest against the human condition’.[[252]](#footnote-252) The ideological battle was, for Ellison, intrinsic to the novel form, one which through suspicion prompted a mood of wariness and alleviated apolitical naivety.

Although Ellison shared with the protest novel a suspicion of the role Black Americans had been given in literature—having been systematically denied representation—for Ellison, Wright had relied on ‘the facile answers of Marxism’.[[253]](#footnote-253) Ellison did not contradict, however, the political stakes of the novel, for he was aware that fiction—despite ‘all its technical experimentation’—was ‘an ethical instrument’, and that the writer was someone who ‘is no freer than the society in which he lives’.[[254]](#footnote-254) Seeing ‘no dichotomy between art and protest’, as he would state in 1955, the problem with the ‘so-called proletarian fiction’—the protest novel—was not in its political purpose but in its form.[[255]](#footnote-255) The discussion was not properly focused, he believed, for critics of the protest novel often targeted its political messages, rather than its ‘lack of craftsmanship’.[[256]](#footnote-256) As Graham and Mack illuminatingly put it, it was the ‘cause and effect’ illusion of the protest novel which was rejected by Ellison, for whom the ‘high modernist standards’ were guarantors of the formal complexity necessary to write.[[257]](#footnote-257) Ellison’s focus on ‘aesthetic form’ was political in its direct relation to ‘the choice of lens through which individuals made sense of the world around them’, Genter explained.[[258]](#footnote-258) A choice of constructing the novel as a suspicious device, Ellison was gathering under the same wing the novel’s political potential as an aesthetic one.

## The Way It’s Always Been

As if advancing the path for suspicious criticism that would define the novel’s scholarship, Invisible Man warns the reader before beginning his narration: ‘I am an orator, a rabble rouser—Am? I *was* and perhaps shall be again’ (14). Such a doubt, as expressed by Invisible Man, sums up the wider interrogative stance that the novel proposes, an interrogating mode of reading which, by holding the reader attentive—having asked a question for which there is no answer, yet—opens up the ethical possibilities of the novel. According to Genter, Ellison sought a *rhetoric* which could engage ‘with the particularities of black culture’, thus not aiming at ‘replacing one ontological scheme with another, one version of reality with another, or one paradigm with another’.[[259]](#footnote-259) The novel allowed him to explore such particularities without prescribing a model, a paradigm, from which to understand the ways in which Black American writers had to construct literarily their experiences. As when he first listened to the voice of Invisible Man Ellison felt pushed ‘towards a frame of mind’ which ‘began combining to form a vague but intriguing new perspective’, the novel allowed him to explore such intriguing vagueness as suspicion, as the undefined but attractive sensibility with which the character lures the reader to pay attention to his story.[[260]](#footnote-260)

Towards the end of the novel, Invisible Man is himself lured to take on Rinehart’s identity—a character mentioned throughout the novel but who never appears in a scene and is never seen by the narrator. In doing so, Invisible Man comes to embrace the invisibility which will appear as crucial in his self-awareness as displayed in the prologue and epilogue, both at the furthest chronological point of the story. Rinehart appears as an embodiment of suspicion, as he is never seen but people remain alert in case he appears. His name hints at the contrast between depth and surface, evoking the words ‘rind’ and ‘heart’, and his characterisation emphasises doubt and multiplicity and prompts the narrator to ask the ultimate suspicious question: ‘What is real anyway?’ (498). This is particularly evident when Invisible Man is disguising his appearance with a pair of glasses and is mistaken for Rinehart by a woman, who approaches him saying ‘Rinehart, baby, is that you?’, talking to him in an intimate way (483). Before realising the narrator is not Rinehart, she reproaches him he is not wearing ‘the new hat’ she had given him (483). After admitting that he is not Rinehart—and that he could not help but go along with the confusion since the woman ‘seemed so pleased to see him’—Invisible Man goes to a shop to buy ‘the widest hat in stock’ to further strengthen a disguise which becomes intentional (483-4). The woman’s confusion soon changes from a case of mistaken identity to an opportunity not only to be perceived differently but to perceive reality differently through the glasses—his eyes having ‘adjusted quickly’ to the ‘dark-green intensity’ (484). The metaphors with which he describes the street—‘cars’ which ‘glowed like stars’, ‘faces’ appearing as ‘a mysterious blur’—serve the narrator to describe a newly-found beauty in his new outlook on life (484). ‘[E]xcitement’ strikes him and he sees ‘magic’ in being mistaken for Rinehart, enjoying the unexplainable nature of his experience (485). Although he is fascinated with the new look of things, the narrator does not just observe but it is at this point when he feels a call to action. He feels he ‘needed a better test’ to undertake a ‘plan’, even before understanding what this plan consists of, for he exclaims, ‘[w]hat plan? Hell, I don’t know’ (485).

Invisible Man’s impulsive need to act is a step closer to the ultimate physical detachment he experiences when hiding in the hole—from where he addresses the reader in the prologue and epilogue. After escaping once more from being mistaken for Rinehart—‘Who the hell you think you are?’, a policeman asks—he keeps walking and believes to ‘[p]erhaps’ be ‘out of his territory’ (493). Nevertheless, as he tries to ‘place Rinehart in the scheme of things’, he realises he has not been able to see him before, for although Rinehart had ‘been around all the while’, the narrator was ‘looking in another direction’ (493). Advised on several occasions to pay attention and look at the world suspiciously, both by fellow travellers to the North as well as by the Brotherhood leaders, it is when realising that his disguise—a hat and a pair of glasses—allows him to pass as somebody else that he can start taking advantage of suspicion actively, that is, prompting suspicion on others and not being just a suspicious observer. At this point, the character’s journey to New York and his life there appear as a journey towards suspicion, as Invisible Man asks himself the same question he had been asked by Emerson, the man to whom he asked a job. As he realises how easy it is to ‘blot out’ his ‘identity so quickly’, he wonders [w]hat on Earth was hiding behind the face of things’ and ‘who actually was who?’ (493). Suspicion becomes literal: the face is not merely a metaphor for an identity, but its disguise becomes an embodiment of invisibility.

Unlike what the narrator claims to be in the prologue—‘a man of substance, of flesh and bone’—Rinehart appears to Invisible Man as someone who can have another type of existence beyond the physicality of humanity (3). Rinehart’s humanity is blurred in his own invisibility, which the narrator takes as a liberation rather than a burden, for Rinehart’s undefined identity does not entail a lack of attention since he is admired and sought after by other people. As the narrator takes a ‘handbill’ from two children who are giving them out, he reads what seems like an advertisement from Rinehart himself: ‘Behold the Invisible / Thy will be done O Lord / I See all, Know all, Cure all. / You shall see the unknown wonders’ (495). Signing as a reverend and as a ‘Spiritual Technologist’, Rinehart announces public ‘prayer meetings’, opening the possibility for some sort of faith, of belief, in the *unknown* (495). Regardless of who Rinehart is and what he does—beyond existing in people’s conversations about him—the encounter with his slippery existence is enough for the narrator. Not an obvious aspiration, nor a reflection of himself either, the narrator sees Rinehart as all the possible identities given to him by the neighbours of Harlem. In this flimsy existence where one figure can take on several roles—often contradictory and of different nature—Rinehart’s way of existing and being in the world becomes—even if momentarily—an inspiration for the narrator, who claims the mysterious figure is ‘years ahead of’ himself in that ‘[h]is world was possibility and he knew it’ (498). In telling us his story, the Invisible Man makes out of suspicion the way in which his own world can become a possibility, embodying then the stakes of suspicion for the character and for the novel.

Suspicion’s crucial role in Invisible Man’s search for knowledge and sight is highlighted when Invisible Man is impressed with not having noticed Rinehart’s existence before, believing he ‘must have been crazy and blind’ not to do so (498). If only he had been more suspicious, that is, more attentive and alert, the realisation of Rinehart’s and of his own invisibility may have come sooner. In mistakenly being assigned Rinehart’s identity, the narrator—rather ‘upset’—wonders [h]ow much was known’ of him by others (498-9). Suspicion is once more embodied as it physically allows Invisible Man to accept his invisibility, a moment when his ‘body’, he explains, ‘started to itch’ and he equates this realisation not with taking on a new identity but with its elimination, as if he ‘had just been removed from a plaster cast’ (499). As a non-identity, the narrator’s invisibility opens a ‘new section of reality’ for him, one in which suspicion becomes a non-negotiable condition in the path towards self-aware invisibility (499). In the moment in which the narrator notices how easily he disguises as Rinehart, invisibility no longer appears as a mere trait of the narrator, but as a matter of *being*, a mode of existence. In Invisible Man’s words, ‘I was and yet I was invisible’, something which is a ‘fundamental contradiction’ (507). Invisibility’s mode of existence allows a ‘new section of reality’ to open, one from which to look at the world without being seen, one from which to examine and remain wary, one which does not offer an explicit political contestation but a mode of asking the necessary questions (499). It also offers a tolerance for undefinition not as a middle stage in the process but as a mode of existing which resolves the contradiction between *being* and being ‘unseen’ that, for Ellison, could express Black Americans’ experience in the post-war American context.

If suspicion allows invisibility to appear not merely as a metaphor but an embodied mode of existence for Invisible Man, he cannot but search for a place from where to embrace such invisibility and exploit it in its full potential, a potential which is tied to the narrative form. It is when the riots break out in Harlem that the character is threatened to be killed and, in his flight ‘remove[s] the manhole cover’ and goes inside a hole, where he falls on ‘a load of coal’ (565). It is in this moment—when he is ‘no longer running, hiding’ nor feeling ‘concerned’ that he recognises the hole as the natural place where he can come to terms with his invisibility as ‘the way it’s always been’ (566). At this point, his glasses have broken and thus he can no longer be disguised as Rinehart, who has been however a crucial step for him to accept and take on his own invisibility. Entering the hole entails entering the depth, it embodies Invisible Man’s own acceptance that being invisible entails being suspected by others—others who seek to uncover and bring to light such depth. However, as he enters the depth and makes a home out of the hole, Invisible Man finds suspicion not as a way to analyse and be alert of that which surrounds him but as a position from where to tell one’s story, from which to narrate.

The hole as a materialisation of suspicion presents the act of storytelling as an inherently suspicious one, since suspicion allows the character to reconstruct the complexity of experience, to reflect upon his own suspicious life in New York and call the reader to be attentive. Constant wariness not only allows Invisible Man to distance himself from every other character and to survive, but suspicion appears as the inherent way in which to tell a story, in which the novel guarantees freedom. Suspicion is, then, where the political stakes of the novel lie: facilitating Invisible Man’s survival and storytelling and demanding the reader to be attentive enough, to be involved. As the reader is addressed as a recipient of the narration by Invisible Man himself, the reader’s involvement is inevitable, and the question of sight and blindness transcends the story, becoming a reflection upon the act of reading itself, the novel asking the reader, thus, to *see properly*, to read the world properly—in its complexity and not falling for simplification—to suspiciously perceive in order to survive.

# 2

# ANOTHER DIMENSION

# Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (1957)

## Strange World of Air

In her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), Muriel Spark recalled how she wrote her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957), in response to a ‘brief but extremely intense word-game experience’.[[261]](#footnote-261) Her experience of hallucinations in the early 1950s, a product of her use of the drug Dexedrine as an ‘appetite suppressant’, served her as inspiration.[[262]](#footnote-262) By 1954, Spark was already established as a critic, having published works on the Brontë sisters and Mary Shelley. Now working on T.S. Eliot, she recalled that ‘one night the letters of the words I was reading became confused. They formed anagrams and crosswords.’[[263]](#footnote-263) Back then it was not known that amphetamine caused schizophrenic symptoms, ‘the most prominent being paranoid delusions’ and ‘beliefs’, Spark explained, ‘that the individual is being spied upon and generally persecuted’.[[264]](#footnote-264) Carried away by the feeling that there was a ‘code built into Eliot’s work’, Spark revelled in the pleasure of suspicion, trying to ‘decipher’ hidden messages and perceiving ‘this word-game through other books by other authors’.[[265]](#footnote-265) However, her poor health pushed her to abandon the accidental but exciting way in which she found herself reading texts—reading through and beyond them and establishing connections to find secret coded messages—as she was advised by her doctor to move to the countryside. For a few months she lived on the grounds of a monastery near Kent and, by resting and eating properly, her hallucinations disappeared. What did not disappear, however, was the exhilarating urge to put down in words what she had seen and felt, the wariness towards the work she was reading: its wobbly letters in motion, the messages they conveyed and, especially, the conviction that there was a message to be discovered.

Spark’s fascination with this experience was such that, while in recovery, she felt ‘released from a very real bondage’ and ready to ‘make use of the experience’, deciding then to write a novel which would deal with her hallucinations.[[266]](#footnote-266) Aware of the difficulty of reflecting her experience—that of letters changing place and moving through the page—in the narrative form, Spark believed ‘the verbal illusions on the printed page would be clumsy’, and instead constructed a character who hears the voice of a narrator ‘composing the novel itself’.[[267]](#footnote-267) From her hallucinations, Spark reworked her real pathological experience of suspicion and turned it into a creative force that not only motivated the protagonists of her novel, but also conditioned the whole construction of the novel. As Spark took her own experience of suspicion as a mental disorder as a starting point for the novel, this chapter will show how she developed such suspicion in the novel form and, in doing so, complicated it. Beyond a mental illness or a neurosis, suspicion worked as a tool of creation and contributed to Spark’s sought-after pleasurable reading. Reading *The Comforter*’s novelistic suspicion, then, prompts questions of how suspicion can be constructed and maintained textually as a productive and creative force, as well as continues to show how suspicion came to be at the centre of literary fiction in mid-century novels in which suspicion became a tool for novelists with which to write in the post-war years.

Before writing *The Comforters*, Spark was in close contact with the realities of the war, an experience which contributed to the intellectual and creative anxieties she later poured into her fiction. Having left her abusive husband in Zimbabwe (at the time, Rhodesia) she arrived in the UK in 1944, when the Second World War was still a threat. Although her family lived in ‘peaceful Edinburgh’, Spark voluntarily chose London instead, for she ‘wanted to ‘experience’ the war.’[[268]](#footnote-268) Indeed, while living in Kensington she was witness to the ‘intense incendiary bombing’ the city was suffering.[[269]](#footnote-269) ‘Bombed-out London was the first real London I was to know’, she stated in her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*,[[270]](#footnote-270) but, nonetheless, the city was ‘enjoyable in spite of the V1s, robot planes that fell with a warning… and the subsequent V2s’.[[271]](#footnote-271) Soon after arriving in the city, Spark got a job in the Foreign Office within the ‘dark field of Black Propaganda or Psychological Warfare’, which consisted of indirectly manipulating German troops through a radio station disguised as loyal to Hitler.[[272]](#footnote-272) This intricate project would deceive the enemy through subtle messages which slowly undermined their power and allowed Spark not only to experience the war but to participate in it. By dedicating her days to constructing believable lies, Spark immersed herself in the necessary state of wariness which dominated the environment of anti-Nazi propaganda. She was made aware of the capacity of political deception and ‘psychological warfare’, which, paradoxically, was ‘inclined to turn back on the propagandist’.[[273]](#footnote-273) In parallel with her job—which, she claimed, ‘suited me all right’ for ‘it was inventive’—Spark consistently worked on her writing.[[274]](#footnote-274) While in Zimbabwe, she had already written ‘poetry and read voraciously’, acquiring the knowledge other authors had gained through university studies.[[275]](#footnote-275) According to her biographer, Martin Stannard, during her time in the Foreign Office, ‘afloat in this strange world of air, light and coded signals she was content’.[[276]](#footnote-276) Spark’s career as a writer and the worldview which would inform her fiction originated from her experiences of the war and its immediate repercussions.

In *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark claimed that she ‘had always been aware of ‘gaining experience’ for some future literary work.’[[277]](#footnote-277) However, while working in London, she realised she also wanted to ‘give experience’ and ‘to offer more of my personality’.[[278]](#footnote-278) Conscious of how her worldview and intellectual background were being shaped during those years, Spark was keen on giving back ‘something of the same effect’ of the things she was living and on exploiting the notion of reading as ‘an “experience” to the reader’.[[279]](#footnote-279) Writing her first novel, Spark could share her own experiences of suspicion and wariness, of war and of illness, and, by doing so, manage ‘to give pleasure’: in literarily constructing such suspicion, she was also to cause something of the same effect in the reader, who would be demanded to remain suspicious and would nonetheless *enjoy* such suspicion.[[280]](#footnote-280) As Spark’s work during the war provided her with a notion of reality in which fictive events had to be constructed ‘in the service of a greater truth’, as Stannard pointed out, the ‘scrupulous research’ needed to construct such ‘plausible’ lies and her close involvement with making up these stories could not but influence her writing.[[281]](#footnote-281) In a context in which details were crucial to sustaining the propaganda she worked on, Spark learned of the importance of having full awareness of the stories she told, but also of the stories that would be told of her. Spark became, in Stannard’s words, ‘determined to control’ her life and acquired an ‘obsession with factual accuracy’.[[282]](#footnote-282) Indeed, Spark claimed to have learned ‘the value of documentary evidence’, for she believed it would serve to maintain a story straight against manipulations, as well as to secure ‘one’s own memory’.[[283]](#footnote-283) Since 1949, Spark consistently recollected documentary evidence of her life, an archive that by 1992 she labelled ‘a social history in itself’.[[284]](#footnote-284) Aware of the contingency of her novels, each representing ‘the convictions and humours of the writing personality’ she enacted at the time, Spark also gathered the contextual foundations which would serve to explore her evolution throughout the second half of the twentieth century, which would later be read under the light of postmodernism and metafiction.[[285]](#footnote-285)

The overall presence of novelistic suspicion in Spark’s work can be traced back to her early experiences of the war and her arrival in London, however, beyond her first-hand experience of the war, she experienced the solitude and estrangement of economic difficulty. Having left her husband, the economic instability she dealt with since arriving from Zimbabwe, in addition to her being ‘half-Jewish’, put her in a different position from the ‘1950s angst typical of post-war writers’, in Stannard’s words.[[286]](#footnote-286) She was not part of ‘the Oxford-educated bourgeoisie’ like her befriended authors Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, nor did she have the privilege to work fully on her intellectual pursuits.[[287]](#footnote-287) However, Spark shared with them the experience of converting to Catholicism as an adult, a religion which undoubtedly informed her worldview. In a 1951 letter to poet John Masefield, Spark wrote that their world was ‘disintegrated’, and that ‘through a rediscovery of form’ it would be possible for them, writers, to ‘make… meanings accessible’.[[288]](#footnote-288) As she recalled, entering the Church a few months before writing *The Comforters* allowed her to ‘see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings’ and to move from poetry, short fiction and criticism to novel-writing.[[289]](#footnote-289) As she converted to Catholicism, her interest as a critic in the Book of Job became a direct inspiration for *The Comforters*. Indeed, as Bryce Christensen put it, *The Comforters* displays the ‘problematic relationship’ between its characters, that is, its protagonist, Caroline Rose and her ‘friends and associates—the Comforters—who offer her advice for dealing with her problems’.[[290]](#footnote-290) Crucially, Spark’s interest in Job is a novelistic one, as, in the novel, ‘the mystery of narrative emerges as a providential gift’, in the words of Christensen, one which guarantees ‘sufferers some hope of perceiving… the sought-for meaning’.[[291]](#footnote-291) Spark not only creates a novel out of the biblical text but allows for its resolution to rely thematically, as the protagonist becomes a novelist herself, on novel-writing via suspicion.

How could faith and suspicion coexist? Was Spark able to construct a novel through suspicion while, at the same time, thematising her own acquisition of faith? As Spark sought a ‘rediscovery of form’, this chapter argues that novelistic suspicion allowed her to literalise her own experience of pathological suspicion reflecting how rather than disconnecting the suspicious individual from reality, it strengthened the search for meaning and the agency of her protagonist. Suspicion in the novel, for Spark, was a way with which to think about the possibilities for emancipation of a character from her author, but also of a human from God, and of an individual from injustice. Suspicion, then, did not contradict faith for Spark but allowed for faith to be thought and reflected upon, for it to exist as an answer to the necessary interrogating state in which suspicion imbued her characters and her readers. In addition to her experience of war and her pill-induced paranoia, her newly found Catholicism contributed to the foundation of the framework from within which she would construct *The Comforters* with novelistic suspicion. Repeated throughout the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, the constant experience of being watched and heard, and of watching and hearing others, was present in Spark’s life through the paranoid disorder, the presence and absence of God, and, of course, through propaganda and her involvement in the war. The intellectual wariness which constituted her worldview also became the experience with which she sought to provide the readers.

In *The Comforters*, suspicion is at play thematically, as the characters’ plots are directly concerned with being suspicious and suspected. Indeed, Spark defined her novel with these terms, stating that in the novel ‘everyone falls under suspicion from everyone else’ and that ‘throughout the story… everyone is suspected… of being other than they are.’[[292]](#footnote-292) However, as distrust is materialised in the character’s plots—they behave like detectives, or hear voices and are suspected of being neurotic—suspicion takes over the narrative itself, and offers an early model of works that decades later were gathered under the label of ‘metafiction’, as the Introduction has explored. As the protagonist of the novel is suspected of being suspicious, she becomes pathologised and diagnosed with paranoia, to which she will contest not with paralysis but intensifying her suspicion to achieve emancipation, she first becomes a character aware of being such and, later, demands to become an author, to tell her own story. Novelistic suspicion in *The Comforters* generates the novel’s self-reflection, and the characters’ consciousness of being fictional, a consciousness which the novel seeks to generate in the reader too. In this sense, suspicion does not stay in the realm of the novel, in being built from within, it is able to transcend the novel and generate a state of alertness in the reader, who, by the end of the novel cannot but remain suspicious and wonder where the story comes from; not only who is its true author but whether such thing can be known.

This chapter continues to explore suspicion from within the novel and thinks such suspicion beyond criticism, not opposing it to socially and politically compromised fiction but as inseparable from it. To do so, it follows James Bailey’s call to consider ‘the nature and purpose’ of Spark’s novels’ ‘disorienting indeterminacy’, which although engage with ‘exploring the possibilities of literary form’ in playful manners, offer too ‘an agile kind of social critique’.[[293]](#footnote-293) This chapter will first examine the conditions under which Spark wrote and published the novel—a genre which allowed Spark to ‘express the comic side of my mind and at the same time work out some serious theme’—and will then move on to focusing on the novelist’s ideas on ridicule mostly developed on her essay ‘The Desegregation of Art’ (1970).[[294]](#footnote-294) In the subsequent sections, this chapter will examine the functioning of suspicion in the novel’s plot as it is materialised in the suspicion of Laurence and Caroline and in the way their suspicion is perceived by other characters. Furthermore, Catholic cultural motifs—namely the conflict between control and chaos, between omniscience and freedom—will be read under the light of suspicion and ridicule, as Spark’s highly self-conscious narrative plays, in Waugh’s words, entails that ‘fiction characters are trapped within the novelist’s script’ as well as ‘in “reality” people are part of the book written by the hand of God’.[[295]](#footnote-295) Reading *The Comforters* novelistic suspicion and allowing for its indeterminacy permits a shift of focus from existing ideas that fiction is corrupted by the bad influence of suspicion’s interpretative methods, to instead explore the aesthetic and political possibilities it offers in the novel.

## An Author Making a Book

While in 1954 Spark experienced acute hallucinations and needed treatment to recover, she was beginning to be known among fellow writers and publishers for her poetry and her short pieces of criticism. Spark, however, could not respond to her growing audience as she wanted to: it was ‘frustrating’, she explained, being ‘unable to respond positively to so many letters’ due to her health problems.[[296]](#footnote-296) During this time she received a letter from Alan Maclean, ‘the best-liked editor in London’, from Macmillan, who was in search of ‘new young talent’, but feeling vulnerable in her position, Spark rejected his proposition of writing a novel.[[297]](#footnote-297) In spite of knowing how rare it was for an author’s first novel to be commissioned, she did not consider herself a ‘novelist’ and rejected the opportunity, offering him instead a collection of short stories.[[298]](#footnote-298) After agreeing on such a project, with which Spark felt more comfortable, she found herself meditating about the hallucinations she had been suffering from and wondering, in her words, ‘how’ to ‘go on about writing a novel’ about her experience.[[299]](#footnote-299) After finding ‘a novel writing process peculiar’ to herself, she decided to commit to the commission and started working on *The Comforters*.[[300]](#footnote-300) Nonetheless, before Macmillan printed the novel, Spark still spent months in economic hardship. Although *The Comforters* was finished by 1955, it would not get published until two years later.

In 1956, although not yet available to a wide readership, *The Comforters*’ ‘proofs’ went ‘round among literary people’, among which was Evelyn Waugh, who had suffered similar hallucinations to Spark and was impressed by her ability to convey the experience, writing himself his own novel on the topic, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957).[[301]](#footnote-301) For Waugh, Spark’s novelistic display of the hallucinations had artistically achieved what he had not been able to. Waugh not only stated that ‘the mechanics of the hallucinations’ were ‘well managed’, but he believed that Spark’s treatment was ‘much more ambitious’ and ‘accomplished’ than his own.[[302]](#footnote-302) Waugh emphasised the novel’s departure from realism, admiring how ‘complicated, subtle and… intensely interesting’ the text had turned out in a moment in which ‘“experimental” writing has quite justly fallen into disrepute’.[[303]](#footnote-303) Confirming the success advanced by her befriended authors, once the book was published, Spark recalled she ‘could hardly keep [her] name out of the papers’[[304]](#footnote-304) and her career as a novelist took off, to the delight of her British publisher, Maclean, who soon was thrilled by the reception of *The Comforters*, believing to have ‘hit the jackpot’.[[305]](#footnote-305)

Spark’s artistic success in conveying her hallucinations in the form of a novel, and specifically in a work where everything revolved around suspicion, as she had stated, coincided with her own acquisition of the tools for novel-writing. In order to turn the paranoid wariness she experienced into literature, the form of the novel was not a choice but the only way, inextricable from the experience, with which to deal with her hallucinations. When in an interview she was asked whether she considered that her novels ‘influenced the shape of the novel in English’, Spark said she ‘hope[d] so’ since novels had been ‘getting very dull’ and she ‘was enough of a critic to know what [she] wanted to do for the novel. It wasn’t by chance.’[[306]](#footnote-306) With similar concerns to those of Ellison, Spark’s concerns about the literary form were reflected in her intent to push the boundaries of what the novel was supposed to do or be like at the time when she started writing her first novel. Precisely because *The Comforters* was her first novel, Spark believed that readers were not warned about her departure from the realist novel which dominated the literary market at the time. Perhaps too experimental, too soon, for Spark the explanation for the delay of the publication of her novel was that Macmillan, once looking for young talent, had gotten ‘cold feet’ about a book that could be ‘thought to be difficult, especially in those days’ for an audience who ‘were not yet used’ to her writing.[[307]](#footnote-307) Spark’s anxieties of being misunderstood were reflected in who she thought her potential readers were, those who belonged to ‘an academic audience’, for, she believed, ‘the majority of fiction readers’ would not ‘really get the subtleties and the ironies’ of her work.[[308]](#footnote-308) Spark was, according to Bailey, ‘arriving… at a mode of narrative prose which draws upon the ludic, intertextual and metafictional techniques and strategies’ which postmodernist authors further developed in latter decades, movements which required of the reader an involvement only suspicion could provide.[[309]](#footnote-309)

As suspicion was crucial in Spark’s rejection of the realist novel, as well as in the plot she constructed in *The Comforters*, it was also central to Spark’s conception of the politics of the novel. For Spark, the novel was not to respond to the world in a mimetic way, reflecting and describing its injustices, but in constructing a fictional world of its own, it could provide an invective against it through ridicule. In her essay ‘The Desegregation of Art’ (1970), written more than a decade after *The Comforters*, Spark distanced herself from political writing and argued for letting go of ‘socially-conscious art’ which relied on ‘the representation of the victim against the oppressor’, for rather than politicise readers, it immobilised them, for they ‘feel that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled’ by those ‘emotion they have been induced to feel’.[[310]](#footnote-310) If this ‘literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself’ had ‘reached a point of exhaustion’, Spark proposed ‘the arts of the satire and of ridicule’, the latter being ‘the only honourable weapon we have left’.[[311]](#footnote-311) Spark’s conception of ridicule, then, as it is ‘satirical’, ‘harsh and witty’, ‘ironic and derisive’, involved the heightened wariness and analytical sensibility of suspicion, whose traits were to be materialised in the novel.

How was the writer to involve the reader while putting ridicule in motion? Did ridicule not involve detachment from the ridiculed object, in the same way that suspicion was accused of creating distance between text and reader? Ridicule, as it puts suspicion at play, indeed, needs to look at the object with wariness, however, as it is constructed in the novel form, it requires the reader’s attentiveness. Ridicule, for Spark, was political because it does not take things for granted but involves us in finding out what they are about. Through suspicion, the reader can ‘be conditioned and educated to regard violence in any form as something to be ruthlessly mocked’, as something to be ridiculed.[[312]](#footnote-312) Ridicule’s effect was defined by Spark as something that goes beyond the text, for ‘if it is on the mark’ it ‘can penetrate to the marrow’ and ‘leave a salutary scar’.[[313]](#footnote-313) Interestingly, Spark believed ridicule ‘can paralyse the object’ but at the same time touch the reader sufficiently to become attentive to the mockery.[[314]](#footnote-314) For Spark, then, fiction was not political despite suspicious ridicule, but precisely because of it as it ‘bring[s] about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge’ and is what—within the duality of suspicion—allows us to ‘defend ourselves from’ and to *ridicule* ‘ridiculous oppressions’ and ‘to entertain in the process’.[[315]](#footnote-315) In other words, ridicule in the novel does not create an unsolvable distance but instead invites the reader to think suspiciously and ridicule as a tool of deactivating injustice, as a tool of demystifying what seems inalterable and inescapable. However, as this chapter shows, the novel goes a step further and ridicules—and thus suspects—even the suspicious method itself, the novelistic suspicion, thus, becoming not only a theme or a method but a desired effect of the novel.

## A Good Informer

At the beginning of the novel, Laurence Manders, a young journalist, inspects his grandmother’s bedroom. Although it is unclear what he is looking for, he is motivated to find something—most likely secretive and hidden. As soon as he wakes up, he starts searching:

When he was half dressed Laurence opened a tiny drawer on the top of the tall old-fashioned chest. It contained some of his grandmother’s things, for she had given him her room. He counted three hairpins, eight mothballs; he found a small piece of black velvet embroidered with jet beads now loose on their thread. He reckoned the bit of stuff would be about two and a half inches by one and a half. In another drawer he found a comb with some of his grandmother’s hair on it and noted that the object was none too neat. He got some pleasure from having met with these facts, three hairpins, eight mothballs, a comb none too neat, the property of his grandmother, here in her home in Sussex, now in the present tense. That is what Laurence was like.[[316]](#footnote-316)

Although he does not find any significant clue from which to draft a hypothesis of what his grandmother is hiding, Laurence finds pleasure listing a series of domestic and menial objects—the hairpins, mothballs, and comb—which, nonetheless, once brought together do not lead to any conclusion. In stating ‘that is what Laurence was like’, the narrator—which, for now, presents itself as a regular omniscient voice—introduces a character who behaves as a naturally suspicious observer, that is, someone who tries to find what is hidden underneath the layers of normality of his grandmother’s house (4). The random objects left behind by her are, for Laurence, pieces of information, ‘facts’, frustrated clues which do not seem to lead anywhere but which he methodically ‘counts’, ‘notes’ and measures. Without being able to establish causal connections, Laurence’s intention to reach a conclusion beyond ‘having met with these facts’ is frustrated. However, in displaying the motivation to keep looking and searching for something without setting the questions he wants to answer—the reason for suspecting his grandmother— his activity is reduced to the pure pleasure of suspicion, to suspecting for suspicion’s sake.

Believing to be the protagonist of a detective plot, Laurence takes the role of a detective figure who is involved in uncovering the mystery of the origin of his grandmother’s wealth. From the beginning of the novel, suspicion takes over the plot: Laurence’s own suspicion is suspected, particularly by his mother, Helena, who deems her son’s behaviour inappropriate and reprehensible, and believes ‘the only unhealthy thing’ about him is ‘the way [he] notice[s] absurd details’ (4). In her reprimand, Helena censors the negative sensibility of suspicion and ‘with unusual force’ claims she hates ‘doubt and suspicion’, echoing concerns of critics who throughout the decades after the publication of *The Comforters* argued against suspicion and for the construction of positive methods which could embrace more positive ways of reading (207). Indeed, in her proposal of postcritique as an answer to suspicion, Felski lamented precisely the way in which critics enacted Laurence’s obsessive search for guilt. Laurence’s behaviour responded to the suspicious ‘sensibility’, which, in Felski’s words, ‘is oriented toward the bad rather than the good’ and through which one ‘presume[s] the worst about the motives of others’.[[317]](#footnote-317)

Indeed, Laurence seeks to find what crime his grandmother has committed and ignores his mother’s reproval to continue patiently and attentively observing. Laurence, then, becomes a detective without a case, a detective who is not assigned a mystery to be solved but who devises the mystery himself. The question he feels compelled to answer, which sets the question of the detective plot, is how Louisa manages her finances. Laurence does not wonder so much whether she is a criminal, but instead, what her crime consists of. Laurence’s suspicion is, however, not fully unjustified, for his mother also wonders how Louisa ‘manages’, for ‘she always seems to have plenty of everything’, however, her doubt does not turn into suspicion (9). Laurence’s suspicion thus manages to remain within the reasonable curiosity regarding his grandmother’s money, who although a widow, the narrator explains, had surprisingly ‘revealed, by small tokens and bit by bit, an aptitude for acquiring alien impenetrable luxuries’ (9). Unlike his mother, Laurence remains alert of any odd behaviours and after realising the strange way in which his grandmother cuts the bread, he writes to Caroline: ‘I’ve discovered such things! She runs a *gang*… Do you know where she keeps her capital? In the *bread*. She sticks diamonds in the bread’ (22). Laurence believes that his grandmother covers her tracks and ‘avoid[s] suspicion’ by pretending to live off her pension, but rather proudly believes to be ahead of her: she ‘has no idea that I’m on to this’, he claims (23). Once having found the crime, a case in which to become the detective, Laurence is able to embrace suspicion to uncover his grandmother’s guilt. However, in seeking to *uncover*, Laurence expects his grandmother to hide and deceit those around her like a criminal would.

If interpretation has taught us that suspicion implies resistance in the suspected object—for it to be buried in depth, covered with a veil or masked with symptoms—what can the suspicious interpreter do when the suspected object refuses to hide? This is the problem faced by the reader, who follows Laurence’s detective duties. As the narration moves onto Louisa’s own endeavours, her open and casual attitude does not leave room for suspicion. In a similar way to Caroline’s rebellion against the author of the novel, which this chapter will come to examine, Louisa rejects behaving according to the model of the criminal character of a detective story. She refuses to become protective of her own secrets and rejects the characteristic wariness of a character who wishes not to get caught in their actions. In other words, Louisa remains unsuspicious and states that although ‘Laurence is very observant’—for ‘he has to be for his job’ as a sports commentator on the BBC—, he is not a real threat (12). Louisa reassures the other gang members in a remarkably ironic way: ‘with discretion we could say all we want to say in Laurence’s presence. He has not got a suspicious nature’ (17). Although Louisa states that Laurence ‘would never make a detective, nothing so low’, her accomplices are unsure and still warn her that he could turn out to be ‘a good informer’ (18). If Laurence cannot fully enact the detective plot it is because Louisa, the object of his investigation, frustrates his intentions. She is aware of this, and pities her grandson, to whom she says that she ‘wished’ he ‘could have caught’ her ‘red-handed’: ‘It must be a disappointment, love. But never mind, we all have our frustrations’ (185). When Laurence states his grandmother’s crimes in front of her—for he ‘had every clue’ and ‘only needed the time’ to catch her—she ‘perk[s] with delight’ and seems ‘to encourage him’ to reveal them (185). After telling her he knows she is ‘[s]muggling diamonds through the customs’ which are ‘concealed in plaster figures’, Louisa proudly adds: ‘and rosary beads at times’ (186). An unrepentant criminal, who does not hide her guilt nor resists being accused, Louisa frustrates her grandson’s passion for suspicion.

Although the detective plot ends rather soon, and the novel moves onto another character’s plot, Spark provides Laurence with all the traits and characteristics of a detective, if only to take them away from him afterwards. As Laurence tells Caroline that he is ‘compiling a dossier’ where he puts down his findings, he is letting her know his suspicion goes beyond a mere orientation or sensibility, and that it not only consists of observation but is materialised in a written record (23). Nevertheless, suspicion, rather than providing him with information, with a heightened sense of perception, seems to blind him. The principle of detective fiction by which the detail and the individual and exceptional clue becomes significant—since ‘everything that is *repeatable* and *obvious* ceases to be criminal’, in the words of Franco Moretti—is contradicted.[[318]](#footnote-318) Although Laurence is a dedicated collector of data, he cannot direct his suspicion towards *making* *sense* of the information he gathers, which makes it impossible for him to reach any conclusion.

Spark’s ridiculing of the detective plot takes place, then, as she suspects the genre’s conventions, which are one by one explicitly reflected upon and even deactivated. Suspicion, as it has been shown, is not exclusive to the novelist’s interest in ridicule, but perpetrated and suffered by the characters: Laurence becomes suspected precisely because of his suspicion towards his grandmother. As the smuggling plot which he believes to be participating in is frustrated, the novel asks: what can a story seemingly based on suspicion do if suspicion is hindered? Without providing a satisfactory conclusion to his investigation, the novel wonders what makes Laurence suspicious, what prompts him to look for his detective plot. What is his motivation beyond cultivating a ‘reputation for being remarkably observant’? (5). In a relationship stranded by Caroline’s recently found Catholic faith, we learn that suspicion arises as a possibility to gain lost affection, that is, as a way of affirming a bond. As the narrator explains, Laurence’s intention to get Caroline ‘interested and involved in the mystery surrounding his grandmother was almost a fulfilment of a more compelling desire to assert the continuing pattern of their intimacy’ (40). In other words, suspicion, although frustrated, is pursued by Laurence as a common ground to strengthen a relationship via shared pleasure. Can the growing distance between a couple, *The Comforters* asks, be salvaged by shared suspicion? As the novel moves on to the second plot, suspicion is carried on and away from Laurence’s investigation. Portrayed as ridiculous, an irrelevant and inconclusive sensibility, suspicion is also shown as an enabling and affirmative force. While Laurence suspects *in order* to gain back Caroline’s love, Caroline’s suspicion allows her to question the reality of the novel itself, embarking on a crusade not against another character of the book but against its author.

## Neurotics Never Go Mad

Having suffered a mental breakdown, Caroline converts to Catholicism and, following Laurence’s mother’s advice, Helena, goes to a retreat. However, she soon escapes and arrives at her home in London, where the second of the suspicious plots begins. Being close to Laurence again is a comforting feeling for her, however, she fears some conflict might arise from having left the retreat. It is then that she hears a typewriter which ‘seemed to come through the wall’ and which is ‘immediately followed by a voice remarking her own thoughts’ (41). She hears her thoughts in third person, as the voice says: ‘*On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena*’ (41). As clear as the voice is, the experience does not provide her with any certainty. The sound does not ‘come through’, it ‘seems’ to do so, and it seems to be ‘more than one voice’ (41). Despite the difficulty in determining its origin—a ‘concurrent series of echoes’—the voice is nonetheless uncannily familiar, for it remarks ‘her own thoughts’ (41).

Caroline’s perception of the voice leads to her belief, her suspicion, that someone is narrating her life, someone who she will eventually resist and confront—that is, the author of the novel. Such suspicion, however, is only experienced by her, and it is not understood by other characters, who do not ignore it but see it as pathological. From the moment Caroline first hears the typewriter, the ‘chorus of voices’ is repeatedly heard by her, who wonders whether she is ‘going mad’ and feels ‘an imperative need to retain her sanity’, that is, to determine whether ‘the sounds she had heard were real or illusory’ (42). Although she does not retain such doubt for long, the possibility that the sounds are caused by hallucinations, by a mental disorder, is a hypothesis sustained by Laurence—who states that ‘[p]oor Caroline isn’t well’ (21)—as well as by other characters— such as Caroline’s priest, who thinks that it ‘goes without saying’ that she is ‘neurotic’ (54). Caroline’s friend, the Baron, considers the hearings ‘quite a common thing’ since her ‘brain is overworked’ (46); an observation which, for Caroline, evidences that the Baron ‘regards another’s words, not as symbols but as symptoms’ and that he is diagnosing her, that is, that he is perceiving her *suspiciously* (52). Caroline is aware of how others perceive her, but she distinguishes her past illness from ‘the new form of her suffering, now that she was well again and committed to health’, that is, not an illness but an *awareness* of the voice (70).

In explicitly acknowledging her diagnosis, Caroline can deny that her suspicion responds to madness, to paranoia, at the same time that she evidences that others see her suspicion precisely with suspicion of their own. For Caroline ‘the typewriter and the voices’ sound ‘as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story’, but her words and behaviour are automatically interpreted as a pathological hallucination (63). Her priest also considers her ill, as he tells her: ‘[Y]ou are not possessed. You may be obsessed, but I doubt it’, he says, to which Caroline asks, ‘Do you think I’m mad… D’you think I’m a neurotic?’ and he replies ‘Of course. That goes without saying’ (62). When Laurence refuses to believe his girlfriend and reminds her of her past problems, Caroline’s response does not sound convincing to him: ‘I’m perfectly O.K. Only a bit tired, but now, you see, I know what the voices are. It’s a creepy experience but I can cope with it. I’m sure I’ve uncovered the true cause. I have a plan’ (68). After asking Laurence if he thinks she is neurotic he affirms so and adds: ‘All my girls have been neurotics’ (80).

The dynamics between Caroline’s paranoid-like suspicion and the socially acceptable suspicion that pathologises her bring to the forefront the problem of discerning what legitimate forms of suspicion are and which ones are read as neurosis, as manias or illnesses. In Shoshana Felman’s well-known ‘Turning the Screw of Interpretation’ (1977), the critic examined the ambiguity of the ghosts which appear in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and posited the question: how should we read such ghosts? As part of the protagonist governess’ psychological disorder or as a supernatural element in the story? James’ novella has been praised precisely due to the impossibility of reaching a conclusive interpretation, a certainty which leaves no room for suspicion regarding the governess’ own suspicions. It is impossible, in other words, to know whether she is crazy or the ghosts she sees are truly there. Similarly, *The Comforters* poses the question of whether Caroline’s hearings are hallucinations, or whether she is perceiving the voice of the narrator of her life. Unlike James’ governess who firmly believes she is dealing with ghosts; Caroline considers the possibility of having a mental disorder. For her, this possibility is more daunting than being in touch with the supernatural, for ‘[w]hile the thought terrified her that she was being haunted’, the narrator explains, ‘she could not hope of the horrible alternative. She feared it more’ because ‘it was like being faced with a choice between sanity and madness’ (42-3). However, knowing that ‘what she had heard was not a product of her own imagination’, allows Caroline to state, ‘I’m not mad’ and to assure herself that ‘her fear was not altogether blind’ (43) Spark’s novel, then, does not leave both possibilities—illness or a ghostly presence—for critics to discuss. Instead, she allows fiction to generate such a critical stance, making suspicious criticism of novelistic suspicion part of the novelistic plot, as the characters condemn and legitimise suspicion.

There is not much space, then, left to interpret whether the protagonist is mentally unwell, but rather to participate from Caroline’s suspicion: it is not about questioning whether she hears the sounds, but about finding out where they come from and what their purpose is. It is in that sense that *The Comforters*’s treatment of the supernatural creates an interesting dialogue with *The Turn of the Screw* and, as Felman emphasised, with the critical discourse around James’ work—its ‘many interpretations’ and ‘many exegetic passions and energetic controversies’[[319]](#footnote-319)—which could even be ‘more significant for the impact of the text than the reality of the ghosts’.[[320]](#footnote-320) Edmund Wilson famously argued that James’ novel presented a case of neurosis in the governess, who suffers hallucinations due to the ‘frustration of her repressed sexual desires’ towards her master.[[321]](#footnote-321) The frustrated governess reads into the reality that surrounds her ‘to *interpret* it, not by looking *at* it, but by seeing *through* it’.[[322]](#footnote-322) However, as Felman pointed out, Wilson falls into his own trap of interpretation, mimicking the character he is diagnosing: he can reach his interpretation only by ‘seeing *through*’ James’ text, as he ‘inadvertently *imitates* the very madness he denounces’ and ‘unwittingly *participates* in it’.[[323]](#footnote-323) Like the governess, he sees beyond the textual surface and uncovers what he believes is the truth, displaying what reading against the grain, or reading suspiciously or paranoidly looks like. Nevertheless, in *The Comforters*, the trap set by the text to catch the reader receives an even more twisted *turn*. If *The Turn of the Screw* did not allow for an ‘innocent reader’, as Felman argued, it is because ‘*we are forced to participate in the scandal*’.[[324]](#footnote-324) In *The Comforters*, we are forced to suspect alongside Caroline, who ‘suspected everything’ (43).

In line with Spark’s interest in ridicule, psychoanalytical diagnosis is treated with humour and does not function by appearing as subject to interpretation: its ambiguity begins and ends within the novel. Laurence, in this case, enacts the position of the psychoanalytical-critic and Caroline the one of the patient-character. These characters enact the ways of ‘symptomatic readers’, as defined by Best and Marcus, that is, those who see the text ‘as symbolic of something latent or concealed’,[[325]](#footnote-325) they enact Wilson’s—and others’—Freudian reading of James’ novella as a ‘study case of neurosis’.[[326]](#footnote-326) Indeed, Caroline enacts, too, a similar role to the governess’, for they both perceive the appearance of the supernatural: ghosts in the case of the governess and a ‘typing ghost’ in the case of Caroline. However, while for Wilson, the governess reads too much into reality due to her sexual repression, in *The Comforters*, it is Laurence’s sexuality that is seen as troubled. Firstly, his parents believe him to be a sexual pervert because of his suspicious attitude. Reproaching Laurence’s obsessively observing behaviour as ‘unnatural’, Helena fears—suspiciously indeed—that Laurence is involved in ‘some vague sexual perversion’ (4-5). Secondly, as recently converted Caroline refuses to have sex with Laurence and puts a pillow between them when lying in bed, he thinks about ‘how strangely near impracticable sexual relations would be between them, now that Caroline thought them sinful’ (97). Unlike in James’ novella, in this case, it is not the diagnosed character, Caroline, who suffers sexual repression, but the ‘diagnoser’, Laurence, who, like Wilson, may perceive Caroline as neurotic only because of his own neurosis. As Laurence believes that ‘people with obsessions could usually find evidence to fit their craziest convictions’, he believes Caroline’s hearings are caused by madness, and does not see his own detective-oriented suspicion as ‘crazy’ but rather as a legitimate and necessary mode of looking at that which surrounds him (97). Although he considers allowing Caroline’s ‘fantasy indefinitely’ to maintain their relationship afloat, he is conscious that they have different ‘notions of reality’, something which will eventually force him to tell her that she is ‘wrong, mistaken, mad’, that ‘[t]here are no voices; there is no typewriter’ and ‘it is all a delusion’ (98). Aware of what Laurence and others think of her, Caroline provocatively acknowledges being perceived as mad: ‘I have what you ought to call a delusion’, she states, ‘In any normal opinion that’s a fact’ (100). However, her acknowledgement is in no way a capitulation nor an abandonment of suspicion. Unlike the governess, through heightened suspicion Caroline becomes an extremely *conscious* character, aware of the potency of holding onto suspicion.

Being diagnosed, however, is double-edged for Caroline, for when she ‘had been more explicit, and had been told she was mad, she felt a perverse satisfaction at the same time as a suffocating sense that she might never communicate the reality of what she had heard’ (54). Caroline’s suspicion, then, is both uncomfortable and necessary, ‘bound to distress’ her, since her hearings are ‘a fact like the fact of the author and the facts of the Faith’, that is, ‘painful to [her] in different ways’ (100). Suspicion in Spark’s novel, then, responds to what Waugh described as the ‘[a]cceptance and simultaneous subversion of both her faith and the novel form’, which does not only provide her work with its metafictional quality, but with the ‘satirical treatment of the irrationalities of a world where everyone has forgotten God, through the stylized creation of fictional worlds where absolutely no one, and certainly not the reader, is allowed to.’[[327]](#footnote-327) In this sense, as Caroline is deeply aware of God, her energy is directed against authorial authority and novelistic conventions of realism, by which a character does not question its own role nor tries to become an author, *the* author of the novel. Suspicion, however, remains a pleasurable activity as well as having a transcendent purpose—appealing to Caroline, in Laurence’s case; and challenging the typing ghost, in Caroline’s case. Laurence believes his grandmother to be a criminal, while Caroline speculates about what the nature of the voice might be—considering its ‘[p]ossible identity’ that of ‘Satan’, ‘a woman’, ‘a hermaphrodite’ or ‘a Holy Soul in Purgatory’—and concludes that it can only be ‘an author making a book’ out of her life (113). Being suspicion-driven, both Caroline and Laurence are able to confirm their own theories within their own thinking frameworks. But as much as suspicion brings them apart, could it bring them together in the end?

## Holiday of Obligation

Caroline’s suspicious subversion of novelistic principles and hierarchies—such as the one between author and character—is possible due to her crucial technical understanding of literature. As a scholar, she knows how fiction works—she is writing a book called *Form in the Modern Novel*—and she is able to judge, for example, that Louisa being ‘a gangster’ makes her an ‘implausible character’ (108). She knows that it is the author’s responsibility to devise a plot and, thus, considers that Laurence’s extravagant suspicion can only be caused by such an author. She tells him: ‘it’s clear that you are getting these ideas into your head through the influence of a novelist who is contriving some phoney plot’ (108). It is her literary knowledge, too, which allows Caroline to resist the authorial voice which conditions and constructs her plot. Her supposed hallucinations, then, become a moment of awareness, as she realises that the figure ‘uses a typewriter’ and ‘the past tense’, and makes her feel ‘exactly as if someone were watching me closely, able to read my thoughts’ (62). The authorial voice, although merely suspected to exist, eventually reveals itself, not only perceived by Caroline but openly self-conscious, as it disrupts the story and states that ‘[a]t this point in the narrative, it might be as well to state that the characters in this novel are all fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever’ (70).

It is then when the reader accesses the voice doubly: first-hand, as a reader of the narration, but also echoed in Caroline’s own thoughts, which are also narrated. The reader first accesses the narration, a narration not meant to be *heard* by the characters of the book and then, as Caroline is also able to hear it, the narration includes a repeated echo of what was meant to be only accessed by the reader: ‘*Tap-tappity-tap. At his point in the narrative*…’ (70). Hearing such a voice opens a world of possibilities for Caroline, as she finds a confirmation that her life is being controlled—and is being developed—according to the wishes of an author. Rather than accepting her position and limitations as a character of a novel, Caroline will rebel against the authorial figure, who she considers ‘an intruder’, and who strikingly resembles the omniscient and omnipotent God she has come to embrace as a Catholic, for ‘it was getting on her nerves… that the eyes of an onlooker were illicitly upon them’ (104-5). At the end of the first chapter of the novel, Laurence and Caroline are involved in a car accident, plotted, of course, by the author, who, aware of the danger of allowing her to ‘intrude’, leaves Caroline ‘confined in a hospital bed’ after the accident (145). Having been a character who is too suspicious for her own good, the author needs to take her away from the story.

Trying to escape the tyranny of the author who makes choices about her life, Caroline can only resist with her knowledge of fictional devices. As she is ‘not easy to dispense with’, according to the author, she is eventually allowed to return (145). Although her ‘determination to behave naturally’ makes ‘her more self-conscious’, such self-awareness does not make her weaker but allows her to critically judge the narrative plot into which she is written and *ridicule* such plot (104-5). Caroline, like Laurence, is determined to record her suspicion methodically, in a scholarly way, ‘privately, noting the facts as they accumulated’, managing to gather ‘a large number of notes’ which ‘she studied carefully’ (194). As Caroline becomes determined to resist the author, Laurence does not grasp the authorial nature of such a voice and tries to explain his girlfriend’s hearings within the ‘natural order’ by trying to capture the sounds with a recorder, an attempt to which she responds that the ‘sound might have another sort of existence and still be real’ (64). For Laurence this is not possible, and he insists Caroline ‘should try to understand the experience in a symbolic light’, but for her ‘the voices are voices’ (69). Although she does not know whether the voice is ‘disembodied’, or ‘a human or a spirit’, she knows it ‘exists in a different dimension’, where ‘[t]he author is doing all the trafficking’ (99).

It is then when she decides ‘to make it difficult from him’ (99), for she ‘refuse[s] to have my thoughts and actions controlled by some unknown, possibly sinister being’, thus turning her suspicion into the resistance against an author who frustrates her free will (109). Although Caroline’s suspicion aims at ridiculing the author, when talking about her experiences to Laurence—who is suspicious of Caroline’s hypothesis—Caroline rejects his interpretative suspicion—one which interprets the voices as symbols, as a literary critic would. To experience heightened suspicion towards the author who narrates her life, Caroline needs to first acknowledge the voice literally, as it is; and to resist Laurence’s attempts to rationalise her experience and to look for a realistic explanation. In their disagreement, Laurence seeks to keep the known order—one which cannot involve another layer of reality, a reality in which an author writes his life—through interpretation: everything that seems out of order is interpreted as a symbol for something else. Suspicion, then, goes beyond entertainment or pleasure, and of course beyond illness, as for Caroline, it becomes the first step towards her liberation.

Caroline’s fight for control over her story eventually transforms from resistance into creation, and she becomes confident that ‘[t]he evidence will be in the book’, that is, the book that she will write—namely, the novel we have access to, which is revealed to have been taken off the hands of the author and appropriated by Caroline herself (171). As she turns ‘her mind to the art of the novel, wondering and cogitating’, Caroline irritates the author, who states she is ‘exerting an undue, unreckoned influence on the narrative from which she is supposed to be absent’ due to the accident (146). However, rather than paralysing her, the accident confirms her agency: ‘this physical pain convinces me that I’m not wholly a fictional character’, she states, ‘I have an independent life’ (171). Through suspicion, then, Caroline gains an authorial overview of the plot, detaching herself from her own story and seeing it from the author’s perspective, who believes nonetheless she is ‘unaware’ of ‘her constant influence’ on the course of the novel (194). After Caroline realises that she has been put aside from the main plot of the novel, she thinks it is because ‘the author doesn’t know how to describe a hospital ward’, to which the frustrated author complains, ‘[i]t was by making exasperating remarks like this that Caroline Rose continued to interfere with the book’ (172). Caroline’s boycott of the novel in which she is a protagonist makes it more and more difficult for the narrator to continue managing her as a character. Since ‘the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last outside it, and at the same time consummately inside it’, the only way in which she can reach the status of the author is by detaching herself from the story (194).

Caroline’s detachment from the plot, however, does not make her distant from the story but causes her to overtake the author’s role. In other words, being detached *as a character*, Caroline becomes highly involved in the plot *as its creator*. In their endeavours, both Laurence and Caroline experience a progressive realisation that, to be suspicious, they need to be distant from their object of suspicion. Spark’s call for ‘less emotion and more intelligence’ to achieve ‘a more deliberate cunning’ is shown in her novel: the distance which is established between the suspicious reader and the text is exemplified in the characters’ detachment from that which surrounds them, but also in the distance between themselves.[[328]](#footnote-328) If, for Spark, literature focused on emotion was tricking us into feeling better about injustices while perpetuating them, anti-suspicious thinkers would argue that suspicion was tricking us into thinking that we knew more than others, more than the text itself and that we can see beyond the surface of things. In the constant tension of denying other characters’ scepticism towards her hypothesis that she is a character—and their accusations of madness—Caroline calls for a ‘surface reading’ of her experience: the voice she hears needs to be interpreted *superficially*, as it *is*—seeing ‘ghosts as presences, not absences’ and allowing ‘ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*” as Best and Marcus put it.[[329]](#footnote-329) Nonetheless, this superficial reading does not hinder Caroline’s own suspicious enterprise—that of suspecting an author and, eventually, taking such a role.

Although Laurence believes that sharing his suspicion with Caroline might favour their intimacy, in their similar experience of suspicion the couple is not able to convince each other of their own theories. In this isolation and distance, they acquire a rather heroic notion of themselves, enacting what Latour defined as the ‘ambiguous pharmakon’ of literary criticism as ‘a potent euphoric drug’ that makes you believe ‘[y]ou are always right!’.[[330]](#footnote-330) Indeed, through detachment from herself, from others, and from the story, Caroline’s attitude becomes a dutiful fight against evil. At the end of the text, she says she is leaving town for a ‘holiday of obligation’ in which she is going to write a novel, presumably *The Comforters* itself (218). Although Laurence’s dad suggests that she writes a ‘straight old-fashioned story’ without ‘modern mystifications’, Caroline says her novel is about ‘[c]haracters in a novel’ (218). After declaring her intentions, Caroline exits the narrative and locates herself outside of the plot, completely detached, allowing the narrative to become coherent. It is then when Laurence finds the notes Caroline has taken and writes a letter to her where he tells her she ‘misrepresent[s]’ him and the rest of the characters, and that she is ‘[o]bviously… the martyr figure’ (219). A last turn in the plot intensifies and confirms Caroline’s authorial omniscience, distancing her from her original role as a character. After Laurence tears his letter into pieces which scatter ‘over the Heath where the wind bore them away’, the narrative voice—Caroline’s, we presume—states that Laurence ‘did not foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book’ (220). The analogy between God and author, although rather obvious, is complicated by Caroline, who firstly confronts the author’s omniscience and authority via suspicion, and then takes over them.

In the end, Caroline and Laurence try to dispense with suspicious detachment: Laurence aims at solving the romantic distance he feels with his girlfriend; while Caroline seeks to end the distance which makes it possible for the author to control her life from another plane of existence. The reader, however, does not meet a conclusive explanation for the question which arises as the story progresses: who has written the novel? Although the novel is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, it becomes more and more possible that Caroline has written about herself and other characters through the omniscient narrative voice. It is, thus, impossible to determine with certainty the true origin of the novel; as well as it is difficult to determine who is a character and who is an author. In other words, as readers, we become suspicious over the character’s suspicious endeavours, this is, of who is suspecting who, and of what the consequences of that suspicion are. Constructed with this novelistic suspicion, *The Comforters* models the close engagement of the text with suspicion by enacting its logic as well as warning against both its possible banality and danger. Performing the inescapability which accompanies any criticism of suspicion, in Spark’s novel being suspicious of suspicion is, obviously, a suspicious activity which becomes the central force in the relationship between characters, narrator, author and reader.

*The Comforters* seems to confirm that it is impossible to be an external observer to suspicion: one is always inscribed in its logic of wariness, especially when looking at it critically. This is precisely what novelistic suspicion shows. It is engaged and extremely aware of the dangers of suspicion and its mechanisms, of its ability to destroy and its addictive traits. At the centre of its proposal, novelistic suspicion asks us, what can we do with suspicion? Although it relies on it, the novel does not take its suspicious endeavours too seriously but paired with ridicule, it questions its existence and its effectiveness. Novelistic suspicion, *The Comforters* shows, then turns suspicion against itself by reusing and recycling suspicious tropes, often mocking them; at the same time as it is unable to be independent from suspicion. Beyond her knowledge of literature, which allows her to make rather offensive remarks about the author’s talents, Caroline’s use of ridicule in *The Comforters* reaches ethical concerns and aims at an ultimate emancipation from the control of the author. In this sense, novelistic suspicion can soothe ethical concerns regarding suspicion’s detachment. In line with Martin McQuillan’s convincing argument that ‘mockery’ is a ‘mode of intelligibility’ in Spark’s novels, the inextricable link between ridicule and suspicion appears as part of the ethical model which the novel can offer: one in which in order to know, to make sense of the world, to make it *intelligible*, the reader gets involved and remains suspicious and alert to ridicule that which is needed to.[[331]](#footnote-331)

By suggesting that suspicion can reach a point of exhaustion and irrelevance—as predictable detective stories—and of danger—that of being diagnosed with mental illness—*The Comforters* serves as a model for novelistic suspicion in its relentless exploitation of a self-assuring and self-deprecating suspicion which can only function with the reader’s commitment. On a superficial level, *The Comforters* provides a catalogue of suspicious characters: the wary criminal, the detective on the lookout, the mentally ill character, and the character oppressed by its author. But *The Comforters* does more than advance the tradition of self-reflexive novels, it proposes a model from which to rethink suspicion, that of believing through suspecting, that is of trusting wariness—of *a* trusting wariness and of trusting *through* wariness. All the suspecting characters of the novel cannot help but look for that trust. Whether investigating a crime to gain back a partner’s love or ridiculing one’s own story to become an author with the power to narrate, the characters of *The Comforters* need suspicion in order to trust, and they ask the reader to do the same. Rather than remaining detached, suspicion in the novel invites the reader to get closely involved with its suspicious agents—the author, characters, and the novel itself—all which function within suspicion, complaining or rejoicing, but, in any case, aware of being wary. In the novel, suspicion is not in a *duel* with trust but it asks for another type of interaction demanding the reader both to suspect and to trust.

# II

# SUSPECTING TRUST

# 3

# SINISTER AMBIGUITY

# Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World* (2014)

## A Woman Looking

In her essay collection *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (2016), Siri Hustvedt profiled herself as ‘a novelist and a feminist’ who ‘love[s] art, the humanities, and the sciences’.[[332]](#footnote-332) An intellectual informed by a variety of disciplines, Hustvedt ‘received a PhD in English literature in the mid-eighties’ but recalled how in her youth she ‘read literature, philosophy, and history’ and ‘developed an interest in psychoanalysis’.[[333]](#footnote-333) With a combination of fiction and non-fiction books, her oeuvre—which spans from the 1990s to the present—has indeed found a place between the arts, humanities, and sciences, however, this was not always the case.[[334]](#footnote-334) In *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*, Hustvedt accounted how in the 1990s she suddenly felt that her mostly literary ‘education lacked’ what she called ‘the biological piece’, something she remedied by researching neuroscience.[[335]](#footnote-335) Hustvedt’s interdisciplinary ambition of working in the intersection between the sciences and the humanities materialised in dialogue with a series of disciplines that, in one way or another, aimed at processing and analysing reality. That is, they educated her on suspicious interpretation. A literary scholar, her incursions into science are characterised by a reflexive and analytical approach in regard to scientific language and bias, as well as on the relativity and ambiguity inherent in ideas of impartiality, neutrality, and rigour, traditionally associated with scientific knowledge. In this sense, Hustvedt’s work spans around a question perfectly synthesised by Harriet Burden, the protagonist of her 2014 novel *The Blazing World*—central to this chapter—, who wonders, suspiciously, ‘Why do people see what they see?’.[[336]](#footnote-336)

For Hustvedt, perception is at the heart of science’s supposed rigour and of humanities’ supposed lack of it. Science’s projected image of precision relies, Hustvedt explained, on a conceptual division between what is seen as masculine hardness and impartiality and feminine softness and non-scientific lack of thoroughness. Attentive to the discourse around the differences between sciences and humanities, Hustvedt was ‘confronted by the adjectives “hard” and “soft” or “rigorous” and “squishy”’, the words ‘soft’ and ‘squishy’ being applied not only to ‘bad scientists… but also to people working in the humanities and to artists of all kinds’.[[337]](#footnote-337) ‘Is ambiguity dangerous or is it liberating?’, she wondered, ‘[w]hy are the sciences regarded as hard and masculine and the arts and the humanities as soft and feminine?’[[338]](#footnote-338) Hustvedt’s response to scientific rigour would not be materialised, however, in an attempt to achieve masculine hardness in humanities or the arts, but by exploiting ways of knowing that do not respond to such scientific ideals. Being interested in asking questions but allowing for them not to be fully answered, Hustvedt explored ambiguity and suspicion as emancipatory literary devices with political potential, holding the balance between inquisitive analysis and the tolerance to indeterminacy. Indeed, in this chapter, ambiguity is conceived as the exploitation of the indeterminacy and openness of meaning, an indeterminacy which, regardless of whether it is solved or not, prompts suspicion. Suspicion, then, will consist of the wariness and distrust generated by such ambiguity, as it is deemed necessary to solve it. As Hustvedt’s novel *The Blazing World* presents the literary possibilities of ambiguity and suspicion, it will also problematise their effectiveness as tools for feminist emancipation which is at the heart of Hustvedt’s ethos.

A prolific essayist as well as a novelist, Hustvedt has written abundantly of the intersection between her poetics and her feminist politics, often materialised in a concern about the perception of women and, specifically, of their art. For Hustvedt, a novel written by a woman ‘is made all the softer by her female identity’ and becomes specifically perceived as ‘woman’s writing’.[[339]](#footnote-339) That literature written by women is perceived differently by the reader to that written by men is evident for Hustvedt, as ‘men who write fiction have an audience representative of the world as a whole while women don’t’.[[340]](#footnote-340) When wondering whether ‘there is some other quality that marks a book as sexed’, Hustvedt situated the question in the perception of art: books by women are not only written but *read* differently.[[341]](#footnote-341) ‘Perception’, Hustvedt argued, ‘is by its very nature conservative and biased, a form of type-casting that helps us make sense of the world.’[[342]](#footnote-342) To reflect upon the perception of authorship, Hustvedt allowed the notion of *author* to include all artistic practices and explored how it can be subject to layers and mediations, opening questions about responsibility and authority which are at the heart of her novel *The Blazing World*.

In *The Blazing World*, literary and artistic authorship are linked by the protagonist, an artist named Harriet Burden who identifies with the ambitions of the seventeenth-century philosopher and writer Margaret Cavendish*.* Cavendish, an intellectually and economically privileged Duchess, was educated and produced significant philosophical and scientific work, however, as a woman, she never obtained the recognition of her male peers. In Hustvedt’s novel, Burden is a privileged and wealthy woman who laments being merely perceived as a wife to her powerful husband, an art collector, and finds in Cavendish a model to her own story. As she searches for what she believes to be her deserved recognition, Burden parallels herself with the duchess, whose ambition is ‘not only to be an Empress, but an Authoress of a whole world’.[[343]](#footnote-343) Cavendish’s book *The Blazing World* (1666), defined by herself as ‘a description of a *new world*’, as ‘a world of my own’, serves as the starting point for Burden and introduces the reader to the question of authorship and the possibilities its ambiguity can offer.[[344]](#footnote-344) Who can claim to be an author or *authoress*? Can that role be enacted by anyone? What does a woman have to do to obtain artistic recognition?

Concerned with female creative authorship, *The Blazing World* asks what benefits ambiguity can offer to an artist who seeks recognition and validation. If the audience will have preconceived ideas about the work of art merely due to the identity of its creator, of the artist, the novel asks how those preconceptions, that biased perception of the audience, can be modified or manipulated so as to generate a different effect and a different outcome in the work of art. By problematising the role of the author and making it ambiguous, the novel asks whether an artist can benefit from the audience’s persistent suspicion generated by a work of art without a clear authorial figure behind it. This chapter, then, examines the suspicious novelistic devices at play in *The Blazing World* by looking closely at concepts mobilised by the novel—such as ambiguity—and putting them in dialogue with criticism. To examine how the novel exploits suspicion as a novelistic trait, William Empson’s crucial work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* will offer a first step from which to think ambiguity, alongside Joel Elliot Slotkin’s work on sinister aesthetics. The emerging sinister ambiguity which the novel constructs, this chapter purports, relies on ambiguity’s and suspicion’s political potential to make a feminist exhortation against the erasure of women’s authorship. However, the success of such exhortation will inevitably clash with ambiguity’s inherent ‘indecision’, as Empson defined it, ‘as to what you mean’.[[345]](#footnote-345) The use of artistic ambiguity as an intentional search ‘to mean several things’—‘a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant’ and ‘that a statement has several meanings’—roots Hustvedt’s novel in suspicion both on the level of the story as well as in the reader’s experience.[[346]](#footnote-346) The character of the ambiguous text, ‘as a rule witty or deceitful’, according to Empson, will be of particular interest when analysing the novel’s engagement with the instability of perception and the ability of the novel to offer different meanings, sometimes contradictory ones.[[347]](#footnote-347)

Although Hustvedt has often been read as part of a cohort of global authors who write in English, it is the American experience and cultural references which, in this chapter, will shed light on her work and on the context within which *The Blazing World* can be inscribed. It is also within this context that Hustvedt was wary of suspicion as a tool which has been dangerously appropriated by right-wing politics. Indeed, her wariness can be framed within calls of critics in the twenty-first century’s method wars to abandon suspicion, critics such as Latour or Felski, who warned of the popularisation and normalisation of suspicion and of denialism of scientific truths. Writing about the Bush era of American politics, Hustvedt criticised the ‘well-worn propaganda technique of repeating falsehoods over and over’ and wondered ‘why this worked’, aligning her concerns with those who feared suspicious conspiracies.[[348]](#footnote-348) Without pointing to a precise moment in which suspicion became corrupted, Hustvedt contextualised her fears within American politics, criticising, for example, the repetition of the word ‘freedom’ in post- 9/11 political speeches as a worshipped but meaningless concept which would come to justify violence and oppression.[[349]](#footnote-349) The danger of losing freedom against the nation’s enemies, Hustvedt explained, was counteracted by ‘fear’, ‘a powerful and mobilizing emotion’, that is, by mainstream suspicion.[[350]](#footnote-350) However, such a phenomenon was not a novelty, for, as Hustvedt noted, ‘anti-intellectual, paranoid feelings have long been tapped in this country’.[[351]](#footnote-351) Hustvedt is an author aware that suspicion had become a tool which condemned society to constant wariness, and which facilitated manipulative political discourse.

Familiarised with the analytical methods of science and with their relevance in the humanities, Hustvedt not only questioned the idea of impartiality as a constructed concept but saw the danger in the corruption of the scientific suspicious ideal: that of constantly reading against the grain, of *doubting* everything. There was a moment, indeed, when the inquisitive scientific mood did not guarantee new knowledge but questioned proven truths and caused dangerous relativism. To criticise right-wing politics’ use of suspicion, Hustvedt made an analogy with the psychiatric patient, noting that ‘absolute polarities’, such as those generated by suspicious thinking, were ‘pathological, a form of dichotomous thinking’.[[352]](#footnote-352) For Hustvedt, there seemed to be paradoxically *uncritical suspicion*, an *unsuspicious* mood of suspicion which could turn the suspicious person into an ‘ill person’ who ‘is unable to tolerate ambiguity and insists on viewing the people in his life through an “all good” or an “all bad” lens’.[[353]](#footnote-353) As Hustvedt complicated the notion of suspicion as a set of predestined attitudes towards an object of judgement—one which is deemed dichotomically good or bad—she reprehended such attitudes by establishing a challenging parallel between suspicion and mental illness. It is worth noting that, as Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* and Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* show in the previous chapter, suspicion was often diagnosed as an illness in women, who were deemed neurotic or hysteric, who were read *symptomatically*. It is interesting, then, how although Hustvedt’s pathologisation aimed to respond to a politically noble cause, that of denouncing the dangers of suspicion—with similar concerns to those critics who sought to abandon symptomatic suspicious reading—Hustvedt held onto the conception of suspicion as an illness. Hustvedt’s concerns about the artistic and social undermining of women entailed a rejection of oppressive suspicion—which precisely serves to attack women and minorities—while being unable to abandon it. Indeed, Hustvedt—unlike those critics who sought for affirmative ways of interpreting—looked for suspicion to be emancipatory by intensifying its traits while she denounced its dangers. There could be, then, a redeeming quality in suspicion, one which could contribute to feminist vindications while warning of its relativism.

Hustvedt’s aim at diagnosing those who—consciously or unconsciously—misuse suspicion interestingly entrenches with the suspicious nature of psychoanalysis, crucial in the history of critical suspicion, namely, within Ricœur’s ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, as it has been noted in the Introduction to this thesis. As Hustvedt wondered, ‘[h]as psychoanalysis changed the novel?’, Ricœur would have argued it most definitely had.[[354]](#footnote-354) The ‘relation… between the patent and the latent’ established by Freud—alongside Marx and Nietzsche—entrenched with fiction’s implementation of the logic of suspicion in the conception of the literary text as a site of discovery, where the writer introduced a hidden meaning for the reader to discover.[[355]](#footnote-355) Hustvedt herself would argue that ‘[w]hen psychoanalysis appeared on the horizon, the novel welcomed it into itself’.[[356]](#footnote-356) As it has been noted, psychoanalysis—as partaking in the irruption of the hermeneutics of suspicion—was directly denounced by critics who moved away from these interpretative tendencies. Susan Sontag directly pointed to how ‘many contemporary intellectuals’ had rejected the discipline ‘as one more vulgar and conformist “ism”’, having ‘become both so official and so bland’ that its workings turned out to be predictable.[[357]](#footnote-357) The Freudian ‘assumptions’ of the ‘dualism of the mind and body’ and of the ‘self-evident value… of self-consciousness’ translated directly into the literary text: as its division in content and form, and its division between textual surface and depth.[[358]](#footnote-358) They translated, too, to ‘symptomatic reading’, that is, the ‘interpretive method’ for which ‘the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses’, which looks for ‘signs of the deep truth’ and tries to figure what its ‘absences, gaps and ellipses’ mean, beyond what the text itself might know.[[359]](#footnote-359) As Hustvedt warned of the dangers of suspicion, she did not however reject fully the symptom logic, and argued that ‘the book can know more than the writer knows’.[[360]](#footnote-360)

Once the relevance of psychoanalysis as a legitimate discourse was historicised and acknowledged for its influence in the development of criticism and of novel writing, Hustvedt’s own relationship as an author with the workings of suspicion is not clear-cut. For Hustvedt, disengaging from the dichotomic thinking of right-wing politics entailed embracing artistic ambiguity, an ambiguity which does not allow, however, for straightforward feminist vindications and which, inevitably, holds onto suspicion. Suspicion, in its novelistic form, this chapter suggests, can be empowering as it is both destructive and emancipating. Liberation is to be materialised, then, in the novel form through the novel’s own logic. Art, Hustvedt argued, ‘necessarily establishes a relation between the artist and an imaginary reader’, a relationship which ‘is inherently dialogical’.[[361]](#footnote-361) If this relation is mediated by ambiguity, the reader does not have access to a finalised and conclusive proposition but must inquire and question the text, must *suspect* it to truly engage with it, and the text must allow for such a dialogue, retaining its ambiguity. However, the novel remains ambiguous regardingambiguity itself, and posits the question: can ambiguity be truly liberating? Suspicion appears, then, as an aesthetic proposition as well as a desired effect in Hustvedt’s novel, in which the idea of the artist—the author, the creator—is vindicated as much as it is problematised and looked at with wariness.

## Maskings

*The Blazing World* tells the story of Harriet Burden, a woman who believes she has not received the acclaim she deserves as an artist and, to remedy this, explores the possibilities of artistic ambiguity. A recollection of textual documents, the novel is not narrated in first person by Burden but is constructed instead through the documents she left behind, which are gathered and arranged by a researcher, Hess, who also is the editor. From Hess’ introduction onwards, the reader faces the layered identities behind which Burden hides. Indeed, the investigator’s work is mostly centred around Burden’s project ‘Maskings’, by which she signs her work through three male living artists in a radical project of intentional ambiguity, and with which she posits a question to her audience: can the work of art reveal who its creator is? Hess finds testimonies which affirm that ‘[t]hree solo shows in three New York galleries, attributed to Anton Tish (1998), Phineas Q. Eldrige (2002), and the artist known only as Rune (2003), had actually been made by Burden’ (1). Burden’s choice of three men to sign her work with is not accidental, Hess explains, but part of a well-thought strategy to reveal that art made by men is perceived differently than that of women, and that when the author is unknown, the audience will most likely attribute the work to a male figure. As Hess explains, after her hoax, some ‘believe Burden is not responsible for’ her work ‘or contributed very little’ to it, while others believe she was the sole creator, and others think it ‘was a collaborative effort’ (8). Within the context of the art world in New York, Hustvedt was set to explore the political stakes of suspicion in art and in the novel.

Alongside the signatures she has conceived as ‘masks’, Burden has also created characters who engage with her art, a fictional audience of sorts. Indeed, Hess claims to have first learned of Burden through a magazine letter signed by Richard Brickman, ‘another character’ of Burden, Hess explains, ‘this time textual’, in opposition to the living men with whom she signs her project (276). It is through a text signed by Brickman that Burden claims that ‘[a]ll intellectual and artistic endeavours’, such as her own work, ‘fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls’ (1). Aside from rooting her feminist vindications in the body as the place where gender is located—an idea which is developed and problematised throughout the whole novel—this first appearance, which serves as an overture to the novel, highlights Burden’s taste for hiding behind different identities, in this case, of Brickman. Along with the three masks and the characters, Burden produces a series of documents, which her partner, Bruno, describes as ‘documents of her struggle—texts Harry called “proliferations.”’ (319). Burden’s proliferations align her work with her beloved Cavendish, who, as Hess explains, introduced ‘interlocutors in her writing’, creating her own readers and exploiting ‘the dialogical quality of her thought’ (6). Burden, like Cavendish, does not only create works of art but seeks to model the context in which they are received, imagining and constructing a fictional audience of her work.

Burden’s ambitious search for control is however revealed as fallible, as the masks, she admits, soon override the face. She sees the mask as a way to modify her art and states she ‘want[s] to discover the works that are’ Rune’s ‘works but which [she] will make’ (213). However, her fear that ‘[t]he mask changes everything’, in her words, ‘far more than [she] had imagined’, becomes real when one of the artists, Rune, refuses to acknowledge his agreement with Burden and appropriates her work (236). While the first two instalments of ‘Maskings’ are revealed to be hers, Rune, whose ‘work was widely reviewed and […] available to anyone’, ends up claiming the work is his (8). Rune ‘was a celebrity, an art star’ and, according to one of his admirers, Burden merely wanted ‘to latch onto his fame’ (46). In line with the classical use of the mask by the Greeks, to Burden’s dismay, ‘the actor’, Rune, ‘is the mask’ himself, or at least is perceived as such by the audience, for he effectively becomes the author of the work Burden’s claims to have authored.[[362]](#footnote-362) In ‘Maskings’ the mask survives Burden and overrides her authority, and, contrary to her intention, she is not able to take it off: the authorship of her work is not hers but remains disputed. Burden, then, moves in a paradoxical dynamic between reclaiming and disguising her role as an author. But, in what way does Burden think creating a work of ambiguous authorship will help her get recognition? Where does her plan take the wrong turn? In other words, when does ambiguity become disempowering rather than liberating?

Hustvedt’s interest in aesthetics and art has often been materialised in her interest in the idea of perception, as, according to her, ‘the experience of art is made only in the encounter between spectator and art object’, for the ‘work of art is always part person’.[[363]](#footnote-363) Informed by Hustvedt’s feminism, *The Blazing World* asks what it is that happens when the author is a woman, and, furthermore, what happens when her authorship becomes mediated by a male ‘mask’. Burden believes that by hiding her authorship and altering the perception of the audience, who perceives her work as made by men, she will be able ‘to expose the antifemale bias of the art world’ and ‘to uncover the complex workings of human perception and how unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer’s understanding’ (1). However, to do so, she needs to reveal herself as the author of her work. Although in her intended plan, suspicion will ultimately resolve in the revelation of the truth, in the achievement of artistic justice, when she intends to uncover her identity and reveal ‘Maskings’ was her project, Burden’s figurative disappearance becomes a real one and she is erased from the audience’s perception. By covering her identity with masks, she cannot prompt her desired suspicion in the audience. As the art world does not accept her reclaiming of her work, the audience’s suspicion is not directed towards the masks, nor to deconstructing the idea of the author. Rather, the audience suspects her of lying, of appropriating the work of Rune. Hess, alongside other characters who follow Burden’s call to suspicion, and alongside the readers of the novel, ends up wondering whether the project is truly beneficial or rather detrimental to her.

The mask’s performative potential, as a means of switching one’s identity—and most crucially in the novel, one’s gender—is central to *The Blazing World* in a figurative and a literal sense. For example, Burden uses a physical mask with Rune, when they ‘change sex and play a… theatre game’ (235). As Rune puts on a mask and turns into a woman, who he calls Ruina, he begins ‘to wriggle and mince and roll his shoulders up and down’, while Burden becomes a man called Richard Brickman—an identity she will continue to explore in her artistic project (236). The implications of the mask in classic culture are not past Burden, who reminds herself that ‘The Greeks knew that the mask in the theatre was not a disguise but a means of revelation’ (60-1). Indeed, in Ancient Greek and Roman culture, the mask was closely related to the notion of *persona* and to identity, notions which Burden purposely wants to put at play in her art.[[364]](#footnote-364) Phineas, another one of the men with whose name Burden signs her work emphasises the revelatory nature of the mask by quoting Oscar Wilde, stating that ‘[m]an is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth’ (121). What interests Burden is the mask as an object of radical ambiguity, one which reveals *while* hiding and, thus, one which works alongside and is dependent on suspicion. Burden wants her audience to mimic her own experience and, to do so, Hess explains, she leaves ‘a number of “clues”’ that shed light on her work even after she has passed away (3). With her works of art, Burden creates the masks and textual characters, ‘furthering what she did best—creating works of focused ambiguity’ and, consequentially, imperious suspicion (75). Burden, then, exploits suspicion as a desired effect on her audience: she wants those who engage with her art to be as suspicious as her, to participate in her uncovering and demystifying project by being wary.

When facing a mask, the audience has the choice of either taking the mask as a layer behind which lies the truth—thus, reading the mask *suspiciously*—or to *only* see the mask and, thus, not take it as a mask but as truth itself—thus, reading the surface. Although Burden desires for the first of these options, her audience does not merely remain *unsuspicious* of the mask but becomes suspicious of her when she tries to point them in the right direction. As she has hidden behind masks, other characters are wary of her, and she becomes the object of suspicion. This suspicion, as this chapter will continue to show, is enacted by the reader too, who is also presented with the masked and layered nature of the narration, consisting of contradictory testimonies. As *The Blazing World* unpacks the ways in which Burden’s project generates an ambiguity which goes beyond the artist’s control, the suspicion with which the novel examines the reception of art made by women performs a turn inwards. Wariness is not only necessary to deal with the sexist bias in audiences’ perception of art but is generated by the novel’s portrayal of Burden’s psychology. In other words, although she seems to be an instigator of artistic and philosophical suspicion—by constructing an ambiguous work of art—she becomes the object of suspicion too. As the reader has access to different sources of information—all gathered by the editor, Hess—Burden’s claims of being unknown are questioned by other characters, whose sceptical input denies Burden’s supposed irrelevance. Her revolutionary project, ‘Maskings’, seems to be driven by the artist’s vanity, who in her obsession with fame and recognition not only becomes too suspicious for her own good but relies on others’ suspicion to gain that recognition. Although she manages to generate that suspicion in other characters, in line with Caroline Rose in Spark’s *The Comforters*, she becomes the object of their suspicion, and she becomes unreliable too. In which ways, however, does her unreliability unfold? Although in dialogue with the long-studied tradition of unreliable narrators, in the *The Blazing World* unreliability is not located merely within Burden’s narration but it transcends it. Becoming a *suspected* character, Burden takes on the role of a manipulator, but also of a delirious, pathologically suspicious person whose object of suspicion—the biased perception of art—could be mistaken and caused by her distorted interpretation of reality.

As the introduction to this thesis has explored, as exhilarating and addictive suspicion is, it often promotes distress and anxiety in the suspicious character. As the governess in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* puts it, being suspicious means believing that ‘there are depths, depths!’, which makes her feel like ‘[t]he more I go over it, the more I see in it, and the more I see in it, the more I fear. I don’t know what I *don’t* see—what I *don’t* fear!’[[365]](#footnote-365) Consequently, characters’ experience of wariness condemns them to isolation and—what they perceive as—misunderstanding, for other characters in the literary works may not grasp the reasons behind their suspicion. This difference in perception—that of looking at the world with wariness or with trust—lies at the heart of the diagnosis of mental disorder of the suspicious character, subject to both directions of suspicion: they perceive suspiciously and they are suspiciously perceived—suspects of being ill. While in some cases the suspicious character succumbs to the pathology diagnosed to them and surrenders in isolation, never finding a confirmation to their suspicion, in other cases characters undertake creative tasks, often involving story-telling—such as Caroline Rose from *The Comforters*, a novelist whose suspicion is an intrinsic part of her work, or as Burden’s interest in creative ambiguity.

The ultimate question of *The Blazing World*, however, is not whether Burden was actively lying or unconsciously deceived, but whether the overarching effect of ambiguity generated by her is a side-effect or if it is precisely at the heart of her artistic project. Indeed, the reader does not only face a story *about* ambiguity but an *ambiguous story* about whether ambiguity can be liberating or detrimental. The ambiguity generated by the novel would respond, then, to Empson’s seventh type of ambiguity, which ‘occurs when the two meanings’, that is, ‘the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context’, and which shows the reader that there is ‘a fundamental division in the writer’s mind’.[[366]](#footnote-366) Indeed, Burden wants to reveal herself by hiding, she wants the audience to suspect what they see but trust her when she reclaims her work. She is first exhilarated and then anxious about signing her work with other names. As suspicion becomes the predominant sensibility when trying to prioritise one out of the two meanings of ambiguity, Burden is the professional *suspector*—suspicion is at the heart of her intellectual and aesthetic project—as well as the *suspected* and diagnosed character.

In its exhortation to suspicion, *The Blazing World* also reads as a fable of the dangers of disguise. Like a cautionary tale, the novel seems to warn us: do not pretend to be other than yourself, for you may never be able to return and reveal your identity. However, characters warn against such warnings too, twisting and complicating any possible ethical implications or any possible rejections of suspicion. As one art critic in the novel states, ‘the story cannot simply be told as a feminist parable’ (72). Burden’s search for the audience’s—and by extension—the reader’s suspicion sees such suspicion as not only desirable for artistic purposes but as a politically enabling tool. Through suspicion, Burden believes, the reader does not become distanced nor aloof, but invested, in this case, in uncovering sexist bias in art. In this regard, suspicion seems to be held onto despite warnings against its destructive power, warnings which are narratively exploited by portraying the novel’s suspicion as being both beneficial but also dangerous for Burden, by asking, once more, whether suspicion gets Burden the recognition she wants or whether it goes against it. Indeed, Burden’s project of generating masks does not lead to her praise as an art critic notes in the book, but ‘toward an increasing and almost sinister ambiguity’ (72). Burden’s ambiguity indeed aligns with what Joel Elliot Slotkin defined as ‘sinister aesthetics’, that is, ‘a set of poetic conventions that generate[s] pleasure by representing things we are supposed to dislike, including deception and cruelty’.[[367]](#footnote-367) In this regard, the sinister ambiguity of the novel shapes an aesthetic paradigm which generates a morally troubling pleasure, problematic but attractive. As ‘an aesthetic order in its own right, partly overlapping with the normative, partly conflicting with it, and partly independent of it’, the sinister, according to Slotkin, participates in the norm as it confronts it: Burden’s goal is to evidence bias in perception by playing on such bias to make her point.[[368]](#footnote-368) The novel’s sinisterness, then, is generated when its feminist moral values—the goal of women’s empowerment—are put at risk by ambiguity—for aesthetics’ sake. After hiding her authorship to pursue a game of ambiguity, Burden cannot but find herself fighting to gain back the position of author, being lost in her own enterprise. Although Burden wants to claim her authorship and deserved recognition as an artist, her actions—the creation of an ambiguous work—go against the feminist cause she defends; they do not affirm but erase her identity.

In working against her own goals, Burden is nonetheless exhilarated by the possibilities which the sinister ambiguity of her project brings to her work, marvelled at the complexity of perception in art: her work can be anyone’s, authored by whoever claims it. In this regard, the sinister ambiguity prompts the reader to be suspicious and, thus, engaged with resolving the mystery—who has authored ‘Maskings’? However, the sinister ambiguity generated by Burden’s work also pushes the ‘audience[s] to balance opposing sensibilities, emotions, and systems of value’, as Slotkin put it, that is, entailing ‘a kind of code-switching’ from the reader: pleasure is not moral, but it is found in suspecting Burden’s noble feminist quest, in suspecting her intentions and motivations.[[369]](#footnote-369) In doubting Burden’s quest, the novel continues to ask about the role of the author in the work of art, a concern which was crucial for structuralist authors. Hustvedt’s seemingly demystifying spirit echoes mid-twentieth-century theorists’ work, such as Roland Barthes ‘death of the Author’—which this chapter will come to examine—but it is counteracted by her belief that ‘[w]hat artists say about their own work is compelling because it tells us something about what they believe they are doing’.[[370]](#footnote-370) The author, however, is a constructed role within the literary work, since ‘[t]he art of fiction’, she stated, ‘cannot be reduced to a writer’s autobiography’, nor to her psyche.[[371]](#footnote-371) At the heart, then of the entanglement between author and work remain ambiguity and suspicion, which appear not as choices but inevitable effects of fiction, despite Burden’s right to irrupt in the reception of her art, despite her legitimacy to accompany the audience and point in the direction of interpretation. If authors, as Hustvedt argued, ‘speak to an orientation or an idea, but those orientations and ideas are never complete’, some degree of ambiguity is always inescapable, and the work of art always leaves space for suspicion.[[372]](#footnote-372) However, when it comes to the reader, not only suspicion is at play in the experience of encountering a text, but the reader’s ‘life stories, our prejudices, our grudges, our expectations, and our limitations’ too, in Hustvedt’s words, which affect the perception of the work of art.[[373]](#footnote-373) If such prejudices and expectations affect the way in which we read and look at art, as Burden fears, the reader’s suspicion must be executed and directed towards their own way of reading and looking too. Burden, then, not only asks herself why people see what they see but wants her own work to prompt her audience to suspect themselves and wonder: why do I see what I see?

## A Coffin Machine

The ambiguity which Burden looks for by signing her work with the name of other artists and disappearing behind such masks—a creator in the shadow of her work—inevitably resonates with Roland Barthes’ aforementioned call for the ‘death of the author’ in his famous essay, a confirmation of a narrative tendency to self-reflect upon its conventions which gained space in fiction in the context of the May 68 student riots. In 1967, Barthes famously declared that the literary author was a dead figure, offering one of the most repeated and dwelled upon slogans about authorship: ‘to give writing its future’, he stated, ‘it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’.[[374]](#footnote-374) ‘The Death of the Author’ challenged the concept of an author as the owner and origin of the text, and as the person who decides over the text’s meaning, allowing for a new celebrated literary openness. Its rhetoric would later crystalise in a literary trope through which authorship would be put at play in fiction, particularly in postmodernism.[[375]](#footnote-375) What was the move forward, then, once the author had been left behind? Barthes enunciated the consequent birth of the reader as a ‘place’ or ‘space’ to occupy, as ‘*someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted’.[[376]](#footnote-376) Echoing the Nietzschean death of God[[377]](#footnote-377) and situating his theory of the author away from individualism and the ideological effects of a series of historical developments—‘English empiricism, French rationalism… the Reformation’—Barthes was pursuing conceptual distance from the individual ‘human person’ and argued instead for the conception of the text as a continuous present and a multiplicity of voices: the text and the reader were born and alive in the process of reading.[[378]](#footnote-378)

The disappearance of the author in favour of a ‘modern scriptor’ who no longer owns the meaning of the text, as Barthes had put it,stood in a troubling relationship with feminism’s aims to emancipate women, especially when the ‘history, biography’ and ‘psychology’ which Barthes dispensed with when speaking of the reader, were determining aspects in women’s aim at being authors.[[379]](#footnote-379) *The Blazing World* and its display of gender as both something which affects the creation and the reception of the work of art offers, thus, a feminist revision of the death of the author and its complex and paradoxical workings. Indeed, in *The Blazing World*, Barthes’ ‘slogan’—in its self-conscious approach to fiction—holds onto the ‘less militant, more melancholic cast’ which Jeremy Green associated with 1990s ‘late postmodernist’ literature.[[380]](#footnote-380) Burden’s interest in the potential of the hoax is emphasised as she writes in her diary, ‘What if I invented an artist who was all art criticism, all catalogue copy, and no work? How many artists, after all, had been catapulted into importance by drivel written by all those hacks who had taken the linguistic turn? Ah, *écriture*!’ (36).[[381]](#footnote-381) The linguistic turn of philosophers such as Richard Rorty and associated with French thinkers, to which this passage alludes to, is mentioned by Burden with the knowledge and complicity of taking part in such playfulness, but also with irony, as suspicion over their suspicion.[[382]](#footnote-382) Burden, then, seems to display the wariness of those ‘marginalized’ authors who were already aware of ‘a sense of identity as constructed through impersonal and social relations of power’, as Waugh explained, ‘long before post-structuralists and postmodernists began to assemble their cultural manifestos’.[[383]](#footnote-383) As much as Burden artistically seeks to disappear, she plays on the idea of the author as a god, and sees herself as a ‘demigod in the studio’, and, while sculpting, quotes, ‘[*a*]*nd the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*’ (31). As she relies on the postmodernist playful character of the hoax and the literary trope of the death of the author, she also sees it as problematic. Burden, however, ignores its possible dangers, and although she ‘knew that art history had steadily sunk the reputations of women artists by assigning the work to the dad, the husband, or the mentor’ she does not consider that ‘borrowing a big name like Rune might sting her in the end’ (140-1). By undertaking the project of ‘Maskings’, Burden seems to fail to consider that ambiguity does not necessarily reverse or do justice to her neglected position as an artist but strengthens the bias and prejudice of the audience. Or could it be that she sees potential in that danger?

Reminiscing the popularity of Barthes during her years as a student, Zadie Smith accounted for his essay’s ‘relative accessibility and the unlimited power he appeared to placing’ at the reader’s ‘feet’.[[384]](#footnote-384) ‘The Death of the Author’ belonged to the ‘thrilling space of the *nouveau roman*’ and the posterior embracement of ‘this “new” French criticism’, however, Smith argued, ‘it’s worth remembering that’ Barthes’ essay was ‘simply a licked forefinger held up to test a wind already blowing’.[[385]](#footnote-385) Could it be, then, that in the twenty-first century critical context of method wars, new sincerity having irrupted in fiction in the 1990s, motifs such as the death of the author—associated with suspicious criticism—were still relevant? Once suspicion’s demystifying spirit was demystified itself—suspicion being suspected—Barthes’ attempt to revolutionise literature from within its own categories was not as obviously rebellious nor emancipatory. The assumption that ‘any restriction on the multivalent flow of literary meaning was not to be stood for’, Smith pointed out, or that ‘what a reader wants most is unfettered freedom’ was no longer ‘obvious’.[[386]](#footnote-386) The demystification of this freedom was particularly confrontative from a feminist perspective: Barthes’s death of the author as the ‘figure of origin […] meaning and power’ contradicted feminism’s ‘birth’ of female authorship—the birth of women who had ‘to claim a voice’.[[387]](#footnote-387) Like non-suspicious criticism, feminism displayed ‘understandable suspicion of the deconstructing and undermining impulse’ of self-conscious literary motifs—such as the death of the author—in favour of ‘construction and support’ which, as Linda Hutcheon stated, ‘seem more important agendas for women’.[[388]](#footnote-388) Could the opposite ambitions of suspicion and construction resolve in a feminist questioning of the figure of the author? Could such a death be an enabler of emancipation? In *The Blazing World*, Harriet Burden seems to believe so.

Alongside Burden’s intellectual hoax—her figurative disappearance—Rune also plans and artistically exploits his death: he films himself ingesting pills to, presumably, sleep for several hours and then wake up. This performance relies on Rune’s own control of his body and its perception by his audience, as he records his performance, however, he falls unconscious and dies in his sleep. The same ambiguity caused by Burden’s self-inflicted disappearance remains in Rune’s performance, for it is not clear whether Rune truly intends to die or whether he seeks a near-death aesthetic experience. Although Burden’s masking is not a definitive erasure of her authorship but a mere hoax which allows her to disappear and then return to claim her authorship back, she is unable to effectively *undo* the hoax, to take off the masks. Rune’s death cannot be *undone* either, however, unlike Burden’s, his artistic—but also physical—death solidifies his position as an artist, for, as a critic explains, ‘[w]hether intentional or not, the artwork itself becomes a “container” for death, a coffin machine for the artist’s corpse’ (324). Rune’s corpse does not only hold onto his authority over the performance but over Burden’s art too, which she has signed with his name. Rune, the critic argues, ‘outmanipulated’ Burden ‘with one stupendous gesture: his own corpse’ (46). Burden’s fears about the power of the mask, then, become real: the mask effectively acquires the funeral purposes it had in Ancient Greece, where it was, according to David Wiles, ‘a simple and obvious device to make a face permanent, overcoming the decay of the flesh’.[[389]](#footnote-389)

Rune’s physical death strengthens his authority over his art, his reputation and even the authorship of what most likely seems like Burden’s work; however, in the case of Burden, her death—both the self-inflicted artistic one and the later physical one—is detrimental for her authorship. If Burden seeks recognition, why does she work against her authorship by using masks? She has come to use masks because she firstly yearns to ‘show work by Anonymous’, she yearns for the authorial demise (158). Nevertheless, it soon becomes evident that that is ‘impossible’, since ‘[a]rt is not allowed to arrive spontaneously unauthored’ (158). Burden is voicing Hustvedt’s own belief that art ‘requires an artist, and that artist is, or was, a living breathing human being with an embodied self that functions both consciously and unconsciously within a larger world of meanings’.[[390]](#footnote-390) It is this troubling relationship with the physicality of the artist which also brings to the table Burden’s inability to dispense with the embodiment of art and of gender. Indeed, Burden’s daughter explains how, for her mother, ‘there was no art… without the body’ (24). In Burden’s creative metaphors, there is, indeed, an identification of femininity with the body and a perception of gender as biological, especially obvious when she writes about Margaret Cavendish. Cavendish’s ‘deeply performative’ artistic ‘insistence on being heard and on having her work noticed’ inspires Burden’s last work of art, a giant sculpture entitled, like Cavendish’s book, ‘The Blazing World’.[[391]](#footnote-391) Burden describes it as ‘a house-woman. She will have an inside and an outside, so that we can walk in and out of her… there will be characters inside that head’ (220). The sculpture is represented giving birth to smaller figures, which is interpreted as a form of female authorship: ‘Don’t women give birth?’, wonders Burden, ‘[a]re we not makers and shakers of generations?’ (222).

For Burden, indeed, the idea that gender resides in the body—as she associates femininity with certain physical characteristics—contradicts its performative nature too. Her own intentions of reaching a bodiless identity as an artist are contradicted as she wishes ‘to transform into a man through Rune’, and as she parallels creating art with pregnancy and giving birth (216). Furthermore, she establishes a relation between childbearing and writing. When speaking of Cavendish’s work, she states that the Duchess ‘gives birth to worlds’, she ‘had no children of her own […] She had her “Paper Bodies,” her breathing works’ (348-9). However, the idea of gender as originated in and identified with the body is subjected to the suspicion that conditions the whole of the novel and is complicated by Burden herself, who, in her diaries, shares a sense of being unable to escape her physicality, writing that she is ‘haunted’ by the ‘thought of another body’, for, if she ‘had come in another package’, the outcome of her art would have been different (32). This points to ‘Maskings’ as an answer to such concerns, as, indeed, a couple of paragraphs later Burden states she is not ‘interested in experimenting with my own body’ nor in ‘living as a man’ for she ‘wanted to leave my body out of it’ (35). By putting on the metaphorical masks, Burden hopes to manipulate the perception of her gender and escape her body altogether, albeit dangerously.

In ‘Maskings’, however, Burden is far from leaving her body behind. She does not only sign her work with a male alias, but she offers the audience real-life men, flesh-and-blood male artists. With her knowledge of the use of the mask in classical tragedy, Burden exploits precisely how the object represents facial features as it hides the real face, the actor having to, as Wiles explained, ‘externalize emotion and develop the expressivity of the body’, augmenting the body’s importance.[[392]](#footnote-392) But it is not only the perception of the audience that changes when the artist is a man, for Burden sees herself differently when using the masks, which, she believes, ‘played a role in the *kind* of art she produced’ (2). As explained before, in the last instalment of ‘Maskings’, Burden and Rune make use of actual masks in a gender-swapping practice. In this performance, Burden and Rune embody the ideas of the masculine and the feminine, which, in Hustvedt’s words, are ‘implicit metaphorical schemas that divide the world in half’.[[393]](#footnote-393) Corporality is further triumphant when Burden falls ill with terminal cancer: ‘I am truly a monster now, ashamed of its hideous body. I smell piss, shit, and some other unknown odor no one else admits to smelling… the stench of dying’, she writes in her diary (357). In this final emphasis on the body, Burden seems to leave behind any gendered pronouns, enforcing a feeling of distance with her own body—an ‘it’, a carcass. However, the binary of masculinity and femininity is kept alive by those critics who write about ‘Maskings’ after Burden’s death, making use of, as Kingston-Reese noted, the ‘gendered somatic cliché that female art is soft whilst male art is angular’.[[394]](#footnote-394) Speaking of the last instalment of the project, an art dealer states: ‘the robotic motions of the dancers are pure Rune. *Beneath* looks nothing like those squishy Burden works’ (179). Furthermore, age influences the perception of the work of art, and Burden wonders whether, if she revealed herself as the author of ‘Maskings’, ‘[t]he work would look different’; she asks herself, ‘[w]ould it look old-womanish all of a sudden?’ (158). Ambiguity, for Burden, *can* escape corporality, it allows the artist’s gender and age to remain ambiguous, unclear, suspicious and undefined. Furthermore, ambiguity, once it appears, stays beyond death.

The idea of an ambiguous work of art in which rigid categories appear as open and malleable and subject to the reader’s intervention remains attractive. And yet, as Burden first metaphorically disappears behind the masks—letting go of the authorship of her art—and then physically dies without having asserted such authorship—that is, leaving the question open and ambiguous—the death of the artist is materialised not as a safe bet but as a motif to engage with, but not resolve, questions of gender and historically erased identities. If ambiguity in *The Blazing World* invites us to wonder at what point the playful disappearance of the author—and the consequential ambiguity and suspicion over the creator of the work of art—becomes detrimental, how can it hold its appeal? The novel’s ambiguity—exploited as a playful device—turns the reader’s involvement into suspicion exerted towards all the ambiguous elements of the text. Could it be, then, that the reader’s suspicion is what allows ambiguity to become liberating and not remain in apolitical openness? It is in the reader, the physically embodied reader, that suspicion can hold its potential—a reader who is not an abstract figure nor a concept, but a human being. Indeed, for Hustvedt, the reader’s body is the mediator for the reading experience, for only living beings can interact with a text and reading ‘takes place… in the time of the body, and it partakes of the body’s rhythms, of heartbeat and breath, of the movement of our eyes, and of our fingers’.[[395]](#footnote-395) Although the author is not physically in the text, ‘[r]eading is intersubjective—the writer is absent, but his words become part of’ the reader’s ‘inner dialogue’.[[396]](#footnote-396) The reader, too, becomes part of the ludic dimension of the novel, where ‘we are free to play ourselves, to muse and dream and question and theorize’, to *suspect* too.[[397]](#footnote-397) Play does not entail observing in the distance nor witnessing a writer playing by themselves but a close involvement with the stakes of the novel.

Suspicion, thus, remains playful and political at the same time. The difficulty in establishing the point in which ambiguity stops being liberating and goes against Burden’s wishes for artistic recognition lies precisely in the playful nature of the way in which she uses masks: if her disappearance as an author is a mere artistic *hoax*, its consequences are part of the playfulness of such hoax. Indeed, the ludic dimension of art is part of Hustvedt’s poetics, as she states that ‘[m]aking a work of fiction is playing, playing in deadly earnest, perhaps, but playing nevertheless’.[[398]](#footnote-398) It is in the earnestness of playing that the conflict between ambiguity and feminism arises: if we are playing for real, for consequences, suspicion is not a mere side-effect of ambiguity but will go beyond the realm of art. Burden’s intention to disappear behind the masks so as to prove that the author’s identity is not fixed but dependent on perception—and thus manipulable—seems to go against feminism’s ethos. In Patricia Waugh’s words, while certain literary tendencies of the twentieth century—such as the questioning of the authorial figure—showed ‘a loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent’, feminism was searching for ‘a sense of effective agency and history’ which had been previously ‘denied by the dominant culture’.[[399]](#footnote-399) Burden’s hoax, nonetheless, retains the feminist urge to reclaim her place as an artist and she believes that by erasing herself she will assert her authorship more strongly. But what if the hoax is *taken* *seriously*? What if the suspicion purported by Burden in the audience does not go against sexist bias in art but against her own credibility? Can the artist truly orient the direction in which suspicion will be executed, or does suspicion escape artistic control—a virus escaped from a lab, as Latour feared? Can all types of authors *play* and be taken seriously?

## A Feminist Parable?

Through her ambiguous game of hoaxes, Burden denounces the disadvantageous position of women in art, a disadvantage materialised not only in the difficulties of creating art but of being perceived as artists. When asking ‘Why do people see what they see?’ Burden answers herself: ‘There must be conventions’, for ‘[w]e see nothing otherwise; all would be chaos’ (59). By manipulating the perception of authorship with the use of masks Burden seeks to point to such conventions, to the tendency to erase women and assign authorship to men. Like her character, Hustvedt is particularly interested in the role of perception in art, conceiving the aesthetic experience as a point of encounter between art and viewers, who ‘are not passive recipients of some factual external reality but rather actively creating what [they] see’.[[400]](#footnote-400) As she relies on her audience’s participation when encountering art, Burden becomes an active instigator of conceptual playfulness by constructing ‘proliferations’, that is, the characters, masks and diaries which accompany the works themselves and which are as important. Burden, in other words, constructs the work of art and its context. Although her ambition is materialised in her search for control of all aspects of her art, the layered nature of her work appears counterproductive. The more she inscribes herself in her art and the more she seeks to intervene in how people view her work, the more she disappears into the shadows. It is only once Burden is truly a *dead* author—after passing away because of cancer—that she obtains part of the recognition she thought she deserved, that is, when Hess compiles the documents and tells her story. However, her authorship is not fully blinded against ambiguity, and the question of who created ‘Maskings’ remains unanswered.

Escaping Burden’s artistic project, the ambiguity she searches for turns into a ‘sinister ambiguity’, one which prompts suspicion in a way which escapes Burden’s directions as much as it escapes the fictional realm (72). Suspicion in *The Blazing World* transcends the text and pushes the reader onto the suspicious self-reflexiveness described by Shoshana Felman: the reader is ‘*forced to participate*’ from the suspicion, being not a mere observant in the distance but taking on the role of the characters which constitute Burden’s audience in the novel itself.[[401]](#footnote-401) The readers, in other words, do not read *about* the dangerous effects of suspicion but *experience* them. As the narration is constructed with contradictory accounts of Burden’s life and work, her self-portrayal as a victim of the unfairness of the art world appears not as a mere descriptive impartial account but must be warily observed by the reader. The reader, then, accesses Burden as much through her own words as through her myth, her artistic persona, which becomes an element to be suspected as it is suspected by the characters of the novel. Indeed, Rosemary Lerner, an art critic, states in the novel that ‘[t]here is a pronounced tendency in all the arts to mythologize the dead’, that is a tendency to construct ‘reductive narratives to explain artists’ lives and works’ (70). Lerner contradicts the whole idea—the myth—that Burden is a forgotten artist: ‘Harriet Burden was not nearly as obscure or unnoticed’, she explains, ‘as she has been made out to be in the stories that are now circulating’ (70). Such contradictory accounts, then, materialise the reader’s suspicion longed for by Burden but, unlike her masks and the artistic ‘proliferations’ she constructs, such suspicion escapes her control and her direction.

Burden, however, conceives the audience’s role in the perception of the work of art as an indicator of their complicity with and responsibility for the bias and prejudices which intervene in such perception. Although she has manipulated them, she resents their inability to suspiciously see through such manipulation, and when they see her work disconnected from her, she complains: they ‘haven’t found a tenth of my little witticisms, my references, my puzzles’ (59). Burden’s intellectual hoax highlights and strengthens what Hustvedt saw as natural to ‘writing’, that in it ‘we alienate ourselves from ourselves even when we say “I”’.[[402]](#footnote-402) If the hoax can take place it is precisely because the ‘representation’, as Hustvedt argued, ‘is estranged from what is being represented’, an estrangement which allows Burden to manipulate the audience and demand their suspicious interpretation to get out of such manipulation.[[403]](#footnote-403) But if her hoax is indeed a manipulation of the audience, does her project not exempt their guilt? Is she not prompting and frustrating their suspicion by creating an ambiguous work of art? When ‘Maskings’ is finally out and received by the audience, Burden’s disappearance as the author is confirmed, for, although the biographical author is substitutable, Burden realises, the role itself is not, for ‘there is no orderly vision without context’, even if that context does not respond to the true origin of the work of art (158). Having relied on suspicion, Burden is left unconnected from her work, demanding, in the end, for suspicion to be paused, and for her to be trusted when she claims she is the *true author* of her work.

Whether the novel warns against self-conscious experimentation or sees potential in it despite its danger is not clear, and it is precisely in such uncertainty that the novel’s ambiguity remains as a sought-after effect. We cannot be certain about whether Burden was truly unknown—some testimonies show the opposite—nor can we be certain that she is the author of the works she claims as hers. The question posited in the novel, however, is not whether Burden is the sole author of ‘Maskings’ but what she is an author *of* and what the extent of her authorship is, for it is certain that she is *an* author. As *The Blazing World*’s ambiguity reaches the very nature of the novel, the reader wonders what—in addition to the three ‘masks’ and the catalogue of characters and ‘proliferations’—should be suspected as a product of the artist’s creation. The novel however continues to remain ambiguous regarding the stakes of being an author. As much as Burden longs for her recognition as a creator, authorship is also projected onto her as an insult. Her ambition for being recognised is perceived by some as part of a delirious fictional plot she has carefully created in which she is an author and character, and in which she self-aggrandises her importance. This is the hypothesis voiced by an art dealer, Oswald Case, who is not fond of Burden’s work and believes she is trying to take advantage of Rune’s fame, and who mockingly talks about her diaries and sees her suspicion as pathological. He explains that ‘the story that came [his] way’, is that ‘she had a nervous breakdown’ (274). This is confirmed by another critic, who states that when Burden’s husband died, ‘she suffered a *complete* mental breakdown and was treated by a psychiatrist’, as well as that she ‘was eccentric, paranoid, belligerent, hysterical, and even violent’ (9). Rune also contributes to this reputation, quoted to have said that Burden ‘was overly sensitive’ and ‘a bit unstable’ (190) Burden’s psychiatrist, however, wants to set the record straight and argues the artist ‘was not psychotic’ nor ‘delusional’, and that she ‘was no more deluded than the average neurotic’ (249).

The possibility that Burden might be ill, or at least neurotic, becomes for some characters the lens through which to explore her creativity. Responding to Hess’ questions during an interview, another character, Burridge, states: ‘if she was as clever as you say, inventing writers for highbrow magazines, why not believe that she left behind, well, a novel of sorts’ (278). He argues that, since Rune believed that Burden ‘lived in a fantasy world’ and her husband considered ‘his wife was lost in her own imagination’, it is possible that, indeed, ‘she made up things without even knowing it’ (278). In not deeming Burden worthy of plotting the hoax with the masks but, however, seeing her as too imaginative, this critic does not see her pursuit of authorship as a legitimate artistic enterprise, but as a tantrum: ‘she was bitter and angry and would do absolutely anything to get attention’ (278). As Burden is accused of inventing too much, Rune, however, is praised by critics for being ‘a fabulist’, for having ‘reinvented himself again and again’ as ‘a man of our time, a creature of the media and of virtual realities’ (188). Burden, who admits being ‘responsible for the drama’, the ‘Mistress of the Masks’, is, however, aware of how ‘the boundary between the two inventions’, between ‘the two masked beings’ she uses to sign her work are difficult to differentiate, and she wonders how to ‘draw the line’ (248). Whether Burden *deserves* to be erased or whether her complaints are legitimate does not change the fact that—legitimately or not—although she is able to prompt suspicion, she is not able to control its outcome. Suspicion, then, escapes precisely what Lerner, the art critic, refers to in the novel as a ‘black-and-white treatment’ of the polemic surrounding the authorship of ‘Maskings’ which ‘leads to mythmaking at its worst’ (73). Precisely because of the ambiguity which Burden both purports and is a victim of, Lerner states, ‘the story cannot simply be told as a feminist parable’ (72).

Since the access to Burden’s writing as well as to the testimonies of other characters is granted by the editorial intervention of Hess, could it be that it is precisely that editorial work which may resolve the story’s ultimate ambiguity? Indeed, Hess is aware of the responsibility in such work, and admits that since ‘Burden wrote so much and so broadly that my dilemma as an editor turned on the crucial question: What do I put in and what do I leave out?’ (7). However, as much as *The Blazing World* is the result of Hess’ work—the information is selected and structured according to Hess’ criteria—the editor’s relation with the edited material is not one of control, nor one of impartiality. When commenting on Burden’s diaries, Hess claims to be ‘fascinated, provoked and frustrated’ by them (4). Furthermore, despite having the last word over the publication, Hess fears the lack of control over the story and thinks of Burden as a ‘trickster’ who seeks control over her story even though she is dead (10). Such an anxiety for control is revealed early on in the novel, in one of Burden’s diaries, where she states: ‘I am writing this because I don’t trust time. I, Harriet Burden […] am sixty-two, not ancient but well on my way to THE END, and I have too much left to do’ (13). As she edits Burden’s story, Hess admits having ‘the uncomfortable feeling that the ghost of Harriet Burden was laughing over my shoulder’, in other words, that Burden, although she is dead—literally, a *dead* *author*—cannot let go of her control (10). Her frustrations as an editor seemingly contradict, then, Burden’s supposed failure in her intentions, for although her vindication does not come through completely, her work truly achieves an ultimate ambiguity. Despite having tried ‘to assemble the texts into a reasonable order’, Hess warns the reader of the result of the investigation: a ‘story that emerges’ as ‘intimate, contradictory, and, […] rather strange’, warning them, in a sense, to remain suspicious throughout (11).

## The Ghost of Suspicion

Why would an artist cover her identity behind a mask if she seeks to obtain recognition? Why would Burden exhort her audience to suspect only to, afterwards, ask to be trusted? What was Hustvedt aiming at when establishing this troubling relationship between the politics of art and the aesthetics of ambiguity? Some critics consider the novel to be asking precisely ‘how should the erasure and belittlement of women’s work be responded to by women artists and authors’[[404]](#footnote-404). When trying to determine whether the hoax undertaken by Burden achieves its intended purpose—that is, if Burden has obtained authority over her work by tricking the audience—there are several possibilities. Burden, as the author of her work, hopes to be allowed to enter and exit the text, to hide in the shadows and later reveal her identity. However, the political implications of ambiguity in the novel are affected precisely by the specificity of female authorship, which cannot be ambiguous—suspicious—in the same way as male authorship. Since the original authorship of the work is not perceived by the audience, Burden’s masks can be considered ‘failures of perception, or readership and reception that are beyond the control of the artist/author’, that is, failures of the intended role of suspicion, which she hoped would be a tool for her authorship to see the light.[[405]](#footnote-405)

Since female authorship is not a strongly established category nor has historically settled foundations, ambiguity does not entail an intensification of authority but an actual erasure of authorship. In other words, not all authors can play dead on the same terms, and in trying to, rather than underlining her merit as an author, Burden loses the possibility of reclaiming her art. The masks guarantee neither freedom nor recognition, nor ‘a dispersal of power’—as the more optimistic interpretation of Barthes’ slogan could entail—but, as Mary Eagleton put it, a mere ‘distribution’ which strengthens the ‘existing hierarchies’ which Burden was seeking to escape.[[406]](#footnote-406) In other words, when Burden renounces her authorship for the sake of an intellectual hoax, the result of her philosophical endeavour is neither a fruitful collective reflection on patriarchy and art, nor a rejection of authority. Suspicion, in this case, does not risk the status quo but, ultimately, strengthens it. Consequently, the death of the author is revealed as a hoax only available to some, while, for the female author, it is depicted as a dangerous and counterproductive game, though an extremely useful one to underline her precariousness. If, as Hustvedt argued, in the novel ‘the writer is not there’ and ‘[h]er body is absent’, Burden’s disappearance seems inevitable and intrinsic to the work.[[407]](#footnote-407) Her mistake, then, lies in her delayed appearance, in presenting the masks before she is able to present herself.

Once Burden realises the consequences of erasing her role as an author, she desperately tries to regain that power back: ‘Methodically, deliberately, Harry compiled every shred, morsel, sliver, and dust mote of evidence to prove her case. As she dug into piles… and hunted for signs of her creative ownership, it dawned on her… how carefully she had hidden her involvement’ (309). Indeed, Hess admits having tried ‘to construct a story of sorts out of the diverse material Burden left behind’, but leaves the question of authorship unresolved, since ‘there is little agreement about what actually happened’ (7-8). Once again, the ‘disturbed, defied’ reader is faced with responsibility, a responsibility which abandons purely aesthetic games and becomes political.[[408]](#footnote-408) The novel’s use of referencing and framing devices, as well as the presentation of the novel as a textual artefact through the presence of paratextual pieces—such as footnotes—underlines its materiality to the extreme and roots the reading experience in suspicion. It seems that Burden, as a dead author, can only come back to life through what she leaves behind. But having erased the material traces that prove her authorship, all that is left is speculation. Hustvedt, then, introduces a third figure: the editor. Without Hess’ intermediation, prior to her investigation, the audience is deceived by Rune’s claims of authorship: there is not a full picture, but a bias caused by Rune’s already existing reputation and power. In the case of the novel, the reader is enabled to decide and to roam freely in the story precisely because Hess offers all sorts of testimonies, which are not always coherent, and prompts suspicion in the way Burden would have liked to do.

The tension between what the novel explicitly *says*—its clear feminist concerns—and what it *does*—its ambiguity—leaves, then, the responsibility to the reader. In the words of Slotkin, ‘the sinister can create a powerful imaginative engagement that raises questions about the audience’s complicity’.[[409]](#footnote-409) *The Blazing World* allows Burden’s narrative to overtake the project as a whole when the political claims come through her text; as well as it allows the shadow of doubt and ambiguity to destabilise her version of the story. The sinister ambiguity can only exist with the reader’s suspicion, which activates it, and aware or not of the authenticity of each of the testimonies, the reader is committed and involved. Indeed, in stating that ‘[i]n art, the relation established is between a person and a part-person-part-thing’, Hustvedt emphasised the agency and ‘aliveness’ of the text, which can demand of the reader to be engaged, to be alert.[[410]](#footnote-410) Hustvedt’s ideas about readership align with an active and constructive notion of suspicion, by which wariness brings the reader closer to the text, rather than further. ‘The reader’, she stated, ‘animates a novel… reader and book form a collaboration of meanings, which have no objective reality but create yet another between-zone, an intersubjective exchange’.[[411]](#footnote-411)

Suspicion does, indeed, bring down assumptions, but does not necessarily lead to devastation. For one thing, Hustvedt noted the importance of the ‘protection of the “aesthetic illusion”’, an illusion which can entail the ability to suspect certain things in fiction, but not the fictional logic.[[412]](#footnote-412) This illusion seems to protect the text from a radical and destructive wariness which destroys the possibility of engaging with the novel; it protects the text, in other words, against disbelief. This illusion, Hustvedt argued, is possible due to imagination: the reader and writer ‘shift [their] perspective and enter the world of another person to travel with her or him for the duration of the book’.[[413]](#footnote-413) To suspect the novel is to ask, it is to doubt its intentions and be invested in its answers, but not to stop reading, it rather entails an involvement in the novelistic form. The text does not provide answers directly, but functions because of the space it provides the reader to be active and engaged.

As I have already explored, Nabokov’s character, Kinbote, the critic who famously overrides the intention of the author whose poetry he is commenting, is a perfect example of suspicious reading and its consequences: ‘for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word’, he states.[[414]](#footnote-414) Hustvedt echoed those words when she wrote that ‘[b]ooks are made between the words and spaces left by the writer on the page and the reader who reinvents them through her own embodied reality, for better and for worse’.[[415]](#footnote-415) Although the role of the editor appears as crucial in the construction of *The Blazing World*, it is the reader who has the last word, as Hustvedt argued, *for better or for worse*. As the novel does not allow to know who created ‘Maskings’, not knowing and being required to suspect, then, is what intensifies the connection between the reader and the text, prompting a continued discussion and engagement and ‘powerful emotional attachments’.[[416]](#footnote-416) The novel, then, invites the reader to suspect further and to suspect suspicion itself, to wonder when doubt and suspicion are suitable and desirable, to wonder when suspicion enriches rather than diminishes the reading and writing experience. As the novel purports that suspicion can be beneficial and enriching in some cases and in others it can be destructive, the feminist politics of the novel materialises in an epistemological proposal rather than in a vindication—the latter appearing incompatible with the novel’s ambiguity. The novel’s feminism does not provide knowledge nor an answer, but rather, revels in the state of unknowing, in the delay of knowledge intrinsic to suspicion, a delay which seeks to keep the question of authorship open. In this sense, the ghost who haunts Hess and who haunts the reader, that is, the ghost of Harriet Burden, appears as the ghost of suspicion, whose presence invites us to lurk and to keep wondering why we see what we see.

# 4

# CORPORATE MACHINE

# Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (2015)

## Signals and Transmissions

In 1991, immediately after finishing his university degree and as he was trying to become a writer, Tom McCarthy received a Government Enterprise Allowance grant provided by Margaret Thatcher’s government. Such a grant was designed, according to the writer, ‘to manipulate unemployment figures by redesignating swaths of jobless people as “small businesses”’, as McCarthy ironically explained in *The New Yorker*, his own business consisting of ‘an enterprise purveying fiction’.[[417]](#footnote-417) With the money he obtained, he moved from London to Prague and lived a comfortable life for some months. Soon, ‘the money ran out’, he changed his career and started earning a living as an art model.[[418]](#footnote-418) ‘Every morning I’d turn up, strip off, and stand on a small podium’ in front of art students who practised life drawing, he recalled.[[419]](#footnote-419) Although this job was seemingly far from his writing ambitions, McCarthy found his literary vocation in the stillness required in modelling, admitting that ‘nothing I’ve ever done, before or since, has afforded me such a state of concentration’.[[420]](#footnote-420) The stillness and the static posture he had to endure allowed him to ‘run whole passages of text’, he explained, ‘through my head, forward, backwards, taking apart each image, amplifying each metre and sub-rhythm in the loaded silence.’[[421]](#footnote-421) McCarthy stared intensely at the tiles on the floor, where he ‘began seeing chessboards, box junctions, starting grids of motor races’, which were all ‘held by geometry’.[[422]](#footnote-422) It is not surprising, then, that he considered his years in Prague as crucial in his latter development as a novelist, admitting that he ‘probably learned more about literature in the six months’ he worked as a model ‘than in the three previous years’ while he was studying in university.[[423]](#footnote-423)

The experience of modelling embodied McCarthy’s conception of literature and materialised the writer’s interest in and passion for literary theory. The transmission of signals and the creation of networks, which he experienced in his fascination with tiles and geometry, appear repeatedly throughout McCarthy’s oeuvre—especially in his novels *Remainder* (2005), *Men in Space* (2007), *C* (2010) and his latest *The Making of Incarnation* (2021)—which display characters concerned with looking at the world in a suspicious manner. While in *Remainder*, after suffering an accident the main character becomes obsessed with re-enacting real-life events by paying attention to small and extremely specific details, in *Men in Space* suspicion is materialised in the characters’ chase of a stolen painting through Europe. In *C*, McCarthy engaged with the idea of literature as transmission of signals—the idea which would later appear as central in his own theory of literature—by exploring the early days of radio communication. His latest novel, *The Making of Incarnation*,which deals with time-motion study, also recurs to patterns and obsessive reporting and measurement as a literary topic. Once and over again the reader finds McCarthy’s characters looking for signals that will provide them with meaning, enacting, perhaps, the writer’s own observation of patterns on the tiles while posing still. As his character’s plots are concerned with sending or intercepting messages, their dramas consist of troublesome communications, and their modes of existence are, this chapter purports, rooted in suspicion.

In his theoretical writing, McCarthy conceived literature as a naturally suspicious activity and reading as an experience of intercepting signals, putting a lot of emphasis on the hermeneutical activity of the reader, who has to be alert and attentive, rather than passive. In *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (2006), McCarthy argued that ‘Tintin’s adventures are framed by enigmas’ and, thus, both the character and reader are constantly obliged to engage in an ‘after-the-crime’ logic.[[424]](#footnote-424) In his collection of essays *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish* (2017) McCarthy discussed a variety of topics from within the suspicious mindset he associates with literature and reading, such as, for example, London weather, which becomes an object of interpretation of atmospheric phenomena. Weather, he argued, is ‘an index both of truth and of all that’s random, meaningless. Like all media, it bears a plethora of messages.’[[425]](#footnote-425) However, although echoing Nabokov’s character in ‘Signs and Symbols’ (1948)—who is followed by ‘[p]henomenal nature… wherever he goes’—for McCarthy referential mania was not an illness but the metaphysics of literature itself—of reading and writing. For McCarthy, the mode of existence of the author is one of constant perception of signals, of constantly listening for signals of communication, an experience which fiction, then, reproduces for the reader, for whom the author has to ‘set up a number of possibilities, things to be interpreted’.[[426]](#footnote-426) For whom, in other words, the author has to offer an object to be suspected.

In *Transmission and Individual Remix* (2012), a short, digitally published piece, McCarthy went back to Ancient Greece to anchor his essay in the *Oresteia* trilogy from the 5th century BC. He was particularly interested in the tragedies’ account of the announcement of the fall of Troy to other cities with a light which can be perceived in the distance, a signal formed by a network of beacons. The author’s duty, McCarthy argued, is to perceive those metaphorical lights, to ‘*listen*… to a set of signals’, signals which are ‘repeating, pulsing, modulating in the airspace’ of the text.[[427]](#footnote-427) Since signals are subject to interception and manipulation, their reception involves an attentive wariness, a suspicious attitude necessary to grasp their meaning. However, if the author merely receives and transmits signals, where does literary originality reside? Establishing an explicit dialogue with T.S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), McCarthy acknowledged readers’ and critics’ appreciation of newness and novelty, who, in Eliot’s words, often ‘dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors’.[[428]](#footnote-428) McCarthy’s concept of ‘transmission’, thus, echoed Eliot’s claim that ‘no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone’, that the artist had to be ‘set’ in ‘contrast and comparison, among the dead’.[[429]](#footnote-429) For McCarthy, the closest an author can be from the experience of individual inspiration, of original creation, is no more and no less than a moment of realisation. As he stated in an interview in 2013, the writer can experience a moment of ‘clarity’ when ‘a whole set of literary genealogies and transmissions’ is ‘constellated into a pattern that is rich and vivid’.[[430]](#footnote-430) It is, however, only for a ‘technologically savvy sensibility’, in McCarthy’s words, that the text appears as ‘a set of transmissions, filtered through subjects whom technology and the live word have ruptured, broken open, made receptive’.[[431]](#footnote-431) At the same time, it is for a suspicion-sensible character and for a reader who is commanded from within the text to take on suspicion that the textual transmissions appear clearly.

McCarthy’s characters and readers are prompted to grasp the signals and make sense of them, to *interpret* and to *suspect*. For McCarthy, a book with ‘one interpretation’ would most likely ‘be a rather one-dimensional book’, that is, a book without a *depth* into which to read, without a symptom to diagnose, without a meaning to unveil.[[432]](#footnote-432) McCarthy’s writing is informed by ‘theory’ understood, as Judith Ryan defined it in *The Novel After Theory* (2012), as a term which, although vague, refers to ‘the French thinkers who initiated poststructuralism’[[433]](#footnote-433) and to literary studies, as ‘a kind of lingua franca capable of bringing scholars together’.[[434]](#footnote-434) Indeed, his taste for the reader’s involvement, theorised by him with a set of metaphors of transmission and communication, conceive literature in similar terms to those expressed by Barthes in *S/Z* (1970), where he distinguished between the ‘readerly’ and the ‘writerly’ text. The readerly leaves the reader ‘with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text’, a text which could ‘be read, but not written’.[[435]](#footnote-435) The writerly, in opposition, turns the reader into ‘a producer of the text’ who is able to rewrite it.[[436]](#footnote-436) In this sense, McCarthy conceived the novel as a product of and a producer of theory, always part of a theoretical framework, either explicitly or unconsciously. The reader must intervene not at the risk, as non-suspicious critics warned, of destroying the text, but in order to grasp everything it has to offer.

McCarthy’s relationship with literary theory, then, is fundamental in his work. As suspicion is a particularly important sensibility he wishes to provoke, it is also one which is not applied to the novel but contained from within it. In his own development of a theory of literature McCarthy did not, however, simply *apply* it to his novel, nor did he *embellish* it with novelistic traits, but, as this chapter will show, generated it from within the novel itself. On the one hand, understanding theory as that which facilitates the decoding of signals, the worldview which allow to interpret the world and make it *intelligible*, for McCarthy all novels are *theoretical* or *conceptual*, since ‘[a]ll writing is conceptual’ and fiction deemed as absent of theory is merely ‘founded on bad concepts’.[[437]](#footnote-437) Precisely because of the inevitability of the novel’s interaction with theory, McCarthy has denied being a ‘conceptual’ author, differentiated from authors who seemingly may not be.[[438]](#footnote-438) In his words, the belief that one is able to ‘not *have* any theory’ and ‘just *write*’ is no more than the ‘naïve’ belief of authors who unconsciously ascribe to ‘narrow liberal humanism’.[[439]](#footnote-439) What would differentiate novels, then, is their attitude towards such theory, that is, being theory-aware or theory-naïve. However, as intrinsic as theory is in the novel, in *Satin Island* (2015)McCarthy also displays it as a ‘contingent historical phenomenon’, in the fashion of the ‘post-theory theory novel’, defined by Mitchum Huehls.[[440]](#footnote-440) While Huehls pointed to the post-theory novel’s tendency—defined by Judith Ryan in *The Novel After Theory*—to make use of ‘dropped names’ and easily ‘digestible concepts’ borrowed from theory, McCarthy consciously includes these tropes and historically locates theory as a product of its time.[[441]](#footnote-441)

The protagonist of the novel, called U., explains his early academic work in anthropology—before being hired by a corporation—and details how his interest as a researcher was directed to the discipline itself, more than to the object of study. Regarding his doctoral thesis, he explains, ‘the most notable’ things about it were the ‘frequent and expansive “asides”’ where he ‘meditated on contemporary ethnographic method and its various quandaries’.[[442]](#footnote-442) U. constantly refers to thinkers and presents ideas from structuralism and post-structuralism, as he, for example, claims he ‘stole a concept from French philosopher Deleuze’ when working on his first assignment for his company, or when describing his ‘protocol or MO’ as ‘feeding vanguard theory, almost always from the left side of the spectrum, back into the corporate machine’ (37), and reveres Lévi-Strauss as his ‘hero’ (35). Both being constructed as a theoretical text as well as presenting theory as a mere discourse *Satin Island* relies on the novel’s self-awareness to write about suspicion and to provoke it as a sensibility in the reader. As suspicion is inevitable in McCarthy’s conception of literature and theory—as two intrinsically related realms—so it is in his characters’ worlds, and so he hopes it is in his readers’ experience.

To examine the threads and the functioning of suspicion as an intrinsic sensibility in McCarthy’s literature, this chapter looks at his novel *Satin Island* (2015), and the novelistic suspicion with which it is built. This chapter reads the novel as materialising the ‘dialogue’ between fiction and theory which Ryan wrote about, a dialogue which facilitates the ‘unfolding of theory’ in itself.[[443]](#footnote-443) Paying attention to the ‘operative structure’ of the novel, shaped as a ‘triangle’ with ‘anthropology, corporate culture, and literature as its three points’, the following sections dissect the suspicious discourses with which McCarthy’s novel dialogues and interacts.[[444]](#footnote-444) Indeed, when first conceiving the novel, McCarthy’s protagonist, called U., ‘was a writer’, a character which would allow him to explore the idea of literature as transmission in a direct manner, by materialising the process of writing within the novel’s plot.[[445]](#footnote-445) However, he decided to turn him into an anthropologist instead, for too many books, ‘all written by white men’, had the same premise of a ‘writer who can’t write a book’.[[446]](#footnote-446) The anthropologist, nevertheless, McCarthy explained, ‘*is* a writer’ and, as such, ‘looks at the world and reports on it’, embodying the suspicious existence and perspective which McCarthy sought to create through his writing.[[447]](#footnote-447) As a new protagonist in the cast of suspicious characters explored in this thesis, the anthropologist is not ill but his experience of the world is that of systematically, albeit obsessively, decoding the signals of the world he observes in his reports, the novel inviting the reader too to decode the reports and to participate from the suspicious logic along his side. As the legitimacy of suspicion is examined in the relationship between anthropology and capitalism, McCarthy’s novel emphasises the literary corner of the triangle to explore how novelistic suspicion can hold onto any disruptive political potential, and if so, to wonder what its power, its limitations, and its dangers are. Once it is ‘fed’ into the ‘corporate machine’ suspicion’s political legitimacy can be exuded from its workings in the novel form.

## The Fibre of a Culture

Writing for *The Guardian* in 2015, McCarthy expounded on the literary nature of anthropology, arguing that Lévi-Strauss was the ‘most important French mid-20th century writer’.[[448]](#footnote-448) For McCarthy, Lévi-Strauss’ work not only ‘displays a richer, deeper literary sensibility than that of his “proper” literary contemporaries’, but ‘it is also infused with meditations on the very act of writing’, meditations which McCarthy had a taste for including in his own novels too.[[449]](#footnote-449) McCarthy’s characterisation of Lévi-Strauss’ writing as ‘infused’ not only ‘with a sense of structure, pattern, system’, but also ‘with a tantalising sense that, if only he could correlate it all, plot the whole system out, some universal “master-meaning” would emerge’ is strikingly similar to the experience of *Satin Island*’s, protagonist, U.[[450]](#footnote-450) Lévi-Strauss’ work, U. explains in the novel, consisted of ‘roaming around the world’ and ‘writing his findings up’ while ‘travelling through worm-holes of association till he’d remade the entire globe into a collage of recurring colours, smells and patterns’ (35). An anthropologist himself, U. reflects upon the discipline as one which searches for patterns and repetition, for connections, and for which ‘it’s generic episodes and phenomena that stand out as significant, not singular ones’ (74). As Lévi-Strauss recorded and reported on the world through patterns and structures, both McCarthy and U. would most likely add him to Ricœur’s triad of the hermeneuts of suspicion—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—as a fourth key figure whose discipline consists, essentially, of an art of interpreting, an art of *suspecting* and of *mapping* the world. A structuralist, Lévi-Strauss was associated, as the Introduction to this thesis explores, to thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century whose methodologies crucially relied on suspicion too.

U.’s practice of anthropology and his interest in the discipline as *writing* is also inscribed within the evolution of the field which took place in the 1980s, and especially after the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). Defined as ‘a watershed in anthropological thought’, this volume of essays edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus ‘highlighted and responded positively to a crisis’ which was both ‘inseparably epistemological and political’.[[451]](#footnote-451) *Writing Culture*, as its title suggests, examined the crisis of anthropology and argued that writing—the anthropologist’s duty to record the information gathered in their work—was an activity ‘central’ to the discipline ‘both in the field and thereafter’.[[452]](#footnote-452) As Clifford explained, throughout the majority of the twentieth century, the role of writing in anthropology was not discussed as determining nor crucial in the field, due to ‘an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience’ which did not consider the subjectivity of writing as something influential in the work of the anthropologist.[[453]](#footnote-453) In other words, this turn changed the perception of the anthropologist from a reporter of reality to a writer whose work was literary. In *Satin Island*, U. experiences this crisis first-hand, constantly wondering what the best way is to put down his investigations, embodying, thus, the anthropologist *as* writer whose reports of ‘codes and representations’, this chapter argues, demand a suspicious interpretation of the world.[[454]](#footnote-454) However, as U. puts anthropology in the service of a company, the novel problematises such use of suspicion. What purpose does it have and what is at stake in his professional use of suspicion?

A corporate anthropologist, U. is the ‘in-house ethnographer’ for a company which ‘advised other companies how to contextualize and nuance their services and products’ (16). Although U. claims to feed his knowledge to what he calls the ‘corporate machine’, anthropology’s convergence with business is, however, not a novelty (16). As U. explains, the relationship between corporations and the academic field of anthropology progressively developed throughout the twentieth century, turning the anthropologist’s work as a field-researcher who sees ‘it all through a lens of rituals, and rites’ and who makes ‘the everyday all primitive and strange’ into a resource to increase capital (21). Although during ‘the Fifties and Sixties’, anthropology’s approach to ‘corporations’ sought ‘pure, unconditional knowledge’ about the functioning and dynamics of companies as objects of study, ‘sometime in the Seventies or Eighties’, things changed: the anthropologist started serving the interests not of his discipline but of the corporation itself which evolved from being an object of study to being its sponsor (48). What object, then, would a corporation want to analyse *anthropologically*? How, in other words, could the suspiciousness intrinsic to the anthropological way of looking at the world—as U. conceives it, via Lévi-Strauss—produce economic benefit?

*Satin Island* does not narrate an idealised past of anthropology, nor purports a narrative of its demise as a turn from a scientifically and ethically unquestionable discipline into a corrupt one. The novel participates in the crisis of representation in anthropology and the consequential focus on writing which, as Clifford argued, contributed to strengthening the ‘critique to colonialism’ which had already started to haunt anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century, when ‘“The West’s” ability to represent other societies’ was questioned.[[455]](#footnote-455) The role of the ‘anthropological subject’ was pointed at as a construction of ‘Western’ thought, a figure of authority which, Glenn Bowman explained, progressively became outdated as denunciations of the discipline’s contribution to colonialism took place.[[456]](#footnote-456) The role of anthropology in the colonial project was not secondary, Bowman argued, for the anthropologist ‘played an important role in imagining others’—those from far-away cultures—as if they could be assimilated into the West’s imposition of the ‘progressive development of mankind’, therefore being responsible for ‘setting up categories of racial difference’, those between ‘the (white) human’ and the ‘sub-humans’.[[457]](#footnote-457) A product of this crisis, in the novel, U.’s corporate anthropological practices do not consist of examining far-away communities nor cultures he does not understand or know first-hand, but those which immediately surround him, and in his work he ‘encounters others in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other’, as Clifford put it.[[458]](#footnote-458) Indeed, constant suspicion forces U. to simultaneously perceive the unknown as if it were familiar and to observe what he knows with distance, ‘approaching the familiar as a stranger’ and his surroundings as if they were far away—*exotic* (28).

The company which employs U.—referred to as ‘the Company’ throughout the novel—aims at influencing society by analysing it and manipulating its functioning according to the interests of whoever hires their services—helping other companies sell their products, telling ‘cities how to brand and re-brand themselves’, as well as indicating ‘governments how to narrate their policy agendas’ (16). Although U. keeps the description of his job and of the Company considerably abstract, he explains that, as a corporate anthropologist, he ‘purvey[s] cultural insight’ (25). He recurs to the metaphor of the fabric, of weaving a thread, to explain that, in the Company, the workers ‘unpick the fibre of a culture’, this culture being their own, ‘and let a client in on how they can get best traction on this fibre’ so that they can ‘introduce into the weave their own fine, silken thread’ (25). By obtaining knowledge of the ‘inner social logic’ of culture—that is, by suspiciously dissecting society—the Company helps other companies, as U. puts it bluntly, ‘sell their product’ (25). The Company, then, does not aim solely at extracting and obtaining knowledge of society, but in using that knowledge to *sell* a product—or an ideology—it also intervenes in the functioning of said society. Corporate anthropology, then, analyses and transforms its object of study, however, the intervention is not physical—the company does not create publicity for a brand, nor does it visually modify the city—instead, the Company provides ‘concepts’ (50). As a corporate anthropologist, then, U. contributes to a grand-scale operation of manipulating and guiding people’s opinions and behaviours to achieve profitable results—either on an economic level or on the level of public influence. In this case, suspicion, once the methodological tool of anthropology, sells itself to the highest bidder—and helps the bidder sell its product.

U. explains the importance of his method, as inherited from Bronislaw Malinowski: ‘You never know (he reasoned) what will turn out to be important’, therefore, he believes, one should ‘capture it all, turn it *all* into data’ (86). He faithfully repeats Malinowski’s ‘First Commandment’: ‘Write Everything Down’(86). The anthropologist-writer, then, embodies the ultimate obsession with suspicion, with reading and analysing reality, his fixation consisting of finding meaning in everything and not letting any information be unaccounted for. In line with other suspicious characters discussed, U. looks at reality suspiciously and *reads* it as if it were a text, trying to find, as McCarthy explained, ‘a codex or a moment that would make sense of everything’ and materialising the idea that ‘nothing’ can stand ‘outside’ of the ‘general system of legibility and mark-making’.[[459]](#footnote-459) For U., like for Lévi-Strauss, ‘even landscape seemed to… withhold in its layers and strata, some kind of infrastructural master-meaning’ (36). As the anthropologist’s aspirations to find meaning are given an aura of scientific impartiality, the novel displays too how, as Clifford explained, the ‘“method” of participant-observation’ is not impartial, and filtered ‘personal experiences’ of the anthropologist through rhetorical conventions of ‘impersonal standards of observation and “objective” distance’.[[460]](#footnote-460) Indeed, U. does not put distance between himself and his job, but admits being ‘bewitched’ by suspicion: ‘Master-meaning!’, he exclaims, ‘Concealed revealment!’ (36).

Like Nabokov’s referential maniac, U. finds meaning—signals—everywhere, and he earns a living by embodying what, according to Timothy Bewes, was Ricœur’s belief that ‘we are always interpreting’.[[461]](#footnote-461) U.’s *professional* suspicion involves dealing with ‘[s]tructures of kinship; systems of exchange, barter and gift; symbolic operations lurking on the flipside of the habitual and the banal: identifying these, prising them out and holding them up, kicking and wriggling, to the light’ (15). By speaking of his objects of study—the structures, the symbolic operations—as ‘lurking’ underneath, below the surface, U. conceives such objects as hidden from the habitual sight, as part of the depth which suspicion has traditionally been commanded to uncover. U.’s suspicion, then, holds onto ‘reading against the grain’, an expression coined by Walter Benjamin which, as Bewes explained in ‘Reading with the Grain’ (2010), became the norm in criticism.[[462]](#footnote-462) Indeed, U. reads and suspects *against* something, as he finds opposition in the structures and patterns he examines, structures which do not wait passively to be uncovered and revealed, but resist being analysed and reject the interpretation that provides them with significance. By ‘identifying’ pieces of information U. is cataloguing and interpreting, determining what their function is; however, in stating that he is ‘prising them out’ and ‘holding them up… to the light’, he admits having to go *against* them, using force and employing some sort of imposition. The structures, systems, and operations which U. seeks to interpret and provide meaning to, indeed, seem to resist his work, for they ‘kick’ and ‘wriggle’—two metaphorical verbs which suggest that U. needs to *impose* his suspicion in order to give meaning to them, and meet the demands of the Company.

In the ‘Great Report’, his most important project for the Company, U. is commissioned to ‘*name* what’s taking place right now’ (72). Usually, the Company exploits the idea of the *future*, an idea which conditions, in U.’s words, ‘our entire social organism—its economy, its social policy, its civil order’ (104). The company investigates and manipulates society by ‘using the Future to confer the seal of truth’ on their reports and findings, on their paradigms, ‘making them absolute and objective *by* placing them within this Future’ (104-5). However, the present’s undefinition makes the Great Report a difficult task; for rather than ‘something that was either to-come or completed, in-the-past’, U. explains, the present ‘would all be now’ (90). U. is conflicted with how to define and engage with ‘the contemporary’—a synonym he uses for ‘the present’—which he considers ‘suspect’ (115). The contemporary has been at the centre of the work of anthropologists such as Paul Rabinow, who, in *Marking Time* (2007), outlined an ‘anthropology of the contemporary’ and pointed to the complexity of ‘inquir[ing] into what is taking place without deducing it beforehand’.[[463]](#footnote-463) For Rabinow, in order to grasp the contemporary the anthropologist must, as U. does, engage in ‘sustained research, patience, and new concepts, or modified old ones’.[[464]](#footnote-464) Indeed, the unattainable nature of the events which are happening as U. is working could also influence his perception of his material of study as difficult to contain, as ‘wriggling and kicking’, for his work as an anthropologist—suspiciously observing, analysing, and finding meaning—always entails a late arrival to what is happening.

Being an analyst of his own time and place, U. wonders, ‘how could life *as lived* become transmogrified from filed-work into work, *the* Work?’ (91). Doing his research for the Great Report, U. finds the present to be ‘slipping backwards into past’ and states that ‘what we require is not contemporary anthropology but rather an anthropology *of* The Contemporary’ (116). In this type of anthropology, the anthropologist must be always on the go, always on the lookout, in order to be contemporary to their own object of study—the *contemporary* itself. For this anthropologist, suspicion cannot be put to rest. At the same time as the anthropologist becomes an analyser of their own times, they also analyse what is close to them, spatially and culturally. In the twenty-first century, McCarthy claimed, ‘[t]he tribe is us’, since ‘[f]or decades now, the distinction’ that was assumed to exist in 20th century anthropology between “field” and “home” has imploded’.[[465]](#footnote-465) It is precisely because of this lack of boundaries between the anthropologist and the object of study, that the Company needs the Great Report. As Peyman explains it, since ‘we’re the natives’—that is, the Company—the Great Report is ‘all the more necessary’ (71). In other words, the commissioner of the Great Report, the Company, is the same entity that needs to be reported. If the distance between U. as the suspector—and as part of the Company—and the suspected object—society, of which U. is a part of—is non-existent, at what point does suspicion exhaust itself? U. does not seem to get tired of it, he constantly finds a ‘situation’ that, he explains, ‘would catch my eye, pique my fancy, and I’d start investigating it’, an activity which prompts him to compare himself to a ‘detective’, a ‘cat-burglar’ or a ‘quick-change-artist con-man’ (40-1). The anthropologist, then, is added to a wider group of suspicious characters whose mode of existence is that of suspicion, who, as I have explored in previous chapters, repeat a pattern of suspicion in their behaviour and in their characterisation—either suspecting or suspiciously avoiding others’ suspicion.

As U. works on the Great Report, his heightened self-awareness, his suspicion of suspicion, generates a deeply entangled relationship with his object of study and provokes, as U. explains, a ‘constant shifting of identities’ which entails a loss ‘in a kaleidoscope of masquerades, roles, general make-believe’, a constant state of wariness and of heightened perception (28). The doubleness of suspicion—of suspecting and being suspected—, then, works inwardly, in a spiral, as U. suspects and is suspected *by himself*, not as a characteristic of U.’s personality or interests but as the professionalisation of suspicion. Furthermore, like other suspicious characters, U. is aware of being suspicious, and, in his case, he expresses this awareness in an explicit manner: reflecting on it and intensifying it when suspicion is directed towards himself. As the novel progresses, we realise that suspicion becomes an almost incontrollable force, one that U. cannot switch off nor put aside, and even when he is not actively working—this is, observing and gathering data—he is always suspicious of his surroundings and of himself. While he is in his office, in the basement of the company’s building, he thinks he sees—‘moving in ripples on the surface of a long-cold coffee cup or in the close-up choreography of dust flecks’—the ultimate meaning: ‘the plan, formula, solution—not only to the problem which I was currently grappling, but to it *all*, the whole caboodle’ (18-9).

U., in other words, does not reserve his suspicious methodology for his working hours. Instead, he is constantly looking for signals to intercept and decipher. Such a deep commitment to his work is directly inherited from Lévi-Strauss too and introduces the nuance of mental illness into the anthropologist’s obsessive interpretation of reality. Alone, the anthropologist may become a sufferer of Nabokov’s referential mania, such as Lévi-Strauss who, U. recalls, could be ‘spending months on end’ among a tribe without ‘prospect of escape in sight’, and was ‘bored out of his skull and starting to fall prey to what he later called a “mental disorder” than can afflict anthropologists’ (143). As U. explains, in his work, Lévi-Strauss constantly tried to find a balance between ‘understanding so completely that an object’s robbed of its allure’—becoming too familiar, without needing interpretation—and ‘not understanding anything at all’—becoming too strange, without possible interpretation (101). However, what if the anthropologist does not achieve a balance that ‘is just *right*’? (101). Could it be, then, that suspicion implodes in its self-destructiveness? If, as Ricœur believed, ‘we are always interpreting’ for Bewes that means ‘we are never interpreting’.[[466]](#footnote-466) To be constantly on the lookout, wary, and suspicious, to find meaning in everything, can result in nothing having a *particular* significance, in no conclusion being reached, in the Great Report, perhaps, leading to suspicion for suspicion’s sake.

## The Noblest Savages of All

U.’s characterisation is mostly ascribed to his suspicion and his work at the Company. As a *flat* character—the reader does not know much about his feelings or emotions—what is known about him has to do with his compilation and reporting, with his dossiers and his aim to reproduce the reality he examines. U.’s name itself points to the reader: it sounds like ‘you’, and being a mere ‘abbreviation’, in McCarthy’s words, U. is devoid of ‘depth and all that stuff you don’t want’.[[467]](#footnote-467) The construction of the character, however, is as much as a question of form as it is of argument. U.’s rather flat characterisation evokes his flat personality and his suspicious existence as a dedicated and full-time worker with no time for exploring life in a non-productive manner. If he has a sense of belonging in, and especially *to*, the Company it is because the Company does not acknowledge its workers’ individuality and claims that the ‘concepts’ it sells are ‘all generated in-house and collectively’ (50). Who responds, however, for the Company’s achievements? Who takes the credit for its inventions? Such a role is played by Peyman, the ‘public face and poster-boy’, in charge of putting the Company’s work out in the world by ‘launch[ing]’ the concepts ‘into circulation’, turning the knowledge obtained and produced into ‘stuff’ that ‘might actually *happen*’ (50-1). Although a variety of fields and disciplines are involved in the Company, U. explains that Peyman himself ‘had named or invented’ certain ‘tendencies’, what he called ‘Peymanic paradigms and inclinations, movements and precipitations’ (52). Peyman appears as one of those characters recognised as *inventors*, creators, who are socially perceived as such, who obtain the recognition the other workers do not.

Although U. seemingly works in the shadow of Peyman, as an indistinguishable piece in the collective of the Company, he believes in the importance of his work and of his role within the corporation. It is because the Company does not only retrieve meaning from the world to report on it, but, also, puts it out there, that U. can feel pride for the corporation’s societal reach. ‘While my supposed business, my “official” function, as a corporate ethnographer’, U. explains, ‘was to garner meaning from all types of situations… I sometimes allowed myself to think that, in fact, things were precisely the other way round: that my job was to put meaning *in* the world, not take it from it’ (38).In his fascination with suspicion, U. believes his work to be crucial not only to the company he works for but for society. He thinks that ‘[t]he world functioned each day, because I’d put meaning back into it’ and that ‘if I’d stopped, you’d soon have known it’ (40). His work, he believes, is crucial for the ‘well-being’ and ‘even survival’ of the ‘populace-at-large’, for without his dedication to putting meaning into the objects he studies, such objects would simply not exist, they would not be perceived (39).

U.’s pride and rather naïve optimism are soon overridden by the capitalism which rules the Company and which the Company purports onto the world. However, in constructing a novel from within suspicion and about suspicion, McCarthy cannot but provide too the necessary contradictions to suggest the possibility of escaping corporativism. As *Satin Island* constructs a world which functions under corporate capitalism, the novel perfectly embodies Georg Lukács’ concepts of commodity and reification, as he inherited them from Marxism and developed in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Lukács defined the ‘commodity-structure’ in capitalism as ‘a relation between people’ which ‘takes on the character of a thing’ and which consequentially obtains a ‘phantom objectivity’.[[468]](#footnote-468) His use of the word ‘phantom’, a spectre-like quality, emphasises the untraceable and hidden nature of the commodity’s ‘fundamental nature’, that is, ‘the relation between people’ which originates it.[[469]](#footnote-469) As yet another suspicious hermeneut, and as a reader of Marx, Lukács theorised a division between what can be seen and what is hidden. Alongside the metaphor of the phantom, Lukács conceived a ‘veil of reification’ through which it is ‘increasingly difficult and rare’ to be able to look when the commodity structure is dominant—as it has been since modern capitalism.[[470]](#footnote-470) In ‘*History and Class Consciousness* 2.0’ (2021), Christian Fuchs contextualised the concept of commodity in the digital age, establishing a connection between Lukács work and recent theorisations of capitalism which also illuminates McCarthy’s portrayal of corporativism. Fuchs emphasised the duality between what is hidden and what can be seen, as he explained that the ‘thing-status of the commodity’ as well as of ‘money’ hide the ‘underpinning class relations’ involved in the system.[[471]](#footnote-471) The necessary step towards solving the problem of reification—of considering social relations as objective and rational things—would be, then, that of suspicion: an enlightening and de-alienating suspicion that uncovers that which reification hides. As commodities are ‘social things whose qualities’ are simultaneously ‘perceptible and imperceptible by the senses’, Lukács sought to make them fully perceptible, fully seen beyond the veil which covers them to understand them not as objects but within their social relations and human quality.[[472]](#footnote-472)

Although he has the methodological tools to uncover the commodity logic underpinning his work, U. also suffers its consequences—he exemplifies ‘the ‘free’ worker’ who can ‘take his labour-power to market and offer it for sale’—while he perpetrates it—his work consisting of ideologically sustaining the capitalistic system by working for the Company. As Matthew J. Smetona explained, ‘the commodity-form obscures the process by which the social relation of capital is itself reproduced through the very act of production’.[[473]](#footnote-473) It is the active sense of the verb ‘to obscure’ that shows how there is intentionality in *veiling* such processes, its phantom nature being sought after. U. writes about ‘spectral presences’ which ‘lent a background radiance, a promise of significance, to everything I did’, giving his ghosts a more abstract quality, which enhances, precisely, the phantom-like quality of the Company (73). When describing his office, U. states it is ‘not only a place of business but, beyond that, a hermetic zone, a zone of alchemy, a crucible in which whole worlds were in the mix’ (17). In selling his research and reports to the Company—who then sells them to its clients—U.’s activity as a corporate anthropologist does not, as I have argued, comply with a romanticised version of anthropology—that of ground-breaking discovery associated, for example, to U.’s hero, Lévi-Strauss—but it actively hides how the whole structure of society is conformed and oriented towards the interest of capital and private profit. U. is like the ‘journalists, consultants and others who serve’ the interests of the capital by, as Fuchs put it, ‘justifying capitalistic interests in their writings’ and who ‘are just like managers part of the ruling class’.[[474]](#footnote-474) As a qualified professional *suspector*, U. is an ‘individual’, in Lukács words, who ‘can use’ the relevant ‘knowledge of these laws’ for their own ‘advantage’ while not being ‘able to modify the process’.[[475]](#footnote-475) In other words, U.’s suspicion must be executed as part of his professional duties, and it can also be used against the system—suspecting, for example, the social benefit of the Company’s endeavours—but he cannot resist such a system.

In the novel, anthropology’s involvement and collaboration with private companies is further complicated and much advanced, beyond the early entanglement between the two. The Company does not necessarily want to become anthropology’s object of study to understand its own structure and its products, but instead puts the focus on society to make it more vulnerable to its influence—an influence which may take on many different shapes, depending on the Company’s client. The evolution of anthropology within the corporative world could be inscribed, then, within what Fuchs considered a colonisation of the ‘social sciences and humanities’ by ‘computer science and business studies’, which eliminate ‘critical thinking and critical theory’, something which U. experiences in his own career.[[476]](#footnote-476) U. remembers his first work for the Company, ‘a dossier on jeans’ for Levi Strauss, ‘assessing the subtle-code spectrum of turn-ups, buttons, zips, creases’ and ‘generally breaking down’ the company’s jeans (36-7). Indeed, as a corporate ethnographer U. has to ‘capture it all’ and ‘turn it all into data’, and his work reaches as far as his reporting (86). The knowledge he is supposed to extract from his suspicious observation is not demanded of him, for the company merely wants information—the more the better—to sell products and intervene in a society which is dissected and analysed (86). In capturing it *all*, then, the Company’s ethos is that of the capitalistic logic of ‘accumulation’—not just of ‘money’ but also of ‘decision-power and definition-power’—and the information gathered by the Company’s workers becomes reified when sold to the customers as a commodity, exchanged as a product for a monetary sum.[[477]](#footnote-477)

Reification does not emerge out of the Company’s work as an inevitable consequence of capitalism, but it is the central outcome of its work, it is the service that they sell: they turn the complexity and openness of any aspect of society into a digestible, apprehensible, and sellable report. Advancing ‘big data positivism’s quantitative methodology’, the Company’s report-making, ‘disregards the qualitative aspects of the analysis of society, such as ethics, morals, critique, theory, emotions, aﬀects, motivations, worldviews, interpretations, political assessments, power, social struggles, or contradictions’, as Fuchs put it.[[478]](#footnote-478) In the simplification of information, by keeping hidden complexities, and neutralising any political implications and any possible calls for change, the Company’s reports acquire the phantom quality of reification and thus strengthen the dominating capitalist model and the Company’s influential power. The Company expands and weaves its influence and its threads with a purpose of expansion, of wide domination of the public opinion and behavioural patterns, and thus needs, as U. explains, ‘people who’d trained as economists, philosophers, mathematicians, architects and who knows what else’, as much as anthropologists (50). The Company, thus, values knowledge to exert control, subjecting once revolutionary suspicion and enlightening disciplines to profit. Reverting the opposition between anthropologist and savage—once widely exploited by anthropology and part of the ideological foundations of colonialism—Peyman speaks of the Company as being constituted by ‘the noblest savages of all’, seemingly aware that, although they have become the commissioners of anthropological studies, societal analyses must involve them too (72).

When U. explains with pride how he is ‘putting meaning into the world’—and not only reporting on it—he reveals that he is introducing ideology into society, an ideology, of course, promoted and sustained by the Company. Although the details of the reports that the Company provides to its clients are never mentioned, its ultimate role in society is one of ideological domination. The Company’s product matches Fuchs’ description of the ‘labour of producing ideology’, which is conducted by ‘managers, consultants, bourgeois scientists, intellectuals and journalists’, all of which are types of workers in the Company.[[479]](#footnote-479) Although suspicion is a key modus operandi of the Company—as U.’s work demonstrates—its logic of uncovering cannot be used against itself. The Company resists being revealed as an evil force by being inconsistent, by expanding its influence onto every realm of society and by rejecting altogether the need to be hidden. The Company’s dominance, U. explains to the reader, is not a ‘secret’, for ‘[t]hings like that don’t need to be’, they, instead, ‘creep under the radar by being boring’ as well as ‘complex’ (15). Although the ‘laws’ of reification can be, as Lukács put it, ‘gradually discovered’ and, thus resisted through Marxist suspicion, they also appear as ‘invisible forces that generate their own power’.[[480]](#footnote-480) The Company employs suspicion to manipulate and dominate society at the same time that it resists political suspicion by acquiring a phantom-like nature.

Part of the Company’s lack of definition has to do with the way it is described, with an inconsistent and sometimes incoherent metaphorical vocabulary. ‘Forget universities!’, Peyman states, ‘*Real* businesses’ are ‘the foundry where true knowledge is being smelted, cast and hammered out’ (71). From this sculptural metaphor, Peyman goes on to express his enthusiasm about the contemporary with geological and geographical metaphors: the contemporary involves ‘[s]hifting tectonics, new islands and continents forming’ for which a ‘brand-new navigation manual’ is needed (71). The structure of the Company is also referred to in religious terms. According to U., one shall ‘[f]orget family, or ethnic and religious groupings’, for ‘corporations have supplanted all these as the primary structure of the modern tribe’ (48). In a secular capitalist society, the corporation occupies the space left by religion, having ‘its gods, its fetishes, its high priests and outcasts’, as well as ‘its rituals, beliefs and superstitions’ (48-9). Within this structure, Peyman occupies the highest position in the hierarchy, being at the same time its most public face and a detached and distanced figure, who ‘secluded himself’, maintaining the mysticism and exceptionality associated with ecclesiastic figures (53). Peyman also makes use of religion to discuss the scope of the work which the Company undertakes and speaking of its logo he describes it as a ‘giant, crumbling tower’, the tower of Babel, which prompts him to say that the biblical ‘myth’, often told as a parable of ‘man’s hubris’ and arrogance, ‘has been misunderstood’ (54). For Peyman, the key to the myth can be found in the lasting presence of the tower once its ‘occupants are scattered about the earth’, in its ‘uselessness’ (54). When briefing U. about his work on the Great Report, Peyman employs religious terminology again, almost asking U. to create a Bible of sorts, ‘The Document’, as Peyman describes it, ‘the Book. The First and Last Word on our age’ which cannot be ‘just *a* book’ but ‘*the* fucking *Book*’ (70). The inconsistencies of Peyman’s use of metaphors are, however, not inconsistent with the way U. portrays the work and the functioning of the Company: they align with the idea of proposing constant narratives in an expansive fashion, constant stories and constructs which will explain or create concepts, paradigms. The Company’s aim to dominate, assimilate and introduce their paradigms in society, needs an expansive and attractive, but not necessarily coherent, discourse.

Throughout the novel, the undefined limits of the company’s work intensify, especially when its goals become more abstract. U. explains how, if Peyman ‘appeared in everything’, that ‘is the same as disappearing’ (52). Disappearing, however, is a searched-for consequence of the Company’s work, rather than a failure or something that must be overcome, for the Company is not successful despite its ghostly nature—the difficulty to define its influence—but because of it. In line with the ambition of becoming ultimately invisible, phantom-like, and, thus, extremely influential—precisely because society does not realise it is being influenced in the first place—U. is tasked with writing the Great Report, a project so wide and undefined that, he does not know how to approach it, and which he can only describe as a project which is ‘finding its form’ (32). Furthermore, neither he nor the reader can become fully aware of its intended results. This sets the directionality of the novel’s plot towards the completion of such a Report and prompts the reader to wonder whether its completion will serve as the conclusion or end of the novel, whether the intended result of his methodological suspicion is the finalised work, ‘*the* fucking *Book*’ which Peyman demands (70). As U. seeks to encapsulate the object of his study within the report, he becomes involved in the search for a shape, for the *form* necessary to undertake such a project.

## Faceless and Compound as Oil

As a professional suspicious observer, U. not only analyses and reports but becomes fascinated with writing and giving form to his findings. While waiting for his flight at an airport, he becomes fascinated with an oil spill which is reported in the newspapers and shown on television, particularly with how the spill is portrayed in media and how the people around him watch it on screens across the airport lounge. As he reads the news on his laptop and carefully looks at the pictures, he cannot stop himself from participating in the reporting and, as a writer would do, creates his own metaphors. He describes the ‘sequence of photos showing tugs, oil-covered men wrestling with grips and winches, those black-ringed outlying islands, the giant oil-flower and so forth’, uniting antithetical ideas and aiming at a conjunction of nature and artifice (10). After comparing the oil spill to a flower, U. writes about those trying to contain the spill as ‘demoralized, tug-mounted cowboys’ who are unable to stop the movement of ‘black cattle’ which, ‘through sheer mass and volume, had mutinied, stampeded and grown uncontrollable’ (11). Although seemingly unconnected, U.’s choice of metaphors dissolves the opposition between the natural element—the sea—and its contaminator—the oil—and emphasises his interest not in the environmental disaster, but in how it can be *told*. The flower, a seemingly innocent and delicate motif of nature contrasts with the destruction and the size of the oil spill, as the cattle image merges the animals and the oil in their uncontrollable force. Referring to the ‘flow of water-borne oil’, U. gives an image of the spill coming from within the sea (11). U. also appreciates the editorial choices of the online newspaper: the ‘“fade” effect to link the shots together’ contrasts with the ‘abrupt type of succession that recalls old slideshow carousels’ (10).

The portrayals of the oil spill in online newspapers and television show that ‘the aesthetic strategies that render data visual are always affectively dense’, as Heather Houser argued in *Infowhelm* (2020). [[481]](#footnote-481) The attitude of the reporter and observer towards the image always mediates the image through such an affected portrayal, either rendering the spill as a tragedy or as a prompt for philosophical thought. All the ways in which the oil spill is reported or talked about represent precisely the ‘environmental and biomedical dilemmas’ which Houser explained as ‘problems of literary forms’.[[482]](#footnote-482) U. is examining such ‘[c]limate visualizations’, by paying ‘[c]lose attention to their aesthetic qualities’, those being, in Houser’s words, their ‘sophistication, color, perspective’ or ‘materialization’ and thus he is able to examine and report on how ‘data becomes experiential’.[[483]](#footnote-483) Regardless of the way in which the oil spill is treated, analysed, suspected upon or portrayed, and regardless of who engages with it—for example, in Houser’s words, ‘data visualizers, climate consultants, novelists’ or ‘science writers’—each ‘epistemology’ which deals with it is ‘deeply aesthetic’.[[484]](#footnote-484) U. is conscious of the fact that he can only *talk about* the oil spill, that the oil spill itself is not perceptible without a frame which interprets it, for example, as an ‘ecological catastrophe, or an indictment of industrial society’, as ‘a parable of mankind’s hubris’ or even as a ‘demonstration of chemical propensities’—interpretations which, for U., possess a narrative story-like characteristic, as ‘dramas’ (129). U. is aware of the possible criticism he might face in his own treatment of oil spills and environmental disasters, and fantasising about a talk in which he could present his ideas, he would defend himself from the accusations of aestheticizing the oil spill by asking ‘*I’m* “aestheticizing” it?’ (133). The passenger in the airport, U. states, had used ‘the term *tragedy*’ first, a clear aestheticising choice of words (133). If environmentalism is possible, U. believes, it must come from aesthetics, from an interest in the environment as information, as data; furthermore, if anyone is a ‘true environmentalist’—that is, ‘nature’s most honest intermediary’ and ‘loyaler servant’—that is the Company, ‘a collective man’ who is ‘faceless and compound as oil itself’ (134). Would it be possible, then, to determine who had ‘cast the first aesthetic stone’?, U. wonders (133). Would it be possible to report, to suspect, with no mediation of literary aesthetics?

As U. unpicks and judges the editorial choices of reports of the spill—he judges them as the ‘right effect to use, aesthetically speaking’—and creates metaphors to speak about it himself, he hints at his later concern, which will be at the centre of the novel’s plot, of the *form* of Great Report (10). If U. struggles to find a shape for the Great Report it is because its object is broad and undefined, thus its form, U. believes, should gather such undefinition and expansiveness. Although he tries to decide ‘which side of the paper’ the Great Report would ‘have been written on’—the ‘scientific, evidence-based’, or the artistic—he concludes that the Great Report is a ‘not-Report’, an ‘offslew of the real, unwritten manuscript’ which belongs ‘to the middle’ and ‘at whose outer limits, like to mirages, the others hover’ (144). U.’s professional suspicion—his unpicking of society—does not find a shape within which to be contained, thus he asks his boss, Peyman: ‘What do you want this Great Report to look like?… What form should it take?’ (72). Peyman, U. explains, ‘wanted something different and surprising; something bigger, more ambitious and, above all, *new*’ (87). When encountering the oil spill U. has felt compelled to metaphorise the image, to *word* it with a literary intent—albeit not coherently—, so as to *grasp* it and *put it down*. Could it be, then, that fiction could respond to his anxiety for form? Indeed, Peyman already conceives the Company’s product as ‘narrative’, a word he assimilates to ‘fiction’. In his own words: ‘What we (the Company, that is) essentially do, I’d choose not *consultancy* or *design* or *urban planning*, but *fiction*’ (55). Peyman goes further and defines ‘the city and the state’ as ‘fictional conditions’, and any ‘business’ as a ‘fictional entity’ which, ‘[e]ven if it’s real, it’s still a construct’ (55). As the novel advances, it becomes clearer to U. that the Great Report is no more than another one of those fictions, one he needs to turn into a *great* one.

In trying to understand what shape the report which will account for ‘the Now’ must take, U. finds that this search conditions his whole experience: ‘Frames, contexts, modes, tones, formats would suggest themselves’ and ‘would fall silent again, slink back into the crowd and disappear’ (73). The search for the shape of the Great Report intensifies a suspicious methodology which overtakes every one of his actions and thoughts and dominates his quest. Trying to figure out an answer for Peyman’s request—to do something beyond ‘writing-down’ and ‘field-note-taking’—U. appears more convinced that the ultimate problem is aesthetic, of representation, of finding a shape which cannot be conceived only in terms of anthropology as a science (87). The problem of finding a form for the Great Report has been hinted at in U.’s encounter with the oil spill. The ‘patterns’ he finds through suspicion are ‘co-related, parts of larger systems lying behind not just a single tribe but also the larger one of all humanity’, that is, the object of U.’s and the Company’s enterprise (35).

Suspicion does not lead U. into a sense of achievement, but rather, to paralysis. The epistemological richness that U. should possess due to his constant and persistent analysis of the world leads, instead, to a saturation of information. This saturation causes a feeling of pleasure when, within the whirlwind of obsessive suspicion, U. is allowed some intellectual stillness. For example, when in the office, his computer slows down due to faulty ‘bandwidth’ and, both referring to his own suspicious thinking as well as the laptop’s software, he states: ‘[t]here was too much information’ (83-4). This unintentional stillness, although frustrating for his colleagues—who he hears shouting ‘*Fucking buffering!*’—is pleasant for him, who enjoys the ‘long stretches staring at the little spinning circle’ on his screen (84). He, however, cannot help himself and within such stillness sees the buffering sign as a ‘bottomless and inexhaustible torrent’ which is able to process ‘data itself, its pure, unfiltered content’ and to ‘reorganize it into legible form’ (84). Although he first finds it ‘sublimely reassuring’, he then anxiously thinks of this buffering as too powerful, ‘nothing less than the skeleton, laid bare, of time and memory itself’ (85). Refusing to simply accept this, he realises that he is deeply entangled with the object of the Great Report, the Now, and that to engage with it he needs ‘experience to stay ahead’ of his ‘*consciousness* or experience’ (85).

In this consciousness U. finds the key elements to be able to fictionalise, to report through fiction, to ‘narrate’, as he states, ‘to others and ourselves’ (85). Contradicting criticism that he has become too detached from reality, he is aware that his suspicious narrative work ‘has to be fed with a constant, unsorted supply of fresh sensations and events’ (85). U.’s paralysis appears, then as a response to the fallibility of human suspicion—be it in the shape of analyses, reports or fictions—which becomes evident ‘when occurrences and situations don’t replenish themselves quickly enough for the awareness they sustain’ and ‘are devoured by a mouth too voracious’, the mouth of machinal suspicion which—much quicker than humans—swallows and processes data (86). U., then, is ‘stuck in limbo’, he becomes paralysed (86). As the novel advances, this difficulty in finding shape for the report shifts. Rather than being impossible, it is illegible: the Report may exist but cannot be read by him or any other human. U. becomes even more concerned with the fact that the Report ‘had *already been written*’ and presents the possibility of ‘a neutral and indifferent binary system’ that has already recorded all there is, all that exists, ‘some autho-alphaing and auto-omegating script’ (153). Furthermore, U. fears becoming the object of suspicion. He is threatened by being suspected by ‘a piece of software’ which allegedly could write the Great Report, becoming himself ‘no more than actions and commands within its key-chains’, becoming something to ‘be viewed, surveyed’ and ‘interpreted’ (153).

In not being able to pin down the object of the Report U., however, finds himself reporting on his own affective response to the impossible task, providing a detailed account of his ‘[p]aranoid thoughts’ and of the ‘anger’, as well as feelings of ‘stupidity, and sadness’ and a sort of ‘grief’ for the fact that the possibility of writing the Report—‘the fucking Book, that was to *name* our era’—is ‘gone’ (146-7). The wide scope of the Great Report makes U. ‘suspect’ that the project ‘was unplottable, unframeable, unrealizable’ regardless of the ‘medium or media’, making it, in other words, ‘*unwritable*’ (145). His approach to completing the Great Report takes him on a journey which makes him ‘exasperated’, especially when trying to find a way of *reporting* on the ‘social, anthropological and historical’ as well as literary ‘dynamics, processes and patterns’ which the project aims to cover (246). Although Peyman assures U. that the report ‘will find its shape’, U. starts wondering whether ‘rather than *it* finding its shape, the age itself, in all its shape-shifting and multi-channelled incarnations, were to find and mould it’ (87). However, the more U. deciphers and tries to *make* meaning, the harder he tries to do his work, the more unable he is to process information and the less productive he is. Suspicion becomes so extreme that it halts.

## Unplottable, Unframeable, Unrealizable

In his frustrating work on the Great Report, U. becomes more and more aware of the Company’s domination and starts seeing it as ‘downright evil’ (154). As the novel advances, U. increasingly develops doubts and even a rebellious attitude towards the quest of writing the Great Report, something which suggests a breakage in his loyalty to the Company and his eagerness to perform his job as a corporate anthropologist. U. is not able to point to ‘a particular aspect or effect’ nor to ‘a specific instigator or beneficiary’ of the Company, but he realises, it is its ‘very vagueness’ that makes the Company ‘nefarious and sinister and dangerous’ (154). As a capitalistic entity which is unmeasurable and undefinable, the Company appears as a phantom, in U.’s words, ‘[i]n not having a face, or even a body’ the Company has ‘enormous and far-reaching capabilities’ (154). Indeed, the Company’s ‘Project’ goes far beyond the reach of a private company which sells a product and its purpose could instead very much be the perpetuation of capitalism itself, as a ‘supra-governmental, supra-national, supra-everything—and infra-too’—entity (155). U.’s realisation is accompanied by the first hint of his refusal to continue working for the Company. Aware of the difficulty of fighting against an undefined danger, he realises he cannot ‘shape the Project’ but, instead, must ‘*un*shape it, sabotage it’ (155). The way to do this, he realises, is by ‘providing faulty data’, by ‘issuing erroneous interpretations’ (156). In his temptation to ‘turn Present-Tense Anthropology into an armed resistance’, U. suggests his temptation to turn his methodological suspicion into a resisting method too, one which escapes the Company’s ambitions (156).

Why does U. keep trying to find a *form* for the Great Report? Towards the end of the novel, U. has a ‘splendid dream’ in which he flies in a helicopter over the water, near an unidentified city (161). ‘Out in the harbour’, he explains, there is a ‘man-made’ island covered by ‘huge, derelict factories’ and, at its centre, a ‘trash-incinerating plant’, announced by the pilot ‘clearly and concisely’ as ‘*Satin Island*’ (162). Convinced that Satin Island will be key in his Great Report and might be the last possible answer to its unfathomability and illegibility, he goes to New York to find Staten Island, the city’s ‘forgotten borough’, a ‘great dump’ covered by ‘garbage mountains’ which closed in 2001 (165). While waiting for the ferry, he claims that ‘*these* images—the piles of rubbish, barges, seagulls—seemed to resist all incorporation into any useful or productive screed’, assimilating them to the vastness of the material he has dealt with in his project (167). In these final scenes, when U. is considering embarking the ferry, Staten Island works as the promised meaning which shall be obtained after a process of suspicion and analysis, as that which could prompt that ‘something would happen’ and ‘make sense’, ‘if not the whole caboodle’, U. insists, ‘at least *something*’ (204). U. appears interested in finding the form—albeit the form of something unachievable, *unframeable*—because he *enjoys* it. As the images of rubbish resist being productive, his suspicious endeavours escape the constraints of the Company, of corporate anthropology, and materialise in U.’s search for the literary form that will hold all the information together.

Throughout the novel, U. has experienced pleasure in his work. The dossiers that he puts together—‘scraps of paper stuck around my walls’ which have ‘lines connecting them and annotations, legible only’ to him—physically reflect his suspicious methods, and the process of putting them together appears organic, as if they were part of his natural thinking; in his own words, they ‘sprang up spontaneously, serendipitously, whimsically’ (40-1). U. describes the experience of finding an idea, ‘following its spore, seeing where it led’, as bringing him onto new ideas, eventually ‘assembling an inventory of all its guises and mutations’ (40-1). Although U. begins with a new dossier whenever he finds a new topic to study, and although he separates between work and personal dossiers, he is indeed employing the same methodology and processes to deal with his personal interests and with the duties assigned by the Company, which ultimately frames all he does. Sometimes, he explains, he finds explicit connections between both: ‘a whimsy-dossier’—that is, the ones he does for himself—‘would suddenly overlap with a client-one’ (41). It is then that the networks are established, ‘parities and conjunctions appearing’ and when the reader achieves a rare insight into U.’s feelings, ‘a sudden pang’, between pain, shock, and pleasure, and the hope that ‘*all* the various files would one day turn out to have been related all along’, that suspicion may have an end once an answer is reached, staying as a methodology and not persisting as a way of living (41-2).

As his passion for the process of suspecting is evident, once he is about to achieve what he believes to be the answer to the form of the Great Report, he is hesitant, paralysed once more. When he is about to take the ferry to Staten Island, he is not able: ‘at the last instant, I held back’, he states (212). While he has been working to find the answer to the Great Report—the image which will summon it all, which will reveal the nature of the condition of the Now—when he comes to the realisation that Staten Island might be part of the answer, he is not able to physically move forward towards it. He is only able to watch from the distance—‘I just stood there, watching’—but cannot produce anything from that observation, nor a report nor a conclusion (213). Although ‘[t]he thought struck me’, he states, ‘that I should be filming this scene on my phone’, he refuses to keep track of his observation and to ‘act on this thought’ (213). Having travelled to New York and being moments away from going to Staten Island, U. realises that there is no real point in going to the physical place which has inspired his dream about a Satin Island. As he explains after deciding not to get on the ferry, ‘[t]o go to Staten Island—*actually* go there—would have been profoundly meaningless’, but ‘[n]ot to go there was, of course, profoundly meaningless as well’ (212-3). U. becomes a mere observer, albeit still a suspicious one since he does not abandon the need to uncover meaning. Nonetheless he becomes distant from the corporation, as he is seemingly not actively reporting nor producing something to give back to the Company. As going or not going will have the same result U. feels ‘suspended between two types of meaningless’ (213). Yet, his meaningless becomes meaningful as he is, for the first time, choosing *not* to do his usual suspicious reporting.

The first possibility that arises to the question of the Great Report is that U. is, in fact, unshaping the Company’s efforts by not going to Staten Island, as he threatens to do when he realises it is an evil corporation. His paralysis could be, in this case, part of his rebellion or a cause of his fear that software-based intelligence can indeed write the Great Report, thus feeling defeated by technology. However, he insists on the image of Satin Island as a metaphor which can indeed be an answer to the Great Report, one which is not attainable by software but by human literary creation. Staten Island—or its oneiric version, Satin Island—cannot be achieved in a material sense, as an actual destination, for it even becomes difficult to look at, as he explains: ‘[t]he dazzle on the water now was all-consuming, overexposed, blinding’ (216). What remains is the idea of Satin Island, the literary image which condenses the metaphor through which U. sees the Now, a literary answer to the problem which haunts him throughout the novel. U. believes that ‘those words’—Satin Island—‘could form’ the Report, both ‘its title’ and ‘its content too’ as a ‘blotter sheet’, explicitly proposing the novel itself, the book which the reader holds, as the Great Report (169). We are therefore presented with two Great Reports, the one potentially written by the software, and the one which takes the form of the novel itself, of *Satin Island*. Beyond the fear of technology which might paralyse U., one possible answer to the Great Report may hold together the uncertainty, the inability to *know* and the pleasure of suspicion, all together in the literary form—one which appears as an alternative to the software’s report.

After not getting on the ferry, U. returns to New York, ‘past the growing stream of people, out of the terminal and back into the city’ (217). It is not entirely clear whether U. is walking back to the Company, nor whether he is going to give them anything resembling the Great Report. Proposing a novel as the answer to the problem of the form of the Great Report, it is possible that U. is going to offer *Satin Island* to the Company as the Great Report. As it becomes clear that there is no need for an actual encounter with Staten Island, having aestheticised it as a fictional Satin Island, the fact that the novel we are reading is U.’s own Great Report, prompts a jump out of the ontology of the novel—that is, U.’s world—into the physical book we hold, designed to contain images of blots of black ink, resembling the oil, as well as a series of possible labels for the book—'a treatise’, ‘an essay’, ‘a confession’, ‘a manifesto’, ‘a novel’, ‘a report’—all of them crossed out except, of course, the novel. Although we can see U.’s distance from the Company by the end, in his refusal to take pictures—thus to be productive—it is not entirely clear how much distance he is putting, for there is a possibility that the novel can be indeed offered to the Company as the product of his work. This makes us wonder whether, by creating a novel, U. is still complicit with the Company’s capitalistic enterprise, whether novelistic suspicion can be complicit or whether it has the potential to escape and refuse to participate in oppression. Once suspicion has been fed to the corporate machine, its transmutation into the literary form of a novel works to uncover and reveal the structures of domination which it once served, not in spite of participating from them but through its entanglement with that which seeks to contest.

However, once the novel is finished, the suspicious enterprise survives the book’s ending in the reader’s continued wondering. The relationship with the reader, indeed, is carefully crafted by McCarthy from the beginning. He introduces devices to attach the reader to U., who addresses the reader and argues that ‘the Project was important’ because ‘[i]t will have had direct effects on you’, and, furthermore, ‘there’s probably not a single area of your daily life that it hasn’t… touched on’ (14-5). U., as an anthropologist, undertakes reading and writing tasks and the reader becomes identified with him, prompted to participate in his work, to join him. The novel presents the dangerous apoliticism of capitalist suspicion while it calls to subject it to suspicion itself, decoding and interpreting it, exploiting the undefinition brought about by suspicion. By saying to the reader ‘*you* are—or could be—this character’, McCarthy prompts the reader to be wary, to be on the lookout, to read the novel suspiciously and retain such suspicion, as well as to believe in the novelistic political possibilities, if not to provide answers, at least to hold onto the potency of not fully knowing.

# 5

# GHOSTS OF DISCRIMINATIONS PAST

# Paul Beatty*, The Sellout* (2015)

## Raceless on the Surface

In a 2018 interview with *Literary Hub*, Paul Beatty denied claims that his 2015 novel *The Sellout*—which won the Man Booker prize in 2016—is a satire. He was suspicious of the relief the genre brings to the reader and critic, since, in his words, ‘[e]verybody’s very comfortable with saying: “Oh, you’re a satirist”’.[[485]](#footnote-485) Beatty claimed to be ‘surprised everyone keeps calling’ *The Sellout* ‘a comic novel’, not because there is no humour in the text but because the label seems to take over any other possible reading of it.[[486]](#footnote-486) Satire’s absurdity can veil the seriousness of the topic, allowing the reader to laugh at the jokes and move on, without meaningful political challenge. Why would *The Sellout* be read as a satire, then? As the novel employs satirical humour, one which, as Danielle Fuentes Morgan explained, ‘addresses the failures and limitations of its contemporary moment’, it also wonders rather anxiously what the stakes of such satirical humour are.[[487]](#footnote-487) Beatty’s concerns at such stakes are embodied when, towards the end of *The Sellout*, Me—the narrator and protagonist—watches a comedian—an ‘unpaid-electricity-bill dark’ man who looked like a ‘crazed bullfrog’ and a ‘traffic-court jester’—confronting his audience.[[488]](#footnote-488) This comedian’s humour is indeed a satirical one, as Me describes him, he ‘plucked out your subconscious and beat you silly with it, not until you were unrecognizable, but until you were recognizable’ (286). When a white couple enters the club and laughs ‘a pitch too high’, the comedian angrily reacts at them, shouting: ‘What the fuck are you interloping motherfuckers laughing at? Get the fuck out!’ (286-7). The audience has taken his jokes lightly, perhaps too comfortably, and right after the punchline, the comedian wants to take a step back and distance himself.

If the audience—the attendees of the club and the readers of *The Sellout*—is too comfortable, the novelist and the comedian are the ones who become visibly uncomfortable with their work, whose satirical political potential is a confrontational, albeit humorous, one. As the scene displays, satirical humour can work ‘to include others’ and ‘form an in-group of those with whom one already identifies’; however, it also works to ‘separate’, ‘as a juxtaposing tactic, from those with whom you do not identify’.[[489]](#footnote-489) The scene asks, then, what happens when those with whom the comedian does not identify, those who he is probably confronting with his jokes, do not interpret satire as such. What if, in other words, the audience cannot *read the room*? As Me explains, the white couple has daringly, albeit unconsciously, ‘joined the frivolity’, ‘snickered knowingly like they’d been black all their lives’ lacking the self-awareness that would have allowed them, like the ‘black folks and the roundtable of Latinas’, to know ‘when to stop laughing’, to know that the comedian is not identifying with them (286-7). If humour is meant to evidence uncomfortable, ‘subconscious’ truths, when the audience does not experience the intended mirror-like recognition and instead laughs with distant cheerfulness, the comedian cannot but intervene and make it clear: ‘This is our thing!’ (287). The comedian’s relationship with his audience—whom he cannot choose—prompts the novel to ask whether satirical humour can overcome political complacency and whether a joke can be derisive enough for it to be unquestionably challenging. Beatty’s own discomfort with the genre displays suspicion of satire’s political stakes, for, at the end of the day, no matter how derisive his novel intends to be, it could be read as *just a joke*.

This chapter explores how *The Sellout* subjects satire to the specific devices of novelistic suspicion to question the effectiveness of its political potency not despite but through its characteristic humour, which Beatty intensifies via suspicion. To do so, this chapter will explore the persistent tension between modes of suspecting and whether and how satire—mediated by suspicion—can take a political stance. As satire is crucial in this chapter, the following pages explore how satire’s inherently suspicious mode seeks the readers’ complicity while relying on distance to achieve its politically derisive effects. Satire in the novel is directed towards ‘ideologies’, in Fuentes Morgan’s words, ‘that render race essential and racism natural’.[[490]](#footnote-490) The possibility that satire, somehow, is not read as such, arises from the ‘presumption’, not the certainty, that ‘the audience is able to decode the authorial intent’ and ‘align’ with it.[[491]](#footnote-491) The possibility that the audience, the reader, does not *align* with the author, then, makes the novel prompt suspicion. *The Sellout* exerts suspicion towards a reader who, like the comedian’s audience, can laugh too loud, suspicion acting as a device for the novel to remain alert against a reader who is too comfortable with jokes which are not only meant to be funny but which directly and derisively denounce racism. Suspicion, however, not only creates a barrier around the novel, but simultaneously holds the reader attentive to injustice, beyond laughter, and makes such reader participate in its own suspicious endeavours: it allows the reader to participate in the question of how racism—which is both evident and hidden—should be tackled. Therefore, although Beatty ‘distributes blame incredibly widely’ and his novel seemingly attacks in all directions, as Elizabeth S. Anker noted, his novel also needs the complicity of the reader.[[492]](#footnote-492) Beatty attempts to do a ‘complete reevaluation of the world’, as, in the words of Henry Ivry, ‘his texts seem to critique just about everyone and everything’; however, he also makes the reader participate from the uncertainty about the novelistic forms needed to undertake such reevaluation.[[493]](#footnote-493)

In suspecting that his readers do not read *properly*, Beatty actively demands suspicion of them. Indeed,the novel’s constant negotiation with suspicion—how much is needed, and towards what objective—is also at the heart of criticism of Beatty’s novels. For example, proposing the term ‘transscalar critique’, Ivry described the writer’s ‘critical mode of inquiry’ as one which ‘thinks beyond the saturated common sense epistemes of race’ and allows to tackle ‘both the big and the small in the same breath’.[[494]](#footnote-494) For Ivry, Beatty’s work ‘combats’ the ‘hermeneutic myopia’ of ‘critical discourses that prioritize either the economic, the national, the biological, or the geologic’ and thus ‘read race through their own limited hermeneutic apparatus’.[[495]](#footnote-495) If Ivry praised Beatty’s wide examination of racism, for Gerald David Naughton the ‘fantasies of transcendence’ of race—the belief that in the US race does not matter anymore—were ‘inherently suspect’ in *The Sellout*.[[496]](#footnote-496) This chapter, then, argues that Beatty’s ability to tackle obvious and hidden, wide and particular, ‘entanglements’ of racism within culture and society—and thus ‘think about questions of ontology and planetary responsibility while not foregoing identity politics and literary critique’—rely on novelistic suspicion so as to be effective.[[497]](#footnote-497)

Conceiving satirical humour as a literary resource that can not only provide comfort but must violently *hit* the audience, Beatty maps his literary interests and intentions through the figurative image of the flinch: ‘I flinch a lot—people touch me, I flinch’, he explains, a metaphor which reflects his artistic intentions when writing *The Sellout*, where he ‘wanted to have this *long* flinch’.[[498]](#footnote-498) The reader, Beatty seems to say, should be wary of the novel’s suspicion, and thus ready to flinch, attentive to a diatribe which, like the comedian’s, directly addresses the audience. In this sense, the image of the flinch entrenches with Beatty’s interest in the dichotomy of ‘being comfortable and uncomfortable’ which acquires a political dimension in *The Sellout*: a too-comfortable reader is an unsuspicious one, who is unable to read and perceive properly.[[499]](#footnote-499) The novel, then, seeks to achieve a productive confrontation with the reader and the cultural system which exists within—and may be an accomplice of—white supremacy. Proposing suspicion as a novelistic mode, Beatty gives a turn to satire by ensuring that it is not harmless but, instead, violently hits the audience. Thus, the image of the flinch becomes crucial: his characters and readers can feel at ease while they must be ready to react to a threat. As a political gesture, the novel purports, being uncomfortable—ready to flinch—constitutes the necessary attitude of attentiveness towards injustice—an injustice which, as this chapter shows, can be hard to discern.

As *The Sellout* subjects satire to suspicion, it does not deactivate nor fully reject satire, nor it claims that it does not work as a political device. Rather, suspiciously wonders in what conditions such satire can take place so that it does not remain within apoliticism so that its humorous layer does not overshadow its politics. As the comedian character displays anxiety about the possibility of his jokes being taken too lightly by the white couple, he screams to them: ‘get the fuck out! This is our thing!’, to which Me wonders ‘[s]o what exactly is *our thing*?’ (288). The difficulty to answer a question like that is brought up earlier in the novel when Me wonders ‘Who am I? And how can I be that person?’ and struggles to find himself trapped in his circumstances, ‘a product of the environment, and nothing more’—that is, the son of a psychologist and the citizen of Dickens, a city near Los Angeles (40). When his father is murdered by the police and Dickens is erased from the map, Me ‘suddenly had no idea who [he] was and no clue how to become [him]self’, and buys a farm with the settlement payment he receives (40). After finding on a ‘clear South Central morning’ that ‘the signs that said WELCOME TO THE CITY OF DICKENS were gone’ he undertakes the task of getting back the city’s recognition (58). There is no mystery surrounding the disappearance of Dickens, for property speculation and segregation are evident: a ‘blatant conspiracy’ of ‘surrounding, increasingly affluent two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up’ has caused the city to disappear (57). Rather than becoming an activist or taking on the commitment of looking for justice in a direct way, Me works within ‘the inherent absurdity of race and racialization’ in which, according to Fuentes Morgan, satire revels: he brings back segregation—first segregating a bus, then a school.[[500]](#footnote-500) In this satirical plot, although the character seems ‘to do *nothing*’—nor the novel, which seemingly just ‘make[s] its audience laugh’—he manages to get his city officially back on the map.[[501]](#footnote-501)

Although absurd, bringing back segregation appears to be an effective solution to the problem Me faces in the novel. Me recalls thinking, as a child, that ‘America’s problems would be solved’ with a ‘motto’, which had to be, ‘like the best of African-American folklore and hairstyles… simple yet profound’ (10). As an adult, his solution to the disappearance of Dickens emulates such deep simplicity which in its absurdity is, nonetheless, effective in highlighting that his town has effectively been erased from the maps. In thinking how such erasure can be counteracted, Me reasons that Black Americans are ‘an entire race that was raceless on the surface’, that is, that they are racialised while they participate in a world which increasingly claims that such racialisation is no longer happening (10). Indeed, following what Fuentes Morgan saw as characteristic of satire, the ‘*absurdity*’ of the novel is not just Me’s call to bring back segregation, but precisely that of ‘both the reality of racialization and the mythology of a “post-racial” that suggests that race is now irrelevant’.[[502]](#footnote-502) Indeed, Me’s project of segregation proves to be fruitful, as by the end of the novel he is able to see his town on the news’ weather report. Once ‘Dickens is back on the map’, he ‘can’t stop crying’ (284). However, Me is taken to trial, for, as the judge admits, by ‘attempting to restore his community through reintroducing… segregation and slavery’, Me has ‘pointed out a fundamental flaw in how we as Americans claim we see equality’ (265-6). In Me’s own words, he is judged for having ‘whispered “Racism” in a post-racial world’, interrupting racelessness’ silence with his loud and polemic recovery of segregation (264).

The novel’s satirical nature uncovers the subtleties of ‘color-blind racism’—which I will come to discuss more extensively later in the chapter—as it also evidences how palpable racism remains. However, the novel puts at play more than mere satire, as suspicion arises as a differentiated strategy, one which does not contradict satire but seeks to assure the efficacy of its political commentary. While comedy, according to Fuentes Morgan, ‘accepts the rules of the social game’, satire functions by ‘subverting those rules’ and ‘disrupting social expectations’.[[503]](#footnote-503) Satire, however, Beatty fears, cannot escape the nature of the ‘joke’, one which although is fit for survival, is also a cause of anxiety due to its ‘plausible deniability’ of being ‘just jokes’—a plausible deniability which although is a ‘form of protection’, also tunes down satire’s effectiveness to be confrontational.[[504]](#footnote-504) As satire can show ‘the connection between laughter and ethical beliefs’, it also may *not* show it, it may be taken as merely comedic and, thus, harmless.[[505]](#footnote-505) It is the fact that satire ‘*might* let’ the satirist’s ‘intention be received by the audience’ that concerns Beatty and that angers the comedian whose scene concludes the novel.[[506]](#footnote-506) Satire’s intrinsic ‘veiled temporality, obscured historicity, and denounced centrality of meaning’ is not sought after in *The Sellout*, which, as this chapter continues to show, puts its intentions out there.[[507]](#footnote-507) By adding novelistic suspicion to satire, the novel intensifies the political attempts of satire as well as expresses doubts in regards to its efficacy: sometimes satire may look too much like ‘*just* a joke’.[[508]](#footnote-508)

*The Sellout* displays Beatty’s own anxiety at being read *right*, an anxiety which takes the form of a suspicion which works to keep the reader close to the text and the text close to the reader. Such an anxiety to be read as intended sparks the conversation around authorial responsibility and power, particularly in regards to the Barthesian death of the author—as discussed in previous chapters—which, in this context, creates a dangerous uncertainty: that of the politics of a text erased and ignored. In the case of Beatty, such anxiety is entrenched in his use of humour, which has political potential but which if not directed properly risks appearing innocuous and apolitical. In this sense, it is worth paying attention to how the author’s intentional use of humour can rely on the idea of closeness to his audience. As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai affirmed, comedy ‘as both an aesthetic mode and a form of life’ can be the source of ‘anxiety’ in ‘risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure’.[[509]](#footnote-509) Although thinking around humour and comedy has usually focused on ‘detachment’ and distance, humour in novelistic suspicion shows that ‘proximity deserves particular attention’, as Berlant and Ngai proposed.[[510]](#footnote-510) Precisely because of the difficulty of establishing borders between the serious and the funny, the appropriate and inappropriate, novelistic suspicion exploits that, in humour, ‘things are always closer to each other than they appear’.[[511]](#footnote-511) If Beatty and the comedian change from trying to be funny to censoring laughter it is because ‘the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it’, because the white couple have laughed inappropriately.[[512]](#footnote-512) It is the impossibility to ‘determine in advance how comedic freedom will travel’ which makes Beatty suspicious of satire and the comedian angry at an audience that he needs but which, nonetheless, he cannot control.[[513]](#footnote-513) As the novel examines satire, it wonders how laughter can make the audience not comfortably dormant but uncomfortably attentive.

Interested in racism’s workings as both a hidden societal system as well as one which functions out in the open, Beatty’s use of suspicion to construct his novel transcends current metacritical discussions which differentiate between depth interpretation and Best and Marcus’ ‘surface reading’.[[514]](#footnote-514) While suspicious interpretation works by uncovering, surface reading entails an empirical position towards the object, rather than an interpretative one. However, the novel does not hold onto one or the other, for, on the one hand, acknowledging the ways in which racism is evident—such as in institutional or police violence against Black Americans—appears as a political stance against those who claim discrimination is no longer due to race but rather, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argued, a ‘product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations’.[[515]](#footnote-515) On the other hand, if, as Me states, Black Americans are ‘an entire race’ which is ‘raceless on the surface’ and we know racelessness is a fallacy, reading surfaces will lead to incomplete and damaging conclusions. The novel’s acknowledgement that racism functions in a duality of openness and covertness must be a suspicious one, which demands the reader to be alert. Though suspicion has been often touted in contemporary America as the bastion of the far-right—of post-truth and relativism—Beatty shows how suspicion can work to debunk myths surrounding the contemporary idea of a post-racial era in the US. Suspicion does not exist for its own sake but as the guarantor that racism will remain closely examined and loudly denounced. Beatty, then, negotiates suspicion and trust to perform, as Anker put it, an ‘exposé of racism as an overarching structure’ with ‘sweeping interconnections’, that is, to emphasise the needed tension between reading suspiciously and reading that which is evident.[[516]](#footnote-516)

In what seems an uncertain methodological position—that of suspecting and trusting, at the risk of being too wary and too naïve at the same time—the reader can find, nonetheless, a clear ideological position. Such an ideological position, I propose, has to do with the image of the flinch which for Beatty was crucial in conceiving his novel and which serves him as the metaphor which conveys what he wished the reading of his novel would be. As the flinch is a movement to avoid danger, one which we do when we *suspect* such danger might come, Beatty not only wants the reader to flinch—to be uncomfortable and attentive to the danger of racism which might arise—but also wants the novel to be suspicious and alert of its own satirical form.

## Dragging All of Black America Down

As a true indicator that suspicion is at work, *The Sellout* begins with a call to the reader to not be suspicious: although it ‘may be hard to believe, coming from a black man’, Me asks the reader to trust that he has ‘never stolen anything’ (3). He lists all the illegal things he could have done but has not—‘cheated on’ his ‘taxes or cards’, ‘snuck into the movies’, ‘failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier’, ‘burgled a house’…—and he asks the reader to believe in him precisely because he is aware of the difficulty of *believing*, of trusting (3). His call to be trusted is a call to revoke the judicial distrust of black men, one which points to ‘the historical process of dehumanization related to enslavement and sustained by a biased criminal system’ which still affects Black Americans.[[517]](#footnote-517) It is not long, then, until, being ‘in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court’, he displays distrust towards the judicial system and what it seems to be: the ‘thickly padded chair’ on which he is sat, like ‘much like this country, isn’t quite as comfortable as it looks’ (3). Comfort is crucial in Me’s denunciation as it was for Beatty when thinking of his novel: ‘Be it ancient Rome or modern-day America,’ the character states, ‘you’re either citizen or slave. Lion or Jew. Guilty or innocent’, ‘[c]omfortable or uncomfortable’ (6). Comfort, then, represents both apolitical complacent attitudes which must be contested as well as the privileged positions that allow them. The privilege of being comfortable, then, is one of being safe and in no need of suspicion, one of not needing to be alert. Making the reader uncomfortable and constructing the novel as a place where one is not to relax, where everything is looked at with distrust, *The Sellout* highlights that in the United States things may not be what they seem, that racism is not a thing of the past and that even if it is evident, it is still in need of suspicion.

Being uncomfortable and making the reader uncomfortable is, then, a political gesture, if only not to get caught up in the seemingly peaceful non-discriminatory society the US claims to be, one in which race does not matter anymore. In this sense, Me aims to escape the constraints of the ‘exceptional black figure’, which, as Roberta Wolfson explained, works as a ‘tokenized pawn of white America’ and is allowed ‘to enjoy success only insofar such success reinforces the specious narrative that the United States has achieved racial equality in the post-civil rights era’.[[518]](#footnote-518) It is the idea of the post-racial which *The Sellout* suspects, an idea that gained popularity ‘in post-civil rights America’, most prominently after the election of Barack Obama as president in 2009.[[519]](#footnote-519) By post-racial I mean what Bonilla-Silva has described as a common lack of examination and an abundance of assumptions regarding racism and its supposed absence in contemporary American society. This ‘mythology’—an ‘accepted dogma among whites’—holds onto the ‘ideological anchor’ of ‘color-blind racism’ and purports that ‘race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans’.[[520]](#footnote-520) If the novel comes to take on satire’s tools it is precisely because, Fuentes Morgan argued, ‘the post-racial mythology… provokes a sharpened production’ of ‘satire’ as the ‘necessary articulation of racism’s continued existence’.[[521]](#footnote-521) Within the predominance of this ideology, Beatty’s novel aims at making the reader uncomfortable so that it can hold the reader accountable to the ‘responsibility’ which this ‘new racial ideology’ of colour-blind racism ‘exculpate[s]’ white people from.[[522]](#footnote-522) Beatty’s satirical impulse is embedded with radical suspicion as a way to exploit precisely what Fuentes Morgan has seen as satire’s reliance on ‘seeking justice in the subversion itself rather than in placing a didactic message’, that is, satire’s assumption that ‘[f]or better or for worse, the onus is now on audience interpretation’.[[523]](#footnote-523) Beatty, however, seems to not fully trust that satire ‘foregoes easy readings’ and ‘the comfort of the reader’, and puts novelistic suspicion at play not to expect but to demand the reader’s involvement, an involvement which is inevitably political, and unavoidably committed.[[524]](#footnote-524)

If the novel seeks to appeal to the reader’s sense of responsibility, it, however, exonerates its protagonist from it. Although he has brought segregation back to his town, when Me is taken to trial he is ‘accused’ of ‘everything from desecration of the Homeland to conspiracy to upset the apple cart just when things’ he claims ironically, ‘were going so well’ (15). When judged, Me does not deny the seriousness of his crime, ‘so heinous’ that if he was judged for ‘possession of marijuana’, it ‘would be like charging Hitler with loitering’ or ‘British Petroleum with littering after fifty years of exploding refineries, toxic spills and emissions’ (7). As Me is aware of the legal severity of promoting segregation he is also conscious of structural injustice, and thus refuses to take responsibility: he does not ‘feel guilty’, and ‘couldn’t care less’ about ‘moving backward and dragging all of black America down’ (19). Considering the absurdityof segregating to fight racism, Me is performing ‘[w]hat some would identify as acts of betrayal’, in Ian Afflerbach’s words, but also what ‘others would defend as obvious rights’: the right to be an individual leader.[[525]](#footnote-525) In negotiating the greater good which is sought after by Me with a betrayal to the ideals of the civil rights movement, for Afflerbach there is ‘a lingering friction that reveals the complex negotiations involved in Black Americans attempting to reconcile individual self-interest with communal identity’.[[526]](#footnote-526) Me’s acts seem to work towards his objective, as he is told that ‘the signs’ which read ‘PRIORITY SEATING FOR WHITES’ make ‘[p]eople grouse at first’ but then ‘racism takes them back’ and ‘[m]akes them humble’ and ‘realize how far we’ve come and… how far we have to go’ (163). As a haunting presence which, although veiled, refuses to disappear—race in a country which seems to be raceless—Me feels ‘like the specter of segregation has brought Dickens together’ (163). Dickens appears, too, as a spectre in itself, a past version of the city being the motivation for Me to recuperate its position on the map, crucial in the protagonist’s aspiration to resist the gentrification which has deemed it unworthy of recognition.

However, in Me’s question of whether the shortcomings of the civil-rights movement are *his personal fault,* there is also an implicit idea about its true efficacy, its true achievements. If a racist country has not evolved towards improving—merely moving from explicit to implicit violence—can it be said that Me has returned to racism? To return somewhere, one first needs to leave such a place behind. It is precisely the belief that things ‘go well’ that the novel suspects. The real reason for his trial is, precisely, confronting society with a memory of a time when racism was overt, just when the country, to paraphrase Me, managed to keep it covert under colour-blind racism. Since he does not feel guilty, Me tries ‘to figure out if there was a state of being between “guilty” and “innocent”’, of being ‘“neither” or “both”’; and states, in the end: “Your Honor, I plead human” (15). He highlights precisely what colour-blind racism purports—that it does not see colour but *humans*. It is because it works as a ‘formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order’[[527]](#footnote-527) that post-racial America is crucial in understanding the context of *The Sellout*, in particular the time of Obama’s leadership, who ‘hovers behind the novel like a shadow’, in Afflerbach words.[[528]](#footnote-528) The election of Obama as president, Ellis Cashmore argued, ‘seemed to validate… the imminence of the postracial society’[[529]](#footnote-529) and the rhetoric of black exceptionalism as explained by Wolfson.[[530]](#footnote-530) By situating Obama’s America as the backdrop of the plot, *The Sellout* suspects and contests the idea that if one Black man can become President, Black Americans do not suffer real impediments—and that if they stay behind progress, it is at their own individual fault. The politician was not only ‘a cultural symbol compatible with color-blind racism’, as Bonilla-Silva stated,[[531]](#footnote-531) but ‘color-blind racism’ was ‘central to Obama’s stand on race’.[[532]](#footnote-532) As his politics relied on a ‘universalist rhetoric’ Afflerbach explained, the politician was ‘criticized for failing to address the nation’s racial inequalities’ as his ‘race-neutral strategy’ guaranteed him ‘growing support among white Americans’.[[533]](#footnote-533) When, in *The Sellout*, Me pleads as ‘human’, he is not merely mocking the naivety of such a claim, but highlighting how fallacious the idea of a post-racial society is.

Warnings against the incoherence and inconsistency of the post-racial and the ideology of colour-blind racism point to the confusion between the desire of a nation free of racial discrimination and its actual existence. Although an ‘illusion that racial inequalities have been addressed and dealt with’, as Kalwant Bhopal put it, the ‘rhetoric of a post-racial society in a post-Obama era’ has been taken as a material fact.[[534]](#footnote-534) As Afflerbach stated, the ‘desire for a raceless America’ does not override ‘the complex reality of personal, familial and national histories’ entangled in long-standing racist discrimination.[[535]](#footnote-535) In fact, hand in hand with the ‘national discourses that construct the United States as postracial’, Wolfson explained, ‘the twenty-first century’ has seen ‘a resurgence in white supremacist ideology and antiblack police brutality’.[[536]](#footnote-536) Thus, inspired by the advancements of the civil rights movement, those who propose the US has entered a post-racial era mistake an aspiration for material reality. Regardless of whether it is intended or unconscious, this confusion has to do with the slipperiness of the debate’s rhetoric. On a most basic level, terms ‘such as “racism” and “race”’, as Bonilla-Silva explained are used without question by ‘the population at large’, but also by ‘social scientists’ who ‘use’ them ‘as if they were self-evident.’[[537]](#footnote-537) The consensus that ‘race is a socially constructed category’ entails that ‘notions of racial difference are human creations’ and not natural ‘essential categories’.[[538]](#footnote-538) However, when arguing that race is a social construct and that racism is constituted not by natural orders but by a ‘*racial structure*’—which constitutes ‘*the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*’—some have grasped this argument incompletely and fallaciously.[[539]](#footnote-539) Instead of acknowledging the ‘*social* reality’ and ‘real effects’ of racism, ‘white social scientists’ argue that if race is not natural, it should not be a ‘fundamental category of analysis and praxis’, and even ‘go as far as to suggest’ that since race ‘is not real’ those who challenge and denounce it ‘are the ones who make it real’.[[540]](#footnote-540) Participating from calls such as that of Bonilla-Silva to examine ‘racial structures’ in order to ‘uncover’ their ‘particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms’, *The Sellout* roots its novelistic devices not merely in satirical laughter, but in corrosive suspicion. [[541]](#footnote-541)

In segregating his town, Me does not merely unveil the fallacy of post-racial America but offers a nihilistic and scathing alternative to it. As Anker stated, Beatty’s novel works as a ‘tale of failure, disappointment, and denial: a story not of Black advancement and of the expansion of civil rights’, but ‘one of fraud and betrayal’.[[542]](#footnote-542) For Wolfson, the ‘nihilistic strategies for black liberation’ which Beatty’s ‘problematic leaders’ display—not only *The Sellout* but also in *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), *Tuff* (2000), and *Slumberland* (2008)—‘ultimately yield a greater loss of black lives and agency’.[[543]](#footnote-543) The novel purports a ‘rather nihilistic message’ in its ‘reduction ad absurdum’ plot: that the return of segregation can have a positive outcome for the Black community of Dickens, that is, Wolfson explained, that ‘the best way to manage the social death of black people is to accept it.’[[544]](#footnote-544) However, if racism is not about the ‘prejudice of individuals’—for, like Bonilla-Silva explained, ‘without an ideology to justify and enable racial projects, racial domination would not be possible at all’—*The Sellout* constantly questions whether Me is responsible for the betrayal he is accused of.[[545]](#footnote-545) Taken to trial, Me is asked, ‘how in this day and age a black man can violate the hallowed principles of the Thirteenth Amendment and argue that sometimes segregation brings people together’ (23). Me, in a sense, responds to what Kenneth W. Warren had deemed characteristic of any Black American collective, particularly that of writers, that their unity strived from the legal impediments of racist laws, that they were together in existing and resisting systematic oppression.[[546]](#footnote-546) For Warren, the ‘achievement of black writers’ was a direct cause for having ‘responded creatively to the imperatives that derived from the establishment of a social order on the basis of assumed black inferiority’, rather than in the ‘transcendence of these imperatives’.[[547]](#footnote-547) Once those imperatives are hidden and there is a change from discrimination which can be pointed at to a ‘mostly subtle, apparently nonracial, and institutionalized’ racism, Me’s actions go beyond nihilism.[[548]](#footnote-548) Colour-blind racism, ‘slippery as the practices it supports’, is counteracted by Me with an even more slippery answer: his recovery of segregation.[[549]](#footnote-549) To burst into the quietness of new shapes of racism, *The Sellout* suspiciously takes away its layers—unveiling, uncovering and undoing—and evidences its absurdity. If the change from a racial to a post-racial era, as Michelle Alexander argued, relies on ‘the language we use to justify’ racism—since, in ‘the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly’—novelistic suspicion not only works to question the stories we are told about a supposedly post-racial era but to explore new ones.[[550]](#footnote-550)

## Specter of Segregation

In his narration of how he gains Dickens’s recognition back, Me is able to provide a thorough and judgemental examination of American society, as well as self-aware reflections upon his own narrative—motivated by his own experience of being subjected to psychological experiments by his father. When Me describes ‘neighbourhoods like the one’ he ‘grew up in’ as ‘places that are poor in praxis but rich in rhetoric’ he points us to the novel’s own rhetorical richness and the fear that the novel has scarce potential as a practical political device (9). Novelistic suspicion, then, employs the novel’s own devices to question whether they have potential, whether, that is, the novel can offer more than derisive laughter. As self-aware as Me’s narration is, the character is not interested in maintaining a ‘novelistic’ rhythm to his story but revels in the sequential and monologue-like sections of the book to construct a suspicious text which reaches the extensive and extended layers of structural racism it seeks to contest. It is no wonder, then, that Beatty’s suspicious mode of narration has been associated by critics such as Wolfson with a ‘postmodern exploration of the challenges of constructing black community’.[[551]](#footnote-551) Found in the philosophical root of postmodernism, suspicion is crucial in postmodernism’s taste for ‘contradiction’; that is, in its efforts ‘to subvert dominant discourses’ while being ‘dependant upon those same discourses for its very physical existence’.[[552]](#footnote-552) Theorising Black postmodernism, Madhu Dubey emphasised in *Signs and Cities* (2003) how ‘the success of the Civil Rights movement’ and the consequent ‘extension of modern citizenship rights to African-Americans’ had not solved ‘the racial problem’.[[553]](#footnote-553) As, according to Dubey, ‘[a]ll the economic, political and technological changes that are taken to be formative of the postmodern condition’ affected ‘disproportionately… racial minorities in the United States’, and ‘African-Americans’ became trapped in a ‘double role’ as ‘victims and redemptive agents of the postmodern condition’.[[554]](#footnote-554) It is this self-aware spirit of suspicion that, as is the case in the other chapters of this thesis, demands postmodernism in the discussion of these novels. In a context where postmodernism has been historicised as a tendency that has been overcome—particularly the ‘high postmodernism’ which developed between the 1960s and 1980s—postmodernism’s devices today cannot but be mediated by suspicion to attend to what I have explored in the introduction of this thesis as twenty-first century’s sense of ethical urgency, which appears as the ‘suspecting trust’ here proposed.[[555]](#footnote-555)

Me’s suspicion does not paralyse him, but politically moves him to undertake his quest: regardless of wondering ‘what are cities really, besides signs and arbitrary boundaries’, he is determined to get Dickens’ recognition back (87). Suspicion does not provoke paralysis, but in the spirit of postmodernism’s scepticism, it moves onto different realms. Suspicion is at the root of the plot, and this becomes evident from the very beginning of the novel, when Me is on trial. An institution of lawful suspicion directed towards potential criminals, The Supreme Court is the object of Me’s suspicion towards structurally racist institutions of jurisprudence.At the trial, the judge asks Me why he has promoted slavery and segregation. In his radically suspicious attitude, Me does not provide a satisfactory explanation and maintains his distrust, stating that, ‘[l]ike all people who believe in the system’, the judge ‘wants answers’ (23). The judge admits his position in jurisprudence, which goes beyond maintaining legality and punishing illegality and offers a critical view, one which questions the legitimacy of law, one which evidences law is not about moral parameters of right and wrong, but about ‘setting the parameters for what is essentially a judicial argument about the applicability, the efficacy, and the very existence of white supremacy as expressed through our system of law’ (265). In pleading human, Me contests the judicial system with what Fuentes Morgan associated with satire’s own take on justice, that is, ‘the right to exist freely and unmolested, in body and in mind’.[[556]](#footnote-556) For Beatty, however, it is not enough to claim such freedom of existence, but it is about demanding the reader’s complicity and understanding of the reasons behind such claims, a demand undertaken with the suspicious intensification of satire.

As it becomes evident throughout the novel, Me’s promotion of segregation is not the cause for racism in his town, but it evidences something that is already there, thus ‘ironically’ becoming, as Wolfson put it, ‘the most radical act of protest against antiblack racism’.[[557]](#footnote-557) Before Me segregates Dickens, the consequences of racism are evident, such as when his father is murdered by the police—the crucial ‘inciting incident’ which prompts the plot, and, according to Wolfson, connects Beatty’s novel with ‘one of the central messages of the Black Lives Matter movement’, that is, that ‘antiblack racism in the supposedly postracial contemporary moment continues to allow stage agents to murder black people with impunity’.[[558]](#footnote-558) In this sense, Beatty’s use of the metaphor of the flinch as an illustration of a physical experience of wariness—the body reacts to pain but also tries to avoid it—can connect to wider considerations of violence which are present in the novel, such as police brutality against Black Americans. After his father’s murder, Me talks with the ‘crisis negotiator’ from the Los Angeles Police Department and asks him ‘how many officers have been convicted of murder while in the line of duty?’, and responds himself, ‘[t]he answer is none, so there is no accountability’ (51). Dickens, Me explains, ‘didn’t go out with a bang like Nagasaki, Sodom and Gomorrah’ nor like his own dad, violently shot dead, but ‘was quietly removed’ (57). In a country where, despite all evidence of racism, suspicion is halted under the pretext of a post-racial society, Me suspiciously points to the persistence of racism which either brutally and violently or hidden under new labels, achievements, and token gestures—in a ‘transscalar’ scale, as Ivry put it—perpetuates the oppression of Black Americans.

Evidencing that the US has never truly abandoned racism, *The Sellout* demands the reader to suspect the possibility of *returning* to racism, for there is no *return* to racism possible since it has always been there. Me, then, is merely *recovering* one of its most explicit forms—segregation. His actions act as a mirror, similar to the humour of the comedian who sought to ‘beat’ the audience ‘not until’ they ‘were unrecognizable, but until’ they ‘were recognizable’ (286). Me’s segregation seeks to make hidden racism recognizable by exploiting an explicit form of racism which, in having disappeared, has seemingly ended any possible claims that discrimination still exists. In this sense, the novel can be read as a demand to keep suspecting in a postcritical context which rejects such suspicion as out-of-date and unnecessary. As Moynihan pointed out, ‘what has now become an orthodoxy in postcritique’, ‘that attitudes such as “paranoia,” “suspicion,” and “vigilance”’ actually ‘limit’ criticism’s ‘richness’, is not as clear as some put it.[[559]](#footnote-559) Moynihan explored the importance of suspicion in the practice of racial passing, which entails that to ‘pass’ is to avoid suspicion ‘in a white supremacist society’.[[560]](#footnote-560) Being alert of suspicion, that is, suspicious of others’ oppressive form of suspicion evidences suspicion not as ‘a choice’ between different strategies but as one which is ‘essential for survival’.[[561]](#footnote-561) Beyond the role of suspicion in uncovering the post-racial fallacy, the novel highlights the ‘implications for critical race studies of dispensing with critique’, and complicates the role of suspicion, as something which because it is a tool of the oppressor is both feared but also needed in order to survive.[[562]](#footnote-562)

Beatty’s persistent use of suspicion demonstrates that its potential is not extenuated once it falls into the hands of the alt-right. Suspicion has been associated by critics with right-wing politics—and the ‘threatening ideologies’ of ‘dangerous extremists’—who install a regime of revisionism, anti-science and generic scepticism towards ‘good matters of fact’—including ‘the hard-won evidence that could save our lives’, as Latour put it.[[563]](#footnote-563) Refusing suspicion, however, does not counteract such threatening ideologies, but allows them to persist. Limited views of suspicion ignore its potential to hold us attentive and sceptical of narratives which—regardless of being well-intentioned or merely naïve—trust too much in the power of sensibility, affects and attachments, and in doing so ignore those instances in which suspicion is not merely a matter of critical sensibility but a political necessity. Although this chapter puts at play the concepts of satire and suspicion, in a wider dialogue with previous chapters which looked at the relation between mental illness, psychoanalysis and suspicion, it is worth pointing to how certain critics have brought the concept of paranoia to the forefront of race studies, as another way in which suspicion materialises and holds onto its political purpose. Lem-Smith made use of paranoia to analyse how Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*’s (1999) ‘exposes Black epistemologies about American white supremacy’ in a similar sceptical attitude to that of Beatty’s regarding the fallacy of the post-racial era.[[564]](#footnote-564) In his defence of critique’s remaining relevance within literary studies, Lem-Smith proposed paranoia as ‘one of the most promising strategies for critical readers to collaborate with novels’, one which, participating from suspicion, demands responsibility of the reader.[[565]](#footnote-565)

Lem-Smith argued that ‘paranoid styles’ constitute ‘a radical form of racialized paranoid thought’ which do not belong to ‘structures of white supremacy’ and ‘fatalistic racial capitalist ideology’[[566]](#footnote-566) but are necessary to combat the ‘world’s hostility’ and thus become an ‘imperative for… survival’.[[567]](#footnote-567) In a racist society which claims racism does not exist anymore, suspicion of ‘latent violence’—which Lem-Smith associated with a ‘paranoid reading of the world’—is not only a legitimate use of suspicion but becomes ‘the necessary paranoia of the disenfranchised’ who seek protection and to ‘anticipate every negative outcome’.[[568]](#footnote-568) Paranoia, then, becomes the first step to not enter the frame of the post-racial one which appears crucial in order to later be able to satirise. Only a paranoid voice will ask, as Cashmore put it, ‘why is so much of America… deeply racially divided’ in a supposedly post-racial society. [[569]](#footnote-569) Inverting the logic of silent *color-blind* racism, Beatty’s satire confronts it with loud old-fashioned segregationist racism, and in its expansive ambition evidences that, quiet or loud, racism is deeply rooted in America. Rather than lowering the stakes or the importance of a vigilant attitude in the reader and writer, critics such as Lem-Smith and Moynihan, and novelists such as Beatty have continued to admit the power of suspicion not as the exclusive methodology of right-wing politics but as a critical tool for survival.

## Mocking the Notion of Being Powerless

First published with a cover design that read ‘*The Sellout: A Novel*’, the novel would later lose its subtitle and gain—in the British paperback publication by Oneworld (2016)—a quote from *The Guardian*’s review: ‘The most lacerating American satire in years’. In his analysis of the novel, Naughton emphasised the key role of humour, as ‘one of the important lenses through which we must read’ the novel.[[570]](#footnote-570) He explained that ‘for many readers, the novel would be incomprehensibly offensive, if not for its supposedly “satirical” texture’.[[571]](#footnote-571) Anker also framed *The Sellout* ‘within a long literary tradition satire as an instrument of sociopolitical critique’.[[572]](#footnote-572) Critics praise the novel’s ‘sharp humor’[[573]](#footnote-573) and highlight his ‘satirist’s desire to call attention to willful ignorance and/or hypocrisy’.[[574]](#footnote-574) As this chapter has shown, the tendency to read *The Sellout* through a humorous lens makes Beatty feel conflicted with his readership and uncomfortable with the ‘critical consensus’ of the novel being ‘repeatedly and insistently touted as an example of “satire”’.[[575]](#footnote-575) Although satire, as Wolfson notes, can work as ‘a subversive genre’ it also functions by ‘appearing nonthreatening to white people’.[[576]](#footnote-576) It is not only that Beatty questions the ‘ability to “believ[e] in the system” and the consoling myths’ but also his ability to joke and the implications laughter may have, participating from satirical humour while feeling sceptical about its power to disrupt.[[577]](#footnote-577) As Anker noted, the comedian’s scene in the novel exemplifies how Beatty ‘lures the reader’ into his ‘borderline humor’ and then ‘pulls the rug out from under the very mood he cultivates’.[[578]](#footnote-578) That is, how the novel invites us to laugh while immediately pushing us away, first uncomfortable with our laughter and then seeking the readers to be uncomfortable with their laughter too. When encountering a character like the comedian—whose words resonate so much with Beatty’s own reservations towards satire—it is worth asking what is at stake in labelling Beatty a satirist, and why he would resent such a label.

Despite Beatty’s suspicion of satire as a genre, which precludes the novel from being truly political, critics have often agreed on satire’s intrinsic political commentary. Darryl Dickinson-Carr gave credit to satire as a political tool, more than Beatty seemed to do, as he argued that if satire ‘does not aggressively defy the status quo’ it cannot be satire.[[579]](#footnote-579) In his analysis of African American satire, Dickinson-Carr stated that ‘humour infused with slapstick, double-entendre, and a healthy dose of irony’ has ‘a central role in African American culture’, an irony which, however, has also been seen as deactivating political action for those critics who, as the Introduction explains, move away from suspicion.[[580]](#footnote-580) It is not, however, that Beatty rejected humour, for he lamented the humourlessness in Black American literature. Recalling learning about ‘the entire black canon’ of literature, Beatty argued that the ‘defining characteristic of the African-American writer is sobriety’[[581]](#footnote-581) and complained that ‘there’s a weird lack of irony, especially when it comes to African Americans and what you can do and talk about and say’, renouncing to the idea that one has to achieve something in order to be able to be humorous.[[582]](#footnote-582) As he explained, ‘people feel there’s a lot of stuff to be done first’ such as ‘rehumanize yourself’ or ‘assert your intellectual equality’ and ‘bring up all the stuff that’s been ignored’.[[583]](#footnote-583) In other words, there is a burden for Black writers who cannot dive into humour and instead must assert a humourless dignity. Beatty’s taste for ‘black literary insobriety’, then, appeared as he realised he ‘enjoy[ed] never fully understanding’ and, in his words, ‘being offended while thinking about why I feel offended and if I should feel offended’, an effect he would come to recreate in *The Sellout*.[[584]](#footnote-584) In this regard, critics such as Dickinson-Carr, emphasise the centrality of humour in Black American culture as part of the need of ‘enslaved Africans and their descendants’ to create ‘various complex coded languages and expressions that allowed for the indirect expression of their frustration’.[[585]](#footnote-585) Satiric humour, then, Dickinson-Carr explained, responds directly to this ‘language of indirection’, to say things which are not being said, which aligns with Beatty’s taste for not ‘fully understanding’.[[586]](#footnote-586)

However, while indirect humour makes sense in a context of protectiveness and guardedness, of censorship and enslavement, Beatty’s novel differs from that context. In *The Sellout*,Me demands humour and laments that ‘[i]n the history of American black people, there have been only two with the complete inability to tell a joke: Martin Luther King Jr. and my father’ (205). Me has tried to make his father laugh, albeit in unacceptable ways. As his father tells him that ‘the key to doing boring tasks is to think about not so much what you’re doing but the importance of why you’re doing it’, Me wonders whether ‘slavery wouldn’t have been less psychologically damaging if they’d thought of it as “gardening”’, and as a response he gets ‘a vicious beating’ from his father (106). In taking his father’s advice out of context, Me pitches a humorous and insensible joke which prompts his father’s wise and contained attitude to turn into a violent one. In this sense, the novel’s suspicion works again to exploit explicit—and somewhat crude—satirical humour: these jokes are as unacceptable as they are necessary to sceptically point to that which is not spoken about. Satire works by ‘refusing traditional respectability politics’ and in doing so, as Fuentes Morgan argued, ‘shifts the concept of ethics away from vague notions of right and wrong’, its ethical stance lacking specific ‘value’[[587]](#footnote-587) and offering instead ‘the freedom to be, freedom to articulate and perform one’s own autonomous identity’.[[588]](#footnote-588) In a supposedly post-racial society—where racism is unofficial and unrecognised—humour cannot work with subtleties nor indirectly. To ‘expose’ and overturn ‘fallacies’, such as that of the post-racial, satire cannot remain within the elusive forms which allow colour-blind racism to remain unchallenged.[[589]](#footnote-589)

In Beatty’s novel, such freedom to *be* is somewhat dragged by satire’s vagueness, by the fact that it can pass without being noticed, that it can merely be laughed at if it is not read right. Beatty fears that satirical humour can be a double-edged sword: while it can joke about a serious matter and reach a broad readership—who could otherwise feel threatened—it also risks being read lightly. Satirical humour, if read as apolitical, can allow the reader to enter and leave the text unaffected, intact, as unconscious as before reading. Indeed, its temptation to appeal is uncomfortable, an appeal denounced too in Obama’s own alluring of wide audiences, who, Cashmore argued, was ‘concerned with broadening his appeal to all ethnic groups and across the class range’.[[590]](#footnote-590) In seeking to not be fully appealing—as the comedian’s outburst shows—*The Sellout* remains highly suspicious of its own novelistic potential. Within Beatty’s suspicion of satire as a literary genre, there is a fear of its hit-and-miss efficacy. Although, as Dickinson-Carr and Fuentes Morgan explained, satire aims at ‘social and political critique’[[591]](#footnote-591) and at ‘upending of dominant ideologies’[[592]](#footnote-592), Beatty believes satire takes reality away of the subject matter, as ‘[i]t’s easy just to hide behind the humour’ and ‘not to talk about anything else’.[[593]](#footnote-593) Indeed, Dickinson-Carr pointed to the ‘simultaneously too pointed and too diffuse’[[594]](#footnote-594) character of satire, as well as the risk of the ‘reductio ad absurdum’ which ‘may also become a tool of demagoguery’ as it ‘avoids complexity in favor of elision’.[[595]](#footnote-595) For Fuentes Morgan, however, satire is precisely what guarantees complexity, what she deemed ‘kaleidoscopic Blackness’, the ‘ethical move that leads to social justice in its revelation of the multiple ways of performing Blackness and being Black’.[[596]](#footnote-596)

In resisting satire, Beatty holds its problematic nature accountable, not rejecting it in favour of humourlessness but purporting its potential through suspicion as a powerful political tool. He denies claims of being a satirist in order to affirm the realism of his novel, stating that ‘some of the more ridiculous stuff in there, that you would think is obvious satire, *is* sort of real’.[[597]](#footnote-597) Anker also noted that the novel offers a ‘worldview’ which is a ‘cynical, despairing one’ and, more than ‘as satire’, sees it as ‘accurately gritty realism’.[[598]](#footnote-598) As much as the absurdness of recovering slavery is ‘sort of empowering’ for Me—who is ‘mocking the notion of being powerless’—such absurdness does not arise because the plot is an extremely exaggerated version of reality but because reality is extreme (224). Employing satirical humour, *The Sellout* shows, can simultaneously bring the reader close and distance them from the text. The reticence to make the reader feel too confident—too relaxed, too content with the text—situates Beatty’s novel within criticism which drifts away from calls to sentimentality and sensibility, and which, in a way, questions the logic and usefulness of feeling and affects-oriented practices—mainly, postcritique. Some critics I have mentioned—Moynihan, Lem-Smith—are critical of postcritique and ‘the whiteness of affect studies’, as critic Xine Yao put it, in their recovery of suspicious methods of critique—such as paranoia—to assert the political agency of fiction and literary criticism, as well as to root Black Americans’ historically motivated suspicious outlook on society since in the context of a racist society—of which they must remain warned and wary—suspicion cannot be relinquished.[[599]](#footnote-599) Not provoking sympathy in the reader, Me prompts, on the one hand, laughter, and on the other, moral rejection towards his polemic—and uncomfortable—claim that by segregating Dickens, he simply ‘did what worked’ without much ethical consideration, and that if ‘a little slavery and segregation ever hurt anybody’, then, ‘so fucking be it’ (23). *The Sellout* shows how, in creating distance, the novel does not push the reader away but demands for them to be entangled with the political implications of its narration. Suspicion does not seek to resolve the matter but remains without a resolution and, in this way, purports to be *on hold*, suspiciously looking around, as the desirable end goal of the novel. Its purpose is to hold the reader attentive, not knowing but willing to keep observing and wondering.

## A Failed Social Experiment

As much as Me sees himself as an individual and rejects his collective responsibility, he is aware of the social structural analysis of racism and of his and the fellow inhabitants of Dickens’ position within it. He claims to be ‘a failed social experiment’, particularly of his father’s work as a psychologist (35). His father, Me explains, was a ‘social scientist’, the ‘founder’ and ‘sole practitioner of the field of Liberation psychology’, which seeks to resist and oppose racism (27). Advancing Me’s own absurd methods of helping his community by promoting segregation and slavery, Me’s father seeks ‘to unlock the keys to mental freedom’ by turning his son into the object of his experiments—an ‘absentminded black lab rat’ who ‘wasn’t fed’ but ‘presented with lukewarm appetitive stimuli’ and who ‘wasn’t loved’ but ‘brought up in an atmosphere of calculated intimacy’ (27-8). Me’s father follows ‘a theory of cognitive development’ (27) which consists of making his son experience calculated and controlled instances of racism: he shows Me ‘objects like toy police cars’ or ‘Richard Nixon campaign buttons’ and teaches him to be scared by ‘firing several window-rattling rounds into the ceiling while shouting “Nigger, go back to Africa”’ above the sound of “Sweet Home Alabama”’ (29). Although later in his life he shows a taste for the absurd too, Me complains about the inadequacy of his ‘shitty upbringing’, which he will ‘never be able to live down’ (29).

It is not only psychology but history which Me is suspicious of, who questions the stories society has been told about the past. He wonders: ‘Is it my fault that the only tangible benefit to come out of the civil rights movement is that black people aren’t as afraid of dogs as they used to be?’ (19). As he is obviously characterised as offensive and disrespectful towards the civil rights movement, he distances himself from a damaging idealisation of the past—an idealisation at the root of the consensus that the US is in a post-racial era. As he looks up to historical figures in the Supreme Court, he downplays their importance: ‘Hammurabi, Moses, Solomon—these veined Spanish marble incantations of democracy and fair play—Muhammad, Napoleon, Charlemagne, and some buffed Ancient Greek frat boy in a toga’ he explains, are ‘casting their stony judgemental gazes down’ at him, who builds up his own prominence (8). He jokes about his own name: ‘I admit it’, he states, ‘*Me v. the United States* sounds a little self-aggrandizing, but what can I say? I’m Me. Literally. A not-so-proud descendant of the Kentucky Mees’ (21). The novel situates historical figures and events alongside the importance of the characters of the novel, such as when, in comic parallelism between Rosa Parks—who ‘refused to give up her seat to a white man’ and ‘became known as the “Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement’—and Me’s friend and slave Hominy—who ‘in a supposedly unsegregated section of Los Angeles, California… couldn’t wait to give up his seat to a white person’ (127).

Me’s scepticism is evident as he mocks the judge while being on trial. The judge, Me states, ‘wants to believe that Shakespeare wrote all those books, that Lincoln fought the Civil War to free the slaves and the United States fought World War II to rescue the Jews and keep the world safe for democracy, that Jesus and the double feature are coming back’ (23). In this call to out the judge’s naivety, the novel purports a similar call to his readers, an anxiety which riddles the novel with suspicion and which makes it constantly doubt its own satirical devices. Me’s scepticism is what allows him too to reject responsibility over his actions, to refuse to engage with the logic of the judicial system and state that when he promoted segregation, he ‘wasn’t thinking about inalienable rights’ nor ‘the proud history of our people’ (23). Refusing responsibility is, for Me, a way to respond to the guilt which he argues is expected of Black Americans, and which he strongly rejects. While on trial, he claims to ‘no longer’ be ‘party to that collective guilt’ and to not ‘feel responsible anymore’ (18). This can only happen once he is guilty, rather than feels guilty, as he explains that ‘the only time black people don’t feel guilty is when we’ve actually done something wrong’ (18). There is, Me states, a ‘cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent’, a dissonance which is suspected as well in order to combat it (18). Evidencing once more the metaphorical structure which sustains the novel’s persistent tension, Me is ‘[u]ncomfortable with being so comfortable’ while feeling ‘relief’ knowing that, for once, he has actually done something wrong, something illegal (18). In line with this refusal to feel responsible or guilty, Me removes any heroism from his actions, and admits that if he has taken over his father’s job as a ‘nigger whisperer’—helping the police to deter Black citizens of Dickens from committing suicide—is not because he ‘answered the call to duty out of a sense of familial pride and communal concern’ but because he ‘had no social life’ (58).

Alongside his promotion of segregation, Me is also involved with slavery as a way to denounce racism. As ‘a modern-day slave owner’, he is ‘insulted that the venerated institution of slavery was not given the viciousness and cruelty which it was due’ (218). He is responding to Jon McJones, a ‘snobby Negro who covered his self-hatred with libertarianism’—unlike Me, who ‘at least had the good sense to’ express it openly (218). McJones denies the severity of pre-Civil Rights Movement racism, by ‘regurgitating the usual Republican Party bullshit that a child born into slavery in 1860 was more likely to be raised in a two-parent household that was a baby born’ after Obama became president (218). His arguments are, Me argues, ‘completely meaningless when you consider the simple fact that slaves were slaves’ (218). Me is ‘not so selfish as to believe’ that his and other Black Americans’ ‘relative happiness’—which depends on the availability of contemporary commodities such as ‘twenty-four-hour access to chili burgers, Blu-ray, and Aeron office chairs’—‘is worth generations of suffering’ (219). With the violent image of a slave ‘in those idle moments between being raped and beaten’ and ‘standing knee-deep in their own feces’, Me denounces the absurdity of ‘rationalizing that, in the end, the generations of murder, unbearable pain and suffering, mental anguish, and rampant disease will all be worth it’ for the slave because someday ‘[his] great-great-great-great-grandson will have Wi-Fi, no matter how slow and intermittent the signal is’ (219). In this rhetorical display of the absurdity of liberal arguments, it is clear where the true offence lies: not in the novel’s satirical humour but in the injustice it denounces, a denunciation which needs suspicion to be truly effective. Me seems unable to avoid a suspicious existence of constant analysis. The world is in urgent need of politically suspicious interpretation, if only to avoid other types of interpretation that will allow ideologies such as post-racism to thrive. No wonder, then, that when he reminisces a time in which he ‘used to think all of black America’s problems could be solved’ with a ‘motto’ (10), he comes up with ‘Any nigger who isn’t paranoid is crazy… *Ullus niger vir quisnam est non insanus ist rabidus*’ which, he believes ‘is something Julius Caesar would’ve said if he were black’ (13).

As I have explored throughout the chapter, suspicion is not performed in one direction towards the unpacking of racism, but it takes over all of Me’s experiences. Even in the aftermath of his father’s racist murder, he cannot contain his scepticism. As ‘[y]ou’re supposed to cry when your dad dies’, ‘curse the system’ and ‘[b]emoan being lower-middle-class and colored in a police state that protects only rich white people and movie stars of all races’, he is unable to do so, he is unable to ‘cry’ and instead thinks ‘his death was a trick’ (43). The same happens when he is injured by a gunshot and accused of being a sell-out, a moment when he ‘feel[s] something akin to closure’—since ‘for the first time’ in his life he has ‘something in common’ with his father—and feels ‘satisfaction’ in having ‘finally paid’ his ‘debt’ to his father ‘and his fucked-up notions of blackness and childhood’ (261). However, as his father ‘never believed in closure’ and ‘said it was a false psychological concept… invented by therapists to assuage white Western guilt’, Me also suspects it (261). His father had ‘never heard a patient of color talking of needing “closure”’, needing instead ‘revenge’ or ‘distance’, for, as ‘people mistake suicide, murder, lap band surgery, interracial marriage, and overtipping for closure’, what they achieve ‘is erasure’ (261).

The novel’s explicit demystification of closure cannot but be looked at in conjunction with the novel’s exploration of post-race and triumphalist ideas of history, which endanger any possible suspicion and rebellion against racism. Me introduces himself in history and states he is ‘the latest in a long line of landmark race-related cases’, and imagines ‘constitutional scholars and cultural palaeontologists’ as they ‘argue over [his] place in the historical timeline’ (8). As Me imagines these scholars ‘digging up backyards looking for remnants of ghosts of discrimination past’, he suggests that race, indeed, has been erased from the surface and buried—if not physically, metaphorically—under terms such as *post-race* (8). As Me explains, ‘most oppressed peoples of the world… vow never to forget’ while ‘American blacks… want everything expunged from’ the ‘record, sealed and filed away for eternity’ (98). For Me, ‘[t]hat’s the problem with history, we like to think it’s a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on’ as he states that ‘history isn’t the paper it’s printed on’ but ‘memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song’, ‘the things that stay with you’ (115). Me seems to resent precisely what Cashmore pointed to regarding Obama’s persona: the phenomenon of ‘black celebrities’ who ‘have sold the idea that America is no longer manacled to its history’, a history ‘pockmarked by racism, segregation and victimization’.[[600]](#footnote-600) These are figures of whom to be suspicious. The only thing to keep us from turning the page of history and instead looking at the present—and its racism and injustice—Beatty proposes, is a persistent suspicion which does not allow for comfort.

Seeking a conclusion to his project of segregation, Me proposes ‘Unmitigated Blackness’ as a ‘Stage IV of black identity’, and also as an explanation for his actions, which respond to a ‘seeming unwillingness to succeed’ and to ‘simply not giving a fuck’ (277). As he argues that the ‘acceptance of contradiction’ is not ‘a sin and a crime but a human frailty’, Unmitigated blackness explains Me’s lack of guilt and sheds light on his motivations to segregate his town (277). Having come ‘to the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is it’s the nihilism that makes life worth living’, his selling-out becomes a liberating and somewhat enjoyable tool, one which is purported and made available by novelistic suspicion (277). On the one hand, the novel warns that if everything is evident and only surface reading is needed, we risk missing the depth of analysis and falling into the post-racial belief that there is nothing wrong. On the other hand, if we claim racism is not evident and only exists hidden under layers of normality, we become blind to explicit forms of oppression and overt racism is read as a satirical exaggeration. Holding onto suspicion, then, allows Me to not feel ‘that familiar overwhelming sense of black guilt’, and appears as the only way for him not to be ‘bent over in total supplication to America, tearfully confessing’ his ‘sins’ and instead demand responsibility, pointing through his own actions to the intricate—sometimes obvious but mostly veiled—workings of racism (17). It allows Beatty, then, not to have to scream at his readers and instead assure that they read *suspiciously enough*.

# Conclusion

# ALSO STARRING: THE SUSPICIOUS NOVELIST

Having read a selection of novels under the rubric of novelistic suspicion, the conclusion of this thesis closes such an endeavour by wondering what the lack of suspicion, if not its direct opposite, may look like in the novel. It wonders, more specifically, what the relation between suspicion and naivety or trust is. Is novelistic suspicion the opposite of novelistic naivety? Novelistic suspicion works in this thesis as a pretext: that the novel holds the potential of being an intrinsically suspicious device in its form and content—as its vernacular language—and that certain writers have exploited its suspicious nature within the plot and characters of their novels. If reality is not immediately graspable, suspicion is the basis of attention and the prerequisite for any political awareness. Why, in other words, are some novels susceptible to being read under these conditions—that they have been constructed, that they exist and are most enrichingly read under suspicion?

As the introduction to this thesis examined, critics who seek to move away from suspicion devise methodological alternatives—which involve, for example, different critical vocabularies—with which to examine literary works. Metacritical discussions about suspicion, however, do not point to certain novels as more suited for ‘surface reading’ (Best and Marcus), or more appropriate to follow post-critique’s precepts (Felski and Anker) or to be read ‘with the grain’ (Bewes). What role does novelistic naivety play, then, when thinking of novelistic suspicion? Is trusting a naïve action? Insomuch as this thesis proposes novelistic suspicion as an intrinsic condition to the novel, it shows that suspicion always entails a degree of self-awareness and contradiction and that the novel does not exist despite its contradictory nature but precisely through it. This thesis concludes, then, that suspicion in the novel also negotiates its stance with naivety—understood as an innocent and somewhat inattentive trust, as a sensibility which is not predisposed to be wary. In other words, without the novel’s own trustful nature, the novel cannot be suspicious. Novelistic naivety, then, is read as a potentiality of the novel which goes hand in hand with its suspicion. Without the reader’s willingness to enter the novel and participate in it—that is, without their trust in the suspicion that the novel proposes—the novel cannot take flight. If the novel does not surrender to suspicion’s ultimate self-cancellation—to be suspected so much that it does not make sense to exist—it is because it *trusts* suspicion’s potentiality. Rather than being naively suspicious, the novel demands its reader to be *suspiciously naïve*, to be warily trustful.

The relation between suspicion and trust has drawn the path of this thesis, as the novels examined here negotiate their power to do and undo, to attach the reader to their detachment, and to invite such a reader to trust their wariness. This does not mean that for the novelists here analysed, naivety is desirable. When portrayed as a sensibility to avoid, naivety is feared as the wrong kind of trust, causing the reader not to take a step onto suspicion and instead misread, misunderstand, or overlook, that is, causing them to remain uncritical. Engaging with novelistic suspicion, thus, entails a fear that the novel might not be read *right*, a fear which is embodied by the novels in different ways. In *Invisible Man*, for example, the lack of suspicion is associated with blindness, with not being able or willing to see reality as it is. It is from the anxiety that reality is not properly seen that Invisible Man addresses the reader, similarly to Harriet Burden in *The Blazing World*. In both Ellison’s and Hustvedt’s novels there is a rejection of simplification and a demand for the novel to allow for ambiguity and indeterminacy to guarantee the complexity associated with the novel’s political potential. For Caroline Rose, the protagonist of *The Comforters*, remaining naïve—ignorant of the fact that she is a character in a novel—entails remaining subjected to the will of the author who controls her life. Hearing the author’s voice and pursuing its origin becomes a stance from which to control her narrative, a concern which is crucial too for Invisible Man and Harriet Burden. In the case of U., the protagonist of *Satin Island*, suspicion appears as subjected to the corruption of capitalism, becoming professionalised, but, however, holding its political potential with which to frustrate the evil intents of his company. In *The Sellout*, Me’s project of recovering segregation works with and against naivety. As his endeavours are seen as criminally ingenuous—believing that segregation can ‘bring people together’—he undertakes them precisely to point to how rather than harmless, naivety is dangerous. Deeming suspicion unnecessary, *The Sellout* purports, allows for the fallacy of the postracial to remain unexamined.

The duality of suspicion and trust, however, is not only at play in the novels’ plots but is intrinsic to what the novels *do*, especially to the novels’ interaction with the reader. If for Ellison the novel’s reliance on realism damaged its ability to represent complexity and to ambitiously develop formally, the novel, for Spark, had to avoid sentimentalism. For McCarthy, the novel is intrinsically suspicious insomuch it originates theory from within. In Hustvedt’s novel, the effect of ambiguity sought by Burden is achieved formally as *The Blazing World’s* overall effect: one which complicates trust. As Beatty’s protagonist wonders about his own endeavours to recover Dickens, ‘what are cities beyond arbitrary boundaries’ (87), *The Sellout* purports such a question with regards to believing in the satirical novel’s potential to be something more than an enjoyable literary product without political significance. The duality between suspicion and trust in these novels, then, presupposes a receiver who is both a suspicious character—in that it mimics its behaviour, as in *Satin Island*, U. is ‘you’, in *The Sellout* the protagonist is ‘Me’—as well as a trustful reader. In other words, as the novel lures the readers in, expecting the closeness necessary to become involved and invested in the text, the novel demands suspicion of them—it demands of them to care about what they read. The political stance of novelistic suspicion, then, is only measured within the novel’s own precepts.

Warnings against the dangers of excessive suspicion—especially common in criticism—appear then as warnings against what I have deemed *naïve suspicion*. An excessively suspicious reader is a naively suspicious reader, that is, one who trusts too much in the power of suspicion. It is now that the suspicious novelist arises as the guest star to the cast of suspicious characters gathered in the previous chapters, in particular in the following brief analysis of a novel that remarkably embodies the novelist’s relation with such a naïve suspicion, that is, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). As a novel about writing novels, with its high dose of reflection upon authorship, *Breakfast of Champions* has been read as a postmodernist novel, chronologically aligned with a celebration of metafiction, of novels which revel in self-reflexivity and irony. Within this context, Vonnegut has been seen as a representative of ‘the authentic spirit of the nuclear generation’, characterised for being ‘apathetic and flippant’, ‘morally righteous’, ‘very cynical… and yet very sentimental’, as well as ‘anti-intellectual, self-indulgent and confidently opinionated’ and his work has been read as a ‘warning against the dangers of the machine age’.[[601]](#footnote-601) Approaching *Breakfast of Champions* at this point may seem to disrupt the relation which has been drawn between the two parts of this thesis. Nonetheless, Vonnegut’s novel threads a connection between postmodernism and the past, as well as hints at the postmodern threads pushed forward by twenty-first-century novelists. Reading *Breakfast of Champions* within this conclusion contradicts the idea that novelistic suspicion originated, dominated, and disappeared as a theme or sensibility, as a dispensable trait. Chronologically in the middle of the two parts of this thesis, Vonnegut’s novel engages with celebrations of and warnings against novelistic suspicion and in doing so evidences the anxiety and the thrill of the writers for whom suspicion and the novel become inseparable.

The novel presents science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, whose work *Now It Can Be Told* has a powerful and dangerous effect on one of his readers, Dwayne Hoover, who read it ‘hungrily, as though starved for print’ and who in such hunger for literature cannot critically discern novelistic suspicion.[[602]](#footnote-602) Although Trout has ‘put… bad ideas into a science-fiction novel’—ideas accessible to ‘anybody who happened to open it up’—he does ‘not expect’ his books ‘to be believed’ (15). However, Trout’s book gives Hoover the suspicion, via its narrative voice, that ‘[e]verybody on Earth was a robot, with one exception’, himself, who was ‘a new type of creator being tested by the Creator of the Universe’, the ‘only creature with free will’ (14–5). Trout’s novel makes Hoover naively suspicious, not being able to stop suspecting and taking on such suspicion onto a violent and deadly rampage since he is human and everyone else is a robot, turning him ‘into a homicidal maniac’ (173). If Hoover has not read Trout’s fiction properly it is because he, ‘like all novice lunatics, needed some bad ideas’, that is, a suspicion which provided ‘his craziness’ with ‘shape and direction’ (14). As Trout’s novel becomes ‘mind poison to Dwayne’, *Breakfast of Champions* asks what corrupts the reader of the novel, what becomes *believable* and violence-inducing in Trout’s fictional suspicion (15). It asks, in other words, what the power of suspicion is to model an excessively suspicious reader and, as I will continue to explore, what the novelist’s role is in this context. As Vonnegut makes a character out of the author-narrator of *Breakfast of Champions*, he allows the novelist to enter the intricacy of the novel’s suspicious devices and measure its dangerous excesses. Embodied as a character of the book, Vonnegut conjures the novelist’s powers to guide his work, to vindicate Trout and Trout’s creations as his: ‘the suspicion’ that Trout ‘express[es] in this book, that human beings are robots’, that eventually reaches Hoover and that it is portrayed to potentially reach any reader is one originated by Vonnegut (3). This explicit novelistic portrayal of suspicion, then, brings together the two parts of this thesis. While in ‘Haunting Suspicion’ suspicion comes upon the novel and is portrayed by Ellison and Spark in their creative processes not as chosen but as necessary, in ‘Suspecting Trust’ the novel has long coexisted with suspicion and with criticism’s intention to abandon it. Suspicion, however, has never left the realms of the novel.

*Breakfast of Champions* presents the novel as a space, one created by Vonnegut—by his novelist character—and one in which suspicion is introduced as inherent to the novel’s existence: there is no story without it. Vonnegut exploits the novelist’s ability to promote suspicion while fearing it when he claims Kilgore Trout was ‘the only character I ever created who had enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of another human being’ (240). Vonnegut gives Trout the possibility to suspect as much as the obligation to believe, for when Trout asks him ‘Are you *crazy*?’, Vonnegut ‘shattered his power to doubt’ him (292). It is the possibility that suspicion does not correspond with the reader’s ‘responsibility for the art of decoding’—crucial, for Linda Hutcheon, in metafiction—that enlivens such suspicion in the writer.[[603]](#footnote-603) Vonnegut’s answer is to introduce himself, as an author who ‘flaunts his… *presence* in the novel’, in the words of Patricia Waugh, and who in doing so cannot but evidence fear to his absence, a sense of a late arrival to his own creation and a lack of control over the effect of prompting suspicion.[[604]](#footnote-604) He claims to be ‘on a par with the Creator of the Universe’, able to ‘shrink the Universe to a ball exactly one light-year in diameter’, and make ‘it explode’ and ‘disperse again’ (200). He knows, too, ‘how the book would end. Dwayne would hurt a lot of people… And then Trout… would meet his Creator, who would explain everything’ (234). However, the more Vonnegut explores the omnipotence and omnipresence of the novelist, the more obvious the novel’s open path is. Indeed, as Vonnegut has ‘created Dwayne and his violence’ and despite keeping a ‘respectful distance’ from ‘all the violence’, he cannot help coming out ‘of the riot with a broken watch crystal and what turned out later to be a broken toe’ (274). Affecting the physical integrity of the narrator, *Breakfast of Champions* materialises the stakes of suspicion and the consequences of prompting suspicion in the reader, as well as the anxiety of being read right not only as being read suspiciously enough but *appropriately* suspicious. Gathering control in constructing the narrative, it is the suspicion intrinsic to the form of the novel which can allow the novelist to contain its characters and to set them free, to draw the reader in and trap them in its logic.

As they undertake their suspicious quests, such characters do not always successfully suspect, either because their suspicion is not fruitful—they do not achieve answers to the questions they posit—or because it is censored by other characters—suspected, that is, of being too negative or even pathological. As they search to understand, to interpret and to find meaning, these characters often end up being misunderstood. Suspicion is not only a way in which to look at the world but a guarantee of survival against threat; a sensibility which allows political resistance against different forms of oppression. Such resistance takes the shape, for example, of a resistance to pathologisation, such as for Caroline Rose, who in *The Comforters* is perceived as neurotic and mad, or for Harriet Burden in *The Blazing World*, who is ‘eccentric, paranoid, belligerent, hysterical, and even violent’ (9), as well as ‘overly sensitivity’ and ‘a bit unstable’ (190). Although it is not an illness, suspicion can constitute, as Spark puts it in her novel, another ‘form’ of ‘suffering’ (70), one which isolates characters. Suspicion is also a cause for ostracism, inevitable, for example, when Invisible Man inhabits the hole in the ground to escape the prosecution of the police but also of the Brotherhood. In the case of McCarthy’s *Satin Island*, the protagonist’s suspicionhas been absorbed and assimilated by his company to make profit, which he can only contest with further suspicion. For Beatty’s Me, the condemnation of his recovery of segregation covers the fallacy under which American society is sustained: that of a post-racial society where race does not play a role in the life of its citizens. As these characters seek to contest injustices not merely by suspecting but by exploiting suspicion in a productive manner, their suspicion is censored and simultaneously dismissed as unreasonable and harmful.

However, these characters do not deem their efforts unworthy and pursue narrative not just to tell a story but to survive *through* suspicion. If the novelist is brought forward here as the last of the suspicious characters, it is because suspicion is often channelled by literary characters in their own attempts at narration as a political stance. As in *Invisible Man* the protagonist’s endeavours result in a claim for his own necessity to tell his story, the vantage point from which he is able to do so only arrives after the suspicion to which he is interpellated becomes fully assumed by him not only as a method of looking at the world but as a mode of existence—one which is translated into invisibility. Invisible Man cannot help but narrate, as he rhetorically wonders, ‘[b]eing invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice… what else could I do?’ (581). Suspicion, then, soothes his anxieties not only of telling his own story but also of being read appropriately and, thus, understood. It is the same anxiety which permeates the narrations of other characters who are explicitly engaging in the activity of writing. Caroline Rose refuses both the diagnosis offered by characters who deem her delusional as well as authorial control by taking over the role of the novelist—in a way that very much speaks to Vonnegut’s novelistic confrontation between author and character. In *Satin Island*, U. is also pushed to wonder whether his own suspicion should take the shape of a novel, a form which might escape the capitalist logic of being *productively* suspicious, recovering suspicion’s resistance and its demystifying and challenging nature.

As the novel, as Boxall put it, has a ‘right to be judged not by the terms we have available, but by those futural forms which it alone is able to summon into existence’, it appears as the appropriate form for suspicion to thrive, providing the promise of suspicion—of knowledge to come, of an outcome from that wariness—and allowing for it to take over the text.[[605]](#footnote-605) What Boxall called the ‘double movement’ of the novel—that it ‘both shapes the world and resists its demands’—assimilates then to the doubleness of suspicion, as it is characteristically a tool of resistance against lies and danger while it risks self-annihilation.[[606]](#footnote-606) In its characteristic state of alert, suspicion works alongside the novel’s ability to exploit the ‘threshold between the world that exists and that which does not, between the world that we already know and understand and that which we have not yet encountered’ as a site of potential and of political action.[[607]](#footnote-607) The relation between excessive suspicion and misunderstanding, as embodied in the novels’ plots, appears then as a desired effect of novelistic suspicion. Being misunderstood, the novel retains the potential of not being fully comprehended, in both its meanings: the novel is not fully *understood* nor *grasped* but remains in the promise of being so. This is not to say that the novel exists in chaos or arbitrariness—for the novel entails imposition of a narrative order—however, the novelistic form enacts a degree of openness in suspicion’s predisposition to look for symbols of the latent, to conceive reality as veiled and in its pleasure in looking for them but not fully knowing what they are. If suspicion sees elements in the text as ‘symbolic of something latent or concealed’, it does not mean that it can transcend such concealment, but rather, this thesis purports, suspicion revels in *unknowing*.[[608]](#footnote-608) If suspicion reads ‘the closet, or ghosts’, as ‘surface signs of the deep truth of a homosexuality that cannot be overly depicted’, as Best and Marcus put it, then, it does not mean it eliminates or substitutes one element for the other—one concrete narrative element for an abstract interpretation of it—but, rather, asks the reader to be attentive at the *possibility* of meaning, that is, it asks to look closer.[[609]](#footnote-609) By remaining in suspicion’s eternal and pleasurable promise of knowledge, the novel plays on this attentiveness as its master effect. Lacking any sort of suspicion, ‘[j]ust reading’, that is, surface reading, Best and Marcus argued, ‘sees ghosts as presences, not absences, and lets ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts of’.[[610]](#footnote-610) Looking for suspicion in the novel entails examining those ghosts closely and allowing them to inhabit the narrative and to get comfortable, only to watch them with care and detail and wonder *if* they are ghosts of anything, what of.

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1. Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Signs and Symbols,’ in *Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nabokov, ‘Signs and Symbols,’ 686-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nabokov, ‘Signs and Symbols,’ 685. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nabokov, ‘Signs and Symbols,’ 687. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nabokov, ‘Signs and Symbols,’ 688; 686. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,’ in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (London: Penguin, 1988), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nietzsche, ‘On Truth,’ 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling(New York: Appleton & Co, 1889), 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Marx, *Capital*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey(New York: Basic Books, 1955), 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Loewenberg, ‘Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutic Science,’ in *Whose Freud? The Place of Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, eds. Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lis Møller, *The Freudian Reading: Analytical and Fictional Constructions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Møller, *Freudian Reading*, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Loewenberg, ‘Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutic Science,’ 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, part Three*, ed. Randall Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,’ in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 1978), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In *Structural Anthropology* (1958), Claude Lévi-Strauss explained that ‘[t]he linguist provides the anthropologist with etymologies which permit him to establish between certain kinship terms relationships that were not immediately apparent’. See *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1977), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In 1981, Jean Baudrillard argued that ‘the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs’. For him it is ‘a question of substituting signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double’. See *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As Rey Chow explained, although ‘Ferdinand de Saussure on linguistics is generally recognized as a founding instance of the structuralist method’, there are ‘other scholars (as well as Roman Jakobson and Noam Chomsky in linguistics)’ who ‘have also been noted for their contributions in different disciplines’ such as ‘Vladimir Propp’s work on the morphology of folktales’ or ‘Julia Kristeva’s work in literary studies and Jacques Lacan’s work in psychoanalysis’. See ‘Poststructuralism: Theory as Critical Self-Consciousness,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Roland Barthes, ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative’ in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 80-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The sign, as Barthes explained, is often ‘placed’ alongside ‘a series of terms which have affinities with it’ such as ‘signal, index, icon, symbol, allegory’, all of which ‘necessarily refer us to a relation between two relata’. See *Elements of Semiology*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Derrida, ‘Structure,’ 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Rey Chow, ‘Poststructuralism,’ 195-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Derrida, ‘Structure,’ 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Derrida, ‘Structure,’ 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. As I will later develop, in ‘Against Interpretation’ (1964) Susan Sontag rejected ‘hermeneutics’ and sought for an ‘erotics’ of art, moving away from the idea of interpretation. See ‘Against Interpretation’ in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2009). Sontag’s interest in finding new ways to engage with art that do not rely on interpretation’s suspicion is echoed in the ‘method wars’, which this thesis will come to examine in depth. In *Critique and Postcritique* (2017)Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski note that in the ‘method wars’ critics of the past decades ‘have questioned the value of reducing art to its political utility or philosophical premises, while offering alternative models for engaging with literary and cultural texts’. See ‘Introduction’ in *Critique and Postcritique*, eds. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017),15. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Bruno Latour’s ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?’ (2004), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’ ‘Surface Reading’ (2009), Timothy Bewes’ ‘Reading with the Grain’ (2010), Heather Love’s ‘Close but not Deep’ (2010), and Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (2015). I engage more thoroughly with these critics in the following sections of this Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,’ *Critical Inquiry* 30, no.2, (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ### Rita Felski, *The* *Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 16. This work will be referenced with in-text citations henceforth.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012),12. Ryan explained the differences mostly in the development of New Criticism, through which theory ‘moved decisively beyond analysis of form to questions of ethics’, and onto the centrality of Marxism within the work of Raymond Williams. Both in Britain and America, ‘postructuralist theory joined Frankfurt School theory’ (12). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Rita Felski, ‘Introduction,’ *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2014): v. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In *The Limits of Critique* Rita Felski traces suspicion’s ‘lineage’ in philosophy, pointing to the Enlightenment’s ‘philosophical awakening that binds reason to the act of critique’ and its rejection of ‘illusions and superstitions of the past’, followed by the ‘post-Enlightenment philosophy that will subject the very idea of reason to excoriating judgement’ (40-41). As I will continue to develop in this Introduction, it is in the ‘late nineteenth century’ when ‘a *literary suspicion* presses increasingly to the fore’, thus crystallizing suspicion’s crucial role in literary writing and in criticism (41). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. ### Susan Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009),4-5.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 5-6.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 6.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 6

    [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 9.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 7.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. It is worth paying attention to the differences between *critique* and *criticism*, for rather than meaning the same as its English counterpart, the use of French word holds linguistic nuance within anti-suspicious arguments. Criticism, then, will appear throughout this thesis as the general practice of reading, analysing, and judging literature, executed to a wide variety of methodologies—biographical studies, feminist criticism or ecocriticism, for example. *Critique*, however,bears suspicious methodologies that appeared and settled in academia in the latter part of the twentieth century after the arrival of continental theory to American universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. ### Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,’ *Critical Inquiry* 30, no.2, (Winter 2004).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 227.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 231.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 231.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 37.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 231.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 231.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. ### Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction,’ *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 2.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 1.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. This introduction continues to engage with the non-suspicious criticism which was central to the ‘method wars’, such as the already mentioned work of Felski, Latour, and Best and Marcus, and also with Eve Kosofky Sedgwick’s influential essay ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’ (2003), as well as Timothy Bewes’ ‘Reading With the Grain’ (2010), Heather Love’s ‘Close but not Deep’ (2010) and ‘Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’ (2010), and Dorothy J. Hale’s ‘The Place of the Novel in Reparative Reading’ (2019) and *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 229-30.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 230.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’230.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 230-1.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 243.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 13.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 9.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’16.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 18.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 17.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. ### Heather Love, ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,’ *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 375.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. ### Timothy Bewes, ‘Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism,’ *differences* 21, no. 3 (2010): 4.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. ### Eve Kosofky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,’ in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. ### Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading,’ 125.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. ### Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading,’ 126.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. ### Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading,’ 146.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. ### Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading,’ 146.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. ### For arguments for new styles of affective criticism see also David James’s work on the history of emotion in ‘Affect’s Vocabularies Literature and Feeling after 1890’ (2021), ‘In Defense of Lyrical Realism’ (2018), and ‘Critical Solace’ (2016); as well as Sarah Blackwood and Sarah Mesle’s essay collection *Avidly Reads* focused on thought and feeling.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. ### Heather Love, ‘Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,’ *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 239.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. ### Timothy Lem-Smith, ‘Colson Whitehead’s Paranoid Styles,’ *Novel* 56, no. 1 (May 2023): 37.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 10.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 239.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 239.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 239.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. ### Felski, *Hooked*, 133.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 14.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. ### Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation,’ 12.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. ### Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading,’ 150.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. ### Dorothy J. Hale, ‘The Place of the Novel in Reparative Reading’, *Studies in the Novel* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 106.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. ### Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 231.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 4.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. ### Richard Rorty, ‘Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy,’ in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 3.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. ### Rita Felski, *Hooked* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 70.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. ### Felski, *Hooked*, 70.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. David Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas,’ *ELH* 87, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. ### Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 218.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. ### Sinéad Moynihan, ‘“Suspect-Proof?” Paranoia, Suspicious Reading, and the Racial Passing Narrative,’ *American Literary History* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 274.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. ### Lem-Smith, ‘Paranoid Styles,’ 26.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. ### Lem-Smith, ‘Paranoid Styles,’ 36.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. ### Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin, 2016), 23.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. ### Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 232.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. ### Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 23.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. ### Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 73.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. ### George Steiner, ‘Reporter,’ in *Vladimir Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 141.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. ### Emre, *Paraliterary*, 218.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Anna Kornbluh, ‘We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique,’ *Novel* 50, no. 3 (2017):399. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Kornbluh, ‘We Have Never Been Critical,’ 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 1. Ryan’s use of theory invokes precisely the strand of suspicious thinkers which revelled in methodological wariness: ‘French thinkers who initiated post-structuralism’, many of them writing in the context of the ‘student revolution of 1968’ which ‘brought the debates about theory to a head and motivated a radical rethinking of traditional ideas about literature and social systems’ (2). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Ryan, *Novel After Theory*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Alexandra Kingston-Reese, *Contemporary Novelists and the Aesthetics of Twenty-First Century American Life* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. ### David James, ‘Transnational Postmodern and Contemporary Literature,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*, ed. Yogita Goyal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 123-24.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. ### Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 1.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. ### Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2

     [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. ### Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 2.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. ### Theophilus Savvas and Christopher K. Coffman, ‘American Fiction after Postmodernism,’ *Textual Practice* 33, no. 2 (2019): 195.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. ### Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity,’ *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering(Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010): 138.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. ### Kelly, ‘New Sincerity,’ 133.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. ### David Foster Wallace, ‘An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,’ interview by Larry McCaffery, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 49

     [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. ### Wallace, ‘Expanded Interview,’ 49.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. ### Kelly, ‘New Sincerity,’ 146.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. ### Lee Konstantinou*, Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. ### Savvas and Coffman, ‘American Fiction after Postmodernism,’ 196.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Kurnick, ‘A Few Lies,’ 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. ### Kornbluh, ‘We Have Never Been Critical,’ 400.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. ### Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 17.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. ### Kornbluh, ‘We Have Never Been Critical,’ 397.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. ### Kornbluh, ‘We Have Never Been Critical,’ 401.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. ### Emre, *Paraliterary*, 218.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. ### Moynihan, ‘Suspect-Proof?,’ 272.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. ### Moynihan, ‘Suspect-Proof?,’ 273.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. ### Moynihan, ‘Suspect-Proof?,’ 274.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. ### James, ‘Transnational Postmodern and Contemporary Literature,’ 133.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 119-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 119-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. ### Dorothy J. Hale, ‘Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century,’ *PMLA* 124, no 3 (May 2009): 899.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. ### Hale, ‘Aesthetics and the New Ethics,’ 901.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. ### Kingston-Reese, *Contemporary Novelists*, 6.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. ### Kingston-Reese, *Contemporary Novelists*, 6.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. ### Kingston-Reese, *Contemporary Novelists*, xv.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. ### Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Phoenix, 2010), 168.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. ### Muriel Spark, ‘The Desegregation of Art,’ in *The Informed Air: Essays*, ed. Penelope Jardine (New York: New Directions, 2014), 81.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. ### See Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity,’ *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131-46; and Theophilus Savvas and Christopher K. Coffman, ‘American Fiction after Postmodernism,’ *Textual Practice* 33, no. 2 (2019): 195-212.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. ### Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*, (London: Vintage, 2016), 15-16.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ralph Ellison, ‘Introduction’, in *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’ vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’, vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’ xiv-xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Ralph Ellison, ‘Society, Morality and the Novel,’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Modern Library: 2003), 727. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Mark Greif, *The Age of Crisis of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2015), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Greif, *Age of Crisis of Man*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Ellison, ‘Society, Morality,’ 728. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Maryemma Graham and Jefferey Dwayne Mack, ‘Ralph Ellison, 1913-1994: a Brief Biography’ in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2004), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Ralph Ellison, ‘Harlem is Nowhere,’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Modern Library: 2003), 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Ellison, ‘Harlem is Nowhere,’ 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Ellison, ‘Harlem is Nowhere,’ 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Greif, *Age of Crisis of Man*, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Steven C. Tracy, ‘Introduction,’ in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Stephanie Brown, *The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent*, *1945-1950* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi: 2011), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Brown, *Postwar African American Novel*, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Ralph Ellison, ‘The World and the Jug,’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Modern Library: 2003), 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Greif, *Age of Crisis of Man*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Ellison, ‘World and the Jug,’ 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Ellison, ‘World and the Jug,’ 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Greif, *Age of Crisis of Man*, 147. Such criticism towards Ellison was inscribed within the wider discussion around assimilationism which had been taking place in African American literature throughout previous decades. In 1926 Langston Hughes offered one of the most famous arguments against assimilationism, defined as the ‘urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible’, and urge which constituted the ‘mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America’. See ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,’ *Langston Hughes Review*, 4, no. 1 (1985), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Greif, *Age of Crisis of Man*, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Greif, *Age of Crisis of Man*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Ralph Ellison, ‘Indivisible Man,’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Modern Library: 2003), 398-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Ellison, ‘Indivisible Man’, 398-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Ellison, ‘Indivisible Man,’ 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’ xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’ xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. ### Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2014), 3. This work will be referenced with in-text citations henceforth.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Konstantinou, *Cool Characters,* 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Valerie Smith, ‘The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*’, in *Ralph Ellison’s* Invisible Man*, A Casebook*, ed. John F. Callahan (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2004), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Smith, ‘Meaning of Narration,’ 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Ralph Ellison, ‘The Art of Fiction,’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Modern Library: 2003), 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Fonger de Haan, ‘An Outline of the History of the Novela Picaresca in Spain’ (PhD diss., University of Baltimore, Springer: 1903) 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1986), 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. J. A. G. Ardila, ‘Introduction: Transnational Picaresque’, *Philological Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Jens Elze, *Postcolonial Modernism and the Picaresque Novel: Literatures of Precarity* (London, Palgrave Macmillan: 2017), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Elze, *Postcolonial Modernism*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Elze, *Postcolonial Modernism*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Smith, ‘Meaning of Narration,’ 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Greg Chase, ‘“Ah just cant quit thinking”: Modernist Narrative Voice in Faulkner and Ellison,’ *Arizona Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Richard Purcell, *Race, Ralph Ellison, and American Cold War Intellectual Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Ellison, ‘Harlem is Nowhere,’ 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Smith, ‘Meaning of Narration,’ 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, (London, SAGE Publications: 2005), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Ellison, ‘Introduction’, xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Ellison, ‘Introduction’, vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. In ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing’ (1937) Wright took to Marxism and to the idea of ‘minorities’ to denounce how ‘the petty bourgeois sections of oppressed minorites’ wanted to ‘assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so they can lift themselves into a higher socials sphere’. See ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing,’ in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (1994): 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Ralph Ellison, ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,’ in *Collected Essays* , ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Ellison, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Ellison, ‘Indivisible Man,’ 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Ellison, ‘That Same Pain That Same Pleasure: *An Interview*,’ in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Ellison, ‘That Same Pain,’ 75. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates paid attention to Ellison’s notion of ‘complexity’ as a way to demand the appropriate representation of Black American experiences, drawing back to ‘the myths of black slaves and ex-slaves’ which, according to him, ‘embody theories of their own status within a tradition’ (xxv). [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Brown, *Postwar African American Novel*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Brown, *Postwar African American Novel*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Brown, *Postwar African American Novel*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Brown, *Postwar African American Novel*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Wright, ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Wright, ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing,’ 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Ellison, ‘That Same Pain,’ 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Ellison, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Ellison, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 224. This defence of individuality was consistent throughout Ellison’s essayistic work, and it appeared in articles such as ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1955), where he defended fiction’s ‘depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance’ (212) as well as in ‘Indivisible Man’ (1970), where he denounced how ‘the white society’ had prevented Black Americans ‘from being individuals’ (397-98). [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Ellison, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Ellison, ‘That Same Pain,’ 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Ellison, ‘That Same Pain,’ 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Ellison, ‘That Same Pain,’ 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Durham, North Caroline, Duke University Press: 2010), 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Irving Howe, ‘Black Boys and Native Sons’ in *Selected Writings 1950-1990* (San Diego: HBJ, 1990), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Howe, ‘Black Boys and Native Sons,’ 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Robert Genter, ‘Toward a Theory of Rhetoric: Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Problem of Modernism,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Houston A. Baker Jr., ‘Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant Garde,’ *Stanford Humanities Review* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Baker Jr., ‘Failed Prophet,’ 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Ralph Ellison, ‘Introduction to *Shadow and Act*’, in *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, Modern Library: 2003), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Ellison, ‘The World and the Jug,’ 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Ellison, ‘The World and the Jug,’ 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Ellison, ‘The World and the Jug,’ 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Ellison, ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction,’ 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Ellison, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 211-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Ellison, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Graham and Mack, ‘A Brief Biography’, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press: 2010), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Genter, ‘Toward a Theory of Rhetoric,’ 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Ellison, ‘Introduction,’ xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (London: Constable, 1992), 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Stannard, *Muriel Spark,* 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Muriel Spark, ‘Muriel Spark - b. 1918,’ interview by Jeanne Devoize and Claude Pamela Valette, *Journal of the Short Story in English* 41 (Autumn 2003): 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Stannard, *Muriel* Spark, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 154-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Muriel Spark, ‘The Writing Life’, in *The Informed Air Essays,* ed. Penelope Jardine (New York: New Directions, 2014), 39. Patricia Waugh considered Spark’s novels ‘a good example’ of works which purport a ‘notion of reality as a construct, explored through textual self-reference’ and which ‘alert[s] the reader to the condition of the text’. See *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 55. Spark would consider herself a ‘post-modernist’ author, because, she argued, she introduced in her fiction ‘another dimension which is a bit creepy, not… consequential’. See Martin McQuillan, ‘“The Same Informed Air”: An Interview with Muriel Spark,’ in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002),216. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. James Bailey, *Muriel Spark’s Early Fiction: Literary Subversion and Experiments with Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Muriel Spark, ‘How I Became a Novelist’, in *The Informed Air Essays,* ed. Penelope Jardine (New York: New Directions, 2014), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Bryce Christensen, ‘“The Latter End of Job”: The Gift of Narrative in Muriel Spark’s *The Only Problem* and *The Comforters*,’ *Renascence* 54, no.2 (Winter 2002): 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Christensen, ‘“The Latter End”,’139. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Bailey, *Spark’s Early Fiction*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Spark, ‘How I Became a Novelist,’ 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Waugh, *Metafiction*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 207-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Stannard, *Muriel Spark*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. McQuillan, ‘Interview with Muriel Spark,’ 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. McQuillan, ‘Interview with Muriel Spark,’ 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Bailey, *Spark’s Early Fiction*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Muriel Spark, ‘The Desegregation of Art,’ in *The Informed Air,* ed. Penelope Jardine (New York: New Directions, 2014), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Spark, ‘Desegregation of Art,’ 80-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Spark, ‘Desegregation of Art,’ 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Spark, ‘Desegregation of Art,’ 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Spark, ‘Desegregation of Art,’ 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Spark, ‘Desegregation of Art,’ 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. ### Muriel Spark, *The Comforters*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2014), 4. This work will be referenced with in-text citations henceforth.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1988), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Shoshana Felman, ‘Turning the Screw of Interpretation,’ *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977): 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Waugh, *Metafiction*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Spark, ‘The Desegregation of Art,’ 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,’ 238-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Martin McQuillan, ‘Introduction: “I Don’t Know Anything about Freud”: Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism’ in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Siri Hustvedt, ‘Introduction,’ in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Hustvedt, ‘Introduction,’ xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. In the early 1980s, Siri Hustvedt published her only work of poetry to date: *Reading to You* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Hustvedt, ‘Introduction,’ xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World* (London: Sceptre, 2014), 59. This work will be referenced with in-text citations henceforth. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Hustvedt, ‘Introduction,’ xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Hustvedt, ‘Introduction,’xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Siri Hustvedt, ‘No Competition,’ in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Hustvedt, ‘No Competition,’ 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Hustvedt, ‘No Competition,’ 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Hustvedt, ‘No Competition,’ 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World* (New York: Dover, 2019), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Cavendish, *Blazing World*, x. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Siri Hustvedt, ‘Critical Notes on the Verbal Climate,’ in *Living*, *Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2012), 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Hustvedt noted the ‘manipulation of language for ideological purposes’ in the change of the use of the word ‘freedom’, used in the past as ‘a call to empathy’. For her, the word ‘has been replaced by its double’ to ‘evoke fear’, and she particularly points at George W. Bush and his use of the word ‘to signal alarm’. See ‘Critical Notes on the Verbal Climate,’ 166-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Hustvedt, ‘Critical Notes,’ 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Hustvedt, ‘Critical Notes,’ 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Hustvedt, ‘Critical Notes,’ 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Hustvedt, ‘Critical Notes,’ 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Siri Hustvedt, ‘Playing, Wild Thoughts, and a Novel’s Underground’ in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2012), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Hustvedt, ‘Playing, Wild Thoughts,’ 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Susan Sontag, ‘Psychoanalysis and Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*,’ in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2009),257. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Sontag, ‘Psychoanalysis,’ 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading,’ 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Hustvedt, ‘Playing, Wild Thoughts*,*’39. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Siri Hustvedt, ‘Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?,’ in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2012), 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. David Wiles, *The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Siri Hustvedt, ‘My Louise Bourgeois,’ in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 25-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. For Greeks, masks were called ‘*prosōpon*’, that is, ‘the regular term for “face”’, Wiles explained, while Romans used the word ‘*persona*’ from which English word ‘personality’ derived––‘the form that we present to the world’. See David Wiles, *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*, ed. T. J. Lustig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Joel Elliot Slotkin, *Sinister Aesthetics: the Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9. Although Slotkin clarifies that his work does not ‘attempt to prove its universal or transhistorical validity’, I have considered his contributions of ‘the sinister as a theoretical paradigm’, applicable beyond the context in which he focuses on, this is, Early Modern English literature (14). [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Slotkin, *Sinister Aesthetics*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
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374. Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author,’ in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. See Judith Ryan’s chapter ‘The Death of the Author’ in *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
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378. Barthes, ‘Death of the Author’, 142-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Barthes, ‘Death of the Author’, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. The linguistic turn is mostly associated with Richard Rorty and other philosophers such as Gustav Bergmann, who in 1952 coined the expression and stated that such a turn had taken place in a ‘significant part of all philosophical activity that went on in the English-speaking countries during the last one or two generations’. See Gustav Bergmann, ‘Two Types of Linguistic Philosophy,’ *The Review of Metaphysics* 4, no. 3 (1952): 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
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384. Zadie Smith, ‘Rereading Barthes and Nabokov,’ in *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
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390. Hustvedt, ‘Embodied Visions,’ 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Natalie Kon-Yu and Julienne Van Loon, ‘Gendered Authorship and Cultural Authority in Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World*’ *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 12, no. 1 (March 2018), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Wiles, *Masks of Menander*,68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Hustvedt, ‘No Competition,’ 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
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395. Hustvedt, ‘On Reading,’ 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Hustvedt, ‘On Reading,’134. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Hustvedt, ‘Embodied Visions,’354. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
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401. Felman, ‘Turning the Screw,’ 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Hustvedt, ‘Why One Story,’ 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Hustvedt, ‘Why One Story,’ 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Kon-Yu and Van Loon, ‘Gendered Authorship,’ 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
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438. McCarthy, *Transmission*, section vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. McCarthy, *Transmission* section vii. / Although humanism most generally implies a concern with ‘human welfare and dignity’ and reliance on the importance of ‘human reason’, McCarthy’s criticism is part of the ‘pejorative’ use associated to certain ‘postmodernist’ authors who find the idea of autonomy and rationality of the self incompatible with the ‘inevitable fragmentary’ human condition. McCarthy’s suspicion over humanism is, however, a suspicion over an original suspicion which historically would locate humanism as a—suspicious—answer, ‘appropriated for anti-religious social and political movements’ in response to religious metaphysics. See *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, 2nd ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), s. v. ‘Humanism.’

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