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Mystifying Technologies: Production and Prestige in Contemporary Literary Fiction

DISSERTATION

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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by

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DEDICATION

To

My mother, Kimberly Rodgers-Weeks, whose unwavering love and support remain—as they always have been—the very foundations of my world, and whose unimaginable strength and boundless smarts remain the limits toward which I strive.

To

My siblings, Spencer and Maddie, who are—by leaps and bounds—so much smarter, funnier, kinder, and cooler than their older sister that I am both humbled to claim them and grateful to know them.

To

Drew Shipley, a perfect partner, an enviable best friend, and the most intelligent, hilarious, and deeply compassionate human being I know, of whose love I will never stop trying to be worthy.

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Dr. Timothy Weeks, whose keen intellect, insatiable curiosity, strident support, and unconditional love as my father, friend, and teacher made all things possible, many things purposeful, and the hardest things worthwhile. Dad – even with the still-stinging grief of five years of your absence, you are as present with me here on every page, in every turn of phrase and expressed thought, as you have been in every moment of joy, frustration, failure, and success in my life.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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"Mystifying Technologies: Production and Prestige in Contemporary Literary Fiction" examines how contemporary literary fiction as a genre coalesces in the late twentieth- and twenty-first centuries to lend unique figuration to the material conditions of literary production and consumption in the US. Reading novels symptomatically and sociologically, the dissertation articulates how the formal and thematic fixations of novels published as "literary fiction" emerge in response to conflicting artistic, economic, and cultural demands for literature to achieve both profitability and prestige. Registering the effects of publishing industry conglomeration, technological advancement, and economic precarity in the present historical moment, it focuses on one prominent strand of recent literary fiction which grapples with the tension between aesthetic ideals and market imperatives by representing the processes attendant to capitalist mystification—from technological mediation to alienation and even fictionalization itself—through formal and thematic engagements with magic, mystification, and dematerialization in otherwise strictly realist texts.

The first chapter argues for understanding autofiction, a dominant subgenre of literary fiction, as a publishing "gimmick" in Sianne Ngai's theorization of the term, making a case for how Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018) and Rachel Cusk's *Transit* (2016) recast technological

processes of production as occult practices to at once reveal and re-veil their own conditions of production. The following chapter then turns to Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2015) and Hilary Leichter's *Temporary* (2020) to demonstrate how the prestige genre of high postmodernism and the popular genre of self-help converge in the twenty-first century to produce an aesthetic of realist irrationalism, which registers the diverse pressures shaping literary fiction published by conglomerate and nonprofit publishers. Ultimately, the final chapter looks back at Jennifer Egan's second novel, *Look at Me* (2001), to illuminate how it re-renders the disjointed temporalities of technological mediation and finance as mystified processes of defacement and re-enactment, at the same time re-rendering Egan's image as an author of prestige literary fiction.

INTRODUCTION

In the recently released collection *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century*, Sarah Brouillette notes, "As a publishing industry niche, literary fiction has been in observable decline for at least ten years now. Prices have been falling; the possibility of making a living by writing has become less common; and it has become rarer to spend one's leisure budget on print literature" (116). Clear and direct in its diagnosis, Brouillette's statement not only reflects the empirical facts of literary publishing and consumption in the first decades of the twenty-first century but also provides determinate shape to a sense of general unease and uncertainty—long voiced by writers, publishers, booksellers, and literary critics—about the future of literary fiction in English. Seeking to make sense of literary fiction's waning prominence and profitability, some point to the cultural saturation of social media, the proliferation of streaming entertainment, and the attention-sapping vastness of the Internet but, as Brouillette suggests, declining funding for liberal education, the shifting economics of book publishing, and the increasing economic precarity of would-be consumers in the US and UK play an equal if not outsize role in this story.

Taken together, these interwoven threads of cultural anxiety and material change help account for how the genre of "literary fiction" cohered as a distinct publishing niche in the contemporary period, as well as the preferred forms its texts now assume. Intent on tracing these threads, this dissertation ultimately seeks to understand how novels marketed and received as literary fiction today employ novel aesthetic strategies compelled by material, socioeconomic conditions in the publishing industry and the US more broadly, conditions which simultaneously demand their own effacement in fiction. In particular, one strand of recent literary fiction—

which excludes modern technologies from otherwise realist narratives or settings, boasts recurring themes of mystification and magic, and involves narrators fixated on the production of selfhood—emerges in this study as a generative site for interrogating how contemporary literary fiction lends figuration to material conditions of literary production and consumption by engaging with the capitalist imperatives for mystification and effacement which perpetuate these conditions.

Taking as a given that any aesthetic work contains the traces of its own production—in other words, that it is "possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works" as Jameson asserts—this dissertation reads works of literary fiction as expressing the pressures of authorship, publishing, and everyday life in the historical moment in which they are produced (99). At the same time, it examines how the contemporary genre of "literary fiction" takes shape in response to conflicting artistic, economic, and cultural demands for literature to be simultaneously realistic, escapist, expressive, therapeutic, and critical as well as profitable and prestigious.

To write of contemporary fiction is to think through the fraught intersection between two categories, the contemporary and the fictional, which continually resist attempts to capture and characterize their fixed meaning. They persist as moving targets for critical inquiry, their historical and conceptual salience seeming to shift under every trained eye which sets them in their sight. Yet to think through the particularities of literary production in its specific material context remains an imperative for those who strive to trace the delineations of the present and to disentangle the threads of social thought and lived experience which, through time, constitute the present as well as the conditions of possibility for our understanding of it. Theorizing the concept

of the contemporary, Theodore Martin argues, "The contours and currents of our current moment—its temporal boundaries, its historical significance, its deeper social logics—are inseparable from the historically determined and politically motivated ways we choose to divide the present from the past" (5). To think through contemporary fiction, then, requires attentiveness to the ways in which literature registers the moment in which we find ourselves embedded and the historical processes which have determined the capacity of literature to do so.

Genre, in Martin's account, offers one particularly effective framework for grasping literature's historical continuity as well as the novel evolutions it undergoes in response to specific historical exigencies. In concert with what some critics have identified as the "genre turn" of the twenty-first century—the recent trend which sees authors of literary fiction, such as Colson Whitehead, Jonathan Lethem, and Jennifer Egan, adopting recognizable conventions of popular genres for their novels—"literary fiction" itself now functions as a recognizable genre, demarcating a certain kind of prestige writing which boasts a distinctly "literary" diction, style, or received novelistic tradition in direct contrast with popular genres like mystery, romance, and science fiction.[1] For this reason, looking at contemporary literary fiction through the lens of genre opens up the possibility for grappling with its recent emergence from identifiable historical conditions and its new iterations in the present moment of uncertainty.

Historically, the novel as a genre has often striven for "the portrayal of a total context of social life, be it present or past, in narrative form," and it has also evolved alongside and from within its own ever-evolving social context through the historical and aesthetic developments of

[1] For more on the "genre turn," see Andrew Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion"; Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace*; Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*; or Tim Lanzendörfer, (ed.), *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*.

realism, naturalism, modernism, and, ultimately, postmodernism in the mid-twentieth century.[2] But in the transformative decades of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in the disputed and uncertain aesthetic wake of postmodernism, "literary fiction" became a common if ill-defined descriptor for a genre of literary texts which seem continuous with the historical lineage of the realist novel and which resist easy categorization into other popular genres. Moreover, as Jeremy Rosen argues, contemporary literary fiction as a genre is "not formally constituted… but rather name[s] [a subset] of the larger literary field and marketplace" ("Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction"). If, as historian of the novel Michael McKeon claims, "The novel crystallizes genreness, self-consciously incorporating, as part of its form, the problem of its own categorial status," literary fiction as a genre might be understood as questioning the status of "literary" novels in the context of their contemporary publication and consumption (4).

While by no means synonymous with contemporary fiction, literary fiction offers a uniquely generative opportunity for investigating the simultaneous historical continuity and novelty of literary production in the present, and particularly in the US, in which conglomeration in the publishing industry, developments in corporate and personal technologies, and socioeconomic instability loom large. But what distinguishes contemporary literary fiction, and how does it function in a larger literary ecosystem?[3] As Matthew Wilkens points out, "there are sections marked 'literary fiction' on Amazon, in bookstores, and on Goodreads, all of which contain many postwar and contemporary titles," and "[m]uch of what is taught in contemporary

[2] Quoting Lukács, *The Historical Novel,* p. 242.

[3] A number of literary scholars in recent years have offered compelling accounts of significant developments in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction, particularly in their social, political, and economic contexts, which bear a meaningful relation to the genre of contemporary literary fiction. See, for example, Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*; Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*; Huehls and Greenwald Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*; Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*; La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*; and Song, *Climate Lyricism*.

fiction classes also falls under the heading of literary fiction, even if that label isn't always used explicitly." This dissertation takes as its foundation that understanding the material conditions of literary production in the present—how it takes place at the intersections of labor, technology, and economics—holds the most promise for illuminating the aesthetic strategies and narrative fixations of contemporary literary fiction.

Any such inquiry into the production of literary fiction in the present necessitates attention to the twenty-first century business of book publishing, an industry which underwent significant transformation in the postwar period that directly contributed to the emergence of "literary fiction" as a genre in the contemporary. In "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007," Dan Sinykin details how corporatization and massive mergers between US and UK publishing houses in the second half of the twentieth century served to consolidate power and reshape the literary market to heavily privilege bankability over other more abstract literary values. "What has the rationalization of publishing meant for literary fiction in the conglomerate era?" Sinykin asks. "At each stage of publishing—in the hands of the agent, the editor, the publisher—a text must now, more rigorously than ever, demonstrate its potential profitability. Authors are regularly confronted with the demand that their work be sellable" (473).

Both the waning cultural significance and economic viability of literary fiction, as well as the fascination such novels continue to hold for mainstream book publishers, literary scholars, and creative writing programs, converge in the contradictory existence of contemporary literary fiction as a genre. To be published as literary fiction, a text must signal its own potential for profitability to publishers (as all titles seeking publication by mainstream, for-profit publishers must, to some degree) while also visibly demonstrating some combination of literary qualities

that would qualify it for the prestigious generic category. In other words, it must simultaneously demonstrate economic and literary value.

Literary value (of whatever that may be taken to consist) does not exist independently of the economic conditions from and in which literature is produced, as Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon remind us: "whatever the 'value' of their craftedness, or their wit, or their critique of craftedness and wit, [literature] is not an opposing *form* of value so much as a lively human activity that takes place in a powerfully shaping political and economic context" (14). Yet, literary fiction as a publishing genre inherently and quite visibly depends upon its embodiment of these two definitions of value, economic and artistic, which it must portray as still operating in, although parallel, independent registers. Conglomerate literary fiction exists as an argument for the value of literature as humanistic, artistic activity, but it is an argument always also in service of bolstering the value of "literary fiction" for conglomerate publishers.

With the capacity to gather vast amounts of data about sales, reviews, and preferences among readers, conglomerate publishers—those often referred to as the "Big Five" (or, potentially, the soon-to-be "Big Four")—tend to invest in the titles and authors with name recognition, readily marketable content, and the potential for licensing that will ensure sizable financial returns to their shareholders.[4] Even small and nonprofit presses, which benefit from the relative freedom of being largely funded by grants and donations, must pursue sales and satisfy their funders' expectations for prestige—prestige which proves difficult to earn without a certain amount of marketing and exposure. As book sales and prices continue to decline and with fewer and fewer authors behind the majority of published titles, the financial imperatives of traditional

[4] At the moment of this writing, Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster are still arguing against the US Department of Justice's legal opposition to their merger.

publishing define the limits of possibility for the kinds of fiction that get published, and furthermore, written (Brouillette).

Industry conglomeration in the late-twentieth century delimited the kinds of literary fiction produced by mainstream publishing houses in yet another way, the effects of which evidently persist into the present day. In *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (2020), Richard Jean So argues that "postwar American book publishing is defined simultaneously by a profound change in its basic structure and means of operation and a profound lack of change in its racial representation of authors" (30). With the growth and consolidation of publishing houses causing publishers to function more like traditional corporations, publishers began concentrating their resources on promoting a very select number of titles that they could identify as potential bestsellers or as lucrative opportunities to garner bankable prestige. This strategic focus necessitated from publishers a shift away from attending to their increasingly expansive "midlists," or the more moderate sellers written by lower-profile authors. As So elaborates, "The postwar evisceration of the midlist inadvertently meant the evisceration of a broad and inclusive field of black authors at large American publishing houses" (10). Even seemingly "progressive" publishers like Random House demonstrated notable racial inequality in their publishing choices throughout the remainder of the century, as only a few "representative" black authors were chosen to fill a "minority" niche within an otherwise overwhelmingly white lineup of marketed authors.

Despite increasing pressure and initiatives to address racial disparities in the publishing industry in recent years, not much has changed. According to Penguin Random House, from 2019-2021, roughly 76% of the authors they published were white. As of 2021, only 4% of Penguin Random House employees were black, while over 70% of new hires in the US were

white.[5] In addition, as Laura B. McGrath has illustrated, the "comps" (or comparable titles) now conventionally used by editors to pitch a manuscript's sales potential to publishers—"books used to justify decisions about who gets published"—still overwhelmingly consist of titles written by white authors ("Comping White"). While, as of now, white readers with a liberal education remain the primary audience to which publishers of literary fiction appeal, Brouillette notes, "That a sizable enough audience for literary fiction can no longer be drawn from an aging white population will no doubt continue to be a site of industry alarm and reform" (128).

Looking at other trends in the output of major publishers over recent decades, it does appear that cultural, economic, and political shifts in the late twentieth-century US contributed to the production of enough "industry alarm and reform" for publishers to adjust their strategies in such a way as to measurably impact the range of authors published by conglomerate houses. While black authors saw only meager gains in the mainstream publishing industry in recent decades, the opposite proves true for women—specifically, white women. Drawing on publishing data spanning the late-twentieth century, So concludes that "[w]hite male authors, following the broader gender trend, are notably declining in this period, while white female authors are on the rise." Out of 187 fiction and nonfiction titles that appeared on the *New York Times* bestsellers list in 2021, 88—nearly half—were written by white women.[6] On Literary Hub's list of the most critically-acclaimed works of fiction published in 2021, based on reviews gathered from 150 publications, four out of ten books included were written by white women

[5] See Milliot, "Penguin Random House Authors and Creators Skew Heavily White," and Watson, *Publishing Industry Diversity in the U.S.*

[6] This data is available on the *New York Times* website, which posts a new "Best Sellers" list weekly.

("The Best Reviewed Fiction of 2021").[7] Thus, it seems in the publishing world, "White women are trading places with white men. White men are on the outs" (So 41).

In addition to the effects of publishing industry conglomeration, recent transformations in the technological conditions of book publishing and consumption have brought about other considerable changes to the literary landscape. In an essay reflecting on the impact of the gramophone on forms of popular music, Theodor Adorno asserts, "the transition from artisanal to industrial production transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed" (48). In the twenty-first century, the rise of corporate behemoth Amazon—the bookseller turned everything-seller whose technological infrastructure and literary ventures seem to expand by the day—plays an unignorable role the production of fiction today, as Mark McGurl argues in *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*. In its function as the largest book retailer, the publisher of fourteen book imprints representing a wide variety of genres, the owner of social media book review site Goodreads, and the host of popular self-publishing platform Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), Amazon looms large in any conversation about the present and future status of literature, particularly among the ranks of conglomerate publishers. McGurl expounds:

> As the more aggressive user of the internet, and as a company initially more concerned to capture market share than profits, Amazon has presented traditional publishing companies and their authors with the specter not of the commodification of literature, a long-standing fact, but of its *commoditization*: the reduction of intellectual property to a less and less profitable—because increasingly interchangeable and widely available—class of generic good. (McGurl 255)

[7] Furthermore, in 2021, white women made up one-fifth of the nominees for the National Book Awards, a third of the nominees for the Booker Prize, and two-fifths of the nominees for the PEN/Faulkner Award.

Enabling a vaster pool of aspiring writers to self-publish books through the KDP platform, Amazon's major intervention is "simply to step in and say 'more, please,'—more books, more *kinds* of books, more Goodreads lists, more countries, more authors, more languages, more transactions, and, if possible, all of them under the aegis of Amazon" (McGurl 106). While the massive and ever-expanding list of titles self-published and consumed via Amazon tends heavily toward popular genres, the literary fiction of mainstream publishers finds further definition—as a rarified breed of "serious" novelistic fiction, worthy of investment for its cultivation of prestige—in direct contrast with the genre-focused, mass market impulses of Amazon fiction.[8] In this way, the "anti-genre genre" of literary fiction takes shape against the genre fiction which most threatens its privileged position, encouraged by the mainstream publishers still hoping to profit from it.[9]

But any perceived threat to literary fiction posed by Amazon—which operates primarily as a technology company with vested interests in the book business and not vice versa—represents just one facet of more wide-reaching anxieties about the potential implications of twenty-first century technologies for the production and consumption of literature. An illustrative example of how such anxieties manifest in a different corner of the literary field can be found in the conflicted attitudes among literary scholars about the emergence of digital or computational humanities over the past two decades. Literary scholar N. Katherine Hayles, whose influential work at the intersection of technology and the humanities spans decades, has acknowledged that while "scholars in the humanities have felt threatened and underappreciated relative to more powerful and culturally central fields" in the sciences for some time, "perennial concerns are

[8] Furthermore, as Brouillette points out, "E-book sales have in some publishing areas made up for falling print sales, but not in the case of literary fiction." (124).
[9] This description of literary fiction as an "anti-genre genre" is borrowed from Wilkens.

now being exacerbated with the emergence of the digital humanities." (206) From their perspective, as Hayles describes it, "If computer algorithms could establish definite answers (such as whether or not a certain word appeared in a text, and if so how frequently) … the open space that the humanities has established for qualitative inquiry as a bulwark against quantitative results was at risk of crumbling" (206).

For many, the privileging of quantitative methods and data collection over critical reading and interpretation—or, put slightly differently, the relegation of creative, academic labor to the functions of algorithms—appears to be yet another expression of broader economic pressures on humanistic disciplines, stoked by the continuing corporatization of higher education.[10] Thus, these anxieties arise not only from vague, romantic concerns about art and the condition of the modern soul but also from—and in concert with—concerns about the future of artistic and humanistic disciplines as professions. While the digital humanities might seem to threaten the qualitative experience of humanistic inquiry, undermining what some believe to be the guiding aims of our disciplines, scholars' resistance to technology-dependent, quantitative approaches also arises from the existential threat they seem to pose to a certain kind of literary scholar and, beyond that, a certain kind of fiction upon which many such scholars' research depends.

In *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, writer and urbanist Adam Greenfield insists, "Whether most of us quite realize it or not, we already live in a time in which technical systems have learned at least some skills that have always been understood as indices of the deepest degree of spiritual attainment" (266). Google-subsidiary DeepMind has developed

[10] These pressures are perhaps now more immediately felt in the rapid, large-scale transition to distanced learning, through which course management systems, videoconferencing technologies, and other technological tools have been used to further rationalize instruction while necessitating additional, other labor from instructors—providing more visible evidence of the ongoing devaluation of academic labor already widely taking place.

AlphaGo, a program capable of playing the notoriously complex and ancient Chinese game Go, even demonstrating it could best an expert human player; Elon Musk's OpenAI has the text-generator GPT-3 (Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3), which has been used to produce original poetry, causing one writer to note that he "began to think of the A.I. not as a computer program but as an artist in its own right"; and Aiva Technologies boasts an AI called Aiva (short for Artificial Intelligence Virtual Artist), whose composed works of classical music have been "used as soundtracks for film directors, advertising agencies, and even game studios" (Greenfield; Rich; Kaleagasi). Still, few writers and critics of literary fiction claim to take seriously the possibility that algorithms and artificial intelligence will truly master or even succeed at replicating the strange alchemy of human creativity.

But what many do seem to take seriously, however, are the transformations of social experience and redefinitions of "reality" that modern technologies seem to have facilitated. Infamous disdainer of technology and lauded literary fiction author Jonathan Franzen, in his 2015 novel *Purity*, harshly critiques the tech-optimist idea that "the Internet is the greatest truth device ever," and writes of "[t]he brain reduced by machine to feedback loops, the private personality to a public generality: a person might as well have been already dead." Zadie Smith, another luminary of contemporary literary fiction, in a film review for *The New York Review of Books*, writes, "We know that we are using the software to behave in a certain, superficial way toward others. We know what we are doing 'in' the software. But do we know, are we alert to, what the software is doing to us?" (Smith). In an interview years later, Smith further comments, "The key with the unfreedom of the algorithm is that it knows everything and it feeds back everything. So, you can no longer have this bit of humanity which is absolutely necessary — privacy: the sacred space in which you do not know what the other thinks of you" (Dundas).

In general, today's writers of literary fiction seem to demonstrate a reluctance to directly engage with the technologies often charged with disrupting or undermining the kinds of psychological and social configurations often thought to constitute the realist novel as a form. Modern technologies now incorporated into so many other facets of everyday life, perhaps most notably the Internet, remain largely absent from the pages of literary fiction. As poet, novelist, and literary critic Patricia Lockwood, author of *No One Is Talking About This*, points out, "It's almost paranoid at this point that we haven't incorporated [the Internet] into our novels and into our work in the way that we've incorporated it into our lives." As Lockwood herself wonders, "Why are we afraid of doing that?" (Iversen).

In one scholarly account drawing attention to this tendency, Zara Dinnen poses a slightly different, though related question: "is everyday digital life too boring for literature? And what about its contemporaneity?" (166). Highlighting the surprising absence of now-ubiquitous, everyday technologies not only in the pages of recent literary fiction but equally in the critical works of those who study it, Dinnen notes:

> Glancing at the contents of currently available monographs and edited collections published on contemporary literature will tell you that literature today is barely interested in its digital conditions. Other than works explicitly interested in the potential antagonisms of old and new media, novels today are, by scholarly accounts, not interested in technological devices, informational logic, and networked sociality of contemporary digital culture. (Dinnen 167)

Dinnen argues that in the twenty-first century the perceived "banality" of our enmeshment with technologies, in particular digital media, can produce an artistic and critical disinterest in attending to how it may exert influence over aspects of our lives and lived experience as

subjects. In other words, the deliberate effacement of technology that pervasive technological mediation effects might contribute to literary fiction's (and literary scholarship's) dismissal of it.

But literary fiction's resistance to technology may also be strategic. As Alexander Manshel argues, writers of contemporary literary fiction seem to omit many recent technologies from their novels to circumvent the risk that their work might become "dated" in the way that some older, mass-market, genre fiction can now appear, hoping instead to evoke the quality of "timelessness" associated with literary prestige. From a marketing viewpoint, publishers might see a financial incentive for distinguishing literary fiction from other mass-market fiction in this way: to increase their literary fiction titles' long-term potential for future sales on their backlist. Ultimately, whether too banal or too contemporary, the technology that shapes and suffuses life in the twenty-first century poses risks for literary fiction—either its writers or its publishers—one that threatens some quality of literariness from which they derive sales or prestige.

At the intersection of publishing conglomerates' bottom lines, racial politics, and the technological mediation of everyday life, conglomerate literary fiction is frequently defined by what it lacks as equally as by any given prose style, diction, or critical function. The genre takes shape in the market through its texts' contrast with mass market genre fiction, their aversion to representing potentially dated or banal technologies, and frequently, still, their production by white authors. But what else can we see as aesthetically characterizing literary fiction in the present, and how can we understand its relation to the historical conditions from which literary fiction emerges?

The novels that constitute the focus of this dissertation's analysis—Rachel Cusk's *Transit*, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, Hilary Leichter's *Temporary*, and Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*—produce arguments for a certain

kind of serious, novelistic fiction's enduring artistic value as well as its present financial and cultural value for publishers while, at the same time, registering the historical forces and contemporary conditions which now compel "literary fiction" to perform these dual functions. They do so by effecting a kind of mystified realism that draws attention both to the sense of contemporary life's irrationality and to the material reality cloaked by the mystifications essential to the reproduction of capitalism. Privileging affective "authenticity" over realism, these novelists eschew direct representation of the material conditions which constitute everyday life and book publishing—namely, labor and technology—in favor of representing how these conditions make contemporary life *feel* mystifying. In other words, they strive to represent the present not necessarily *realistically* but *affectively*.[11] Registering the impossibility of collectively accessing an objective "reality" in a global capitalist system which feels increasingly unreal, they retreat to the level of individual embodiment and affect as last resorts for locating novelistic meaning and truth.

In *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction*, Alison Shonkwiler suggests contemporary literary fiction can be seen as "[reviving] the premodernist interest in demystification." The novels on which Shonkwiler focuses "raise questions about realism's changed capacity for social and economic critique," yet, she argues "they nonetheless demonstrate the contemporary persistence of the realist impulse to unmask the unreal" (xv). The novels at the center of this dissertation similarly demonstrate "the realist impulse to unmask the unreal," by first reproducing the processes of and attendant to capitalist

[11] In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson presents the dialectical tension between narrative and affect in literary representation as co-extensive with the opposition between *recit* and presence, predestination and the eternal present, and linearity and singularity. With the weakening of narrative against the conflicted temporalities of twenty-first century capitalism, Jameson sees the force of what remains for realism: the impersonal consciousness of affect, existing in a synchronic, episodic present.

mystification—from technological mediation to alienation and even fictionalization itself—in order to, in a sense, recreate the felt necessity for unmasking the unreal. As they demonstrate a thematic and stylistic preoccupation with transparency and opacity, the mechanical and the organic, and rationality and intuition, these novels attempt to grapple with the irresolvable tensions of these dualities by blurring them and even at times reversing their fixed meanings, furthermore complicating and intertwining mystification and demystification.

For this strain of literary fiction, with its emphasis on expressing the particularities of contemporary experience, the urge remains to express, represent, or lend form to the social totality of an impossibly opaque and complex global system. To do so, these novels reimagine technological systems as instead magical, mythical, or mystical processes within otherwise realistically-rendered, recognizable settings. Technical production—including literary production—becomes almost literally alchemical in these books. As Arthur C. Clarke famously insisted that "[a]ny sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," the same might be said of the "technologies," or technical processes, of artistic production.[12] In "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," anthropologist Alfred Gell writes, "The power of art objects stems from the technical processes that they objectively embody: the *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*." Thus, "The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form" (44). The conglomerate genre of literary fiction—comprised of technically-produced works of art which aim to cultivate an aura of literariness in a market-driven sphere—elicits a simultaneous enchantment and distrust appropriate to contemporary capitalism.

[12] This quote, which describes the first of "Clarke's Three Laws," first appears in the essay "Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination," published in Clarke's *Profiles of the Future* (1962).

This is perhaps why these products of conglomerate literary fiction seem to resonate so forcefully with Sianne Ngai's recent theorization of the gimmick—an aesthetic object that elicits awe and suspicion from viewers because its technical production appears at once transparent and opaque, too effortless and too contrived. As Ngai writes, "our captivation by 'technique' is the oscillation between knowledge and nonknowledge" or "the flicker between the socially transparent and opaque" as gimmicks exist as "commodities produced in a system in which labor is separated from means of production, in which the continual transformation of technology toward increasing productivity is compulsory, and in which social exploitation is hidden in the very forms that express it" (101). Although effacing the material, technological conditions of real-world production and consumption, the novels at the center of this dissertation attempt to *demystify* processes of capitalist mystification by forcing attention to the constructed-ness of the absences and illusions produced by mystification, particularly in the pages of conglomerate fiction.

Thus, magic and mysticism come to take the place of technical processes of production in these novels, representing how we affectively and aesthetically respond to them. When we respond to technically-produced works of art with the language of magic, Ngai suggests, "What we are… registering is how something about that process is not being construed—and in fact, is not possible to construe—directly from our perception of the object itself" (102). This sense of magic is produced when a technical object conjures for us the possibility of the "magic standard of zero work." The unconveyable thing that this aura of magical production (or really, technical artistry) belies is the social relations of production. Knowing this, it becomes possible to see why the literary fictions of Cusk, Heti, Kleeman, Leichter, and Egan in various ways literalize and narrativize technical processes of production as a kind of magic or suprasensible force. That

these novels were all written by white women with institutional ties or otherwise notable literary pedigrees provides even further occasion for analyzing how prestige literary texts are conditioned by writers' and publishers' respective anxieties about and incentives for aesthetic production in a literary ecosphere which attempts to veil the fact that it reflects, and sometimes magnifies, the same inequalities and precarities of contemporary social existence.

In Chapter One, "Self-Divining Society: The Gimmick of Autofiction in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk's *Transit*," I turn to the recent trend of autofiction in contemporary publishing as a particularly illustrative subgenre of conglomerate literary fiction. Analyzing the two autofictional novels through the lens of Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*, the chapter argues for an understanding of autofiction as a contemporary publishing gimmick, which evokes the technological and economic systems shaping everyday existence at the same time that it self-consciously presents them in mystified form. Building on Dan Sinykin's claim that "[i]n both its reality hunger and its depiction of its milieu, autofiction expresses the conditions of its production and negotiates those conditions to pry from them symbolic and financial capital… by expressing the contemporary pressures of authorship," I examine how Heti's *Motherhood* and Cusk's *Transit* express the conflicted conditions of their own production by recasting technical processes as occult practices (475).

While reflexively narrating the process of their literary production, these novels at the same time render literary production opaque by yoking these processes to divinatory consultations—of the *I Ching* and of the stars, respectively—which they represent as thematically and formally significant for their final published products. In this way, I suggest that these novels invoke occult practices to effectively mirror the gimmick of autofiction as a genre, which elicits fascination and suspicion from readers with its simultaneous claims to reality and

fiction, transparency and opacity, "knowledge and nonknowledge." As such, the chapter argues that Heti's and Cusk's autofictions illuminate how the publishing subgenre of autofiction assumes its particular aesthetic form in a strategic bid to generate both prestige and sales, creating the appearance of a gimmick which at once demystifies and re-mystifies literary production, as well as technological processes of capitalist production in the twenty-first century more generally.

Extending this engagement with how processes and conditions of production find strange figuration in contemporary literary fiction, Chapter Two, "Ghost Work: Self-Service and the Mystification of Labor in Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and Hilary Leichter's *Temporary*," argues that the prestige genre of high postmodernism and the popular genre of self-help converge in Kleeman's novel to evince the hidden influence of self-service in fiction and in retail, ultimately lending form to literary fiction's dual imperatives to cultivate literary distinction and appeal widely to consumers. It begins by articulating how Kleeman's novel strategically reuses key themes and settings from Don DeLillo's *White Noise* while continually invoking the therapeutic impulse, establishing a parallel between representations of consumer labor in fiction and the motif of "working on yourself" in popular self-help. Tracing the logic of self-service through the "practicality hunger" Beth Blum locates in contemporary fiction and the "servile domination" Mark McGurl identifies as Amazon's guiding ideology, the chapter argues that *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* produces a critique of and capitulation to the mechanisms of conglomerate publishing that perpetuate profitable illusions about autonomous literary production and therapeutic consumption.

The chapter concludes by contrasting Kleeman's novel, published by Big Five conglomerate HarperCollins, with Leichter's *Temporary*, published by the nonprofit Coffee

House Press, to make a case for how the "realist irrationality" both novels employ to represent contemporary life in the self-service economy manifests in notably distinct ways, and even functions to disparate ends, ultimately testifying to the differences in how literary fiction is valued by and functions for conglomerate and nonprofit publishers.

Finally, in Chapter Three, "Now You See Me: Literary Voice and Defacement in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*," I shift my focus to a slightly earlier moment in the "contemporary" to explore the ways that Egan's second novel, which predates her Pulitzer-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by a decade, reproduces the disjointed temporalities of photographic technology and finance capital to suggest the novel as a "magical" technology for producing Egan's future prestige. Beginning with the uncannily reconstructed face of *Look at Me*'s central character, a fashion model named Charlotte, I take up Michael Taussig's concept of "defacement" to think through how the face—in commercial photographs and as re-created by surgeons— functions literally and metaphorically in the novel as a mediating screen that at once mystifies and reveals the production of subjectivity. I demonstrate that the filmed re-enactment of Charlotte's real-life defacement initiates a process of corporate self-authorship that allows her to renegotiate the temporal structure of the narrative, enabling Charlotte access to an "authentic" self beyond the image-commodity of her face. At the same time, Charlotte's private ownership of this authentic self—figured as her voice—is equally sustained by and sustains the continuing profitability of her image as a corporate brand.

In this way, I argue, "voice" becomes both the locus of "authenticity" as well as the basis for financial success in the novel, which replicates how the perceived "authenticity" of literary voice serves to distinguish literary fiction from other genres in the publishing industry. Drawing from sources ranging from Benjamin to Mladen Dolar to recent computational studies of literary

voice in twenty-first century publishing, the chapter makes a case for understanding *Look at Me* as Egan's own attempt at cultivating a uniquely contemporary literary voice that, through the recursive temporality of the novel as a technology, re-renders her career as both profitable and prestigious. The chapter ultimately argues that the novel's fascination with mediation, re-enactment, and self-creation registers not only the technological and financial context of its production in the late 1990s, but also Egan's own relation to the conditions of authorship at that time.

Overall, the impetus of this dissertation is at once to pierce through the "magic" veil of twenty-first century literary fiction as a conglomerate genre and to examine how its literary texts uniquely figure, express, or self-consciously conceal the cultural, technological, and social aspects of production in the contemporary US. Following Timothy Bewes's assertion that "[l]anguage functions as a mechanical apparatus, just as much as the camera or the piece of recording equipment," I read each of these novels as artifacts and expressions of larger systems and processes (economic, technological, and historical), looking for moments of "intentionlessness" that register the contingencies of technological production and consumption, which Walter Benjamin originally attributed to the optical unconscious of photography (Bewes 18). At the same time, I take to heart the assertion by Jasper Bernes, that "[a]ttending to the moment of production within circulation means attending to the openness of the cultural object in its moment of facture, as it appeared to the makers in their own historical moment." Because, as Bernes continues, "Even if we understand cultural objects to be symptomatic, to reveal themselves as having been blind to what they really were, or what they really could be, we still must understand the desires and aspirations that formed them" (33). What this means in practice is a commitment to holding enough space in criticism for artistic intention and creation, aesthetic

effects and judgments, and historical relations and forces of production to adhere meaningfully in any analysis of literature as texts and as cultural, material objects. It requires thinking through literature in its synchronic and diachronic existences, looking for moments of continuity and novelty as they appear in individual texts and across multiple authors' works, and interrogating how the mechanisms of production and consumption work simultaneously, in contradiction and in cooperation in the present and over time, to shape the limits of possibility within which literature, its writers, and its readers live and against which we perpetually struggle.

Admittedly, this commitment entails a necessarily fraught, flexible, and open-ended approach to literature. The categories of the contemporary, the literary, and the fictional remain unresolved problems throughout each of the following chapters. Recognizing how they are conditioned by their historical existences and present usages, these categories attain new significance and allow for generative, new approaches to individual texts, which then contribute to a deeper understanding of how literary fiction functions as one incarnation of the novel (among many others) in the twenty-first century. As Jameson professes, in *Marxism and Form*:

> .... the essential movement of all dialectical criticism… is to reconcile the inner and the outer, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the existential and the historical, to allow us to feel our way within a single determinate form or moment of history at the same time that we stand outside of it, in judgment on it as well, transcending that sterile and static opposition between formalism and a sociological or historical use of literature between which we have so often been asked to choose. (Jameson 331)

As such, historical, theoretical, and sociological analyses appear alongside close-readings of literature throughout the dissertation, as each chapter seeks to articulate how literary fiction as a publishing genre—aesthetically, thematically, and commercially—emerges historically from and

against the imperatives and effects of industry conglomeration, as well as the larger technological and economic conditions of contemporary life, and how one identifiable strand of this genre expresses and lends form to the contradictions of its production in the present.

CHAPTER 1

Self-Divining Society: The Gimmick of Autofiction in Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk's *Transit*

Introduction

To date, most published writing about autofiction understands the term as a convenient portmanteau for a loosely defined and frequently disputed genre, primarily characterized by its blend of autobiographical and fictional impulses, and often rendered in the novel form.[13] While the term and its would-be genre originated in France in the 1970s, it has recently garnered considerable attention in English-language publishing and literary criticism.[14] Chris Kraus, Karl Ove Knausgård, Tao Lin, Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Rachel Cusk, Teju Cole, and Jenny Offill represent only a handful of the most prominent writers associated with autofiction's twenty-first century resurgence in North America and the United Kingdom. These writers boast reputations built upon literary fiction critically and popularly perceived as experimental, obsessively detailed, and almost exhibitionist in nature, showcasing narratives that hew perilously close to what many would consider the writers'

[13] Hywel Dix, with slightly more precision, claims, "Drawing attention to discontinuities, lacunae, inconsistencies and contradictions within and between different forms of self-narrative, autofiction is a means of serializing multiple fictive aspects of the narrating self." More plainly, Dan Sinykin explains, "Autofiction features protagonists whose characteristics and situations so closely resemble those of the author—often down to their name—that such novels invite readers to mistake fiction for real life" (474). Marjorie Worthington alternately provides a more reader-focused definition when claiming that "autofiction occupies a liminal space between fiction and nonfiction that requires continuous adjustments to the reading process as the novel vacillates between biographical fact and outright fiction" (472). These represent just a small sample of the competing definitions of autofiction as an impulse, a technique, or a genre.

[14] Serge Doubrovsky is widely credited with coining the term for his 1977 novel *Fils*, but according to Google Trends, searches for the term have been rising annually since around 2010, with those searches largely confined to New York and California. In a 2018 feature, titled "A Premature Attempt at the 21st Century Canon" and published by *NY Magazine*'s online culture wing, *Vulture*, a panel of thirty-two critics (including former *New York Times* head critic Michiko Kakutani, *Artforum* editor-in-chief David Velasco, *Los Angeles Review of Books* editor-in-chief Tom Lutz, *New York* book critic Christian Lorentzen, *n+1* co-editor Nikil Saval, National Book Critics Circle president Kate Tuttle, and poet Eileen Myles) included twenty titles marketed or reviewed by at least one outlet as autofictional in their list of the "100 most important books of the 2000s… so far." Tope Folarin, writing for *The New Republic* in 2020, described autofiction as "the hottest trend of the last decade."

"real lives."[15] While discourses on autofiction almost always foreground how these texts exploit the boundary between fact and fiction—avowing the fictional status of their representations of real people and events—comparatively little attention has been paid to how twenty-first century autofiction emerges from a markedly different historical context than that of its would-be predecessors in postwar France. Yet, across its meaningfully disparate contexts, autofiction appears united in its mystification of the social and technological forces which produce the autobiographical subject and text that tethers it to reality.

During a 1997 interview with *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Serge Doubrovsky, the French writer generally hailed as the progenitor of autofiction, reflected that as a human being and particularly as an artist, "[t]he meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing," explaining that "this is what [he] personally call[s] *autofiction*" (400). Twenty years earlier, in his 1977 novel *Fils*, Doubrovsky drew liberally from the tradition of autobiographical fiction, attempting to cast himself into fresh critical terrain in the wake of Roland Barthes' seminal essay on "The Death of the Author" and amid the ongoing popularization of deconstruction and other French theory which posited the self as a necessarily constructed fiction. *Fils* presented the literary world with such a seemingly realistic account of the writer's own life that it invited scrutiny, further encouraged by its writer and publisher, about the extent to which the events and personal experiences that appeared within the novel were fictionalized and the purpose and value of its claims to fiction.

This gambit appeared to provide a response to what Philippe Lejeune not long beforehand described as the "autobiographical pact," wherein a writer, by making claims to autobiography—a

[15] See Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997), Knausgård's *My Struggle* series (2009-2011), Lin's *Shoplifting from American Apparel* (2009), Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2013), Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Cusk's *Outline* (2014), Cole's *Open City* (2011), and Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014).

genre in which the figures of the narrator, the protagonist, and the writer coincide—elicits the reader's trust by promising to truthfully recount the events of their life [QTD on 7 in Worthington]. [1] *Fils*' autofiction attempts to complicate the "autobiographical pact" by centering the already assumed instability of the relationship between writer and reader, as it acknowledges the elusiveness of objective reality when filtered through personal recollection and transcribed into narrative (Lacarme). As Doubrovsky conceived of it, autofiction argues for the possibility of recovering authentic meaning through writing by its embrace of the fictionalizing inherent in the function of memory, and as additional French writers adopted or inherited the generic label first employed by Doubrovsky, the narrative function of memory continued to be the preeminent focus of autofictional texts, emphasizing affective realism by troubling the waters of referentiality. To point, Catherine Cusset, another well-known French author of autofictional novels, frames her understanding of autofiction as dependent on the meaning of "truth" not as objective data, but affective interpretation. For Cusset, much like Doubrovsky, autofiction raises questions about how to represent real experience in writing, but these questions ultimately bear down on truth's relationship to emotion and memory as opposed to any facet of external reality. This is one reason that autofiction often appears more invested in writing's production of the self than in material conditions' production of this kind of self-writing.

However, in a notable break from the tradition established by Doubrovsky, French novelist Anne Garréta challenged critical undervaluation of the material conditions which produce the autofictional writer and text. Garréta drew this critical insight from the root of the term "autofiction" in Doubrovsky's own work, a point of origin largely overshadowed since the publication of *Fils* (Lévesque-Jalbert). As also noted by Karen Ferreira-Myers, Garréta points out that Doubrovsky's choice of the neologism "auto-fiction" originally resulted from both a winking reference to the

setting of the missing scene's composition—the interior of his automobile—and the scene's iterative, cyclical figuration of the creative process itself: it is a dream of a scene of writing about dreams about writing about dreams (and so on and so on). With the context of this originating scene, Garréta explains, "The auto of autofiction is not so much the 'self' than a mechanical car (or better yet, the condensation of a 'self' and a motor vehicle); and fiction is a recursive *mise en abyme* of the dream of the book'" (229). From its very beginning, then, "autofiction" refers not only to the autobiographical quality of Doubrovsky's fiction but also to the automobile in which he writes and to the fiction writing automatically generated through the fantasy Doubrovsky entertains about writing it. That the scene in which the term initially appears ultimately disappears from the published edition of the novel, only to be referenced on the book's back cover, seems to amplify the significance of autofiction's referential slipperiness and the eventual elision of its original context. In her re-interpretation, Garréta highlights the crucial if overlooked historical enmeshment of autofiction with the technological and socioeconomic conditions of its production and, beyond that, its enmeshment with a particular machine—which for Doubrovsky appears in the form of the automobile, arguably the most pivotal midcentury technology.

One strand of recent Anglophone autofiction resonates with the veiled though significant influence of social and material conditions that Garréta pinpoints in Doubrovsky, counterintuitively registering the valences of material forces through their very elision. In Rachel Cusk's *Transit* (2016) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), socioeconomic and technological forces manifest not in "the condensation of a 'self' and a motor vehicle," but in what first appears as the condensation of a self and a recording device as their writer-narrators avow to transcribe the "truth" of a historical period in which technology mediates nearly every aspect of life, in which memory is perpetually encoded, emotion quantified, and sociality virtualized. Much like Doubrovsky's automobile-fiction,

however, their technological roots seem strangely absent from these novels' pages, appearing only in the reverberations of dream-like mystification.

For contemporary autofiction published by mainstream presses and written by authors who already wield a certain amount of literary clout, such as Cusk and Heti, self-conscious thematizations of the process of their own writing and the omission of larger socio-technological conditions represent a strategic compromise between literary prestige—best identified with much autofiction's romantic portrayals of the artist—and publishers' demands for literary fiction's commercial profitability.[16] This kind of upmarket autofiction authorizes a profitable fiction of its authors' texts as more authentically realistic and meaningfully distinct from the proliferating products of genre fiction and self-publishing, texts which frequently and directly represent the technological present and its imagined futures.

Strikingly, Rachel Cusk's and Sheila Heti's autofictions do not represent their socio-technological contexts but in many ways *assume their form*, effectively disappearing the social relations—and thus the labor—upon which opaque technological processes depend by rendering production as a magical, not a technical, process which still bears a meaningful connection to human individuals. At once romanticizing the labors that produce a novel as magical, affective, and non-technical while reinscribing capital's mystification of the social as a technological process, Cusk's and Heti's novels stage the powerlessness of the individual to comprehend her relation to the world as she is suspended between global systems of technological production and a lingering belief in the value of the human. They testify to anxieties surrounding a certain kind of literary production in the twenty-first century, as conglomeration, digitization, and automation transform publishing and society more broadly. The contradictions evinced by the most compelling instances of autofiction—

[16] For more on autofiction as embodying the socioeconomic imperatives of publishing in the "conglomerate era," see Sinykin.

between reality and fictionality; creative inspiration and systematic tasks; the freedom of individual genius and the universal fate of human existence—give rise to compelling questions about the social relations that bind these antinomies and the means by which the social is made to magically disappear through them.

Such an understanding of autofiction fuels what follows in this chapter, which first establishes the fraught connection between the writer-narrators and technological recording devices in *Transit* and *Motherhood* before considering how these novels, as well as autofiction more broadly, offer compelling examples of Sianne Ngai's theory of the capitalist "gimmick," an aesthetic object which appears as "both a wonder *and* a trick," veiling and revealing the contradictions of capitalist production (469). Building on Ngai's generative critique of the counterposing magical and technical processes which the gimmick seems to simultaneously evoke, the chapter then examines how magical practices of divination in Cusk's and Heti's novels function as foils to technologies such as artificial intelligence and automation in order to shed light on how autofiction's literary sheen derives in part from its visible resistance to and invisible imbrication with the technologies that now suffuse and structure publishing, as well as society more broadly. Finally, the discussion concludes by revisiting and further explicating how *Transit*'s and *Motherhood*'s complicated disavowals of technology, often staged in their experiments with temporality, ultimately testify to myriad fears and anxieties about the meaning of humanity and of literature in an imagined technological future, the fantasy of which thrives by mystifying social labors in the present.

Autofiction: A Recording Device or a Gimmick?

A thematic and formal investment in transcribing the affective experiences of women narrators during significant periods of literal and metaphorical transition, indecision, or suspension

perhaps most visibly unites Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk's *Transit*, two of the most critically visible and lauded autofictional novels of the past decade. The novels grapple with the equivocating relationship between writing and living in the world, a dilemma represented through the figuration of writer-as-recording device, which seemingly allows for both living and writing to take place concurrently.

Heti's *Motherhood*, published in the United States by Henry Holt & Co. in 2018, ultimately poses a single question over which the text prevaricates and to which it variously capitulates and resists, namely: what does it mean to actively (or passively) choose not to be a mother? For its duration, Heti submerges her readers in the consciousness of a writer rapidly approaching forty, an age which signifies for her an end to the lingering possibility of giving birth to children of her own. The narrator, Sheila, a transparent facsimile of Heti, wrestles self-consciously with indecision about the value of the life she is creating for herself and seeks answers to her uncertainty through methods that seem to push the narrator further from an answer to motherhood and deeper into the exercise of writing.

Cusk's *Transit*, published by Vintage in 2016 as a sequel to her 2014 novel *Outline*, finds the series' elusive and opaque narrator, a writer named Faye, having recently relocated to London after a divorce. Over the course of the novel, she absorbs the stories of the many friends and colleagues she encounters, listening to the builders who renovate her new house, to the students who populate her writing class, to the male authors on her panel at a literary festival, and to a dinner party of middle-aged couples, restless or resolved to reorient their lives. Throughout, Faye remains strikingly absent from her own narration, rarely interjecting or explicating her thoughts in great detail. As she remarks, "it was hard to listen while you were talking. I had found out more, I said, by listening than

I had ever thought possible." This is seemingly Faye's avowed function: to listen like a recording device so that the reader can access reality at the same time and in the same way as she does.

In *Transit*, Cusk presents a narrator who appears functionally indistinguishable from the kind of technology that would enable the lengthy, detailed, transcriptive style of her storytelling: the recording device. The theme of recording recurs in a number of scenes throughout the *Outline* novels, and critics especially have seized on this idea. Profiling Cusk for *The Cut*, Heidi Julavits writes, "Faye describes, or really more accurately transcribes, her encounters with other people… She is less an interlocutor than a recording device or a processing machine." Similarly, Dwight Garner, reviewing *Transit* for *The New York Times*, suggests, "There's a constant sense of Ms. Cusk's mind whirling, as if she were forever, in the background, performing an internal disk check." In yet another example, during an interview with Cusk for *The Paris Review*, Heti echoes these descriptions, remarking to Cusk that "The narrator, Faye, hears and witnesses. She's almost like a recording device." Again and again, critics describe narration in Cusk's work as a technological process of production, yet most often as a metaphor for the narrator's work instead of a description of Cusk's own productive process.

Whether they themselves acknowledge or their texts merely draw critics' attention to the technological aspects of their narration, both Heti's and Cusk's novels affirm a belief in the kind of transcription performed by a recording device as the best strategy for authentically capturing the experience of living today. Heti's description of Cusk in particular holds weight because she too conjures a narrator intentionally conflated with a recording device in her 2010 autofiction *How Should a Person Be?*, in which "Sheila" (the fictionalized version of Heti who narrates) purchases a digital tape recorder with which she records the myriad conversations that constitute the bulk of the novel that follows. After the publication of that novel, Heti admitted that it reflects part of her own

real-life writing strategy. Marrying recording, or "taping," with transcribing, to form a singular, compound process, Heti commented, "Taping and transcribing was part of looking around to see what things were really like in my environment," an approach apparently shared by Chris Kraus, the author of *I Love Dick*, another touchstone of the contemporary autofictional form ("Sheila Heti on *How Should a Person Be?*"). When interviewed by Heti herself in 2013, Kraus avowed, "Literally, I see my writing as transcription—a transcription of what I see, hear, think, live" (Kraus).

For both Heti and Kraus, transcription, as Alexandra Kingston-Reese argues, "is the mode that emerges as best suited to capturing the banalities of everyday life today: a merging together of experience and novel form that brings the present into both writing and reading" (110). But such a claim about these contemporary writers of autofiction's embrace of transcription as a writing strategy also contains the kernel of an argument once made by Walter Benjamin, that "[o]nly the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text..." (448). With this, Benjamin describes transcription as a bodily engagement of the reader that simultaneously transforms them into a sort of automatic writer, a mechanized body which allows for the full engagement of the metaphysical self. What autofictional transcription reveals, then, appears less to be the "banalities of everyday life," or the real "environment" as Heti asserts, than it is the "soul of [her] who is occupied with it"—in other words, not the readers of autofiction but its writers.

While transcription is understood as the "mode" of writing employed by writers of autofiction, who seek (like Doubrovsky) to "open up" new truths of their experience through its rewriting, recording devices serve as a modern technological metaphor for the writers themselves as they attempt to capture the authentic "now" of experience. But when a writer's transcription of experience appears to transform the writer-narrator into a recording device, the work of writing such

transcription requires is also transformed and subsumed into the writer-narrator's perpetual present of personal experience. Perhaps Cusk's narrator in particular seems to function like a recording device in *Transit* because the novel's reader never encounters a description of her actually writing. While *Motherhood* includes self-conscious meditations on the pleasures and pain of writing, the literal recording device used by Sheila of *How Should a Person Be?* disappears in favor of her consultation of the *I Ching*. Instead of just using one, Sheila becomes the recording device.

Yet, as already noted, despite their numerous comparisons to recording devices and their emphases on transcribing life "authentically," Heti's and Cusk's autofictional narrators provide strikingly little detail about either the socioeconomic or technological conditions of the contemporary world. Heti and Cusk rarely mention cell phones, computers, or the internet; they infrequently allude to money or debt; and as a result of their heavy focus on internal monologue and conversation, respectively, they provide remarkably few contextual details about the material worlds in which they take place. Instead, their narrators strive to "record" the arguably ineffable vagaries of affect, whether their own (in Heti's case) or others' (in Cusk's case). They efface the mechanical form evoked by recording devices by taking the metaphysical and the individual, as opposed to the material and social, as the content of their transcription. Taken together, Heti's *Motherhood* and Cusk's *Transit* demonstrate how autofiction can the form of a technological process itself and, furthermore, perform the self-effacement necessary to obscure its technical production. As Alexander Galloway posits in *The Interface Effect*, "any mediating technology is obliged to erase itself to the highest degree possible in the name of unfettered communication, but in so doing it proves its own virtuosic presence as technology thereby undoing the original erasure" (62). With this in mind, autofiction's mediating form can be studied both for what it obscures about itself in its aim of representing reality and how it reveals itself as a product of that reality.

Heti's and Cusk's novels appear to show readers the process of their own production, the writers' lives as they live them, resulting implicitly or explicitly in the book the reader holds in front of them. The reality is much more complicated. The author's life in some sense provides the source material for the writing, but the work of writing—and not just writing but rewriting, editing, copyediting, and even pitching—produces the text's claims to the status of "autofiction," as does the design, marketing, and distribution of the book, which influences readers' frameworks for understanding the text and their access to it, all with the aim (at least on the publisher's end) of maximizing sales or prestige. In its existence as a critical and commercial genre, autofiction demonstrates how a technical process of capitalist production can come to define the aesthetic existence of an object above and beyond any other aspect of it, providing perhaps the most compelling generic literary example of Sianne Ngai's theorization of the capitalist "gimmick."

As Ngai explains, "We call things gimmicks when it becomes radically uncertain if they are working too hard or too little, if they are historically backward or just as problematically advanced, if they are wonders or tricks" (49). As an aesthetic form, gimmicks elicit contradictory logical and affective judgment from its viewers because of their appearance of being at once magical (or labor-free) and mechanically transparent (or clearly contrived). In this way, Ngai contends, gimmicks lend form to the antinomies of late capitalism, in which technological advancements lead not to less and more fulfilling work but instead serve to reduce necessary labor time while intensifying the actual human labor undertaken to boost productivity, and in which employment becomes increasingly more temporary and precarious. Ngai argues that the aesthetic gimmick fascinates precisely because it creates the appearance of both transparency (as a trick laid bare) and complexity (as a wonder that dazzles) that renders its viewers ambivalent and mystified about the social process it at once reveals and obscures.

Describing a form of writing that narrates the process of its own production, the label of autofiction itself functions as a sort of marketing gimmick, collapsing two seemingly irreconcilable generic categories into a new category infused with an air of innovation and a cloud of ambiguity. Authors of autofiction appear to work too little because they fall back on copying people and events from their own lives to populate their stories instead of imagining pure fictions. They also appear to work too hard in making their claims to fictionality, whether merely in name or in practice. This explains why, despite their assertions to the contrary, the novels' writer-narrators ultimately read less as recording devices than narrative gimmicks: their autofictional status always elicits some amount of confusion or suspicion from readers. Ngai articulates this crucial distinction, explaining, "A device cannot be a gimmick—it would just neutrally be a device—without this moment of distrust and aversion, which seems to respond directly to or even correct our initial euphoria in the image of something promising to lessen human toil" (472). This intertwinement of skepticism and exhilaration in readers' aesthetic judgment of autofiction naturally complicates the function of these writer-narrators. Unlike authors of autobiography, who are bound to the "autobiographical pact" of trust between writer and reader, autofiction solicits its readers' trust with a winking acknowledgment that promises, as they say, were made to be broken.[17] In the same way, the apparent neutrality of recording is undermined by the engineered technology of the device itself.

As a result, the production of autofiction reads as a process readily transparent in that the reader feels more knowledgeable about how the writer generates novelistic material, yet still confoundingly opaque in that the reader remains mystified about the techniques by which the

[17] Bran Nicol explains, "Where the autobiographical pact secures the reader's sympathy in return for the author's sincerity, the autofictional pact is more of a proviso or a get-out clause: it promises autobiographical fiction, and draws attention to the act of constructing its author's identity before the reader's very eyes…, but it does not demand sympathy as it acknowledges it may not be an authentic account of the past" (271-2). For more on the "autobiographical pact," see Lejeune's *On Autobiography* (1989); for more on the "autofictional pact," see Jacques Lacarme, "L'autofiction, un mauvais genre?", in *Autofictions & Cie*, ed. Serge Doubrovsky (1993).

writer's experiences transform into something that qualifies as fiction. Towards the end of *Motherhood*, Sheila writes, "In the early days of writing this book, I thought it would be a trick: that I would write it and it would tell me whether I wanted to have a child. You think you are creating a trick with your art, but your art ends up tricking you" (273). The gimmick of autofictional texts—the avowal that what they contain bears a more meaningful, immediate connection to reality than other fiction while remaining essentially fictional themselves—provides the form's most characteristic and unifying feature and demonstrates how autofiction, in the most basic sense, depends upon the confusion produced by this contradiction. The recurring invocation and evocation of the recording device exemplifies the contradictions at work here: a technology's claim to more direct representation serves to obscure the particular qualities of its mediating function.

In *Motherhood* and *Transit*, the would-be "gimmick" of autofiction becomes doubled in the "gimmick" of magical practices of divination, emphasizing how difficult a task it is to disentangle the real from the fictional, the mechanical from the human, and agency from automatism when it comes to capitalist processes of production. In *Motherhood*, Heti consults a modified version of the ancient *I Ching*, in which the tossing of coins supplies answers to the real Heti's yes or no questions, ostensibly actually shaping how Heti produces her text and directing the narrator-Heti's writing within the novel. This algorithmic consultation ritual also emphasizes the humanity of Heti's narrator, which is primarily evidenced by her irregular, unpredictable creative process and further represented through the novel's fragmented sections, multimodality, and Heti's use of the menstrual cycle as the text's organizing structure. Cusk's *Transit* begins with the narrator's description of an auto-generated email sent by an online astrology service whose predictions, while never foreclosed to the reader, will later signal the novel's climax and reappear at its conclusion. The algorithmically-produced astrologer brings about the novel's first of many opportunities for its narrator to

characteristically recount and reflect on something said to her by a friend, concerning the uncanny intimacy communicated by the automated human voices now used widely and frequently, particularly in public transit announcements. Representing the tension between machinic logic and intuitive interpretation, the early introduction of the *I Ching* and the astrological report provides a structure and symbolism for both novels that gestures toward the compulsory artifice of fictional representations of reality and simultaneously reasserts the authentic significance of the authors' creative interpretations. Famously, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) appears as the most notable (if not the only) postwar Anglophone novel in which the *I Ching* functions in a similar way—to direct both extratextual formal decisions and intratextual narrative—allowing its author, Philip K. Dick, to exploit the porous yet opaque boundary between reality and its potential alternatives.[18]

In a prefatory note to *Motherhood* which appears as the novel's first page, Heti tells the reader about the *I Ching*: "a divination system that originated in China over three thousand years ago," which requires the tossing of coins and the consultation of an interpretative text, described as "poetic, dense, highly symbolic and intricately systematic, profoundly philosophical, cosmological in its sweep, and notoriously arcane." From these first moments, Heti is already establishing a connection between the ancient text and her own novel. At the end of the note, Heti informs the reader, "In the pages that follow, three coins are used—a technique inspired by the *I Ching*, but not the actual *I Ching*, which is," she clarifies, "something different." With this, Heti seems to caution against the likely possibility that the reader will be tempted to confuse Heti's "real" life with the fictionalized version that she presents in the novel. But on the following page, the reader encounters "A Further Note," which avers, "In this book, all results from the flipping of coins result from the flipping of actual coins." While this vow serves as a solicitation of trust from the reader by

[18] For more on Dick's use of the *I Ching* as both a compositional technique and narrative element, see Mountfort.

promising that Heti's depiction of her own formal technique is transparently "real," and that Heti herself, in a sense, is "really" trusting the coins that she just endowed with authority, she also seems to be intentionally confounding what appeared to be the previous note's dismissal of direct referentiality. With these two notes in tension, Heti at once acknowledges the "trick" that produces her novel and insists on its transparency and authenticity. The inclusion of these prefatory notes and the novel's marketing as autofiction work in a similar manner: implying a text's higher degree of referentiality while avowing its fictionality binds readers in a spell of uncertainty that, while potentially repelling, simultaneously attracts.

Throughout *Motherhood*, Heti's interactions with the modified *I Ching* lead to conversations between Sheila and the coins that fuse the feeling of invoking the mystical with that of engaging with a familiar form of technology, continually positing magic against logic. As a result of Heti's modified *I Ching* method, as Mark Currie argues, the novel "stages a contest between superstitious forms of divination and more rational systems…" and while the coin-tossing functions as the primary divinatory tool, "there are also dreams, prophecies, tarot cards, fortune-tellers… pitched against processes of reasoning, calculation, and decision making..." (3). Towards the end of the novel, Sheila laments that both in writing the book and coming to a decision about motherhood, she "wanted to do it by old-fashioned means—means that didn't work—delving into my past, religion, spirituality dreams—not by modern means, which are easy, and work…" (241). Peppered with dashes, commas, and associative lists, this section of the novel feels almost asyndetonic, juxtaposing the soft flow of the intuitive, spiritual strategies she desires and the hard interruptions of "modern," rational systems which she cannot elude. It acknowledges Heti's coin-tossing technique serves as a formal inscription of this thematic tension between magic and rationality, highlighting the

technique's illusory appearance as effortless creation within the novel while utilizing it as a formal structure for actually producing the novel.

This tension between the appearance of magic and underlying technological production serves a formal purpose in Cusk's novel as well. In the opening paragraph of *Transit*, Cusk's narrator, Faye, receives an email advertising an astrological report that supposedly contains crucial information about her future, gleaned from the movement of planets and her relationship to the stars. The scheme immediately arouses suspicion in Faye, who muses:

> It seemed possible that the same computer algorithms that had generated this email had also generated the astrologer herself: her phrases were too characterful, and the note of character was repeated to often; she was too obviously based on a human type to be, herself, human. (Cusk 3)

Although Faye knows that in all probability both the report and the "astrologer" who authored it were algorithmically-produced, the first chapter closes with the admission that "[she] paid the money and read what it said" (9). Faye's decision to pay for the report despite her skepticism about the authenticity of its source provides an interpretative framework for everything that follows it in the novel, much in the same way that Heti's prefatory notes function for *Motherhood*. Cusk's narrator can express disbelief about the astrologer's report while simultaneously enabling it to influence the structure of the novel because her credible disbelief depends on the assumption of more credulous others, paralleling how a reader might scoff at the gimmick of autofiction while materially contributing to its critical or popular success.

When considering autofiction, the crux of Ngai's account resides in the power that functions in and through gimmicks regardless of how transparent their tricks may seem—that gimmicks shroud technical processes in a veil appearing simultaneously magical and cheaply wrought, but that

they retain their illusory power because the illusion is social in nature. The transparency of the trick belies the opacity of the society that produces it. Ngai writes, "We read our horoscopes, erect Christmas trees, and wear special jerseys on game day, even when we 'see through' these illusions, do not believe in them or think of them as 'ours.' Ownerless illusions are therefore 'objective' illusions: systematically displaced to other agents and *in exactly this way* collectively realized" (97).

Reading the cosmic advice of a popular astrology column, Theodor Adorno found, in 1953, "the type of irrationality in which the total order of our life presents itself to most individuals: opaqueness and inscrutability" (20). Here, Adorno describes the opaqueness of the technological, administered world which he saw doubled in astrology, with modern technology existing as a sort of scientific doppelganger for the divinatory practices of astrology, each offering a different mask of abstract authority to rationalize the invisible, inscrutable forces to which we all are subject. "In as much as the social system is the 'fate' of most individuals independent of their will and interests," Adorno continues, "it is projected upon the stars in order thus to obtain a higher degree of dignity and justification in which the individuals hope to participate themselves" (42). Many people in a technological, rationalized, and alienating system find themselves drawn to astrology's forecasts, Adorno argues, because the column's "overrealism"—its presentation of seemingly objective advice and its insistence on the significance of small, everyday choices—restores to its readers a belief in the agency of individual humans while offering an abstract authority to provide meaningful direction, and which obscures the irrationality of the system that really shapes human lives. In other words, the uneasy awareness of the increasing insignificance of individual action within the vast machinations of global capital manifests as equally in astrology's occult logic as it does in technological fetishism.

In the same fashion, Heti and Cusk's novels cast a mystifying veil over the real conditions from which they emerge while evincing their authenticity through direct contrast with imaginative fiction and nonfiction, casting the worlds of their narrators as more objectively rendered and impersonally produced. They first present their narrators—and authors—as recording devices who transcribe reality. But this characterization, when met with these texts' claim to the novel genre, forces readers to perpetually stall in their determination of what is true and what is fiction, what is transcription and what is imagination, what is authentically human and what is essentially artificial, lending their relationship to the technological and social conditions of their production the magical appearance of being anything but social.

The Human and the Machine, or the Machine in the Human

Presenting their narrators—and thus suggesting their authors—as recording devices, *Motherhood* and *Transit* subtly redefine the technical role of narration as the writer to produce quasi-mystical, fictional yet authentic models of the "human" by amalgamating data from the real world, identifying patterns in it, and abstracting from it the qualities that make something recognizably human—much like the function of an algorithm or computer program. Further strengthening the saliency of the invisible relation maintained between magic and technology in these novels, Heti's active consultation of the coins and Cusk's passive consultation of the astrologer evoke the influential computer scientist Alan Turing's so-called "imitation game" (also referred to as the Turing Test), in which a subject attempts to determine solely via conversation whether the person with which they are speaking is a real human or an artificial intelligence (AI) program.[19] Both

[19] The historical development of the Turing test offers yet another significant insight into the importance of divining the human in Heti's and Cusk's texts. In the first iteration of Turing's imitation game, a human subject conversed remotely with two other humans—one man and one woman—each of whom attempted to convince the subject that the person with which they were speaking was in fact the woman. There was no artificial intelligence at this stage,

Turing's imitation game and the narrators' divinatory practices similarly rely upon their evaluation of language, or reading, and the ability to discern authentic human meaning from technologically produced scripts.

In Heti's novel, Sheila's coin-tossing produces interactions that eerily resemble dialogues between a human and a chatbot (like Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA therapy bot), which alternately satisfy Sheila when they unfold like human dialogue and frustrate her when confronted with their inhuman randomness.[20] In Cusk's novel, Faye's subjective thoughts appear for the first time amid her habitual stream of description in order for her to voice her suspicion of the astrologer's human-ness, a suspicion based on Faye's evaluation of the language in her email. In a broad sense, both autofictions imply that these suspicions and frustrations extend to their own readers, left to discern whether the narrators of these novels are more human or more fictional character in kind. The necessary screen which separates the subject (or the narrator) from knowledge of the source of the language they encounter appears as a double for the sort of mystifying veil of fiction that shrouds the author of a text from its readers. In autofiction, the writer-narrators assume the unstable form of either technological device or divinatory tool, with the reader compelled to perpetually evaluate or reconcile these dual roles, as well as their import for the meaning they encounter.

In *Transit*, Cusk underlines the particular significance of the astrologer's algorithmic production in order to question what it means to communicate in an "authentically" human way.

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only human participants who exploited the gendered cultural assumptions of the time to demonstrate Turing's belief in the role of conversational skill and imagination in determining human intelligence. Jennifer Rhee notes that, "Implicit in the numerous technological and cultural AIs shaped by the Turing test's influence is the idea that the human and human intelligence is, or should be, knowable to humans," but this compels further questions about what (or who) counts as human, especially in light of the test's gendered origins (12). That Turing's "sexual guessing game" transformed into a machine guessing game, after determining machinic status took the place of determining gender, highlights long-lasting assumptions about the difference between human intelligence and women's intelligence. The (machine) test's succession of the (human) game also emphasizes the potential significance of the autofictional narrators' divinatory games overshadowing the writers' technical tests. If the text is not magically divined, is it produced by a woman? If not produced by a woman, is it generated by machine?

[20] For more information Weizenbaum and ELIZA, see Rhee, in particular pp. 31-66.

Describing the feelings of warmth for artificial human voices that a recently divorced friend had relayed to Faye, Cusk writes:

> There had been a great harvest, he said, of language and information from life, and it may have become the case that the faux-human was growing more substantial and more relational than the original, that there was more tenderness to be had from a machine than from one's fellow man. After all, the mechanized interface was the distillation not of one human but of many. Many astrologers had had to live, in other words, for this one example to have been created. (Cusk 3)

This passage evokes a number of questions central to an understanding of the themes in Cusk's fiction, but perhaps most noticeably, it gestures not only towards the astrologer but also to Cusk as the novel's author. Recognizing her role as an interlocutor, or even a recording device, for the stories of all the people she encounters, Cusk draws a direct parallel between herself and the auto-generated astrologer, offering a complicated image of her function as an amalgamation of inputted data and the narrator's function as a technologically-produced simulacrum of a human. The co-existence of—and tension between—technology (or the rational) and enchantment (or magic) bears an intimate relationship with the process of autofiction's production more generally: the image of the algorithmic production of the almost-too-human astrologer casts a cloak over—while paradoxically drawing more attention to—the human labor undertaken by Cusk. The author no longer figures only as a recording device but also, simultaneously, as a sort of diviner—through her labor she appears technological and magical at one and the same time. This technological process of abstraction allows for the sort of automated female voices ubiquitous in technology (from the London Metro announcements to Google's Siri and Amazon's Alexa) to be perceived as communicating something like authentic "human" empathy even in their transparently inhuman forms, much like the literary

process of abstraction allows for fiction to be perceived as communicating authentically "real" experience.[21]

Just as the Turing test ultimately demonstrates the complex processes underlying humans' ability—or failure—to recognize the "human" through reading, autofiction depends in great part on cultivating a particular kind of reading experience that challenges their readers to question how they distinguish the real from the fictional in their reading. Marjorie Worthington suggests that "autofiction occupies a liminal space between fiction and nonfiction that requires continuous adjustments to the reading process as the novel vacillates between biographical fact and outright fiction" (472). As a result, readers of autofiction must constantly shift their expectations and parameters for judging what they read, continually re-defining and re-evaluating the significance of the narrative and its production depending on their current frame of reference. Heti's prefatory notes in particular gesture toward her cultivation of this generative ambivalence in her readers, and her and Cusk's texts demand a reading process equally reminiscent of taking the Turing test and having one's fortune told, in that the reader must at once rationally question the authority (or authenticity) of the narrator, and by extension the author, while also suspending this critique in order to accept that narrative can be both imaginative and transcriptive. By characterizing their compositional techniques as a juxtaposition of the rational and irrational—the technological and the magical or imaginative—Heti's and Cusk's novels encourage readers to view them as gimmicks that seem to simultaneously expose their authors as narrators and efface their authors as white, women writers. That both authors' primary thematic gimmicks (the modified *I Ching* and the automated astrologer)

[21] For more on the use of women's voices in recent technology, see O'Meara, *Women's Voices in Digital Media: The Sonic Screen from Film to Memes*, particularly chapter 2; Toncic, "I Dream of Siri: Magic and Female Voice Assistants"; Power, "Soft coercion, the city, and the recorded female voice" in *The Acoustic City*; Nass and Brave's *Wired for Speech: How Voice Activates and Advances the Human-Computer Relationship*, especially chapters 2-3.

appropriate and subsequently de-race and de-historicize ancient Eastern practices further emphasizes how they function to abstract these real writers into impersonal, abstracted characters that can then reflexively confer readers' perceptions of these characters out of the text and back onto the real writers.

Autofiction posits itself as representing reality through narrative during a historical period in which algorithms and Big Data structure and influence a staggering amount of the daily experiences of and interactions between humans participating in an increasingly complex global system. Whereas Karl Ove Knausgård's obsessively-detailed, comprehensive account of his life in his *My Struggle* novels refuses to privilege or present information within a hierarchy of significance, like a database amassing ever more details, Heti's and Cusk's texts shift the responsibility for their narrative structures over to abstract, authoritative sources (the coins, the stars) that their narrators' consult to provide a meaningful narrative of their lives.[22] There is no inherent meaning to Sheila's coin tosses or Faye's astrology report—the exact contents of which Cusk never even discloses to the reader—but the narrators imbue them with meaning dependent on the contexts of their own lives. "You are complete randomness, without meaning, and you are not showing me the way," Sheila complains to the coins midway through Heti's novel. "That can only be determined by mining my own heart, and looking at the world around me…" (131). Sheila's method for sorting through the random data produced by her own coin tossing serves to generate the sort of narrative that the author, Heti, ostensibly refuses to provide. In *Transit*, Faye's purchase of and continuing investment in the astrology report provides a narrative structure for the seemingly plotless novel that in some ways takes the place of Cusk as its author, at least from the perspective of the reader. But this is the trap, in a sense, of both novels' representations of reading: treating reading as a search for narrative

[22] For more on Knausgård's autofiction and its stylistic affinities with the database, see van den Ven.

through the systematic divining of patterns only reproduces the illusion for the reader that they can magically conjure meaning out of the vast and varied materials of reality that these authors, as recording devices, transcribe in "transparent" form. If the wisdom of the coins or the astrologer proves false or faulty to the narrators who nonetheless put stock in them, what does this suggest about reading these autofictional texts?

It suggests that, while readers cannot see the machinations of "fate" which produce these novels for what they really are, they nonetheless can *sense* them. In *Transit*, on the day the astrologer marked as particularly important, Faye tells a man with whom she dines, "I was beginning to see what other people called fate in the unfolding of events, as though living were merely an act of reading to find out what happens next" (197-8). But reality cannot be so neatly mapped on to reading. Faye makes this statement during a critical scene late in the novel, during which she talks for the first time at length about her own beliefs and at the conclusion of which her name is spoken for the first time. The true importance of the scene, however, is indicated to the reader at the novel's outset by the astrology report, which spurs the reader—and perhaps Faye—to read on "to find out what happens next." Faye mentions the augur once again on the day of the dinner conversation, paradoxically fulfilling the very prophecy she rebukes and validating in her actions what she has already validated with her payment. She continues, "The idea–of one's own life as something that had already been dictated—was strangely seductive, until you realised that it reduced other people to the moral status of characters and camouflaged their capacity to destroy" (198). The seductive mystification of believing in "fate" obscures the reality of the people who actually produce it, but the alternative that Faye seems to suggest by entertaining the astrology report nonetheless appears only to reassert individual freedom while still retaining the affective charge provided by accepting a cosmic and unknowable social system. To the reader, the future of the autonomous, individual

narrator is painted as undetermined and uncertain while the fictional world becomes incidental and aleatory despite both being fixed in the past by virtue of the act of writing itself.

This realization provides some insight into how Cusk describes her unique approach to form, which aims to erase Cusk herself from the text and which prioritizes conversation above description or interior monologue. "A new kind of narrative comes out of eliminating the author, eliminating prior knowledge," Cusk tells Heti in an interview for *Paris Review*. "Everything in the book could be witnessed, more or less, by a person innocent of hearing it or seeing it. I wanted to return every bit of information to its rightful owner..." This explanation bolsters Faye's characterization as a recording device as opposed to a reader, painting her as a more transparent and impersonal narrator that experiences the fictional world simultaneously with the reader. But Faye's appearance of transparency simultaneously renders Cusk more opaque to her readers, further demonstrating the complexity of autofiction's seemingly simple gimmick. What information does Cusk want returned and to whom? In light of Faye's remarks about fate, it seems that what *Transit* returns is credit for those whom Cusk transcribes and transforms; for Cusk, this autofiction is not a self-moving, uncanny machine but the product of accumulated people and their narrative labors.

Yet *Transit* invites readers to misrecognize the labors that constitute it—much like the labors that constitute the automated astrology report. While Faye suspects that the astrologer is likely an algorithmic amalgamation of data, she nonetheless treats the uncanny product of that technical process—the astrologer herself/itself—as the source of something potentially and meaningfully real. This suggests that, to the reader, the novel appears as an abstract, quasi-magical product of an opaque technical process, much as Heti's *Motherhood* directly suggests itself as something that Heti magically "births" into the world.[23] On the second-to-last page of *Motherhood*, Sheila's own mother,

[23] Much scholarship and writing exists on the history and use of "birth" as a metaphor for artistic production, particularly in reference to women writers, some of the most cited works being Virginia Woolf's 1929 *A Room of*

who Sheila reflects on extensively throughout the novel and whose approval she craves, responds to reading Sheila's book (perhaps the same one now in the reader's hands) in the only email incorporated into the text. The subject line reads: "*It's magical!*"—a sentiment repeated in the body of the email (283). Sheila knows that she is the source of all the writing that her coin-tossing prompts, despite all the contingencies that determine how they land; Faye knows that she is the one that pays for and thus makes the astrology report "real," despite all of the "astrologers [that] had to live...for this one example to have been created." "Yet the illusion of meaning recurred," Faye concludes, "much as you tried to resist it..." (197-8). Both Sheila and Faye as narrators result from technical processes of production: they are recording machines, after all. But it is narrative and interpretation that produce the illusion of meaning—not data or transcription.[24] It is not exactly magical, but technical.

The Literary Labors of Mystifying Technology

By many accounts, technology and magic are fundamentally and historically intertwined, and work has always been the tie that binds them. Much of Ngai's discussion of the gimmick draws on an influential essay by anthropologist Alfred Gell, published in 1992 and titled "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in which Gell offers a theory about the role the "magic standard of zero work" plays in our perception of artworks. Gell argues that the fascination and awe elicited by a work of art, whose technical production exceeds the viewer's comprehensive

One's Own, Hélène Cixous's 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, and Susan Stanford Friedman's 1987 article in *Feminist Studies*, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse." For more discussions of this general theme, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*; Jennie Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750-1830*; Rivka Galchen, *Little Labors*; and even Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*.

[24] For an influential and challenging consideration of the contrasts between narrative and database, see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.

understanding, results from a valuation instinctively derived by comparing the labor imagined necessary to produce the object with the fantasy of its production without labor (in other words, its magical production). Thus, he avers, "Magic is the baseline against which the concept of work as a cost takes shape… just as the value to us of objects in the market is a function of the relation between the desirability of obtaining these objects at zero opportunity cost… and the opportunity costs we will actually incur by purchasing at the market price" (58). Furthermore, he clarifies, "The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form" (44). In this way, "magical technology is the reverse side of productive technology, and… this magical technology consists of representing the technical domain in enchanted form" (59). According to Gell, because products of technical labor such as artworks compel uncertainty in the viewer about the technical process by which they are produced, they conjure the possibility of their magical, labor-free production, just as gimmicks in particular invite conflicted reactions because they force us to identify the possibility of both no work and too much work in one instance. As technologies become more sophisticated, their technical processes become more opaque and so potentially more "magical"—or invisible—to those outside the production process.

Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke famously insisted that "[a]ny sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."[25] But in an article critiquing the ubiquity of descriptions of contemporary technologies such as AI and automation that use the language of "magic," data and AI researchers M.C. Elish and danah boyd caution, "To evoke magic is not only to provide an alternative regime of causal relations, but also to minimize the attention to the methods

[25] This oft-cited quote, which represents the third and best-known of "Clarke's three laws," appears in Clarke's essay, "Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination," included in the 1962 publication of *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*.

and resources required to carry out a particular effect" (9). Characterizing a technical process as magical throws a veil over the material labors and resources necessary to sustain it and furthermore mystifies the mechanisms of causality that underlie its production.

Gell's articulation of technical artworks and Ngai's theorization of the gimmick together help shed light on a crucial, underexamined aspect of contemporary autofiction: the material conditions of its production and reception, and moreover, how technological processes that sustain capitalist production find unique, and at times unexpected, figuration in texts—importantly, even those that fall outside the purview of science fiction and fantasy. The algorithmic procedure of Heti's coin-tossing technique and the algorithmic character of Cusk's astrologer point most clearly to the influence of current socio-technological conditions in their respective novels, but their autofictional qualities further testify to the specific material contexts—both literary publishing in particular and global capitalism more broadly—in which they were produced. That *Motherhood* and *Transit* incorporate magical forms of divination as themes and formal structures only emphasizes the significance of the unseen technological and social processes of production in and of these texts (as well as the unique position of their white, women authors).

Some of the most significant differences between the conditions from which earlier French autofiction and contemporary English-language autofiction emerge boil down to changes in publishing wrought, on the one hand, by industry conglomeration and, on the other, by the unfettered growth of book-retailer turned everything-retailer Amazon. Like other common devices and services emblematic of the twenty-first-century technological milieu, Amazon is never referenced or represented within the pages of *Motherhood* or *Transit*; both novels landed with one of the "Big Five" publishers, meaning neither relied on the corporation's wildly popular self-publishing

platform.[26] Yet, like the lack of other representations of the technological present within the novels, Amazon's seeming absence is not indicative of its unimportance. The corporation's impact on the literary market—even on the production and publication of literary fiction by traditional publishing houses—should not be underestimated (McGurl). Ultimately, both conglomeration in publishing and the growing cultural and economic influence of Amazon help explain how the blurred lines between magic, labor, reading, and writing in autofiction intersect with the conflicting temporalities at the core of modern technology and publishing.

Autofiction's relatively high profile in contemporary literary culture can be understood as one manifestation of personal and professional anxieties about the fungibility of literary writing in the context of conglomeration in the publishing industry, the expansion of internet use and digital media, and the dehumanization more broadly engendered by technologically mediated social relations.[27] Both Heti's and Cusk's reflexive focuses on creative labor and fictionalization

[26] An abridged publishing history of Heti's and Cusk's novels not only demonstrates their relative distance from Amazon but also, and moreover, provides a modest illustration of the kind of tangled web of associations and ownership characteristic of post-conglomeration major publishing. As earlier mentioned, Henry Holt & Co. published *Motherhood* in 2018. Henry Holt & Co. is operated by one of the traditional "Big Five" publishing houses, Macmillan Publishers, which itself operates as a US-based subsidiary of the internationally-operating, German-owned Holtzbrinck Publishing Group. *Outline*, the first novel in Cusk's series, was originally published in 2014 by Faber and Faber, which at the time was owned by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, yet another division of Macmillan under Holtzbrinck. *Transit* was then published in 2016 by the Vintage Books imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Knopf Doubleday is a subsidiary group of the "Big Five" Penguin Random House, which is owned, in turn, by a different German-based media conglomerate, Bertelsmann. For more detailed information on the "Big Five," conglomeration, and publishing imprints, see John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century.*

[27] Over the past several decades, numerous articles and essays have been published testifying to these concerns. Here is a woefully limited list of examples of such discussions in recent media: from author Tim Parks for *The New York Review of Books* in 2014, "Reading: The Struggle"; from novelist Will Self for *The* Guardian in 2014, "The novel is dead (this time it's for real)"; from Padraig Belton and Matthew Wall for BBC News in 2015, "Did technology kill the book or give it new life?"; from Victor Daniel for *The New York Times* in 2016, "No, the Internet Has Not Killed the Printed Book. Most People Still Prefer Them"; from Chad W. Post for *The Los Angeles Times* in 2020, "The latest publishing mega-merger might kill off small presses—and literary diversity." For recent scholarship on these topics, see Brouillette, "Neoliberalism and the Decline of the Literary" in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Culture*; McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* and *Everything and Less: the Novel in the Age of Amazon*; Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*; Price, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: The History and Future of Reading*; Sinykin, "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007"; Sinykin and Roland, "Against Conglomeration: Nonprofit Publishing and American Literature After 1980"; Konstantinou and Sinykin, "Literature and Publishing, 1945-2020."

attempt to re-establish the labor of writing literary fiction as a singular human endeavor, unable to be reproduced by computers or capitalists, and worthy of continuing investment by publishers and readers alike. In these novels, the quasi-magical aura of fiction transforms the data of reality into a profitable and prestigious product that can at once appear authentically human to potential consumers and continue to posit literary fiction as fundamentally distinct from increasingly popular genre fiction and genre-hybrids. Keenly aware of the need to prove profitability yet still deeply invested in a romantic understanding of the artist, Heti and Cusk attempt to have it both ways by presenting writing as a magical and not a technical process and the author as a magical and not a laboring human, simultaneously invoking the structure and temporalities characteristic of contemporary technology in enchanted form.

Reflexively narrating the process of writing a novel; depicting their narrators participating in literary talks, festivals, and conferences; and incorporating writers' conversations with editors, agents, and critics: in these ways, autofiction's representations of publishing, ranging from beginning to end of the process, bolster its claims to authenticity, or at the least a kind of verisimilitude that contributes to its bids for sales and prestige. In an analysis of the effects of publishing industry conglomeration on contemporary literary fiction from 1965 to 2007, Dan Sinykin argues, "In both its reality hunger and its depiction of its milieu, autofiction expresses the conditions of its production and negotiates those conditions to pry from them symbolic and financial capital… by expressing the contemporary pressures of authorship" (475). The period Sinykin dubs "the conglomerate era" saw the consolidation of smaller presses into the "Big Five" publishing houses, concentrating corporate power and boosting profits through bureaucratization and the adoption of literary agents as necessary mediators between authors and publishers.

These two major transformations directly led to and represent the core principle now defining the publishing industry at large: that is, the perpetual need for a text to "demonstrate… potential profitability." As a result, the publishing industry itself has become a recurring "fixation" of contemporary autofiction. The reflexive focus on the writing and publishing process thus becomes a strategy for authors to embed themselves further into the literary field and for publishers to capitalize on the potential synergy of their subsidiary properties commingling. Autofictional texts' "fixation" on their own production formalizes the contradiction between publishers' demands for proof of future profitability and the opaque technical processes used to project and quantify that potentiality, a contradiction with which literary writers must now grapple and weigh against their own artistic ideals.

During Amazon's precipitous rise to corporate dominance, conglomerates' demands for preemptive proof of a text's potential profitability felicitously collided with the retail, logistics, and computing behemoth's guiding ethos built on a reverent attention to customer service. Their enshrinement of "customer service above all" would justify the existing technical capacity to directly access to vast amounts of consumer data, through which Amazon receives near-immediate feedback on the profitability of literary products. In *Everything and Less: the Novel in the Age of Amazon*, Mark McGurl writes that, as "[a]n epic triumph of supply-chain logistics and algorithmic mass marketing… strikingly distinct from its corporate brethren… in its uniquely intense and ongoing self-association with literature and the book," Amazon thrives on founder Jeff Bezos' singular commitment to an ideology of "servile domination," which promotes a vision of "a world composed entirely of customers and no workers" (448). Animated by this ideology, Amazon manufactures and sells an image of a world run by magical, worker-less, technological production and directed by

individual consumers.[28] While the ideology of servile domination justifies the material infrastructure that enables Amazon's continuous growth (for example, the infamously dangerous and cruel working conditions of its distribution and fulfillment centers), the corporation's consumer-facing technologies obscure that infrastructure from view of the customer, who never has to think about how Amazon's real "magic" consists of labor and logistics.[29] A world of all customers and no workers is arguably also a world composed entirely of readers (some of whom self-publish their own writing) and no authors or, furthermore, copyeditors, editors, publicists, marketers, designers, printers, or distribution workers.

Assessing the distinctive impact of the "Age of Amazon" on literature, McGurl singles out two concepts of time central to the corporation's business logic—the "real time" of online shopping

[28] This illusion is exemplified by Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT) digital task clearinghouse, an online marketplace platform where employers can outsource large volumes of small digital tasks, "like transcription, content moderation, and image classification," to a large, distributed group of individual IT workers. Amazon Mechanical Turk's appearance of automation belies a system of precarious laborers who perform numerous microwork assignments for pennies. The digital infrastructure of this "new labor service masquerading as technology," as Lilly Irani, scholar of the cultural politics of tech industries, explains it, results in a "shift in speed and scale" that "produces a qualitative change in which human workers come to be understood as computation." Irani recounts how employers and programmers who decided to utilize AMT, "described how it was 'like magic." But this "magic," Irani reminds, "was the handiwork of Turk workers" (36).

The Mechanical Turk from which it drew its name perfectly evinced the tricks and wonders characteristic of a gimmick until its illusions were ultimately revealed as a hoax; designed by Wolfgang von Kempelen, the magical exterior appearance and strategically designed mechanical interior of the "automaton" in reality obscured a live, human chess master who manipulated the board from a cramped, candlelit chamber. Moritz Altenried, author of *The Digital Factory: The Human Labor of Automation*, observes, "Referenced both by Alan Turing, ironically as an early example for research into AI, and Walter Benjamin, as an allegory for historical materialism and its relation to theology, the Mechanical Turk has become a symbol for the borderlands of human and machine, science and magic" (148). In a perversely fitting tribute, Amazon's Mechanical Turk service refashions real human labor into both machine-work and a kind of instantaneous and consumer-controlled magic at once, a fiction which represents even more widespread illusions about the technical capacities of current technology and labor conditions in processes of production. The digital work fueling platforms like AMT is "hidden behind the magic of algorithms" (Altenried).

[29] An odd 2021 TV ad promoting Amazon's "in-garage delivery" service shows anthropomorphized garage doors with reacting with awe as they watch an Amazon delivery worker drop off a package directly inside the code-protected garage of a customer without ever interacting with anyone else at the home. "Was that magic? Because it looked like magic," one garage door says. Another declares, "It *had* to be magic," while yet another garage door answers, "Nah… well, maybe a little bit," before winking at the viewer. With only the garage doors and the viewer to witness to the Amazon employee's delivery, the final wink seems to suggest to the viewer that once you become a customer you no longer have to see the worker at work, offering the pleasing illusion that your package arrived by "magic." See "Convenience. Security. And a Little Bit of Magic."

and on-demand delivery and the "quality time" promised through its investments in book retail, book publishing, and the Kindle eReader. On the one hand, "real time" (as in: happening "in real time") promises immediate, almost magical access to information free from the lags caused by mediation, as the concept grew out of the technical data collection and management made possible by computerization. "Real-time data close the gap," McGurl explains, "between the occurrence of an event and its apprehension as information, crowding reality and representation together in the urgent space of a perpetually self-renewing *now*" (463). On the other hand, "quality time," a phrase which began floating around in parenting literature in the 1970s, gestures toward slowed-down experiences of authentic human intimacy, meaningful reflection, and embodied presence, such as time spent between a mother and a child, time spent with oneself, "or with a book" (464). "Real time" and "quality time" thus diverge in several different registers: where the former produces instantaneity, the latter cultivates the long-term; where one emerges from technological advancements, the other derives from sociocultural developments; and where "real time" is pursued for economic efficiency, "quality time" is motivated by affective investment.

Within the publishing landscape of contemporary fiction, these coexisting temporalities represent the conflicting imperatives and expectations of writers and readers alike. Publishers strive to replicate Amazon's ability to collect "real time" data about consumer purchases, preferences, habits, and reviews, but even as they develop similar mechanisms for data collection, they lack the infrastructure to produce and promote literary fiction titles in response to such data at the rapid pace that Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing and vast backlist enables. "Real time," already at odds with the timeline of traditional publishing, furthermore conflicts with one of the primary incentives for reading contemporary fiction: the promise of meaningful (if inevitably temporary) reprieve from the demands of the "real-time regime" of work and technological life. "Consumed during alone time,"

McGurl argues, "…[fiction] finds its thematic substance in the narrative dilation of human intimacy and intrigue, while its most typical grammatical form—the past tense—indicates its imaginary removal from the real time of the reader's present" (465). Fiction functions as a sort of "*virtualization of quality time*," creating for the reader an experience—or imagined experience—that affords them the gratifications of "quality time" that often prove difficult for them to access elsewhere. The problem thus deepens: in the business of books, how do you pursue the "real time" demands of economic growth while also satisfying readers' (and writers') desire for literature which offers the value of "quality time"? This proves a particularly tricky problem for literary fiction, and one that writers must wrestle with on the level of form but also, at times, content.

As traditional publishing conglomerates scramble to compete with Amazon's ever-growing market share, literary fiction published by imprints of the Big Five houses often registers as such (i.e. as the marketable genre of "literary fiction") by its direct contrast with the kinds of popular genre, mass market fiction—such as romance, mystery, young adult, and science fiction—that dominate the Kindle Direct Publishing platform.[30] Some established authors of literary fiction have, in recent years, begun openly incorporating elements of genre fiction into their novels, capitalizing on the wide-reaching appeal of such genres while "elevating" their potentially tired plots and character types through the formal experimentation and stylized language more often associated with the "literary."[31] Alternately, autofiction instead reaches even more resolutely away from popular

[30] As Jeremy Rosen has lucidly argued, the contemporary use of "literary fiction" as a generic descriptor for mostly realist, more conventionally highbrow novels, defined against "genre fiction" or fiction that represents more crystallized and middlebrow genres like science fiction and romance, is largely the result of the publishing industry and its ecosphere: "'Genre fiction' and 'literary fiction,' insofar as they can be considered genres, are not formally constituted ones, but rather name subsets of the larger literary field and marketplace. They are produced by certain publishers or certain imprints of publishing conglomerates, displayed in certain sections of the bookstore, aimed at particular audiences (though these may well overlap), and generally able to access differing kinds of capital and forms of institutional recognition. But these subfields are shifting and permeable." See Rosen, "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction."

[31] For more on the "genre turn" in twenty-first century literary fiction, see Hoberek.

genre, with its impulse toward autobiography and documentary utilized as a means to "ground [its] literariness ever deeper in the supposed authority of the real" (McGurl 210).[32] But the "reality hunger" that autofiction's opposition to popular genre manifests is further complicated by the dual temporalities of "real time" and "quality time" which permeate contemporary fiction and its market.

Autofiction can be seen to strive for a kind of "real time" convergence between "reality and representation" through its adoption of literary mode of transcription, but *Motherhood* and *Transit* omit representations of the technologies from which "real time" emerge and through which it suffuses experiences of everyday life. The former primarily reads as a formal strategy, while the latter registers as a narrative one, appearing to reject the immediacy of modern technology and datafication in favor of further evoking the "quality time" of human connection and creative activity. But both their formal and thematic engagements evidence a more complicated relationship between how "real time" and "quality time" shape the two novels and how autofiction functions as a literary fiction. They seek to answer: how can literary fiction transcend the self-renewing urgency of capitalist "real time" to access the long-term enrichment suggested by "quality time" while also realistically representing experience in a historical period permeated by the sense that the future has already been foreclosed, that the future, in fact, might never come?

The Felt Temporalities of Autofiction

[32] The full excerpt from McGurl here proves immensely illuminating: "Whereas the worlds built in genre fiction tend toward what we might call an essential fictionality, holding themselves responsible to internally established rules and the accretion of same as generic conventions, those of literary fiction are beholden even now to the 'real world,' as a guarantor of referential gravity. This is why… the writer-as-character looms so large there eve now, long after the 'death of the author,' in a way it does not often do in genre fiction. It is also why recent discussions of the so-called genre turn in literary fiction… err when they decline to account for its equally prevalent dialectical opposite, the impulse not to be fictional at all but novelized documentary or memoir. The 'genre effects' of the first can be understood as a bid to offer some of the pleasures of popular culture even while remaining identifiable as literary, while the 'reality hunger' of the second would ground that literariness ever deeper in the supposed authority of the real" (209-210). For more on these dialectical impulses, see McGurl, "The Novel's Forking Path."

Instead of aspiring to a kind of literary realism that would reproduce the temporalities of everyday life, autofiction in its original context substituted the affective primacy of memory for the temporal structure of other realist fiction. Cusset, in framing her understanding of autofiction as dependent on the meaning of "truth," not as objective data but affective interpretation—or "the capacity to go back inside an emotion… in order to offer it to the reader in a bare form"—pointed to emotion as the "organizing force" of her work and of autofiction in general. This would explain why "[autofiction] doesn't need a plot, like the novel, or a chronological timeline, like an autobiography." Unlike those linear temporalities, according to Cusset, the trajectory of an autofictional text instead resembles "a spiraling movement towards the resurrection of a buried fragment of memory."[33] This spiraling movement captures the feelings of compulsion and recursivity that plague many autofictional narratives: the tug-of-war between the progression of time that produces character and narrative and the inexhaustible series of nows of conscious experience.[34]

This kind of temporal structure can also read as a kind of stuckness, a feeling which registers particularly in the current historical period. Ngai writes, "There is… a sense in which the gimmick confronts us with a kind of bad contemporaneity, one akin to the 'elongated present,' 'endless present,' or 'perpetual present' strikingly diverse theorists use to account for the peculiar feel and situation of our contemporary moment" (483). A gimmick's repetitive re-staging of non-reusable, non-cumulative moments of aesthetic performance—which Ngai directly connects with Fredric Jameson's concept of "singularity"—creates the overall feeling of a work that is both intensely

[33] Karen Ferreira-Meyers echoes Cusset in describing French autofiction's structure as, "almost never linear." She insists, "Its shape is much more random, which," nonetheless, "does not mean it is a product of chance" (215). Rather than ascribe it to chance or meaninglessness, Ferreira-Meyers attributes this intentional fragmentation as a technique also useful for diverting readerly over-identification: "leaps in time, strata of temporality, of history, are arranged in order so that the reader does not necessarily identify with the narrator."

[34] Notably, the "bare form" of emotion that autofiction aspired to offer resonates with the turn to affect that was taking place across humanistic disciplines in the 1980s and '90s, just as autofiction reached a cultural zenith in France.

present and yet stuck in time.[35] Aiming to represent the world *authentically* as opposed to realistically, autofiction prioritizes affect over narrative in a way that recreates the feeling of an elongated present. Yet *Motherhood* and *Transit*'s preoccupation with divination and fate illustrate the difficulty of relinquishing desire for futurity and narrative, both in fiction and in real life.

In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson posits that the dialectical tension between narrative and affect in literary representation is co-extensive with the opposition between *recit* and presence, predestination and the eternal present, and linearity and singularity. According to Jameson, the collective understanding of destiny or fate upon which earlier historical periods relied necessitated the acceptance of the past-present-future causal structure characteristic of narrative realism and required an investment in the individual character, or protagonist. Conversely, the "eternal present" evoked by the current historical period necessitates a rejection of *recit*'s determinism and the embrace of a web of simultaneous, conflicting narratives. In other words, the shift between these ideologies of temporality appears as the shift from diachronic to synchronic representation. Perhaps most interesting about Jameson's account in this context, however, is the relation he establishes between affect and consciousness. "I want to assert that the present of consciousness is somehow impersonal," Jameson writes, "that consciousness is itself impersonal; while it is the subject of consciousness or the self that is the locus of personal identity in the ordinary sense." Contrary to the individual self that is subject to destiny, "in a way all the personal identifications of past-present-future in the other sense are distinct from the impersonal present, mere objects in it, no matter how inseparable they are from it" (25). In this elongated present, impersonal consciousness registers affect as "global waves of generalized sensations" that "activate the body," a body which here exists

[35] Jameson: "...what may be called an aesthetic of singularity, in which what is constructed is not meant to be the elaboration of a style or the practice of a genre (even a newly hinted one), but rather the experimental projection of a single one-time conceit, inimitable and without a legacy or any intention of founding a tradition formal or otherwise: not a new style, but the assemblage of various styles…" (304).

in direct opposition with language. In contrast to the preterite of narrative, the "perpetual present" results in a "reduction to the body" that Jameson identifies as affect, which he describes as autonomous, context-less, and "free-floating" in form (29, 35-6). With the weakening of narrative, Jameson sees the force of what remains for realism: the impersonal consciousness of affect, existing in a synchronic, episodic present.[36]

When Heti lauds Cusk's *Outline* novels, she asserts that in the trilogy "characters narrate moments from their lives rather than live them in an unfolding present."[37] Yet while Cusk's writing appears as the present-moment recording others' past-tense stories of life, Heti claims to step outside real time entirely through her writing, and specifically in contrast to the effects of the Internet. Sheila writes, "Inside this writing place, time and space are completely without form. Life has some defect of soul… In here I feel no tears, I feel no emotion at all; no pleasure or pain…" Her "writing place" renders her as abstracted and disembodied as data—writing divests her from a human "self." She explains, "Thinking about the Internet, I can feel the tears coming back. That is my body materializing… My body materializes, speck by speck, and I'm no longer part of the void. I am a self again, no longer *no self*. I am no longer a paradoxical thing" (*Motherhood* 228-9). Out-of-time, out-of-space, Sheila's writing nonetheless remains intimately connected to the undecided present, at least by Heti's characterization of the novel.

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[36] Jameson's claims pitting narrative against affect evoke an idea briefly discussed by Walter Benjamin in *One-Way Street* (1928) about temporality, presence, and the body, in which Benjamin writes: "For presence of mind is an extract of the future, and precise awareness of the present moment is more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events. Omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or to use them: that is the question. The two are irreconcilable… For before such prophecy or warning has been mediated by word or image, it has lost its vitality, the power to strike at our center and force us, we scarcely know how, to act accordingly. If we neglect to do so, and only then, the message is deciphered. We read it. But now it is too late… To turn the threatening future into a fulfilled 'now,' the only desirable telepathic miracle, is a work of bodily presence of mind" (482-3). This section, too, bears affinities with the concept of "messianic time" that Benjamin would some years later explore in his well-known essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written in 1940.

[37] Heti makes this comment in her interview of Cusk for the *Paris Review.*

As she recounts in one interview, "*Motherhood* takes the form of a series of nows, a series of present moments. It doesn't sum up something that happened, but rather documents something that is happening over several years..." (Miller 168). The immediacy of autofiction's representations of life, seemingly less swathed in the distancing mediation of narrative, must reconcile with the inherently lengthy process of writing and publishing a novel in physical form with a traditional literary publisher—something sure to have happened once the book ends up in the reader's hands. This contradiction and confusion between temporalities reverberates elsewhere in the novel's themes and form: the hurry of Sheila's biological clock, represented in sections titled with different phases of a menstrual cycle, rubs up against her perpetual indecision, which is projected onto her coin-tossing method and scenes of her consultations with psychics.

While the divinatory motif itself draws attention to how the future, or the long-term, coexists in the present in the novel, *Motherhood*'s simultaneous preoccupation with history and ancestors (at least one memorable scene references Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History") illustrates how the past—and the past tense inherent to the novel as a form—converges with the perpetual present of the autofictional technique, which takes the spiraling and cyclical form of perpetual indecision, uncertainty, and unsettlement. Heti's recurring meditations on fate and destiny meet opposition, although importantly not negation, in the novel's dedication to presence, or unforeclosed possibility. However, the convergence of fate and presence, of cyclical return and perennial adjustment, in *Motherhood* presents yet another problem: the impersonality of present consciousness it suggests entails an *escape* from material reality.

As Heti's novel counterintuitively aligns the Internet with embodiment, feeling, and the burdens of living with temporalities in tension, writing becomes cast as a method for transcending both time and body and in this way becomes stripped of the traces of labor. While its every page is

suffused with Sheila's labors (and her potential labor as in birthing), the novel itself seems to assume a human form while writing transforms Sheila into "a self without form, unimprisoned" (228). In *Transit*, too, Faye declares "that writing and reading were non-physical transactions and might almost be said to represent a mutual escape from the actual body" (115). These descriptions once again conjure the possibility of the magic standard of "zero work," idealizing how their writer-narrators transcend the human body and with it the temporality of production. Writing, a labor that necessarily assumes a temporal form, instead becomes a way to escape material reality and the fraught temporalities of the technological present.

Inge van de Ven argues that contemporary autofiction generates "an experience of time that differs from both traditional narratives with over-arching, causal structure and instantaneous modes of recording…" (333). In *Motherhood* and *Transit*, the "over-arching, causal structure[s]" of fate and divination rub up against the transcriptive mode of autofiction that functions like recording. In these novels, writing autofiction offers two possibilities for their narrators: the technological form of the recording device or the magical form of diviner. The former works in "real time" while the latter deals in the long term, but both represent a similar conclusion: that the intractable intertwining of the two temporalities in these novels emerges from the conditions of their production, from their writing to their publishing to their milieu of twenty-first century capitalism.

Both recording and divination suggest these disparate temporalities, as they are accessed in the present and signal future repetition, they are discontinuous processes that nonetheless produce a continuous narrative. Both allow for the elision of human labor, one through technology and the other through magic. This is where the function of autofiction becomes even more apparent, as it perpetually wavers between fiction and reality—it authorizes a specific understanding of writing as a necessarily technical and magical process, a process that claims to authentically reproduce the

experience of real life while also, somehow, transforming it meaningfully. Cusk has said that, "To tell a story is to reconstruct the conditions of reality in order to manipulate or change them."[38] In this light, autofiction seems to reconstruct the conditions of reality in order to tell a story about the author *not* manipulating or changing reality, a story avowing that socio-technological systems do not transform the trajectory or quality of human lives and which suggests that sociotechnical processes of production do not apply to the production of literature.

This is the gimmick of autofiction: in reflexively representing the work of the narrator, it effectively obfuscates the labor of the author; in eliding the socio-technological context of its production, it reveals their determinative influence. The gimmick of autofiction results in part from its attempts to distance itself from its production while also representing it, unwittingly reproducing capitalism's own temporal mystifications.

[38] This quote taken from Cusk's interview with Sheila Heti for the *Paris Review*.

CHAPTER 2

Ghost Work: Mystifying Labor in Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and Hilary Leichter's *Temporary*

Introduction

Upon the 2015 publication of Alexandra Kleeman's novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine,* novelist Valeria Luiselli opens her review for *New York Times* with a description of Edgar Allen Poe's "A Man of the Crowd," pointing to how the story's themes of obsession, uncertainty, and alienation equally refract through Kleeman's text despite its emergence from a period of American literature separated by more than a century. Luiselli dubs Kleeman "a fine heir to the tradition inaugurated by Poe" before conceding that "others will undoubtedly compare her to Pynchon" due to the novel's decidedly postmodern feel, with its shady webs of corporate conspiracy, interpersonal paranoia, and near-absurdist representations of our contemporary culture of consumption.

While Poe-like and Pynchonian in many respects, the novel itself more explicitly nominates Don DeLillo as the voice echoes most loudly in its pages, which, like DeLillo's 1985 *White Noise*, locates scenes of modern alienation in the aisles of the supermarket and its crowds—not of people but of brands. Like Poe's short story, Kleeman's novel relies on the anonymity of its unnamed characters and the pervasive threat of their disappearance, with its three main characters referred to throughout only as "A," "B," and "C." But as Walter Benjamin, citing Poe's generative rendering of the crowd, designates "[t]he department store [as] the last promenade for the flâneur," in Kleeman's novel the curiosity and loneliness of the window-shopping flâneur—that wandering ghost of the city crowd—become the disillusionment and alienation of the under-employed, debt-incurring consumer,

the haunting figure of the suburbs, the exurbs, and the less characterful parts of the homogenous twenty-first century city (40).

HarperCollins published Alexandra Kleeman's debut to largely positive if modest critical acclaim, garnering write-ups in venues ranging from literary journals to fashion magazines, which roundly praised the book's timeliness in its satire of "the naval-gazing horrors of contemporary life: on the beauty and dieting industries, on the 'clean-eating' evangelists, on all of those cult-like lifestyle movements" that claim to empower women through "self-care" while stripping them of their individuality and cash (Day). Yet reviews also note the undeniable sense in which the book feels out of sync with our time: while set vaguely in or close to the present, the novel's most notable setting is a supermarket and it deliberately harkens back to an almost retro near-past of television ads and old-school beauty campaigns, from its title ripped right out of some "corny 80s exercise tape" to its clear debt to the slightly unfashionable twentieth-century techniques of postmodernism (Tashjian).[39] While the cultish manifestations of the current culture "self-care" and the retro influences of midcentury literature figure significantly into any reading of *You Too*, Kleeman's novel bears a more complicated relationship to both literary fiction and the motif of consumption which seems to preoccupy it.

If supermarkets and television ads seem to set an oddly outdated stage for what seems to be a critique of consumption in the twenty-first century, a period in which online retail and social media campaigns dominate cultural and economic discourse, the absence of more current technology in *You Too* feels perhaps even stranger. Unlike *White Noise*, which rapturously centers and at turns

[39] For some examples of contemporaneous reviews of the novel, see: Day, "*You Too Can Have a Body like Mine* by Alexandra Kleeman: Eat Yourself Perfect"; Tashjian, "*You Too Can Have a Body like Mine* and Our Obsession with Beauty Routines, Diet Diaries, and Chia Seeds"; Singer, "Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have a Body like Mine* Is Fight Club for Women"; and Fischer, "This Novel Nails the Weirdness of Being Female in a Culture Obsessed with Your Body."

inhabits the tech of its time—most notably in the form of the ATM (Automatic Teller Machine) and consumer credit cards—Kleeman's novel palpably lacks engagement with the modern technologies that transfix some of her literary contemporaries, such as Sally Rooney, Patricia Lockwood, and Lauren Oyler. Luiselli continues, noting:

> Curiously, there are few references to the Internet and social networks in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* — a novel ultimately about losing touch with ourselves and other people as we become increasingly caught inside the web of our prosthetic electronic souls, replacing things in our lives with proxies, our loved ones with avatars. (Luiselli)

While the same seed of modern alienation that germinates in Poe's nineteenth-century urban crowd, sprouts in the postwar suburbs of Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, and continues to flower in the TV advertisements of DeLillo's *White Noise* adheres in the new, fertile soil of the Internet-saturated twenty-first century, Kleeman's novel largely severs this strain of anomie from the technological conditions that now foster it. But why make such a choice in a novel so clearly striving for contemporary relevance and connection to a prestigious literary lineage? What role does technology's absence play in how this novel should be understood?

Significantly, the curious case of missing technology is not unique to Kleeman's novel—in fact, it appears to be characteristic of a surprising number of novels published over the last half century. In "The Lag: Technology and Fiction in the Twentieth Century," Alexander Manshel outlines this trend, posing the question, simultaneously historical and systemic: "How can information technology be both central to the story of the twentieth-century novel and conspicuously absent from its last chapters?" (41). Gesturing to technology's centrality to the formal and thematic innovations of modernism and postmodernism, Manshel highlights the relative invisibility of technological developments in twenty-first century literature, particularly in what critics and

publishers might call "literary fiction." Computers, cell phones, and the Internet, while appearing with some regularity in mass-market genre fiction and with limited frequency in a small subset of literary fiction, remain gauche topics of interest for "high" literary novels despite their inescapable presence in most people's everyday lives.[40]

One possible explanation to which Manshel's study points is a literary and critical tradition of associating literary prestige with cultural longevity, or "a certain timelessness," that contemporary technology, ever evolving and becoming obsolescent, can make difficult—just think of any number of clunky explanations of the Internet found in popular fiction in the early 2000s, cringe-worthy references to cellular telephones in the 1990s, fax machines in the 1980s, or television sets in the 1940s for proof. Alison Shonkwiler suggests, "With technology changing so much faster than the word, language becomes a real-time archive of technological obsolescence."[41] The intentional absence of technology in literary fiction then testifies to a kind of authorial anxiety about future relevance that undoubtedly relates to broader, more longstanding anxieties about the future of the novel as such (94).

Yet even this anxiety about literature's obsolescence may be a red herring for why contemporary technologies fail to make it into the print of contemporary literary fiction. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues, "the apparent source of the novelist's fear of obsolescence,"—for her purposes, television—"may in fact be a convenient screen for some other, murkier anxiety about instability in social relations" (7). In this sense, contemporary literature's avoidance of current technologies might be understood as evidencing the new and amorphous tension between literary production and

[40] The notable exception to this trend is the recent proliferation of "literary" novels (identified as such by their relative position in the publishing ecosphere, by author's reputation, or by critical attention and/or evaluation) on or engaging with social media; see, for example, Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021), and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021). This has been met by a modest increase in scholarly attention to social media in literary fiction, as evidenced, for example, by the 2020 publication of Bronwen Thomas's *Literature and Social Media*, as part of Routledge's "Literature and Contemporary Thought" series.

reception that emerges from unique socioeconomic conditions in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What exactly are these conditions, though? Critics and commentators have pointed to a multitude of different sources, from the funding crises in higher education and the digital humanities on the one hand to climate change or conglomeration in the publishing industry on the other, as possible explanations for the precarity and uncertainty that condition and characterize the writing and reading of literature today.[42] With the overwhelming scope of these issues in mind, the question remains: what anxiety about contemporary social relations—literary or otherwise—might speak loudest through its absence? The answer in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* lies (as it always does) in the essential structure of social relations, the relations of production, which are now inextricably interwoven with advanced technologies both real and imagined.

What propels Kleeman's novel is its inversion of how the visible technological infrastructure of current social relations allows these relations themselves to gradually fade from view. The novel's failure to engage with the entanglements of modern technology reads less as an oversight than as a strategy to draw attention to the otherwise overlooked imperatives which register visibly in its absence. To point, as Manshel argues, if contemporary fiction which prominently features of-the-moment technology tends to register critically and commercially as belonging to popular, mass market genres like mystery and romance, this technology's absence from other fictional works might be understood to help signal the text's aims to the prestige genre of "literary fiction." Within the framework of Fitzpatrick's study, the absence of technology might register anxieties of obsolescence, which bring to the surface unarticulated unease with the faltering cultural and

[42] The following sources provide only a few representative examples of these debates. For a discussion: of the "crisis" in the humanities, see Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (2004) or Bérubé and Ruth, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments* (2015); of the digital humanities, see Allington, Brouillette, and Golumbia, "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities" (2016); of climate change, see Heise, "The Environmental Humanities and the Futures of the Human" (2016); of publishing industry conglomeration, see Sinykin and Roland, "Against Conglomeration: Nonprofit Publishing and American Literature After 1980" (2021).

economic status of a literary form (for example, the novel) or, beyond that, the social reality to blame for these perceived threats to literature, its producers, and its consumers. In Kleeman's novel, the absence of current technologies, taken alongside the emphatic presence of the long-since-novel technology of television, helps elucidate the production of literature today by gesturing toward the consumption of literature from an earlier era marked by anxieties about (or at least preoccupation with) television. One of the most significant and timely problems at the heart of novel is one that also meaningfully connects it to its postmodernist forebearers like *White Noise*, and one which sheds light on the novel's relationship to the technological conditions of the present: the disappearance—or more accurately, the invisibility—of widespread forms of contingent labor behind the screen of contemporary cultures of consumption.

You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine inverts the mechanisms of our contemporary economy, in which technological interfaces render invisible or mystify the realities of labor, instead featuring the invisibility or mystification or technology which renders visible fantasies of consumption. Such a claim may surprise those familiar with Kleeman's novel, as scenes depicting characters at work barely register, so few are they in number. However, this is what makes labor a point of critical interest here; like modern technologies, labor produces meaning in the novel precisely through its absence or obscurity. *You Too* is, if anything, a novel about the problems that attend to under-, hyper-, and unemployment and, appropriate to the subject, Kleeman engages them through her use of themes and forms of dematerialization and disappearance. A workplace populated by sticky notes stands in for absent employees; working fathers suffer from "Disappearing Dad Syndrome," causing them to disappear from their lives for months only to reemerge in shopping malls with amnesia about the lives to which they must return. Entire families don white sheets, abandoning their lives and possessions, to join a cult that extracts unpaid labor with the promise of erasing their identities

through a process called "ghosting." Wally's supermarket, where labor and consumption collide in Kleeman's novel, serves as a hub for demonstrating the entanglement of alienated, insecure labor and the technology upon which it depends and for which it is perpetuated. Even the choice of such a nearly-anachronistic setting as a supermarket in the novel serves to emphasize how consumer spaces, functioning in ways largely designed to conceal labor, emerge from a historical lineage in which the development of technologies enabled the concealment of production.[43]

In a sense, *You Too*'s obsession with consumption results from a transubstantiation of anxieties about labor and those who do it. The constitutive fantasy and fear of disappearance that permeates the pages of *You Too* points toward a deeper concern with what absence masks in a present in which bodiless, immaterial data—of the same sort that DeLillo famously locates in the supermarket of *White Noise*—belies an invisible crowd of laborers which produce and reproduce the global economy and its technological infrastructure. Kleeman imbues her novel with a sense of the mystical akin to DeLillo's descriptions of "psychic data" and "waves and radiation," but she manifests this feeling for the "veils of mystery and layers of cultural material" explicitly through the dualities of Gnosticism: presence and absence, light and dark, revealed and hidden (DeLillo 37-38). In this way, the technological and economic underpinnings of the narrative—namely, the forced invisibility of labor in spaces of consumption, whether physical, digital, or psychic—speak through their contradictory existence as, on the one hand, visible and ephemeral and, on the other, invisible yet material.

At the intersection of colliding concerns about consumption, labor, literature, and technology in the twenty-first century lies the ideology of self-service, which has grown to be a dominating influence in the design of consumer technologies, the expansion of hyper- and under-employment,

[43] For more on the evolution of consumer spaces, like the department store, the supermarket, the shopping mall, and eventually the online retail site, see Bowlby, Cochoy, Palm, or Smith.

and the trends of the publishing industry. Self-service refers to both a kind of technology and a kind of consumer labor, both of which replace (or redirect attention away from) human labor in the production process. In *White Noise*, as Leigh Clare La Berge argues, the self-service technology of the ATM serves as the physical node that connects its protagonist to the global financial system while also representing the novel's investment in questioning the narrative possibilities of "plotting" (like a human narrative) versus telling (like an automated machine). In *You Too*, the theme of self-service manifests in several ways: in the work on the self which is demanded by the self-help and self-care invoked in the novel's title, in the self-moving shelves at the supermarket, and in the recurring motif of consumption as production. Beyond this, in its constant evocation of *White Noise,* it raises questions about what it might mean to consider the consumption of literature—specifically, postmodern fiction—as self-service labor.

In what follows, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* will first be considered alongside DeLillo's *White Noise* through the lens of self-service in order to elucidate how the invisibility of technology and visibility of consumption in Kleeman's novel functions as both a social critique and a case for literary fiction. Building on this discussion of self-service, labor, and postmodern fiction, the chapter will then briefly consider Hilary Leichter's *Temporary*, published in 2020 by Coffee House Press, to contextualize *You Too* in its contemporary publishing milieu. While illuminating some of the shared impulses of literary fiction in recent years, these two novels—due to their relative positions within the publishing industry—provide complementary insights into how literary fiction in the twenty-first century grapples with contemporary problems of labor while deeply impacted by self-service technology and culture.

You Too Can Perceive White Noise

As corporations find more ways and occasions to implement self-service technologies—invented for the supermarkets of the 1930s and further popularized in the 1980s with the introduction of the ATM—and as AI-fueled automation becomes progressively more sophisticated, the appearance that labor is increasingly *disappearing* from scenes of consumption exists in tandem with the proliferation of the labors necessary to support that appearance.[44] In *Out of Sync & Out of Work: History and the Obsolescence of Labor in Contemporary Culture*, Joel Burges argues, "The obsolescence of labor is a critical source of grave levels of both unemployment and underemployment in the present, levels that the most commonly cited statistics notoriously conceal, indeed, that they deliberately forget in their calculations" (6). Yet the notion of labor's obsolescence, specifically as a result of technological advancement, is misleading at best. In reference to early twentieth-century speculations about what some saw as the rapidly approaching future of retail, Rachel Bowlby notes, in *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping,* that "the alternative to the living salesman was not, in the end, the machine;" instead, "it was self-service" (31). Looking at the more recent past, Jason Smith nonetheless seems to echo Bowlby's observation, explaining in *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation* that "the automated teller replaces the bank employee's labor not with a machine, but the with the free labor of its user" (119).[45] For these reasons, self-service provides a useful framework for examining how, in the twenty-first century, the appearance of less work might belie the reality of more and different work.

[44] For more detailed explanations of the history and development of self-service technologies, see Cochoy, particularly chapters 2 and 3, for the roots of self-service in twentieth-century retail; Gershuny, for a '70s-era theorization of self-service's potential to be a dominant postindustrial logic; and Palm, for a study of emblematic self-service technologies from the telephone to the ATM.

[45] It is also important to note here that the ATM functions not as a machine which replaces the bank teller but as a conduit for reorienting the bank teller towards other labors, as Smith helpfully articulates: "The introduction of the now-ubiquitous automated teller machine (ATM) did not spell the disappearance of the human teller; it merely shifted the responsibilities of those employees dealing directly with customers away from handling deposits and withdrawals and toward (say) the marketing of credit cards, consumer loans, and other banking services" (119).

But how can we understand self-service or self-service technologies as meaningfully working to register current socioeconomic conditions in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* when current technology is decidedly absent from the novel? Looking back at the function of a significant self-service technology in DeLillo's *White Noise* provides an in-road to addressing this question. In *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fictions of the Long 1980s,* Leigh Claire La Berge argues that *White Noise*, already an oft-studied and published-on text, can be newly read as registering and lending form to the impact that the proliferation of personal banking and the finance industry made on daily life in the 1980s. La Berge points in particular to DeLillo's use of the ATM (Automated Teller Machine) as an embodiment of the ethos of personal banking, in which the customer must assume responsibility for labor once performed by a bank teller. The personal banking represented by the ATM in the novel is banking at once internalized and abstracted; while labor shifts over the consumer, who internalizes a service once performed by bank employees, the consumer's encounter with the ATM as a networked machine creates a new relation to an abstract, global financial system in which they can see themselves individually participating. Particularly unique in La Berge's account is the emphasis placed on the changing status of labor brought about in part by financial culture and its emblematic iteration of personal banking: namely, the newfound importance of self-service labor.

In a similar vein, Alison Shonkwiler emphasizes the imagined connection that the ATM fosters between the consumer and the global economy, epitomized in a scene in DeLillo's novel in which Jack Gladney, while using an ATM, witnesses a "deranged" man being escorted out of the bank by security guards. "In *White Noise*," Shonkwiler argues, "the ATM offers one of the most routinely powerful moments of connection with a system that lurks beyond the borders of perception… To be blessed, authenticated, and accepted means not to be 'deranged' in the sense of

disarranged, disordered, or incompatible with the system" (77). To achieve the "blessing" or "authentication" that subsumes the consumer into the "system that lurks beyond the borders of perception," the consumer must willingly and gladly perform the self-service labor that effectively remakes social relations as they really exist into a narrative structure in which Jack Gladney makes sense as his own protagonist. In other words, the ATM—perhaps the self-service technology *par excellence*—serves as a locus for registering how self-service, as a technology and a logic, works to confuse the social relation between an individual and the economic system to which they are subject, producing a narrative that casts external actors as irrelevant or invisible and the global system of capitalism as mystical, almost "sublime." Perhaps to a greater degree than even the ATM, however, the supermarket also functions within the novel as a powerful symbol of the role of self-service in late twentieth-century US economy and consumer culture, the basis of a generative connection between DeLillo's novel and Kleeman's, published thirty years later.

As the birthplace of self-service shopping, the American supermarket impacted twentieth-century retail so significantly that food industry titan M.M. Zimmerman once referred to its logistical and physical organization as achieving a "revolution in distribution."[46] This "revolution" describes in part how consumers assumed responsibility for procuring the items they desired from the shop floor without the aid of an employee and transporting them home in the back of their cars. Self-service technologies, first the automobile and eventually the Universal Product Code (UPC) scanner, refocused the retail experience as solely between on consumer interactions with the retail space and its products as opposed to any retail employees. Store design, product labels and advertising, as well as retail technologies all contribute to the illusion that the consumer alone controls their experience at the supermarket and this experience shifted through the postwar period in response to new

[46] A fact noted in his *New York Times* obituary, "Max M. Zimmerman, an Expert on Supermarkets, Is Dead at 82."

technological and economic developments (Bowlby). Drawing from its own historical moment, the scenes set in DeLillo's supermarket lend shape to the irresolvable tension between embodiment and immateriality posed by consumer technology and media in the information age, and critics reliably read *White Noise* with an emphasis on the power of visible things and invisible systems to influence or be influenced by consumers. [47]

One notable moment arrives with the late, unexplained shifting of shelves at the supermarket in which Jack Gladney and his wife, Babette, tend their son, fill their bags, wander aisles, and bear witness as Jack's eccentric colleague, Murray J. Siskind, delivers monologues on death in some of the most-quoted passages from *White Noise*. In the novel's final few pages, DeLillo writes with a depersonalized authority afforded by short, declarative sentences, "The supermarket shelves have been rearranged. It happened one day without warning" (325). Shoppers scramble, tensing up with confusion in response to a change that betrays no clear cause. Yet "in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see"—the products on the shelves move without their help, without warning, without need for any additional interpretation or context—without any visible labor.

In a recent re-examination of the scene by David Alworth, the unprompted rearrangement of shelves signals the dynamic role played by the site's material objects. He writes, "While DeLillo tacitly acknowledges the role of human agency by opening the description with a passive-voice construction—'The supermarket shelves have been rearranged'—he makes no mention of supermarket employees; rather, his emphasis falls on the shelves themselves" (47). From this vantage point, DeLillo's shelves refuse a sole focus on human actions as propelling the narrative. These seemingly self-organizing shelves actively "surprise the shoppers, prompt a range of affective

[47] Hayles, for example, describes the supermarket in *White Noise* as "[t]he high temple of this society, the point where forces converge and data are coded most intensely" (408). For more, see LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*; Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*; Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels*; also see reviews by Ferris and Phillips.

reactions, and fundamentally reorient the social experience" as the supermarket stands in for the whole swarming field of social interaction—here, consumers and the objects of their consumption. In this reading, the rearrangement of shelves signifies that the products and shelves meaningfully act on and with the store's human shoppers; in doing so, Alworth unwittingly dramatizes the structure of the experience of self-service shopping, as first implemented in the design of such a store.

In *White Noise*, the shelves appear self-moving as a result of DeLillo's prose, but a motor of misdirection and illusion powers the shelves in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine.* Early on, readers learn that Wally's supermarkets have a peculiar organizational policy: "they were designed to baffle" (13). This "special trick," based on the real convergence of social sciences, advertising, and supermarket design in the first half of the twentieth century, means that items disappear and reappear on a semiweekly basis, restocked in new locations.[48] Fairly early in the novel, *You Too*'s protagonist, A, starts fixating on pinpointing the exact moment when these products on the shelves and in the store's displays appear elsewhere. "As many times as I had come to Wally's," she thinks, "I had never seen someone swap out the food in the food chandelier, and yet it was different every time I saw it." Employees hover everywhere throughout the supermarket, but curiously seem to be doing no work, or at least no productive work. In one scene, A suspiciously eyes an employee, concluding that "what this Wally was doing was not so much shelving as rearranging, moving the front-most boxes of raisins to the back and vice versa." Moreover, "The work that the Wally seemed to be doing was purposeless, designed only to distract me and obstruct" (114). Her observation prompts questions: if the workers at Wally's are not stocking shelves or moving the products, what exactly are they there to do? Who is moving the items on the shelves if not them?

[48] For more on the convergence of marketing, social sciences, and store design in midcentury supermarkets, see Bowlby, Turow, or Cochoy.

As Alworth observes, DeLillo "makes no mention of supermarket employees," and in his supermarket, the increased visibility of consumers and products successfully papers over the absence of employees. In Kleeman's supermarket, however, employees—each referred to individually as a "Wally"—appear littered throughout the store. While they do not stock shelves, they also decline to provide assistance to customers, per company policy. Instead, as one Wally asserts, "[a]t Wally's, Consumers are Creators," meaning that the employees are essentially a sort of human embodiment of the function of self-service, obscuring labor and transferring it in some small part onto consumers. What purpose, then, does their presence serve?

A's encounters with the Wallys in *You Too* produce, as Shonkwiler suggests of Gladney's encounters with the ATM in *White Noise*, "powerful moments of connection with a system that lurks beyond the borders of perception," providing brief but revelatory insights into the socioeconomic structures that invisibly shape the world around her (Shonkwiler 77). In one of the novel's last scenes, A, starving and seeking refuge after abandoning a cult, encounters what the novel dubs a "Wallyform," a kind of Wally's supermarket of which A knows little except that it "performed a very special role and required unique, highly talented employees" (Kleeman 268). As the name hints, the Wallyform seems to embody the idealized form of the supermarket chain—at least from an outsider's or a consumer's point of view. From that vantage point, the Wallyform appears nearly identical to the other Wally's stores; "It was only when you looked for the flaw that errors began to surface" (268). In these flaws resides the true significance of the supermarkets in the novel. Here, Kleeman provides the novel's closest analogs to the supermarket passages in *White Noise*:

> Employees bustled around at the checkout counters and the shelves closest to the front of the store, but the areas in the back, the bakery section and the swinging freezer doors behind which heaps of food sat in suspension, were desolate, backgrounded. The fruit in the produce

> section was perfect and unblemished, which was normal, since all Wally's produce was waxed, polished, and painted before being put on display. But this fruit was not only unblemished, it was identical: each pear like another, modeled after a Primary Pear and repeated over and over and over in the bins. (Kleeman 268)

Employees teem throughout the most visible areas of the store, but the less readily visible areas of the store, those in which a different kind of labor might be performed, remain empty. The fruit (pears instead of the apples in DeLillo's supermarket) are described as almost machine-produced, neither natural nor cultivated by human hand. The scene continues:

> The Wallys glided around within, unnaturally graceful, handling the items as though they were living things, baby animals or organs for transplant. They were Wallybaffles, trained Eaters who authenticated a Wallyform by performing in full view the customary gestures of an employee. (Kleeman 268)

Finally, the picture comes into focus: the "unique, highly talented employees" in the store merely *perform* labor, in sense that this labor is merely *performative*, merely intended to suggest the performance of labor rather than actually require it. Shortly thereafter, when a wayward Wallybaffle agrees to let A into the store through a side entrance (because even the front door of the store is an illusion, a thin line painted on glass to look like a door), Kleeman provides even more details about the pointlessness of the work:

> I watched the Wallybaffles do their graceful shelf-restocking dance… From this distance though, it was clear they weren't restocking anything. How could they? The products would overflow, choke the shelves. They'd need unstockers to take down the products they had placed, and if anyone from the outside were to see those, it'd all be over. So instead they rose

> and sank like ocean waves, hoisting product and then bringing it slyly back to the floor, where they would pick it up and hoist it once more. (Kleeman 272)

A discovers the deception of the Wallybaffles' "shelf-restocking dance" only once she stands to view them from an insider's perspective. To call what they do a dance is not entirely inaccurate, if slightly imprecise—they perform, as gracefully as would dancers, movements meant to transform reality into an intended message for an intended audience.

Inside the store, A discovers the falseness of the rest of the store, with its "decoy food" and trompe l'oeil set that progressively shrinks in scale the further into the store and away from the view of an outsider until she reaches the painted backdrop of a supermarket (275). "This was why nobody was doing anything at the back of the store:" she realizes, "there was no back of the store. Just smooth surface and a little scene that I… would never fit into" (276). Her inability to fit is both physical and material, as well as figurative. As a consumer, she was never meant to be where she is and to see what she sees: the truth that the scene of perfect labor and glistening product is only intended for consumption; it is all surfaces. None of those employees do the work upon which a supermarket depends. In the end, the Wallybaffles and the Wallyform limn the purpose of all the other Wallys and Wally's supermarkets. They are there to baffle consumers (and readers), directing attention away from the real work behind the success of the supermarket—that undertaken by the wageless members of the Church of Conjoined Eaters, a spiritual corporate cult obsessed with purification through consumption. In this way, and in yet another instance, consumption emerges to outshine production.

Although there may be an abundance of employees in Kleeman's supermarkets, they recreate the sense in *White Noise* that the supermarket exists as a multivalent symbol of the illusory power wielded by consumers, showcasing the fruits of their labor (which they perform elsewhere) as

manifested in the scene, and the goods, for them to consume only as a result of labor long since performed. In the final supermarket scene of DeLillo's text, "it doesn't matter what" the shoppers "see or think they see," because the surfaces that dazzle and confuse them also, though nearly imperceptibly, contain the truth of their existence: the traces of their production. "[T]he terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly," DeLillo writes. "This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living" (DeLillo 326). In one compelling sense, the "dead" labors of production, crystallized in the supermarket products and their Universal Product Codes, speak to the living through the holographic scanners which render their price. The shoppers need not "decode" anything themselves nor consider this labor as anything more than "waves and radiation" beyond their perception. But if the supermarket as it already exists in DeLillo's novel succeeds as a shrine to the contradictions of consumption and consumer culture, all shiny surfaces and consumer empowerment, what need is there for employees to "baffle"?

In *You Too,* Kleeman first renders consumer labor visible by populating Wally's supermarkets with employees who function only as physical catalysts for consumer labor, calling attention to the façade of other labors necessary to satisfy the imagination of consumers who must agree to continually assume responsibility for tasks previously undertaken by waged workers. But these employees' dual existences as front-facing Wally's workers and as members of the Church of Conjoined Eating complicates this even further, conveying the troubled reciprocity between consumer and worker and the hidden exploitation of laborers in one area depends upon and is co-extensive with other workers' visibility to consumers in another. What ultimately distinguishes Kleeman's supermarket shelves from DeLillo's is that, when their movement becomes visible and

registered, they reveal the essential unity of the consumer, the front-facing worker, and workers hidden their machinations.

Behind the self-moving shelves and the unproductive Wallys lies the truth about the supermarket, as well as a potential solution the empty purposelessness that A experiences in the novel, united in the guise of the Gnostic-inspired Church of Conjoined Eaters. The cult, we learn, owns Wally's supermarkets, as well as a seemingly every other corporation whose products feature in the novel, ranging in industry from beauty to food snacks. Eventually revealed as the unseen prime mover behind the events of the first two thirds of *You Too*, the Church of Conjoined Eaters called out to A long before she knew of its existence, but only after A glimpses the bodies working behind the shelves of Wally's does she join the Church.

At a pivotal midpoint in the novel's plot, A speaks with a Wally at the supermarket after her boyfriend (referred to only as C) breaks up with her for her roommate (referred to only as B), who has gradually altered her appearance so wholly as to nearly become A's double. Having lost her distinct identity as girlfriend, as friend, and as singular person in the novel's central triangle of relations, A's confusion about her role in a world from which she feels utterly unmoored heralds the first time in which she finally witnesses the shelves at the DoubleWally's move. But "[b]y the time I understood it was the product shelves sliding on their tracks, shifting into their new positions, it didn't even matter," A reflects, because what this movement represents is much more significant:

> In the gap newly created by the sliding shelves, where the plastic cups of jellied fruits trapped in firm syrup had once been, and behind the head of the Wally whose voice radiated from within me, pouring out from my skull as though I were the speaker rather than the listener, I saw the bodies of Wallys working away at something, heaving boxes of something

dense that hit the ground with moist thuds. 'I don't know,' I said. 'You will,' it replied. (Kleeman 182-3)

The Wally in this scene morphs from the employee in front of A to a disembodied voice speaking for the Church of Conjoined Eaters, Wally's supermarkets, and then ultimately herself. Where she was once listener, A is now also speaker; where she was once a consumer, after glimpsing "the bodies of Wallys working away," she will now also become worker. Immediately following this scene, A voluntarily allows herself to be hustled into a van and transported (almost like freight) to the Church's base, the shell of a former corporate complex in which she will become another laboring body, toiling to make her own existence as a laborer invisible. In view of this, the supermarket emerges as the novel's most important setting: it exists at the intersection between A's previous life and her life in the cult, between scenes of consumption and production, between reality and its representation through illusion, and ultimately between Kleeman's and DeLillo's novels. The self-moving shelves, and the workers hidden behind them, provide the moment and means by which these intersections become discernible.

When considered more deeply with the concept of self-service, the supermarkets in *You Too* testify to notable socioeconomic transformations and technological advancements that have taken place in the decades since the publication of *White Noise*. In DeLillo's novel, the ATM provides visible representation of the expansion of self-service beyond the supermarket and into other industries, in particular banking, as well as a symbol allowing Gladney to understand himself as plugged into a much vaster, opaquer web of global financial dealings. By the time Kleeman publishes *You Too*, however, self-service technologies have been thoroughly adopted and integrated into the daily lives of most Americans through cellular telephones, laptop computers, and other

internet-enabled devices.[49] Their proliferation and their neutralization through familiarity only speak to their continuing potential for real and lasting socioeconomic impacts.[50] Their absence in Kleeman's novel reflect their relative invisibility in the twenty-first century; they no longer amuse or shock or excite.

Interestingly, the same could arguably be said about postmodern literature. In his introduction to a special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature*, Andrew Hoberek sums up one version of this now-familiar narrative:

> Postmodern writers had enjoyed a notorious and wild ride of radical challenge to institutionalized art and its generic categories in the 1970s and 1980s, but their ironic, skeptical, and knowing (yet celebratory) juxtapositions of high and low, and their rejection of objective (or political) reality as a significant object or limit for representation, no longer worked by the 1990s. (Hoberek 233)

According to this line of argument, the most cited, defining characteristics of postmodernism, those which in hindsight made its original interventions feel so vital, transgressive, and liberating (or conversely, offensive, trivial, and demoralizing) were seen to lose their affective charge and critical potential after mass culture co-opted them so successfully and widely as to render them impotent and indistinguishable from the art and culture they once critiqued. But as Hoberek suggests (and a point on which he greatly expands), "that's [just] one way to tell the story" (233). While many attempts

[49] One 2010 report authored by Daniel Castro, Robert Atkinson, and Stephen Ezell for The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation argues, "Self service has long existed—think of do-it-yourself homeowners doing the work of professional contractors, or self-help books substituting for therapists—but its importance has grown as IT has created many opportunities to leverage technology for large gains in efficiency and convenience. Many of these changes have become ingrained into Americans' way of life" (4). Furthermore, as Michael Palm notes, "Thanks to the commercial emergence of interactive touch screens, coupled with the popularity of apps, the smart phone is an unprecedentedly expansive and versatile consumer labor technology" (156).

[50] As Vincent Mosco argues, "It is when technologies such as the telephone and the computer cease to be sublime icons of mythology and enter the prosaic world of banality… that they become important forces for social and economic change" (6).

have been made to propose, locate, or name successors to postmodernism as a historical period, literary postmodernism's lasting influence still registers, if less visibly, in literary production today. *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, with its intentional nods to postmodern fiction, its interest in the fragmentation of the self, its shadowy web of corporate paranoia, and even the Kurt Vonnegut-esque hand drawings interspersed throughout its pages, clearly wants readers to think about its use of postmodernism.[51]

The novel's invocation of elements of postmodernism functions less like pastiche or parody than an argument for how the proliferation of self-service, or what Michael Palm deems "technologies of consumer labor," transforms the "technomodernism" of a novelist like DeLillo into something markedly different today. In his influential study of postwar US literary production, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl makes a compelling case for a more nuanced understanding of the US fiction that critics and readers tend to lump into the broad category of postmodernism, arguing instead that the kind of postmodern fiction written by white men like DeLillo and Pynchon represents an aesthetic he describes as "technomodernism." This label, as McGurl explains, "registers a growing acknowledgment of the scandalous continuity of the literary *techne* (craft) with technology in the grosser sense—including, most importantly, media technology" (McGurl 42). In this sense, the modernist "systematic experimentation with narrative form" practiced by DeLillo converges with the interconnected, global systems of media technology and finance which provide the anchoring points for *White Noise*'s literary production. DeLillo's novel draws attention to and at times assume these technical forms through its use of branded language, narrative interruptions made by the abstract speech of credit card companies

[51] Kleeman arguably demonstrates in her debut novel what Robert L. McLaughlin has described as "the conflicted attitude the millennial generation of US fiction writers has toward their postmodern forebears," in which they appear as "on the one hand, an inspiration, a reminder of the possibilities of narrative and language; on the other hand, a problem, a sign of cultural collapse and psychological malaise" (285).

(what N. Katherine Hayles refers to as "postmodern parataxis"), and the porousness of television and radio broadcasts with characters' dialogue and the overall.[52]

Writing in a different historical context and from a different subject perspective (as a white woman in the twenty-first century), Kleeman evokes *White Noise*'s technomodernism in *You Too*, with its fixation on the complicity of global systems of production and consumption with literary practice, acknowledging the novel's continuity with the literary project of postmodernism while, at the same time, registering the influence of newly pervasive technologies on contemporary fiction. In order to achieve both ends simultaneously, the novel leans further into its insistent focus on consumption, interrogating the literary consumption of self-help, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, as an embodiment of the self-service logic which grew out of the midcentury supermarket.

Self-service Literature Beyond Postmodernism

Many iterations of postmodern literature replicate the primary imperative of self-service, which requires consumers to undertake labor otherwise performed by a paid employee, by transferring the onus for some of the narrative work away from the author and over to the reader.[53] Perhaps more interestingly, this description might equally be applied to self-help literature, a genre which proliferated in the popular market over the latter half of the twentieth century, during roughly the same period in which "postmodernism" became one of the most recognizable terms in U.S. literary fiction (McGee). *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine,* with its overt nods to postmodernism in key settings and themes as well as its invocation of self-help literature in its title and plot elements, demonstrates how the metabolization of self-service into twenty-first century life further

[52] See Hayles, "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information."
[53] La Berge makes a brief but similar argument in her discussion of *White Noise.*

complicates the consumption and production of literature. At the same time, the novel's dual loyalty—to literary postmodernism and the genre of self-help—testifies to how major publishing houses like HarperCollins require authors to balance the desire for their work to be understood as "literary" fiction with publishers' demands for titles to succeed commercially (Sinykin).[54] While postmodernism now often functions as a generic label that can be intentionally leveraged by writers to signal a text's "literariness," self-help literature remains a largely unacknowledged influence for the contemporary novel, in no small part due to its mass market appeal and long-standing scorn from literary critics.[55] On the one hand, the novel's cultivated associations with authors like Pynchon and DeLillo elevates it to the status of "literary fiction" while its gestures toward self-help literature and culture increase its appeal to a wider, more popular audience of women in particular.[56]

Postmodern literature and self-help speak to each other in more ways than one might initially assume. Often identified as the political or economic manifestation of historical postmodernism, neoliberalism—an ideology promoting deregulation, individuation, and privatization—also bears a significant and more readily identifiable relationship to the foundational pillars of self-help developed in the same historical period.[57] In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary*

[54] For more on the tension between these dual imperatives, see Sinykin.
[55] Per Beth Blum: "Self-help became the target of a fairly sustained academic attack in the early twentieth century. Thinkers from Theodor Adorno to Michel Focault have derided self-help as a form of narcissistic self-indulgence and as a 'technology of the self' meant to depoliticize individuals for the sake of social control… In addition to Adorno and Foucault, subscribers to the former position, including T. J. Jackson Lears, Christopher Lasch, and Lauren Berlant, have been reluctant to acknowledge the idea that self-help could incite positive political change, arguing that it tends to domesticate, rather than inflame, transgressive appetites" (30).
[56] This split signaling is evident even in reviews of the novel: Luiselli, writing in the *New York Times*, highlights Kleeman's affinities with postmodern titan Thomas Pynchon and connects her work to even further literary history by comparing it to Poe; in contrast, Rachel Tashjian's review of the novel for *Vanity Fair*, titled "*You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* and Our Obsession with Beauty Routines, Diet Diaries, and Chia Seeds" focuses on the novel's critique of the self-care industry and Maya Singer, interviewing Kleeman about her debut for *Vogue*, calls the novel "*Fight Club* for women" and asks primarily about its "intimate relationships," its evocation of "detox" culture, and its featured skincare products.
[57] David Harvey provides this helpful and frequently cited definition: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" from *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 2.

Literary Culture, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith elucidate how, over the course of the late twentieth century, neoliberalism's economic logic came to penetrate "otherwise noneconomic domains of life," explaining, "No longer just a set of ideological beliefs or deployable rationalities, neoliberalism becomes… a mode of existence defined by individual self-responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximization of human capital" (9). This mode of existence manifests in the imperative to pursue individual self-development, both in work and in life, which characterizes the literature of self-help. In a sense, modern self-help literature, like the logic of self-service to which it lends form, authorizes the individual assumption of more and more work when disguised as the pursuit of self-realization.

As sociologist Micki McGee argues, in *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*, "Fundamentally, it is our culture's fantasy of a disengaged, masterful, rational, and controlling self that creates the possibilities for endless and futile self-improvement," the same fantasy to which self-help literature owes its sales (173). Self-help encourages the exact fiction of the integrated self that both modernist and postmodern fiction seeks to expose and challenge, but at the same time it appears as coextensive with the project of postmodernism in its insistence on the instability of the self set adrift in a historical period marked by ahistoricism, alienation, and widespread feelings of powerlessness. Tracey K. Parker puts it thusly: trapped in a political and socioeconomic context insistent on the freedom of individual responsibility, "the postmodern subject is left to rifle through the self-help section at her local bookstore, cruising through a number of micronarratives which may or may not explain her past in relation to her present" (Parker 2). Fittingly, Kleeman places the self-help in her novel in the postmodern setting of the supermarket, further underlining how postmodernism, neoliberalism, and self-help might be meaningfully understood through the current of self-service that courses through them.

Thus, instead of focusing exclusively on Kleeman's gestures toward postmodern literature, which can be broadly (if only partially) understood as registering her text as distinctly "literary" in kind, we can further situate her novel in its contemporary context by maintaining and expanding a focus on the under-analyzed ideology of self-service in literature, best represented by the genre of self-help. After all, in the final pages in *White Noise*'s supermarket, the tabloids feature "miracle vitamins, the cures for cancers, the remedies for obesity"—small textual promises of the sort of self-improvement that grow in frequency and importance in the pages *You Too,* and which represents the literary impulse connecting consumers and workers. The novel's depiction of the Church of Conjoined Eaters, simultaneously a corporate entity and a cult, illustrates how corporations in the last decades of the twentieth century leveraged the neoliberal impulse for self-improvement to subtly extract more labor less noticeably from their employees. Furthermore, A's particular vulnerability to the appeals of the Church hints at how deeply late twentieth-century transformations in work and self-help were impacted by and impacted women in particular.

The "belabored women" of the modern workplace, as McGee describes them, became the target of some of the twentieth century's most successful self-help titles. Coinciding with many of the most identifiable postmodernist literary publications and the broader political-economic period of neoliberalization, a deindustrializing US economy following the postwar boom contributed to what some have referred to as the "feminization of labor," a term which denotes several significant transformations in the meaning and realities of work that took place over the second half of the twentieth century. During this period, historically male-dominated workplaces saw an influx of women as waged workers while some types of work, particularly white-collar work, were increasingly reframed to emphasize traditionally "feminine" characteristics of emotional management, flexibility, and social networking. This suited the concurrent, rapid expansion of the

service sector, wherein the shifting of employees off the factory floor, out of the steno pool, and into front-facing positions demanded workers cultivate emotional regulation and accept the irregular scheduling of at-will and on-call contingent employment while also attending to the domestic duties still undertaken by many women in the home. These shifts can be explained, at least in part, by transformations in industry and home life brought about by technological advancements that converged with influential new theories of corporate organization and management. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, Jasper Barnes details how, as mechanization was rendering many rote tasks and technical roles redundant, corporations profitably co-opted the collaborative ethos of midcentury artists and organizers, de-emphasizing visible hierarchies and encouraging workers to view themselves as creative laborers who can find self-fulfillment through work, no matter how uninspiring or taxing that work might actually be.

The pervasiveness of self-service in consumer spaces and practices today—whether in the form of supermarket self-checkout, Internet retail platforms, or the pages of popular self-help—parallels its necessary counterpart in the atomization and precarity of contemporary work. In *You Too*, A's own apparent under-employment as a proofreader at a magazine publishing clearinghouse four days a week serves as a nearly-invisible motor propelling her to roam the aisles of the Wally's supermarket, ultimately opening her up to the Church's self-improvement appeals. At the office, sitting in a drab cubicle among a sea of faceless others, A takes on whatever assignments her nameless boss throws at her, usually proofreading scientific articles, metaphysical puff pieces, and trade copy. Here again, Kleeman omits the technologies enabling work in the modern office, instead drawing attention to the conditions which they foster. During the novel's only extended scene at the office, and the only one depicting A working for a wage, A sits alone, all of her would-be coworkers having called in sick for the day. Her boss, out sick with the same fake-sounding illness,

communicates with A not via email or by phone but through an improbably long and hyper-specific string of Post-It notes left strategically for her to read, leaving her to assume the labor of self-management.[58] Apart from A, the employees have disappeared from or been rendered invisible in the workplace by their absence, and the actual technology that allows twenty-first century bosses to order around their employees from a distance—the now inescapable and dreaded email—has been transformed into a slew of trivial physical messages that A must both locate and follow around the office.

In her limited rendering of office work, Kleeman further suggests the significance of the fraught relationship between dual roles of consumer and worker in the novel by characterizing the work undertaken there as blurring the boundary between reading and writing. At work, A reads through magazines like "*Kayaking Quarterly* and *Marine Hobbyist*," looking for "duplicate characters" to strike out and "misplaced punctuation" to highlight. Her job means that she quite literally reads through proofs, or unfinalized articles, to test them for quality, work that in today's context generally amounts to scanning for typographical errors or misprints. While this means she belongs to a community of publishing industry professionals, albeit as a lowly and likely poorly compensated member, as a proofreader she must also put herself in the position of a reader who might encounter and consume one of the company's publications. As A explains, her role as a proofreader is more complicated than one might expect: "Other people think that proofreading is just about changing incorrect things into correct ones," A tells us, while insisting, "but it's more complicated: it's about holding language in place" (135-6). In other words, A understands her role as

[58] From *You Too:* "The cubicle was mine today because almost everybody who worked here was out sick: one with the flu, another with tonsillitis, three others with some kind of stomach bug. It gave me the feeling that there was something wrong out there, something that was many different things. My direct manager had something called pelliculitis. Instead of giving me the day off, he was managing me via a series of Post-It notes I found stuck up throughout the office" (150).

not only consisting of the rote tasks of typographical correction, the kind that could be and largely is performed by computer programs, but also requiring much more serious and metaphysical responsibility: the onus of cementing language into a determinate shape or form.

Only in her role as reader does the labor A performs produce consequential effects in and for the novel; reading appears, in a sense, as productive work. Although neither a writer nor an editor, exactly, A bears ultimate responsibility for transforming a text into its final, published form, hopefully appealing to other readers. As a reader this means that she tests the language for evidence of its truth or falsity, as one might do with a different kind of proof. This account of reading also, significantly, applies to how the pamphlets that she reads outside of work, distributed by the Church of Conjoined Eaters, compel her to look for "FALSEHOODS THAT WORK AGAINST YOUR WELLNESS," to discard the "DECOY KNOWLEDGE" of a text for the "SHADOW STRUCTURE" beneath it. While the articles A reads for work fall into fairly narrow, niche genres of nonfiction writing that appeal to clearly defined audiences and rely on a fairly lengthy publishing process, the Church's pamphlets bear the mark of self-publishing with their numerous errors and hand-drawn illustrations.[59] It remains unclear whether the self-help pamphlets are more fiction or guidebook, but this distinction ultimately seems irrelevant. Beth Blum has suggested "that self-help's cultural intervention is its implementation of an alternative way of reading" which encourages "… self-help readers [to] undermine the generic distinction between the novel and the handbook, poring over manuals with an aesthetic reverence, sifting out the practical advice in works of fiction."[60] A, as the reader of the Church's pamphlets, subordinates the "history and intention of the

[59] The pamphlets are described thusly: as "identical folded white papers. White filled the cracks between white, a harbor of inexhaustible paper… the pamphlet, which had the flimsy feel of paper from a home office printer. The shiny black of the type dissolved into tiny dots when you looked into it deeply. The pamphlet was blank on the outside, but on the inside it read…" (Kleeman 132).

[60] Blum cites Sheila Heti's self-professed project of staging a "relational aesthetics" between herself and her readers, a kind of interactive production more akin to theater than the novel that would involve the reader more fully in the text, as one logic guiding the construction of her own text (216). But even Heti's "relational aesthetics" seems to

text" to her "current ambitions"—to leave her dead-end job and her dead-end life for something more meaningful and permanent.

As Blum notes, "The growth of the 'creative economy' in the latter half of the twentieth century has co-opted the jargon of well-being, self-optimization, and self-actualization for the liberal-managerial class" (23). In *You Too*, The Church of Conjoined Eaters exists at this crossroads between self-help and corporate, with traces of corporate language often contaminating their façade of spiritual self-improvement. The first pamphlet that A encounters for the Church boasts, "Our spirituality centers offer the best step in diagnosing factual contaminants in you or your beloved, using subtractive processes developed by some of the most successful corporations in the country" (Kleeman 142). The use of "spirituality centers" here evokes the language of Scientology, the ultimate paragon of corporate self-improvement-as-religion, and the advertisement of their collaboration with corporations in the development of their "subtractive processes" puts only a degree of separation between their claims to being a "church" and their functions as the top shareholder in multiple companies and the producer of numerous commodities.

Evidence of corporate influence seeps into every description, scene, and setting featuring the Church. "Each new part of the Church I saw made me think it had once been something else: a hospital, a corporate hotel, an office complex," A remarks upon moving into the Church's secret compound. "Even stripped of its former contents, the deep structure of the building held traces of its former use" (205). The activity and purpose that the Church intentionally projects—or makes visible by directing attention to—through curated language of self-help and spirituality belies the invisible

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mirror Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's description of one fact of the "new spirit of capitalism's" projective city, in which "connexionism" compels the worker, adapting from project to project, to perpetually draw more contacts into their network of lateral associations. The idea of connexionism resonates both with the neoliberal tendency toward radical individuation and with a countervailing imperative to connect and collect. It can also help further explain the relative lack of characterization found in fiction like Kleeman's. While a great deal of people float in and out of the purview of the protagonist's everyday life, these characters largely appear more like outlines of people than figures with real emotional depth and complexity. See Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

activity and purpose that actually sustains it: corporate profit. But like the "ghosts" of the cult's self-eradicating members, the ghost of capitalist production still haunts the space of which the Church attempts to veil the true purpose. Even this veiling is transparent, however: A's introduction to the Church's compound takes place in a conference hall, and the first rule of the Church (explained to the room of newcomers by the "*Regional Manager, reporting to the General Manager and by extension to the Grand Manager himself*") requires that "[y]*ou show up at staff meetings on time and ready to participate. That means volunteer your own experiences, ask a good question, or just stand up and applaud someone who deserves it*" (192-4). Their structure as a church exactly replicates the structure of a corporation because the two entities are inextricable—they are one and the same, just as the workers at Wally's and church members are one and the same. One visible facade provides cover for the invisible double which sustains it. Both ventures must emphasize consumption (of one sort another) above all else because both benefit from their would-be customers and members thinking solely about individual consumption, at the expense of recognizing the work that labor that will be extracted from them.

Co-opting a hybrid language of corporate jargon and holistic wellness, the novel's Church of Conjoined Eaters stokes fears about self-preservation, self-definition, and self-integrity through its condemnation of a certain sort of consumption and diagnosis of some sort of contamination in those around you, casting fear about the stability of social relations as a problem to be solved by the individual. The Church, in turn, offers the solution toward which they might work. An early pamphlet for the Church of Conjoined Eaters given to A by a Wally's supermarket employee warns of "FALSEHOODS THAT WORK AGAINST YOUR WELLNESS," as well as improperly sourced food and the "UNIVERSAL TWINNING OF SINGULARITIES and their DIFFERENTIATION INTO LIGHT AND DARK varietals" (133). The pamphlets identify only the vaguest malaise, into

which any unsatisfied or unhappy person could insert themselves, with a universal cause to which the Church provides the solution. From the uncritical consumption of both food and knowledge, they explain that most people have unknowingly polluted themselves, in body and spirit. To underline this, the pamphlet even warns of decoy pamphlets that present incorrect information about the Church as fact, further undermining the reader's trust in their own ability to discern truth. The Church promises you that, like a grocery store freezer, "You too can be well stocked, free of false certainty or taint." (142) The pamphlets, like conduct books or instructional manuals, promise you the security of their ideology for the life that the individual feels they can no longer manage under the pressures of modernity.

In the Church's literature—in "pamphlets with titles, such as 'BOUNCING BACK FROM SELF-EXILE' and 'THE PROBLEM WITH YOUR LIFE IS YOU'"—more than anywhere else, the significance of Kleeman's self-help-inflected title is born out; in fact, it is the *only* time in the novel that the particular syntax of "you too" appears (142). Here, "you too" addresses the character of A as she wanders aimlessly in the aisles and in her life, promising to rid her of the "taint" of "false certainty" (or, in other words, uncertainty) that her unstable relationships and ephemeral work produce in her. At the same time, "you too"—in their pamphlet as equally as in the novel's title—addresses the reader who turns to fiction for similar purposes, whether to escape the uncertainty of their world or to gain some knowledge to navigate that world better. The self-help styling of "you too," and its dual appearance within the cult's promotional material and the title of the book itself, signal its significance in two registers. It gestures toward the self-service logic cultivated by both self-help (you must do the work to change your life) and literary fiction (you must do the work to read and understand this literature); it also communicates the influence of self-help on the

contemporary literary market, even on the literary fiction that strives to distinguish itself from the mass market titles of the self-help genre.

In part, this subtle acknowledgment of market imperatives points to how publishers like HarperCollins must compete for the attention of modern readers who are plagued by a similar sort of "hunger" that plagues A throughout the novel. Immediately after reading the contents of the pamphlet, A narrates, "I stared at it and felt like it was trying to tell me something, something I couldn't hear over the sound of my hunger, which was like two people with megaphones shouting at each other through the center of my head." Wondering, "Was this the correct pamphlet?" A acknowledges that she looks to this literature to provide an answer to her "hunger," one reminiscent of a notable claim made about contemporary fiction and its readers made by writer David Shields (143). In a "manifesto" published by Knopf in 2010, Shields famously argues for what he labels the "reality hunger" of readers, who he sees eagerly turning away from the ironic detachment of postmodernism and toward the renewed realism of "New Sincerity" authors like David Foster Wallace in the wake of postmodernism's cultural neutralization.[61] Yet A does not hunger for "reality," per se, although she does not hunger for fantasy either.

Taking Shields' much-discussed charge as a challenge, however, Blum points instead to what she terms the "practicality hunger" evident in literary fiction throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which has reliably drawn inspiration from the popularization of self-help in literature and culture. In *The Self-Help Compulsion: Searching for Advice in Modern Literature*, Blum suggests that self-help's most visible cultural intervention becomes evident in the reading practices cultivated by its consumers, practices that subordinates genre and history to a bricolage strategy of individual instrumentalism. A's hunger, at this point more spiritual than physical, is a symptom of

[61] See Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*.

her impoverished work and private life, which compels her longing for instructions on how to fix something she can control: in other words, herself. Similar desire in readers has generated an equal response from writers and publishers who recognize self-help's saliency and allure.[62]

Noting this, Blum calls attention to the recent popularity in literary fiction of the "how-to narrative," a fictional framework for practical self-cultivation which emerges from a lineage of self-help writing whose tendencies she sees increasingly manifesting in literary fiction. Blum explains, "how-to fictions turn self-help's steamroller didacticism into a compositional method" for literary narratives (211). As evidence, Blum gestures toward titles such as Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014), Paula Cocozza's *How to Be Human* (2017), Jesse Ball's *How to Set a Fire and Why* (2016), and Eleanor Davis's graphic fiction *How to Be Happy* (2014)—to name just a few. These texts share what Blum points to as a defining characteristic of writers of contemporary how-to narratives: a certain self-awareness about their participation in the market of advice-giving.

Kleeman's explanations of her protagonist's experiences in *You Too* clearly function as descriptions of seeking transformation through reading in an alienated modern world. Reflecting on thoughts she had during the creation of the novel, Kleeman commented, "The perspective of my character [is] sort of lost, pushed out from the world, looking for something either that she can take possession of or [for] some belief system. I imagined her coming across a pamphlet that will offer her solutions to that and how that type of information convinces her ("Interview with Alexandra Kleeman"). Kleeman's novel draws from the same well as many of these "how-to" fictions in its

[62] It should be noted that the cooptation of self-help's inherent generic ambiguity—much like the novel's generic ambiguity—also affords writers, publishers, and booksellers more leeway in marketing their titles with algorithm-targeting metadata.

marshalling of self-help's themes and promises of transformation, apparent in the novel's recurring focus on advertisements and applications of beauty products and the rituals "self-care," a parallel to the self-help-inflected appeals of the Church of Conjoined Eaters. Kleeman's choice of title suggests an acknowledgment that the novel might be read by those who hope to be "transformed" by it.

As McGee suggests, "the work of… self-belaboring itself includes a labor of active forgetting, of denying the dependence, vulnerability, and contingency of this purportedly autonomous self" (173). Fittingly, the Church's promotion of "ghosting" thematizes as much. "*Here at the United Church of the Conjoined Eater, we believe,*" the Regional Manager tells the newcomers, "*... the quickest route to self-improvement is self-subtraction*," a mantra that motivates the Church's insistence that each member intentionally banish all memories of their former lives (Kleeman 193). At the same time, the Church heavily restricts members' diets, allowing them to eat only a few Kandy Kakes a day in a perverse unification of dieting culture with the literal goal of working them to death. *You Too*'s emphases on beauty, wellness, and the more mystic self-help of the Church share a common, underlying feature with the appropriation of self-help in other contemporary how-to narratives: that is, they draw attention to the veiled corporate interests that encourage and profit from the narratives of self-transformation, in addition to the products themselves, that they provide for our consumption. In part, the effectiveness of that veiling depends upon the successful mystification of the labor required to prop up these industries by selling consumers the fantasy that it is their own work—and importantly, *not* the work expended to produce the products they consume—that can and will change their lives for the better. In this way, the products of self-help, self-care, and the "how-to" narratives of literary fiction similarly lend form to the logic of self-service upon which they depend: the appearance (and in many ways, the reality) of

transferring labor over to an empowered consumer, which simultaneously obscures the labor of all the workers that make this continually possible.

The desire for "practicality" that Blum identifies in modern readers seems inarguably compelled by the collapsing distinctions between work and private life, as the instrumental imperatives of productivity and self-cultivation seep into more and more aspects of individuals' personal lives. This emerges from historical shifts in the late twentieth-century, by which Sarah Brouillette argues, "Embrace of the primacy of the therapeutic self, motivated by nonmaterial or postmaterialist goals and committed to constant indeterminacy and self-evolution, converges with the neoliberal worker whose career is her primary site of self-discovery" (14).[63] This proves especially true today for the under- and hyper-employed workers of the service and gig economies, and for women, whose emergence as a visible force in the working world of the late twentieth century influenced the ways in which self-help developed and appealed to readers at that time.

Self-help, self-care, self-service: all of these depend upon the illusion of the empowered individual, who alone bears responsibility for their life. This powerful fiction of the individual also necessitates a negation of the social, a refusal to see the relations that produce the individual and the world in which they live. In *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*, Timothy Aubry argues, "The therapeutic emphasis of contemporary fiction *internalizes* problems, prioritizing their multiple psychic manifestations, ascribing to them causes rooted in the dysfunctional dynamics of the family or the pathological impulses of the characters, and magnifying their affective consequences" (201). *You Too*'s invocation of self-help gestures

[63] In the world of self-help, as Micki McGee explains, "The literature of self-improvement directed specifically toward these increasingly belabored women offered a series of 'solutions': the application of market values to every corner of one's experience… a Romantic alternative in the form of the idea of one's life as a work of art… and, finally, the traditional solution to these diminished expectations, in the form of a retreat to domesticity and appeals to simplicity" (82).

toward this therapeutic impulse while simultaneously undermining it, as the therapeutic promises of the Church of Conjoined Eaters—which offer to solve the problems of A's individual psyche through "self-subtraction"—prove wholly unproductive. The novel's lack of technology and its mystification of labor help create the conditions of possibility for the therapeutic impulse to at first appear alluring to A, with her isolation from material social relations encouraging belief in the Church's insistence that "'THE PROBLEM WITH YOUR LIFE IS YOU'" (Kleeman 142). By the novel's end, however, their absence and mystification function inversely to emphasize A's impotence in and continuing alienation from society, revealing the emptiness of the therapeutic promise. Transformed yet unsolved by the corporate mysticism of the Church, the real problem with A's life remains inaccessible and unknowable to her.

The failures of the therapeutic impulse in *You Too* serve as a parallel to the illusory appearance of consumption as a liberatory act, wholly divorced from the source of whatever is consumed. In the final few pages of the novel, on the brink of starvation, A finally reads the nutrition label for the Kandy Kakes whose ads she first obsessed over before joining the Church, whose empty boxes at the Wally's were instead stuffed with Church pamphlets, and which constituted the entirety of the Church's allowed diet for her. She realizes each "Kake" contains less forty calories and is made from "[j]ust chemicals, flour, aspartame, and some food-grade plastic," with neither the chocolate she expected or the mystic potency the Church promised (278). Fully disillusioned after leaving the Church and its corporate practices, she is wise enough to identify this as "a cost-saving strategy: real fat had to come from somewhere, and it took time and energy and money to squeeze the living oil from living things." But while she recognizes that all along she was starving, eating only "the food of the dead—mineral, chemical, synthetic," she still cannot see that she consumes the dead labor of living workers, even after laboring for the Church responsible for producing Kandy

Kakes (279). She only grasps the deleterious effect of this consumption on her own body and its failure to change her life, even if she could never quite articulate how she had hoped it would. At this moment, A resolves to return to her old life and embrace its surface pleasures, fully relinquishing her vague feelings of unease and discontent. "I would be going forward," she decides, "forward by way of getting back to the kind of life I used to have, only this time I'd live it better" (281). Ultimately, A chooses not to turn away from therapeutic promise of self-help or the sustenance of consumption despite their failures. She decides to keep pursuing them as a strategy for survival, one dependent on the systems which produce what ailed staying hidden from her view.

In the final scene of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney narrates as shoppers, confused at the unexplained rearrangement of the supermarket's shelves, "scrutinize the small print on packages, wary of a second level of betrayal." Overall, he notices that in the store "[t]here is a sense of wandering now, an aimless and haunted mood" created by their bafflement and "in the plain and heartless fact of their decline." He continues:

> But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in racks. (DeLillo 326)

Gathered there in the supermarket, the shoppers—Gladney included—do not need to see or know who rearranged the shelves or how, nor do they need to perceive "the binary secret of every item." The living labor of the workers and the dead labor of technology enable them to look elsewhere, at the mystified reality offered by the tabloids, "[t]he tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity" (326). While the changing

shelves remind them of things beyond their control, beyond their understanding, the familiar consumption still offered by the supermarket—both the "brightly colored goods" and the tabloids on the rack—helps assuage their anxiety and their fear. Immediately preceding this scene, Gladney admits he is "making it a point to stay away" from his doctor, whose technology might confirm what he fears and already, in a sense, knows: that "all plots move deathward" (325). The novel ends with the implicit understanding that Gladney chooses the comforting fictions of the supermarket because he knows what purpose its mystification serves.

Instead of a supermarket, Kleeman sets her novel's final scene inside a supermarket warehouse, suggesting the novel's further penetration behind the veil of the supermarket shelves. It ends perhaps even more cynically than *White Noise*, with only the fantasy A entertains about returning to the very same kind of existence from which she initially sought to disappear. "In the surrounding vastness of the warehouse," A sees no workers, none of the Wallys still performing the motions of restocking the storefront (Kleeman 283). No longer attempting to "ghost" herself, A chooses instead to live with the symbolic erasure of the material and social relations constraining her. Deciding to hunger for mystification—as opposed to reality—turns out to be a practical choice, one which authorizes a sense of personal control within a world constituted by opaque, global systems beyond individual comprehension. To return to her role as consumer, she now knows she must work to maintain the fictions that undergird it.

Literary Fiction in the 21st Century: Working Hard or Hard Working?

When HarperCollins published *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, Kleeman had already earned her MFA in fiction from Columbia University, published in a variety of notable literary outlets such "the *Paris Review, Zoetrope, Guernica, Tin House*, and *n+1*," and was currently pursuing her PhD in Rhetoric at the University of California-Berkeley.[64] Kleeman's pedigree, containing both creative writing and scholarly academic programs, situates her among a sizable crowd of contemporary novelists whose literary fiction provided the basis for Mark McGurl's periodization of the "Program Era," the postwar boom of US writers deeply influenced by the institutional contexts in which they learned directly from established authors working at universities and indirectly from the canonized texts those cadres of writers and programs valorized. Writers like Don DeLillo, who continued to publish regularly beyond the historical heyday of postmodern literature, proved to be particularly influential to a younger generation writing fiction in the late decades of the twentieth- and the earliest decades of the twenty-first centuries (Kelly). These celebrated authors, ranging from David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen to Benjamin Kunkel and Jennifer Egan, found DeLillo stylistically as well as theoretically compelling. As Adam Kelly argues, drawing on McGurl's work, "[m]ost of the post-boomer writers [mentioned above] undertook English degrees, or degrees in related areas of the humanities, during the 1980s, when theory was at its zenith of influence in the American academy" (396). For this reason, not only does the stylistic influence of postmodernism register in the fiction of these writers, but so too does a more critically- and theoretically-inflected understanding of the postmodern texts that exist as their predecessors. This explains, in part, why Kleeman's novel fixates on consumption and not least of

[64] Though standard practice in book publishing, it is important to specify that these publications represent only those deemed noteworthy enough by the publisher and/or Kleeman to note in the author blurb included in the back flap of the book's jacket.

all the consumption of fiction like DeLillo's *White Noise*, itself a text famously preoccupied with the power of media consumption.

But Kleeman's imbrication with the university, some twenty years after the likes of Wallace and Franzen also, registers the concomitant pushback against "theory" in the humanities, particularly Derridean deconstruction and Jamesonian "hermeneutics of suspicion," and the rise of competing models of literary criticism, such as Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's influential "surface reading"—as evident in *You Too*'s preoccupation with the visibility and penetrability of surfaces and depths. In one particularly illustrative scene from midway through the novel, when A questions what the purpose of a supermarket might be if not merely to sell food, a Wally tells her, "'A store is about something greater than selling,'… 'If you looked only at the surface of the word, you could say its primary purpose is storage. That surface is its core" (Kleeman 179). Yet, by the end of the novel, the reader knows that the surface of the Wally's supermarket, the main connective tissue between *You Too* and *White Noise*, is one intentionally constructed to deceive, to obscure, and to mystify. This ultimately demonstrates how Kleeman's consumption of DeLillo's novel and her position within a recent critical milieu work together in constituting the novel's relationship to its literary predecessor in the contemporary moment.

Consumption provides the surface of Kleeman's text, but it is really the maintenance of consumption's illusory appearances that serve as its simultaneous core. David Alworth, whose Latourian reading of *White Noise* appears earlier in this chapter, argues that in DeLillo's final supermarket scene, "A paranoid reading would take DeLillo to be implying that humans are being displaced, rendered obsolete by thinking machines" (74). Contra this, Alworth insists, "Focusing on the interface between the scanner and the bar code, [DeLillo] reminds us that humans are not the only actors interacting at the supermarket. Something like nonhuman sociality is everywhere" (47).

You Too, with its plot strands of doubling, disappearance, and ghosting seems on its surface to beckon the kind of paranoid reading of *White Noise* that Alworth conjures, but at the same time, a "paranoid" reading of Kleeman's novel seems to reveal the surface assumptions Alworth himself makes. As A sits in the empty warehouse, an inversion of DeLillo's ultimate scene, she hears rats somewhere inside with her scavenging for food; the novel's final line concludes: "Life was everywhere, inescapable, imperative" (Kleeman 283). From the contemporary vantage point of *You Too*, the "nonhuman sociality" of technology in *White Noise* transforms into the inhuman sociality ultimately produced by such technology: the therapeutics of individual consumption.

Instead of reflexively representing its production as a literary text, so heavily imbued with the elements of a canonical postmodern novel, *You Too* signals its indebtedness to DeLillo in its adoption of what Sean McCann and Michael Szalay have identified as the "high-minded irrationalism" of DeLillo's fiction, with its "deep investment in the therapeutic value of ineffable mystery" (451). This can be seen most evidently in the novel's Gnostic fixations: the themes of surface, depth, light, and dark, which resurface repeatedly throughout its pages, most readily in the literature of the Church. But, as revealed in the novel's final scenes, the apparent reverence for such mystery is just a necessary performance, reaffirming that the therapeutic promise of contemporary consumption—even, or especially, of literature—depends upon one's surrender to the mystifications of capitalism. In this sense, the novel suggests that literary fiction (as well as theory) can assume the function of a mystifying technology when consumed for therapeutic purposes, while simultaneously acknowledging the limited promise of consuming postmodern literature as a means of unveiling conditions of political and social alienation in order to merely survive under them. McCann and Szalay charge DeLillo with neglecting to engage with the material possibilities of political organizing in favor of sacralizing the ineffable, but the affinity with DeLillo's "high-minded

irrationalism" found in Kleeman's novel, and its similar failure to imagine redemptive social action, testifies compellingly to the institutional context for its production in the contemporary publishing industry.

You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine's publication by HarperCollins—one of the "Big Five" corporations which dominate publishing in the US—helps explain not only the novel's continuity with DeLillo's prestigious postmodern text but also why consumption appears its sole venue for representing the anxieties and insecurities of contemporary life.[65] This becomes especially clear when comparing Kleeman's text with Hilary Leichter's *Temporary* (2020), a novel which boasts a number of stylistic and thematic similarities with *You Too*. Like Kleeman, Leichter earned an MFA from Columbia University (where she now teaches) and had published her writing in a variety of well-respected literary outlets before publishing her debut novel with the nonprofit, Minneapolis-based Coffee House Press.

In Kleeman's novel, her narrator laments, "what I wanted wasn't something that I could have: my life, the process of living it out, was undelegatable, intransferable," deciding, "[t]his was an essentially contemporary problem, a problem of supply and demand" (Kleeman 105). As a consumer in a world of consumption, A desires someone to work not just for her but *as* her and in her stead, freeing A not only from a job but from the affective labor of social relations. As if in response, Leichter's novel interrogates this "contemporary problem" from the opposite vantage point, demonstrating how precarious and unrelenting hyper-employment renders the dream of

[65] As John B. Thompson details in his 2010 book *Merchants of Culture*, published by Polity Press, the ongoing consolidation of the publishing industry in the second half of the twentieth century led to a restructuring so that "by the end of the 1990s there were four large and powerful publishing groups in the field of US trade publishing" (113). The publishing groups to which he refers, and which are commonly referred to as the "big four" publishers, are Random House, Penguin, HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster. The field then swelled to include Hachette Book Group and MacMillan, colloquially known as the "big six." In 2013, however, the "big" number shrank again with the announcement of the Penguin Random House merger, a number that now hangs in the balance pending future judicial decisions that may allow or for a second time block Penguin Random House's bid to acquire Simon & Schuster (Milliot).

controlling one's life and "the process of living it out" functionally impossible. These two complementary novels, taken together, testify to how the logic of self-service necessary for reproducing existing social relations is constitutive with the self-effacement of technology and labor. While *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* wonders, "Was consumption a form of infiltration?" *Temporary* answers that contingent work most assuredly is (130).

Like Kleeman, Leichter sets her novel in a recognizable world which she renders slightly uncanny by pushing real-world absurdities to their logical conclusions. Like *You Too*, *Temporary* circumvents any substantive inclusion of current technologies such as cell phones or the Internet, ubiquitous in the real world and required in most work settings, by filtering realistic feelings and circumstances through a mystical, even mythical, lens. Reviews for *Temporary* emphasize the novel's non-realist evocation of the bizarre contradictions of contemporary under- and hyper-employment. Parul Seghal writes in *The New York Times* that "*Temporary* reads like a comic and mournful Alice in Wonderland set in the gig economy, an eerily precise portrait of ourselves in a cracked mirror," while Rebekah Frumkin of *The Washington Post* called the book, "a refreshingly whimsical debut that explores the agonies of millennial life under late capitalism with the kind of surrealist humor." Writing for *The Baffler,* Jess Bergman commented that "[b]y embracing absurdity, Leichter evades realism while borrowing from reality." Other reviewers' appraisals, largely though not exclusively positive, further cement an understanding of the novel's two most salient features: its critique of unstable, unfulfilling modern employment and its technique of leveraging said critique in the shape of an uncanny world that feels affectively familiar despite its unfamiliar-seeming underlying mythology.

Temporary follows an unnamed woman, the latest in a matrilineal line of "Temporaries," as she bounces between a series of temporary job placements, each strange and surreal in their own

way, in pursuit of a life of a permanent occupation. Slipping into and out of roles varying from Chairman of the Board to pirate, from murderer's assistant to blimp-based remote bomber, the woman substitutes her whole self for those whose positions she fills, guided by an old adage once stitched on her mother's decorative pillow (or perhaps "on a granola wrapper" she read "on [her] way to work"): "There is nothing more personal than doing your job" (Leichter 5). Yet, with each new placement, her certainty of finding the permanence she desires—what Leichter refers to in the novel as "the steadiness"—as well as her trusting acceptance of the role into which she has been born gradually erode, eroding her sense of self in the process. Over the course of the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that "doing your job" is only personal to those whose whole reality is determined by their struggle to secure a job.

Far more so than *You Too*, *Temporary* insistently directs the reader's attention to work, even if the work depicted often appears blatantly silly or surreal (at one point, the protagonist briefly and by accident finds herself subbing in for a sea barnacle; at yet another, she passes out pamphlets in service of an underground-dwelling witch). Work structures the novel, with chapters segmented according to the protagonist's current gig and the plot motivated by her search for a permanent position. Novelist Ben Marcus describes the novel as "a demented, de-tuned love song for the working life," but *Temporary*'s discordant tune sounds less like a love song than a hobo's ballad, wholly dependent upon the conditions of itineracy and dispossession that this world of work creates.[66]

While *You Too*'s Church of Conjoined Eaters labors to shroud work in a veil of mysticism, redirecting desires for social belonging into individual pursuits for self-improvement through consumption, *Temporary* foregrounds how that same sort of identity-seeking necessarily coincides

[66] For more on the currents of labor crystallized in the "hobo" ballads of the early twentieth century see Jasper Bernes' discussion in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, specifically pp. 185-196.

with job-seeking in the capitalist system. Four, brief intervals interspersed throughout the novel present an extra-narrative mythology which points to gods whose own labor of creating the universe prompted the very existence of Temporaries. "*The gods created the First Temporary so they could take a break,*" one mythic interval establishes. "'*Let there be some spare time,' they said, 'and cover for us, won't you?*" (Leichter 164). From the very beginning of the universe, the passage attests, Temporaries have existed for the sole purpose of supplying the surplus labor upon which the universe depends. The novel's narrator receives these myths from her mother, who received them from her mother (and so on); the system continues to function by cloaking the extant labor relations of office work in the language of mythology, reinforcing the immutability of the system and encouraging the narrator to view her self-sacrificing work as an existential imperative. "*It was their bureaucracy that allowed for her existence*," she acknowledges, but although "[s]*he noted the fallacy of permanence in a world where everything ends*," she *"desired that kind of permanence all the same*" (164).

After failing through every corner of the system she worked so thanklessly to prop up, the narrator of *Temporary* never earns the psychic security she seeks, even when offered a permanent position aboard the pirate ship. "I close my eyes and wait for the steadiness to arrive," she tells the reader, "but it never does" (172). In the end, only a surprise inheritance of a corporation from her suddenly revealed father (the former CEO of the company, whose ghostly remains she wears in an amulet around her neck) ultimately changes her individual fate. Only a stroke of unforeseeable luck grants her the "steadiness," which turns out to be another burden— "Actual forever permanence," allowing her to exist as in her role as CEO in mythic perpetuity (179).

The final section of the novel consists of an "exit interview" for the woman as a Temporary, detailing in brief what has happened since her existential change. While the rest of the novel is

narrated in the present tense—the ever-changing present of insecurity and labor—in the exit interview the woman responds to questions in past tense, as the segments of mythology also appear. As we learn, the woman has written the interview questions herself. In a sense, then, the final pages of the novel display the woman writing herself into a different mythological role, one that casts her as nonhuman, although not a god. "I mean to say that I'm a literal fossil," she explains. "I'm a rock formation, holding many impressions from many objects, many beings, many times" (179). The good luck of inheritance wins her permanence, but the endlessness of that work—along with a lifetime of temping—fully disconnects her from humanity, a disconnection she grieves. The closing pages of the novel feature the final mythological account of the "Last Temporary," remaining permanently to search for other signs of human life.

Temporary begins and ends with work, just as *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* begins and ends with consumption, but the resolution of Leichter's novel suggests the transformative potential of the social while also insisting on the dehumanizing nature of all capitalist work. Like *You Too*, Leichter's *Temporary* closes with its unnamed narrator in the isolation of a workplace. While Kleeman's narrator, as a consumer trespassing in a warehouse, cradles a fantasy of returning to the system from which she has alienated herself, Leichter's narrator, bound by her employment, cannot leave her corporate tower. While A chooses to locate sustenance for her life in the consumption of inorganic matter, the Temporary herself turns to stone. The mythology into which she writes herself allows the former Temporary to preserve "*something more sacred than just survival*," which appears to be empathy and social solidarity (Leichter 168). The passage reads:

> *She summoned the strength of the very First Temp, of her mother, of her grandmother, too, all the people now departed. When she closed her eyes, she could muster the force to fill in for every single person, and for their favorite people, and for their enemies, and for their*

> *boyfriends, and for their children, and for their employers, their wives, their wardens, their supervisors, their supervisees, their acquaintances, fugitives, fathers, fiancés, friends, even me, even you.* (Leichter 180)

Interpolating both the reader and the narrator in this passage, Leichter identifies both labor and fiction as sites for recognizing the humanity of others and forging social bonds, even within the limiting conditions of their capitalist organization.

The hopeful grief at the end of Leichter's novel and the pessimistic relief at the end of Kleeman's novel reflect, in a way, the conditions of their own publication—the former by a nonprofit press and the latter by a conglomerate publisher—which find figuration in other thematic and stylistic differences between the novels. "To a large extent," John B. Thompson explains in *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*, "this world of small presses exists as a parallel universe to the world of the large corporate publishers," and *Temporary* and *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* represent these parallel universes, their authors' shared backgrounds and identities serving as a balance upon which their similarities and contrasts can be measured (156). As both novels aspire to the status of literary fiction, evidencing their indebtedness to postmodern irrationalism and evading popular genres, their opposing investments in consumption and labor and their contrasting conclusions about social relations mark Kleeman's and Leichter's debuts as representing notably different vantage points within the literary field.

Beginning in the 1980s, the conglomerate and the nonprofit emerge as the two primary models for the publishing industry, with conflicting incentives and financial pressures producing two distinct approaches to what constitutes the "literariness" of literary fiction (Sinykin). While conglomerate publishers (or, in other words, the Big Five) boast bigger operating budgets, vaster backlists, and steadier cashflows, nonprofits rely largely on a combination of grants, private

donations, and trusts. At the same time, however, this means that while corporate demands for high financial returns create considerable constraints for the editorial decisions of conglomerates, nonprofits benefit from the leeway provided by their relative lack of dependence on a title's commercial viability, enabling them to gamble potentially on more experimental literary fiction and pursue more titles reflecting the passions and ideological commitments of editors (Thompson).[67] As a result of conglomerate and nonprofit publishers' differing functions and constraints, the fiction each publishes tends to bear evidence of their publishing roots, at times intentionally shaped by writers and at other times selected by editors to fit their specific institutional context.

While both Kleeman's and Leichter's novels stylistically fit the mold of literary fiction as a marketable genre, *Temporary*'s overt focus on the potential solidarity borne from the precarity of modern work resonates with its publishing origin, as the last title to be published by Emily Books, the now-defunct feminist imprint of Coffee House Press. By its own account, the publicity of Coffee House Press characterizes the nonprofit as striving to function as "catalysts and connectors—between authors and readers, ideas and resources, creativity and community, inspiration and action," which they achieve not only through regular publications but also through the arts programming, funding, and publishing series which together constitute their "Books in Action" initiative. That outward-facing initiative was spearheaded by Chris Fischbach, the press's publisher at the time of *Temporary*'s publication, who himself began working at the press as an intern—a career trajectory which appears in contrast to the Temporary's constant reassignments—and who fostered literary talents such as Valeria Luiselli and Ben Lerner ("Fischbach Out").

[67] In fact, Thompson argues, "For many small indie presses, the world of corporate publishing is seen as a sphere of commodification in which money reigns supreme and where cultural values and commitments have been sacrificed to commercial ends" (161).

Positioning themselves in direct contrast with the Big Five conglomerates, Coffee House appeals to its readers, "With your support, we're able to make experimental, creative choices rather than react solely to sales algorithms and trends." In *Temporary*, the inescapable demands of modern employment function as limiting conditions for the real work of creation—the forging of social bonds through literary engagement—and its substitution of human beings for current technology (the last temporary work the narrator performs is as a "human metal detector") reasserts Coffee House's self-alignment against the technological conditions of conglomerate publishing (Leichter 162). As of 2022, Coffee House's website lists Leichter's novel as their bestselling fiction title.

Conversely, viewed within the context of its own conglomerate publisher HarperCollins, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, *You Too*'s thematic obsession with consumption makes a particular kind of sense, mirroring the fraught task of balancing a title's potential sales—or in other words, its consumption by readers—with its literariness (Thompson 114). In "Against Conglomeration: Nonprofit Publishing and American Literature after 1980," Dan Sinykin and Edwin Roland argue that "conglomerates produce allegories for themselves. Language of ambition, bureaucracy, and social mores differentiates conglomerate books from those of the nonprofits." Up to a point, *You Too* confirms this assertion, producing an allegory, albeit a critical one, for the conglomerate group through the Church of Conjoined Eaters, whose convoluted bureaucratic structure and aspirational literature might call to mind Rick Warren's *New York Times* bestseller, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (2002), published by the HarperCollins imprint Zondervan to tens of millions in sales (Thompson 114).

In contrast to other conglomerate titles, however, Kleeman adopts techniques that Sinykin and Roland identify more generally with the kind of "literariness" usually cultivated by nonprofits,

which "double down on what distinguishes fiction from nonfiction: language of embodiment."[68] In Kleeman's novel, moreover, the language of embodiment stands in for representations of contemporary technology and technical processes in a similar manner as in Leichter's, further solidifying *You Too*'s affinity with *Temporary*'s anti-conglomerate positioning. Yet *You Too*'s fascination with rendering embodiment (using language akin to "shoulders, hands, feet, rhythm, movement, washing, jumping playing, catch, grab, beat, gesture, break condition, sweat, swollen, dizzy, hunger, body") always revolves around its investment in critiquing the illusions of consumption, suggesting how such a literary technique might function as a strategic bid for boosting the consumption of literary fiction, even when leveraged by a writer with a nonprofit publisher (Sinykin).

Ultimately, Kleeman appears to lean more heavily into her novel's themes and language of bodies and consumption to leverage popular interest in self-help and self-care into a case for its wide-reaching appeal as literary fiction while simultaneously undermining the transformative possibility of such fiction in a corporate publishing landscape. While *You Too* reveals the mystic literature of the bureaucratic Church as deep-sounding though deeply ineffective nonsense, the novel's answer to it is a renewed, albeit cynical embrace of popular consumption. A returns to the life of consumption she knows because it proves satisfying in a way that her complicated relationship to production within the Church disallowed. Kleeman directs readers' attention away from the fraught imperatives fueling conglomerate publishing and toward the individual necessity to continue consuming its products. Emerging from a publishing industry hyper-responsive to the

[68] As Sinykin and Roland take care to point out, their characterizations of the distinction between conglomerate and nonprofit fiction is derived from a broad overview of general trends, conceding, "But if we zoom in to the scale of a single book, the view changes, returning some agency to the author. An author has considerable leeway in leveraging the discourse acceptable to her press. This negotiation between an author and the institution is almost subliminal for everyone involved, happening at the level of intuition."

easily trackable consumer habits of readers, Kleeman's novel must encourage consumers to assume individual responsibility for ensuring the continuing production of prestigious literary fiction at a conglomerate scale.

Conclusion

Consumption in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* signals the biological, economic, and cultural in equal measure. The characters' disordered eating draws sustenance from omnipresent TV commercials of a starving cartoon cat perennially chasing a chocolate bar; a recurring ad for topical beauty cream touts (and then demonstrates) its inexplicable ability to be literally eaten. The primary source of narrative movement in the novel, the Church of Conjoined Eaters, owns a massive chain of supermarkets and adheres to a strict diet of mass-produced candy, preaching a gospel of 'light' (or good) and 'dark' (as in bad) consumption in the broadest sense of the word—of food, of material things, of conversation—with no clear parameters for distinguishing between its objects. Leaning heavily on these conflicting messages of consumption, Kleeman invokes the age-old dictum, "You are what you eat," for an age in which fast food corporations face as much criticism for their low wages and the nutritional content of their products as they do praise for socially conscious commercials and fostering entrepreneurship.

In yoking her novel so clearly to its much-read and critically-metabolized predecessor, *White Noise*, Kleeman implicates yet another register of meaning for consumption, casting the complex process of absorption, omission, and enaction which marks literary influence as much an expression of the process of consumption as the well-worn metaphors of consuming art or entertainment in general. Over the course of the novel—as these multiple, variable inflections of consumption collide and compete with one another for an ultimate claim to meaning—it emerges that what actually

matters for this text is not consumption *per se* but rather what these representations of consumption serve, by design and by desire, to obscure. Going beyond a mere critique of consumption, *You Too* suggests that the perversions and inversions embedded in and arising from our representations of consumption emerge as a result of an unspeakable desire to banish all traces of production from the spaces in which we imagine 'real life' to take place, a paradoxical fantasy that arises from the technological conditions that render its impossibility.

Kleeman's *You Too* and Leichter's *Temporary* eschew representation of the technologies of twenty-first century life in favor of the irrational existence that such technology perpetuates. While *You Too* catalogues an individual life of consumption, *Temporary* traces an individual life of labor, and both novels leave their narrators suspended by their inability to transcend the limited role they each occupy as consumer or worker. Both novels reveal each of these existences as dependent on illusion, either the therapeutic promise of consumption, on the one hand, or the liberatory promise of work on the other, denying the fundamental collusion between these illusions.

Whether in the supermarket, in the office, on a pirate ship, or in an empty home, the obfuscation of labor—and the blurring of the boundaries between work and private life—encourages the perpetuation of existing social relations through voluntary blindness or belief in their mythic immutability, both presented as strategic tools for individual survival. In this way, through the teachings of the Church of Conjoined Eaters and the retelling of the mythology of the Temporaries, *You Too* and *Temporary* depicts how the pervasive logic of self-service functions beyond the technology which it enables it and through literature itself. While the gods may have created the First Temporary by handing her credentials and passwords, a key card, a contract, a copier, and some binders, "*She activated her keycard and swiped herself into existence*" (Leichter 21).

CHAPTER 3

Now You See Me: Literary Voice and Defacement in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*

Introduction

During an interview following the highly anticipated publication of her sixth novel, *The Candy House* (2022), Jennifer Egan makes a slightly surprising and unprompted confession about another one of her novels, which had been published nearly two decades earlier. "Probably of all my books," Egan tells the interviewer, singling out *Look at Me* (2001), "that is the one that has really stayed with me the most. I think I'm the proudest of it… It was really the book where I feel like I crossed over into doing the kind of work that I'm really interested in doing" ("Candy from Strangers"). While by no means the most well-known or most esteemed of the celebrated author's works of fiction, *Look at Me* nonetheless represents a critical juncture in Egan's career as a novelist. When she first began the six years of writing and drafting that ultimately resulted in *Look at Me,* Egan had already published one collection of short stories, *Emerald City* (1993), as a well as her first novel, *The Invisible Circus* (1994); before that, she had worked primarily as a journalist and literary critic. Upon *Look at Me's* publication, however, Egan suddenly found herself on the receiving end of more critical attention from the literary world than she had for any of her previous writing, with the novel garnering a nomination for that year's National Book Award.

In addition to the novel's role in cementing her literary reputation, it also signaled a pivotal moment in the development of Egan's thematic preoccupations, which manifest equally in the formal innovations of her fiction. As Egan remarks in the same recent interview, "[In *Look at Me*] I feel like I introduced a lot of ideas that have guided me ever since." In fact, the novel

registers as Egan's first serious literary attempt at exploring modern technology's potential impact on the human condition and consciousness (it features a start-up tech company called Ordinary People whose platform eerily foreshadows twenty-first century social media), a theme that would continue to prominently appear in later works such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011) and its sequel *The Candy House*. Some of Egan's highest-praised formal innovations—for example, featuring a chapter in *Goon Squad* written in and as a PowerPoint, or composing and releasing the short story, "Black Box," as a series of "tweets" on social media platform Twitter—can arguably be seen as evolving from earlier attempts in *Look at Me* to wrestle with how the forms assumed by human consciousness are influenced by our forms of technological mediation.

As a novel that Egan identifies as particularly significance for her, *Look at Me* deserves to be understood within the context of its author's career; furthermore, and as such, it demands to be situated in the literary historical context of Egan's writing and publication of it. As scholarly engagements with Egan and her work have gradually increased in the years following *Goon Squad*'s cultural enshrinement, Egan has been discussed in relation to what some scholars have identified as one of the dominant literary impulses to emerge in the US during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, constituting a trend often referred to as the "genre turn" of literary fiction.[69] The genre turn describes the recent trend of "serious" or prestigious authors publishing novels which incorporate the stylistic and thematic markers of a given popular genre (like science fiction, mystery, or fantasy, for example) into what would otherwise register as

[69] For a better understanding of the "genre turn" as a discourse in literary scholarship, see Andrew Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion"; Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace*; Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*; or Tim Lanzendörfer (ed.), *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*. For more on Egan's relation to the genre turn, see Kelly, "Jennifer Egan, New Sincerity, and the Genre Turn in Contemporary Fiction."

literary fiction. It was Egan's subsequent publication after *Look at Me—The Keep* (2006), which heavily engages with the tradition of the gothic novel—that nominated her as a compelling example of the trend's emergence among notable literary authors.

Some scholars of the genre turn argue that it should be understood as aesthetic innovation that lends figuration to authors' own relations to popular genre, while others argue for its significance as a commercial strategy demanded by the conditions of contemporary publishing (Kelly). These conditions were already cohering when Egan wrote *Look at Me*, the last novel she published before making her own "genre turn." Adam Kelly, one of the first literary scholars to publish extensively on Egan, claims, "If the turn to genre sees contemporary literary authors resolving this bind by making their peace with market considerations, then *Look at Me* belongs to an earlier cultural moment, a moment when the full literary and commercial embrace of popular genre forms, televisual models, or the genre realism of *Manhattan Beach* [Egan's 2017 novel] was not yet a done deal" (166). Kelly reads *Look at Me* as primarily registering another dominant literary impulse in contemporary literary fiction earlier associated with Egan, the "New Sincerity" of writers like David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers, whose fiction is (in part) characterized by a seeming rejection of postmodern irony and the idealization, instead, of the pursuit of "authenticity."

Kelly ultimately suggests Egan's second novel demonstrates an affinity between the genre turn and New Sincerity, both literary sensibilities with which Egan has been associated, arguing that the writers of New Sincerity fiction paved the way for the divided accounts of genre-turn writers described above. Both invite the questions: do these impulses arise from "authentic" authorial intentions or as market-motivated strategies for literary distinction in a conglomerate publishing industry? Following Kelly, this chapter understands *Look at Me* as

Egan's attempt to grapple with the contradictory imperatives for self-objectification and authenticity, marketability and prestige produced by literary fiction's strange position in the contemporary publishing landscape.

Despite her modest success in publishing *Emerald City* and *The Invisible Circus*, Egan has admitted that, in the years prior to *Look at Me*, she still longed to attain literary fame: "Of course one craves that desperately—you're in America… I felt that I clearly wasn't worthy of that, and that's why I had not been pegged for it" (Schwartz). To cement her place in the publishing industry, she would have to become a recognizable brand; to maintain her claim to literary distinction, she would have to cultivate an "authentic" and distinctly literary "voice." *Look at Me* registers this conflicted desire for literary prominence as it also demonstrates the strategic compromises necessary to accomplish this as a writer of literary fiction at that moment in history. With its intersecting inquiries into technological mediation, self-objectification, and authenticity, amid historical conditions shaped by economic and cultural forces ranging from finance to reality television, *Look at Me* lends form to the contradictions of everyday life under capitalism at the turn of the millennium as equally as it refigures the contradictions upon which Egan produces her literary career.

Authorship and Defacement

In *Look at Me,* Egan interweaves the narratives of tangentially yet fundamentally related characters—a traumatized New York model, a former golden boy turned disturbed history professor, a disguised terrorist who falls in love with Hollywood, and a passionate but naive teen girl in the Midwest—tracing their personal histories back and forth across the country and through time. Haunted by the geographical and temporal ghosts of bygone American

industrialism, the novel explores the painful fragmentations of identity and history caused by financialization, technological mediation, and image-obsessed culture in late capitalism. In doing so, Egan presciently anticipates the kinds of social media technologies and corporate practices that would soon permeate daily experience and recalibrate the ways in which we relate to ourselves and to others as human beings. She seems to predict that self-commodification would prove to be not only a commercially profitable strategy but also a strategy for survival at a moment when labor and leisure, private and public, "real" and "fake," and even past and present have become increasingly indiscernible.

The main throughline of the novel follows model Charlotte Swenson, whose narrative intersects with other secondary characters' over several decades and across the US. The novel begins after a harrowing accident in her hometown of Rockford, Illinois traumatizes Charlotte, erasing her memory of events leading up to the crash and requiring her to undergo cutting-edge surgery to reconstruct the face upon which she built her career. Upon returning to her home in New York City, Charlotte is approached with a lucrative opportunity by Thomas Keane, the CEO of a tech startup, who convinces her to take part in his as-yet unreleased platform, Ordinary People, a revolutionary new network that will allow individuals to log on and voyeuristically observe the life of another "ordinary person" in real time. With the promise of handsome compensation and on the condition her profile will be ghostwritten, Charlotte returns to Rockford to film a re-enactment of her fiery car crash—a move Keane insists will lend necessary credibility and draw to her "Extraordinary Person" profile. By the novel's close, after the wildly successful launch of Ordinary People, Charlotte's unique story grants her instant celebrity, and her ghostwritten autobiography becomes a smash hit. In the year that follows, we learn, Charlotte lands a reality show, an extensive list of product and fashion endorsements, honorary chairs on

academic committees, and a fictional sitcom based on her life. Cameras photograph and film her performance of life at every angle and with every thought; every one of her feelings becomes "cannibalized" with capitalist hunger into fame and profit. Finally, Charlotte possesses the fame and fortune of which she always dreamed both in Rockford and in her mediocre modeling career.

Tracing this central narrative, it becomes clear that *Look at Me* is structured around the problems attendant to creation and authorship and, beyond that, those of self-creation and self-authorship. Charlotte's ghostwriter Irene Maitlock, an academic "playing" journalist—a woman described as being rendered nearly invisible by her uncrafted appearance—stands in as the authorial figure for Egan in the novel, herself a journalist and essayist earlier in her career. When Irene fashions Charlotte's character for the re-enactment of her accident, Irene's own creative writing workshop habits keep slipping into her scripts. Even before she signs on with Ordinary People, Irene tells Charlotte, in a pitch to interview her for the *Post*, "[The story is] about identity…the relationships between interior and exterior…how the world's perceptions of women affect our perceptions of ourselves," echoing some of Egan's self-identified motives for writing *Look at Me* (94).[70] Irene continues,

> A model whose appearance has changed drastically is a perfect vehicle… for examining the relationship among image, perception and identity, because a model's position as a purely physical object—a media object, if you will… is in a sense just a more exaggerated version of everyone's position in a visually based, media-driven culture, and so watching a model renegotiate a drastic change in her image could provide a perfect lens for looking at some of these large… (Egan 95)

[70] In an appearance on the radio book club, the Leonard Lopate Show, Egan responds to a question about her inspiration for writing *Look at Me,* identifying as her starting point a fascination with "the question of whether image culture has impacted identity," especially "in a culture in which we're obsessed with image and we've become so adept at creating ourselves from the outside in."

At this point, Charlotte—as if registering the "boredom" of the reader—cuts Irene off. But Irene's suggestion of a "vehicle," arguably gesturing toward both Charlotte and the literal car that she crashed, itself serves as a "lens" to clarify and more broadly apply Egan's own concerns with authorship, which orbit a mediated relationship between interior and exterior, or text and writer.

Following the logic of branding, the novel's looping, recursive narrative ultimately allows for the subsumption of the "author," either Irene via Charlotte or the Egan via the novel, into the impersonal structure of a media-constructed history.[71] But for Irene and for the novel, in acts of self-authorship there persists the question of interiority's relationship to its material exterior, which becomes muddled through the temporal distancing inherent in production. This is a question which Charlotte's post-accident face evocatively represents, as it physically mediates the slippery notion of a pre-existing subjectivity. Old photographs from Charlotte's modeling days that she revisits post-surgery exist as material objects that engender a sort of time travel; Charlotte's uncanny new face—reconstructed by surgeons and held together by "eighty titanium screws," the remnants of her industrial-town past— embodies within it the span of Charlotte's history. Charlotte's face serves as a mask and a "window to the soul," at once obscuring, revealing, and then again obscuring the "soul" or self behind it.

A potential bridge (or chasm) between the features of the face and the soul (or what constitutes the voice in this understanding) forged in a culture saturated in images could here provide a further foundation from which to articulate a certain model of self-authorship. In his book *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Michael Taussig explicates

[71] Brand managers cultivate brands (like the one into which Charlotte eventually transforms) to appear timeless, authorless, and paradoxically constitutive and independent of their products, working to continually re-establish a history that suits the brand's current market presence.

something like this, the result of which he refers to as a "public secret"—that which is revealed whose revelation eludes voicing. [72] For Taussig, the face serves as both the veil and the expression of subjectivity, the crucial point of contact between interiority and exteriority—a window that reveals and yet contains. Charlotte's face becomes a fetish in the commodity sense through her modeling, but Taussig argues that under photographic scrutiny the face becomes a fetish in the spiritual sense, imbued with some sort of magical ability to transform the intangible into the tangible.

The shattering of Charlotte's original face and its subsequent replacement with one constructed by human labor invites an interrogation of the significance of either face in their function as mediator between one point in time and another, as well as one self and another self. While the new face both occludes and contains the old, both faces occlude and contain the "real" Charlotte that is her subjectivity. In *Look at Me*, the "natural" face (as it describes both Charlotte's face pre-accident and the unaltered faces of those whom she encounters) at once obscures and reveals the secret of subjective identity, the "shadow self" that Charlotte attempts to uncover in every person she meets throughout novel. In Charlotte's conception, a "shadow self" hides under the projected and easily visible mask of personality, existing secretly and intangibly like a veiled reflection or a ghost shorn of its physical body. As Adam Kelly has argued, "In a world obsessed with image over reality, and with lying over truth, these 'shadow selves,' where detected, offer Charlotte the comfort of accessing something authentic, some reality that is not being simulated" (408). "When all else failed," Charlotte explains, "I found [the shadow self] by looking at people when they thought they couldn't be seen—when they

[72] As Taussig explains, "The reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth, I call the public secret, which, in another version, can be defined as that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated…" (5).

hadn't arranged themselves for anyone" (Egan 53-54). The shadow self that Charlotte claims haunts every person, then, makes visible some self that predates or outlives the act of self-authorship. In a way, the shadow self is a subjectivity that transcends the structured temporality of production, though at once is tethered to and withdrawn from the physical body.

In her traumatic accident (which the novel eventually suggests is an intentional, suicidal attempt at self-destruction), Charlotte becomes unmasked. The mask shatters when the crash breaks nearly every bone in her face, leaving her faceless. By virtue of the unbreakable glass windshield into which her face smashes, the integrity of her face's border dissolves, liberating all else to violently assume a new configuration. In the novel's opening pages, Charlotte narrates,

> After twelve hours of surgery, during which eighty titanium screws were implanted in the crushed bones of my face to connect and hold them together; after I'd been sliced from ear to ear over the crown of my head so Dr. Fabermann could peel down the skin from my forehead and reattach my cheekbones to my upper skill; after incisions were made inside my mouth so that he could connect my lower and upper jaws…I was discharged from the hospital. (Egan 5)

Charlotte's face had to make brutal contact with the car's windshield to allow for her money-given face to be fashioned. The glass provides the crucial point of contact, the liminal space that ultimately rejects her. In this moment of abjection and trauma, caught between two faces, one past and one future, Charlotte occupies a point of potential—a negative space, a potential outside of time—for radical transformation and power. Revealingly, this moment renders literal the shearing of selves compelled by photography, the very source of Charlotte's would-be, pre-accident "self," as it perpetually demands we attempt to sew time together.

As Taussig continues:

> …being 'faceless' in this way is not so much being without a face as it is a reorganization of faciality creating a new type of face, collective and mysterious, wherein body and face coalesce. This type of face reconfigures the masquerade of history that is the public secret—that which is known but cannot be stated, of the face as both mask and window to the soul—such that there is a type of 'release' of the fetish powers of the face in a proliferation of fantasy and of identities, no less than of the very notion of identity itself, a discharge of the powers of representation. (Taussig 256)

Thus, in becoming faceless, the potential arises to reveal and re-fashion the "masquerade of history" as represented and presented—the potential to forge a bridge between temporalities that could support the perpetuity of a new condition or, in other words, a different understanding of time and self. "Hence unmasking leads" in Taussig's account, "to a certain refacement, but hardly the face we once knew. Something new has emerged. A mystery has been reinvigorated, not dissipated, and this new face has the properties of an allegorical emblem, complete with its recent history of death and shock, which gives it this strange property of 'opening out'" (Taussig 253). A new history emerges from the unmasking and the mystery "reinvigorated" remains a fiction of that history—Charlotte's history.

Thus, Charlotte's "refacement" marks the beginning of a process of self-authorship. Within the narrative, it also marks "opening out" the appearance of the unbearable interiority of her life to the Facebook-esque startup, Ordinary People, as a monetized subjectivity.[73] In the wake of her crash, Charlotte's literal refacement boldly re-casts not only her personal history, but

[73] Patricia Malone also argues for understanding Charlotte's accident as the moment in which she is destined to become an author: "The transparent barrier of the windscreen may be read as that invisible border between self and other imaginatively crossed by authors in their habitation of their characters: language itself is the transparent barrier in such a framework, and by exceeding the limitations of language as an exteriorization of the self—by imaginatively refashioning language to exceed the self—Charlotte's nascent authorial consciousness comes into being" (271).

a greater understanding of history. Moreover, unmooring past and present from self, and refiguring their relationships, necessarily prompts larger questions about how time and history in a cutting-edge, immaterial world unfold at all.

Spectacular Time

The re-enactment testifies to the society that demands it, a society engorged by the interminable circulation of images. In his description of spectacular society, Debord decries a culture crystallized in the present as a result of historical processes already past; it is "the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production" (Debord 8). The spectacle, famously defined as "capital accumulated to the point it becomes image," always-already justifies and then perpetuates its own existence, churning out the "memories of the present" that Paolo Virno relates to the experience of *déjà vu*.[74] *Look at Me*, positioned at the crux of the spectacular images of the fashion world, inhabits a space between the present (represented by the immaterial economy of New York) and past (represented by the industrial history of Rockford, Illinois) and the pasts and presents of its characters, which increasingly overlap. Egan chooses well the world of fashion photography as the setting for her novel; she invokes its glossy, photographed images lacking context, divorced from the historical moment of their production and consumption. In this setting, the unique power of the surface and image of Charlotte's re-made face manifests in its ability to remake her own past. The re-rendering of Charlotte's face, just like the re-enactment

[74] As Paolo Virno writes, "Far from only referring to the growing consumption of cultural commodities, the notion of the spectacle concerns, first and foremost, the post-historical inclination towards watching oneself live. To put it another way: the spectacle is the form that the déjà vu takes, as soon as this becomes an exterior, public form beyond one's own person. The society of the spectacle offers people the 'world's fair' of their own capacity to do, to speak and to be -- but reduced to already-performed actions, already-spoken phrases and already-complete events" (55).

of her crash, unsettles choices long since made, the consumption already embedded in production; instead, her new face creates the past that it requires.

To understand the extent to which the present and the past, housed distinctly in New York and in Rockford, weave together the personal histories of Egan's characters, *Look at Me's* Moose Metcalf deserves considerable attention. As the older brother of Charlotte Swenson's hometown best friend and a former East Coast professor turned Rockford community college instructor, Moose touches every corner of the temporal and geographic map of the novel. In his soggy basement office at a Rockford community college, with his monomaniacal fixation on glass and the Industrial Revolution, Moose channels Debord, insistent on revisiting the constructed, mechanical past and plagued by his fear of the intangible, trivial present—an image-driven present exemplified by Charlotte's pervasive and prolific photographic ads. Moose's academic obsessions engulf his whole being. He ruminates on the state of the world, first pondering, "Objects existing in time and space…" (reminding us, perhaps, of Irene Maitlock's proposal of the relationship between self and world "as a purely physical object—a media object…"). Moose expounds that "…information was the inversion of a thing; without shape or location or component parts. Without context. Not history but personal history" (368). Moose singles out the slippery, evaporating information of the "Information Age" as the agent of history's demise. He bemoans a space and time *outside* of space and time, where information floats unhindered by history, wherein the context to place such information no longer exists.

In a 2004 article in the *New Left Review*, directly addressing the spectacular images of the September 11th terrorist attack that took place the same week that Egan published *Look at Me*, the Retort collective suggests, "…the key to [Debord's] hatred of the image-life… what [the image-life] threatened, ultimately, was the very existence of the complex, created, *two-way*

temporality that for him constituted the essence of the human." The "image-life," the spectacular society in which subjectivity emerges from the creation and circulation of images in the next stage of alienating capitalism, tears away at the reciprocal relationship society once fostered with space and time, in which space and time derived from society as much as society developed within space and time. The mention of a fast-fading "two-way temporality" points to the disappearance of a clear distinction between past and present that would allow for self-orientation within a particular historical moment, as well as a recognition of historical past and future—a privilege denied to those living in a historical moment often characterized as the "eternal present." [75]

Egan's own engagement with the dissolving "two-way temporality" surfaces, in fact becomes corporeal, for Moose shortly after his niece (Charlotte Hauser, who herself appears as a double of Charlotte Swenson's youthful self in the present) rejects him and his fanatical teachings. In an unusual fit of unbounded energy, Moose drives out toward Chicago, a city that for Moose generates the closest imagining of his gauzy childhood past. In an oneiric scene set on shore of Lake Michigan, "Moose-the-man" walks hand-in-hand with "Moose-the-boy," a hallucinated image of the childhood self with whom Moose hopes to re-connect. At the scene's end, "Moose-the-boy" turns and stares beseechingly at "Moose-the-man." Though the latter remains painfully aware of the gaze of his expectant past self, he proves unable to return it. Egan emphasizes the strangeness in the familiarity of Moose's surroundings, revealing, "All around him, in those glass apartment buildings overlooking the lake, lived a legion of strangers, people

[75] This condition is what Fredric Jameson credits for the dissolution of narrative realism in the present age; furthermore, in his account, it is corporeal affect which assumes the role of narrative. In *Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson writes, "I believe that the contemporary or postmodern 'perpetual present' is better characterized as a 'reduction to the body,' inasmuch as the body is all that remains in any tendential reduction of experience to the present as such" (29). This resonates with how, in *Look at Me*, temporal confusion is ultimately subsumed by the physical body of Charlotte, which binds the novel's disparate temporalities together.

who didn't know, who couldn't see." Giving voice to Moose's reflections, she continues, "[He] was alone because his vision had divided him from these people—had altered him internally so that the child he'd once been, the little boy who had walked alongside him earlier today, by the lake, when the sun was out, no longer recognized him" (495). Surrounded by his imagined and literal reflections on the beachfront and in the skyscrapers, Moose becomes more alienated from himself than ever before. He desperately longs for communion with that former self in order to make sense of his present self in a way that could orient him toward a future. However, the failure of recognition illuminates the artificiality of a past created by the present—an artificiality that Moose rejects. In his refusal to return the boy's gaze, Moose rejects the re-wiring and re-writing of the information-driven world and for this very reason, the boy rejects him.

Throughout the novel, Egan draws Moose in the context of a radical, though mystifying, split between past and present, as he appears first in the narrative as an idolized teenage party boy and then, later, as a misanthropic adult with an all-consuming vendetta against post-industrialism. Moose fails to forge the crucial link between his past and the present exactly because it must be forged under contemporary conditions of production. He believes in the significance of maintaining a crucial link between past and present (in both a sociological and a personal sense for Moose), but he also knows the instability of that link in "a world remade by circuitry…a world without context or meaning." He visualizes the imaginary figure of his past self as a projection of his mind permitted by the reflections of culture that surround him but quickly, albeit unwillingly, he recognizes that this self proves both illusory and inaccessible to him. His few remaining connections between the past and present arrive in "bullets of memory," attacking with "foolish and unreliable nostalgia," that further alienate him (Egan 487).

Along the Chicago shoreline, the glass exteriors of skyscrapers—as crystallizations of the contemporary moment of technological and economic development—prove to be an especially significant backdrop against which Moose's failed fantasy unfolds. Glass, for Moose, had always provided the key to self-revelation, just as in a sense it eventually does for Charlotte. Propelled by an urgent attraction to the "evolution of technology," Moose found, "glass—glass he returned to repeatedly, that magically, liquid solid" (Egan 139). Its seemingly magical properties at the heart of its transformative appearance, glass, as Moose studies it, engenders visual revelation and transportation—be it to a clearer, sharper world of imagery (via the camera's lens) or to a formerly unfathomable self-understanding (via the glass of a mirror). As Walter Benjamin writes, "The most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us" (Benjamin 58). Here, glass reveals itself as perhaps the most precise (and ubiquitous) of technologies.

Contemplating the ontology of glass, Moose traces two transformations in its functional history. The first occurs with the dissemination and "proliferation" of newly-perfected glass, revealing to the masses a clear and bright picture of the world for the first time—a world unconnected to the dirty surroundings in which they had previously been living, in a sense, out of focus. This transformation births the mirror, allowing for a new understanding of one's relation to oneself and to the world or, as Moose exclaims, "Lacan's mirror phase wrought large upon whole villages, whole cultures!" (Egan 139). This first transformation anticipates some of the transformations that would accompany early photography, the medium Charlotte depends on to make a living, which would reveal a temporal "present" through a perfecting lens.

In "A Short History of Photography," Benjamin refers specifically to the glass of the camera lens, the mediating eye that fundamentally transforms our relation to time and self. He

argues that, in a world first embracing the latest technological advancement of glass (the camera lens), the photograph provokes a moment of heightened temporal awareness; in gazing at a photo in its uncomfortable proximity, we are compelled to test its faithfulness to an immediate present, searching for some small translation of the now that might, to a future-self gazing backward, render this singular moment in time accessible. "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject," Benjamin writes, "the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it" (Benjamin 58). Benjamin's description allows for an argument that we *require* from the past an assurance for ourselves of Proust's *memoire involuntaire* in the future, and *long* for a bridge of temporality both looking forward and backward concurrently.[76]

With the incorporation of the glass lens and its images into every facet of modern life, photography eradicates the necessity for the anchoring moments of keen temporal awareness that arise from contemplating the past, abolishing as well the need to account for the context of the lived present. The present would exist now always displaced—as, too, would the past. In Egan's novel, Moose sees the proliferation of glass since the popularization of photography as now having reached a point of oppressive ubiquity. He laments this, concluding, "for now the world's blindness exceeds that of medieval times before clear glass, except that the present blindness came from *too much sight*, appearance disjoined from anything real, afloat upon nothing, in the

[76] Egan has spoken about how Proust influenced her formal approach to temporality in her novels. In response to a question from Heidi Julavits about the function of time in *Goon Squad*, Egan explains: "…I was reading Proust. He tries, very successfully in some ways, to capture the sense of time passing, the quality of consciousness, and the ways to get around linearity, which is the weird scourge of writing prose. There is the sense that one thing has to come before and after another if you're writing a sentence." See "Jennifer Egan," interview by Heidi Julavits, *BOMB Magazine*.

service of nothing, cut off from every source of blood and life" (Egan 139). With this, Moose points to what Charlotte herself becomes as a photographed face plastered on billboards, magazines, and TV commercials. While the first era of glass allowed for and provoked a connection between time, image, and identity, this one disallows it; again, this resonates with Debord's spectacular images sans context, sans history.

Referencing Dauthendey's reports on early daguerreotypes, Benjamin recounts, "'We didn't trust ourselves at first', so he reported, 'to look long at the first pictures he developed. We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see *us*, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed truth to nature of the first daguerreotypes" (59). While providing an apt summation of Benjamin's various definitions of aura, this anecdote reveals the same desire to bridge the temporal gap between the present of the photograph and the present of the now, as well as the photograph's uncanny resistance to our doing so. The onlookers Dauthendey witnesses see the faces in the photograph not as their own but as "little tiny faces" with imagined agency, demonstrating the self-alienation implicit in the photographic image as explored by Benjamin elsewhere.

This also describes what Charlotte experiences even more intensely, even at the end of the twentieth century, when she looks at photographs of her former, pre-accident face. After her face-shattering car crash, Charlotte realizes that photos of her—of which plenty exist in magazines, on TVs, and plastered on subway walls from her career as a model—cannot now convey the face she had worn pre-trauma; they cannot allow her to bridge the gap between past and present selves and access that once-lived present. She emerges from reconstructive surgery with a face familiar to her original but somehow fundamentally warped—uncanny. The faces on

either side of her photos fail to connect because they imperfectly re-render the past, warping the faces in the photos and preventing them from aligning.

Meeting with her long-time modeling agent and friend Oscar for the first time after her reconstructive surgeries, Charlotte interrogates him, "'Did you recognize me?' Oscar snorted. His business, after all, was the business of sight, of recognizing what he'd never seen before. 'Through the window,' he said haughtily" (Egan 44). Oscar and Charlotte's working and personal relationship spans a decade, and his career has depended upon turning her face into something recognizable, branded, and consumable. While other acquaintances perceive her as a stranger, Oscar recognizes Charlotte through the clarifying lens of the glass, the lens that had always stood between them. Only in this manner could Oscar recognize the familiar in the unfamiliar, witnessing the difference between faces, images, and temporalities that so mystifies her other acquaintances. Oscar's "business of sight" mimics the business of every consumer, trained to recognize that which they do not know as that which belongs to them when aided by the mediating technology of the glass camera lens. The photographer's camera, in selling the illusion of history and self, capitalizes on its own ability to stage a timeline of memories.

Charlotte's new face appears as a literal manifestation of Wolfgang Haug's "second skin," a sparkling and attractive illusion provided by the promises of a commodity—the skin of the commodity itself that can be worn both as an aesthetic affirmation of exchange and as a desirable identity. As the surgeon peels back her skin and reconfigures it anew, they enact a metaphoric re-creation of the second skin Charlotte slips into when she first enters the world of modeling; entering "an unbroken vista of pure triviality," the face of a teenage girl becomes the face of a model as seen in a photograph, an image itself to be exchanged via the magical power of the camera. At one point Charlotte reminisces, "I enjoyed the inconsequence of [modeling]

even as I scorned it for being nothing; I enjoyed it *because* it was nothing" (Egan 170). Charlotte knows its artificiality but persists in inhabiting the face of it anyway. This new skin provides the means by which she can escape her quotidian Midwestern industrial town. In the re-creation of her face after the accident, the mystery that remains and renews itself is the relationship between the interior subjectivity (underneath the second skin) and the image and surface of her face. Her reconstructed face only allows for the revelation that such subjectivity *might* exist. Divorced from the historical past and floating in the stasis of trauma, Charlotte's broken face reveals that which it cannot reveal: her own self. Both faces provide the attractive allure of exchange-value, but both also attest, in their own ways, to the estrangement from their interior that this entails.

Self-alienation finds fitting expression in the disjointed faces of Charlotte Swenson. When she gazes upon photographs of herself from the past, Charlotte cannot recognize herself because her new face literally, physically differs from the "old" face contained in those photos. Moments before cameras roll at the re-staging of Charlotte's accident in Rockford, Egan sets the scene, writing, "Lightning strobed the cornfield making a daguerreotype from a hundred years ago" (511). The vast expanse between the "daguerreotype from a hundred years ago" and the high-tech cameras peppering the field matches what would seem like the great expanse between temporalities. However, this encapsulates the exact purpose of the shoot—to remedy that expanse by forcibly producing the past.

The investment into re-creating Charlotte's past and merging her two faces serves to smooth out the chronological appearance of her Extraordinary Person profile. Charlotte credits the idea to "[re-enact] climactic moments of [her] story on film" as "a staple technique of *Unsolved Mysteries,*" a documentary crime television show that she watches voraciously in her period of post-accident wallowing (470). On location in Rockford, the farmer whose land they

use for the re-enactment divulges to the crew, Charlotte among them, that only a year or so ago a woman suffered a terrible accident in that very same spot. The farmer is, of course, unwittingly referring to Charlotte's accident. Already, the re-enactment staged by Thomas Keane and Ordinary People begins to merge with the first crash, the details of which remain woefully inaccessible to the reader (and to Charlotte, too). The re-enactment begins to eclipse the original event or, in other words, historical reality.

On the scene, Keane attempts to quell Charlotte's apprehensions about re-creating the past. Charlotte narrates, "'Char,' he said, when we were alone," (here, Keane yokes her name with images of fire, the phoenix, and charred remains). "If I could rewrite history, if I could turn back the clock, I'd have us all set up in that field with cameras and lights and sound all ready to go when you landed there the first time. That would have been a thousand percent better, no question, because it would've been real" (492). Keane suggests something at once peculiar and profound. The media event will in essence supersede the historical event; in a sense, the camera makes the event real. Charlotte's memories (or lack thereof) no longer exist as the product of history, but as the product of Ordinary People's corporate authorship—of Irene's ghostwriting, of Keane's directing, and of Charlotte's own role as an actor.

Both accessing and creating her past from the present, Charlotte becomes uncanny to herself in the way that her new face appears uncanny to others. Charlotte's fixation on *Unsolved Mysteries* is no coincidence; the show dramatizes the stories of women who disappear in life and only reappear as remains and in re-enactments on camera. The re-enactment of Charlotte's crash, which reminds her so much of that favorite TV show, reiterates the same process; Charlotte's "remains" alone emerge from the re-enactment. Here, Egan further emphasizes the self-alienation of photography as rendered physical in Charlotte's two faces as Charlotte, under

corporate guidance, gains control over that uncanny gap and closes it intentionally and for profit. Charlotte recognizes her own ambiguous position as both historical witness and cinematic actor in this de-personalized context. It feels odd, she notes, "that as the 'subject,' I was both the center of attention and completely extraneous. The feeling brought with it an eerie, stultifying familiarity; I was still the model, after all. I was modeling my life" (336). In claiming that she "models" her own life, Charlotte maintains her sense of self-alienation. She no longer resides in and experiences present life, so to speak, but rather exists as a product she produces, owns, and displays—something to be bought and sold.

Charlotte sells herself in this way to Ordinary People. Thomas Keane's website aims to "catalogue" a global portfolio of individualities, meticulously recording every facet of an ordinary (or extraordinary) individual's "unique" lived experience with a fusion of reality television, vlogs, blogs, and social network profiles. As Keane explains it, "…I want to get Cyrano out from behind the curtain and bring him to the table" (313). The company produces and presents historical re-enactments, achieved through the cunning technology of film and photography, as a sort of fetishized aesthetic of authored reality, exemplified best by Keane's elaborate "documentary" re-creation of Charlotte's accident. However, in this undertaking, Charlotte and the film crew *alter* the very conditions of the historical event that they aim to re-create such that Charlotte in the present only remains as a function of the media event itself. On location for the filming, Keane coaxes Charlotte, telling her, "'What am I saying? I'm saying forget all that, Char. Forget what happened. *This* is what happened, and it hasn't even happened yet! It can happen any way we want!'" (493). According to Keane, by manipulating what unfolds before the camera they control the creation of reality, displacing the "real" event upon which what is unfolding might be based.

In “Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics,” Joshua Clover provides a definition of “[r]etroactive continuity, to give it the full name nobody uses,” which he explains, “changes the backstory in one of several ways—generally categorized as addition, alteration, and subtraction—to rescue the present, which can now be re-rendered with a continuous surface.” As Clover notes, “retcon” crops up most often in popular entertainment (mostly science fiction and comic books) where writers might introduce twists to a superhero’s backstory in order to allow for whatever narrative development each new issue or movie requires, often with high-tech time travel as the device for such a change. To characterize it broadly, retroactive continuity aims to establish a *past* that allows for the *present* to be plausible or, in other words, changes the past in the service of a desired present.

Furthermore, Clover suggests that the literary function of retroactive continuity prompts comparisons to a hallmark of contemporary finance: the derivative. The derivative belies a contract between two parties betting on future fluctuations in market price and exchange rates, each party aiming to protect or increase their respective investments as time goes on. This type of contract fixes an agreed-upon moment for a sale or swap to take place with the purpose of managing and minimizing risk for the parties involved. While retcon transforms the past for the present’s sake, a derivative attempts to predict or establish a future for the sake of the present. In a sense, derivatives require us to project ourselves into the future wherein we treat that future as the future-*present* and our present as the future-*past*; we must figure the present as the past of the future. Both retcon and derivatives require the reinforcement of a past in service of continuity, but derivatives shift the moment at stake further down the timeline.

With a narrative structure mirroring the recursive loops of retroactive continuity and financial derivatives, the novel can also be understood through the lens of authorship as Egan

attempting, at once, to recast herself as an already distinctly literary author and to bring about a favorable new present for herself by projecting a certain future of her design. *Look at Me* self-replicates the act of revision over and over again, not only re-rendering the literal surface of Charlotte's battered face, but also the simple chronology of the novel's timeline as Egan flashes forward and backward in history. In this way, Egan envisions a final re-rendering of herself as she at once ensures her present position as author and invests in her future position as an author of literary fiction. The recalibration of Egan's history through the publication of *Look at Me* depends in part on the reconsideration of memory and of history made necessary by the pivotal moment it occupies, caught between two catastrophic financial bubbles. Rather than poetics providing the means to testify to the elegant functions of finance, as Clover highlights, the cyclonic temporal and spatial mechanisms of finance leading up to the turn of the millennium provide a useful model by which we can grasp the foundations of self-authorship for Egan at this critical juncture in time.

By her own account, Egan completed *Look at Me* over the course of six years leading up to its release in September 2001. From 1995 onward, then, Egan invests herself in crafting a sprawling, layered narrative evolving out of her own concerns about the wide-ranging repercussions of what she saw as a technology-obsessed, image-based culture. Of course, concurrent with the writing of *Look at Me*, one of the most significant speculative bubbles in recent history, the dot-com bubble, rapidly inflates and then bursts. Thomas Keane's Ordinary People, the propelling force behind the novel's second half, nods directly to the dot-com frenzy whose fever pitch spanned from 1997 to 2001, when an overconfidence in forestalling high risk losses met with the fetishization of high-speed technology would lead us ultimately to a dizzying market crash. The large flows of venture capital that were funneled into risky Internet

speculation, often dependent on the network effects a company like Ordinary People exists to generate, finally resulted in bursting the speculative bubble before *Look at Me'*s completion.

The crash resulting from the dot-com boom, much like the crash that Charlotte suffers, de-stabilizes a history that had previously been predicted to only crystallize, one projected and assured by advisors and investors. Still wading in the wake of the bubble's burst, Egan highlights and critiques the technology- and image-driven fervor of the Information Age out of which it results, attempting to uncover the invisible shackles with which it entraps. Throughout *Look at Me*, Egan only hints at Charlotte Swenson's accident, which is never absolutely defined or witnessed, ascribing it to some fixed though unnamable point in the past which proves only as certain as points fixed in the future by speculation. But it is finally and only in harnessing the technology of the media event that the crash materializes as something from which Charlotte can determinedly walk away. Similarly, it is only through the publication of the novel that Egan produces something distinctly hers to walk away with.

A Voice, and Something More

Through a novel obsessed with the machinations of self-creation and destruction in a high-stakes sector of the economy, Egan establishes a process by which her characters grapple with their present by in some way re-rendering their past. At the novel's climax, Charlotte is alienated from her photographed image as a model, from her former physical face, and from a past that she can neither access nor alter. However, what emerges at the novel's conclusion reveals the completion of a process set in motion by Egan from the outset. The re-enactment of Charlotte's crash occurs and subsumes the original accident subsequently justifying Charlotte's new existence, her new face, and her new identity. While the original crash causes a rupture from

Charlotte's lived past, in re-producing the timeline of events to which she herself lacks access, the present actually produces the past for her. In the same way that Charlotte's new face, though identical, re-fashions her "natural" face, Charlotte's new, corporate-funded life colonizes her previous history.

Fittingly, the same could be said about what Egan accomplishes herself with *Look at Me.* As the narrative unfolds following the trajectory of a "figure eight" (as Egan herself describes it), the novel continually returns to questions about the value of authenticity and self-creation not only for its characters but for Egan as well, whose career up to that point remained just below the watermark of true literary prestige ("Jennifer Egan"). Formerly an academic-cum-essayist much like her character Irene Maitlock, Egan here attempts to leverage herself from the relative insignificance to which she had previously been relegated into the realm of the literary elite, a move she would eventually fully achieve with her publication of *Goon Squad.* In this earlier novel, Egan "ghostwrites" the story of Irene "ghostwriting" Charlotte's story, inserting herself into the same process that results, though not immediately, eventually in respect and renown not just for Charlotte but for her author, Irene, as well.

At the novel's conclusion, the part of her that Charlotte Swenson once called her "shadow self," the "real" person she once or had always been, feels trapped in the money-lined prison of her own making. Exhausted by the tension between dual selves, the public and the private, Charlotte dyes her hair, changes her name, and leaves her high-rise apartment. Exploiting a loop in her contract with Ordinary People, the woman-formerly-known-as-Charlotte slips away from the ubiquitous brand of "Charlotte Swenson" and begins a new life of quiet anonymity. Despite the actual woman's slip, the image of Charlotte Swenson™ lives on without her through the work of a team of handsomely compensated 3D animators and brand managers.

The virtual Charlotte continues to perform her role for public consumption ad infinitum, still going through the familiar motions of ordinary life, modeling a hollow but wildly profitable version of a popular human product.

Several things emerge from the book-long process for Charlotte— a new face, a new past, and a new self. After surgeons produce a surrogate face and cameras produce a re-enacted past, Charlotte's "shadow self" emerges as the necessary remainder that distances herself from both. After her accident, Charlotte gains fame, gains wealth, and gains far-reaching recognition, but still chooses to withdraw from it. While for years she models her life unknowingly, when she reassumes that same role with the knowledge of its function, she gains access to something that, though always present, had until then eluded her: her voice.

After the settling of debts and the termination of contracts with Ordinary People, the woman formerly known as Charlotte revisits the past from a position of studied distance. She thinks back to her former self and her previous desire for recognition, concluding,

> Life can't be sustained under the pressure of so many eyes. Even as we try to reveal the mystery of ourselves, to catch it unawares, expose its pulse and flinch and peristalsis, the truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, cold privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light. (Egan 528)

Existing invisible, untenable in light, and endlessly generated, the private, slippery truth of which Charlotte speaks can in fact be found in a voice—specifically Egan's own authorial voice. The "pulse and flinch and peristalsis" in the machine-like production of "the mystery of ourselves" escapes the conditions of its own material creation, just as the written work of the author escapes the person who might have created it.

Reading the final chapter of the novel, Adam Kelly points to the moment in which Charlotte seems to promise the reader that she no longer is the Charlotte that Ordinary People produced, a moment which further emphasizes the inauthenticity of a corporate-owned, technologically mediated image of reality. Kelly argues, "when the public Charlotte has become the protagonist of webcams, TV series, movies, chat shows, video games, books, photoshoots, and even an academic symposium… Egan holds out the possibility of a residual form of sincerity that resists the mediated world of public consumption, albeit a sincerity rather fragilely and dubiously figured in the isolated performative, 'I swear'" (159). Charlotte's last promise of authenticity also functions as Egan's promise to the reader as well. In this sense, Egan acknowledges how the novel's publication will contribute to the production of Jennifer Egan as an author, a public figure, and a brand. But she seems to swear that if we look away from the publishing industry's image-commodity of the author, her "authentic" voice as a writer will nonetheless remain.

In her final scene, Charlotte admits to calling her old voicemail, the one left in the apartment sacrificed with the life that she forsook, to hear the voice recorded on the machine. "Once or twice a year," Charlotte tells us, "I still call my old voice mail, just to see if the outgoing message is the one I recorded myself. My hand shakes as I dial the phone and I wonder who will answer. 'Hi, it's me,' comes her childish, cigarette voice from the digital void. 'Leave a message, but keep it short.'" It remains unclear if the voice on the machine belongs to someone else—if it is "her" voice, or that other Charlotte's. The Charlotte making the call leaves a message, responding in turn, "'Hello,' I say. 'It's me" (528). At once, the distance between the two is re-established but further muddied. The voice on the machine sounds not like the voice of

a ghost come back to haunt her; rather, the question remains as to whether the voice belongs to someone else entirely now.

Voice registers first in the novel as simultaneously material and immaterial proof of a thread uniting Charlotte's many selves throughout the disjointed temporalities of the narrative, one that hints at the possibility of an authentic consciousness that can never fully be commodified. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar proposes "the intimate kernel of subjectivity" that we attribute to the voice provides the very basis for our social structure. Dolar writes, "The signifier needs the voice as its support, just as the Matrix needs the poor subjects and their fantasies, but it has no materiality in itself, it just uses the voice to constitute our common 'virtual reality'" (13). The voice succeeds as a vehicle for meaning by binding us in a mutually agreed-upon reality, or providing the intangible field upon which the signifying game unfolds. Dolar continues, "But the problem is that this operation always produces a remainder which cannot be made a signifier or disappear in meaning; the remainder that doesn't make sense, a leftover, a castoff—shall we say an excrement of the signifier? The matrix silences the voice but not quite" (20). This surplus of voice remains as a site of potential rupture from the shackling processes of abstraction or from the confining materiality of the image-commodity.

In re-enacting her crash, enveloped and undone by her screams, Charlotte becomes a new, separate person from that image of herself. Ultimately, the last and only connection between Charlotte Swenson and the woman formerly known as Charlotte Swenson becomes the phone calls the latter makes to reaffirm or rediscover some deeper, fuller communion with that other, previous self. Dolar poses the question, "...if the voice is the first manifestation of life, is not hearing oneself, and recognizing one's own voice, thus an experience that precedes self-

recognition in a mirror?" (39). Here, we might ask: what can you access in a voice that you cannot access in an image?

As Thomas Keane attempts to woo Charlotte to join Ordinary People, he cues up a video of an African tribesman whose speech translates into text below him. The African serves as one of the site's so-called "Ordinary Persons." As Charlotte gazes on, she notes with awe,

> The text lagged behind the warrior himself, who had already burst into song: a series of guttural, atonal sounds gouged from someplace well below his diaphragm. The sounds, like the visuals, had a heightened precision that made me feel not merely in the warrior's presence, but inside his throat. (Egan 333)

If "the truth has slipped away," from the mirrored world of modeling and the surveilled Manhattan apartment and "burrowed further inside a dark, cold privacy that replenishes itself like blood," can Charlotte have thought it to go anywhere else than in such a voice? Crucially, the film clip's text and voice fall out of sync. Here—as she does, not unproblematically, elsewhere—Egan turns to the voice of a black man, a particularly othered figure, to illustrate the apex of intangible, guttural contact, an attempt at demonstrating the disconnect she sees between the voice and the physical self. Concerning what the sound of a voice can reveal, Dolar wonders, "…what is the texture of this voice, this immaterial string, and what is the nature of the subject implied in it?" (23).

Posing an analogous question, Eric Lott elsewhere applies this pivotal provocation to the voice of blues singer Howlin' Wolf to propose the process of "subject formation through sound" (698). The voice of Howlin' Wolf, he argues, physically testifies to the socioeconomic production of the "Howlin' Wolf" that appears in a "hesitation between tenses" of "an older industrial order and an oncoming postindustrial 'urban crisis.'" Lott proposes that the abstract,

intangible social relations and economic conditions integral to subject formation manifest *physically* in the sound of the voice— for Howlin' Wolf, the traumatic experience of blackness in the South sounds like a growling, gritty bass. Lott writes, "Manifold registers of experience and expressiveness thus cluster around the site of beaten skin; not for nothing is Howlin' Wolf's back door man 'shot full of holes,' pores become wounds made over through violent sound, 'soul' saved through singing as howling, howling a near-sublimation of screaming that does not tame its disruptive—or seductive—force" (705). In this way, physicality and temporality entwine to bear the mark of trauma. Howlin' Wolf's blackness, like the blackness of Egan's African tribesman, provides a convenient model for Egan's understanding of an indestructible "truth" that somehow emerges between the meeting of physicality and time. In her screaming, Charlotte Swenson's voice bears witness to the trauma of both her accident and her re-making.

For Egan, the process becomes even more self-conscious. Her voice—her authorial voice—bears witness to a similar autobiographical truth, but one motivated by the conflicted pressures of publishing literary fiction. Egan invites us to recognize her voice, the voice of a future Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, as at once an authentic expression of her authorial craft and as a register of marketable literary quality. Analyzing the function of "voice" in contemporary publishing, Nika Mavrody, Laura B. McGrath, Nichole Nomura, and Alexander Sherman conclude, "If trade publications like *Publisher's Weekly* and *Writer's Digest* are any indication, there is no more desirable a trait for a would-be writer than voice. Not talent or technique, not craft or style, not a meticulously plotted story or glittering prose: *voice*" (142). Building on Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, which examines the creative writing program's insistence on "finding your voice," Mavrody et al. demonstrate that a writer's "voice" continues to be a central concern for publishers, writers, and readers in the contemporary literary landscape despite the

term's multiple, often contradictory, meanings and uses (142-3). Their computational analysis of the function of "voice" in discussions of contemporary literature indicates an interesting and significant association between voice and prestige or literary fiction in particular (147-8). In this light, Egan's subtle fascination with voice in *Look at Me* can be understood as an expression of authorial anxiety about how her own voice might resonate with readers and what it might be worth to publishers.

If, as Mavrody et al. find, "A good voice is connected to being 'authentic' and 'genuine,' having a 'true appreciation of the humanity and soul of the characters,'" then Egan's novel's suggestion of the voice as the last haven of authenticity begins to look like an argument for Egan's own literary value in the world outside of the novel (154). In fact, our understanding of a writer's voice is frequently shaped by considerations that extend well beyond their texts; as a voice emerges from the writer, it may gesture also to their identity and their biographies, as well as the institutions and conditions in which their texts are produced. Thus, in the contemporary period, "Voice has become a shorthand through which readers intelligently negotiate questions of contextualization and paratextual politics, authors relate their biographies to their writing, and the publishing industry structures the literary marketplace" (163-4). Cultivating a distinctly literary voice, then, becomes a way for writers to strategically signal, first to publishers then to readers, that their writing should register as "literary" fiction. It is, in a sense, a strategic bid for prestige.

Thus, the "me" that the title of the novel invites its readers to "look at" appears also to be the novel, the constructed face of the author through which we can hear Egan's voice. Patricia Malone argues, "Rather than signaling a passive entrapment, 'look at me' is an imperative, and it is, crucially, a textual one… The novel's opening describes nothing less than the birth of the

author…" (270). While Malone is referring to Charlotte's "birth" as the author of her accident's re-enactment, the reader's choice to open the novel gives rise to Egan as well. Although Egan consistently avows that her writing is not autobiographical, many aspects of *Look at Me* betray an undeniable similarity with aspects of Egan's real life ("Choose Your Own Adventure"). Like Charlotte, Egan had a short-lived career as a model; in a parallel to Moose, Egan's brother Graham struggled with delusions and paranoia; and Egan's own mother was originally from Rockford, Illinois (Schwartz). To be clear, these similarities are not necessarily unusual or inherently meaningful, but their existence further underlines the possibility that in *Look at Me* Egan lends form to something about her own self-production as an author through her production of the novel. In a way, *Look at Me* compels us to understand it not only as a text authored by Egan but as itself a participant in the authoring of Egan's career.

In this early-career novel, Egan displays an understanding of her relationship to both the demands of the publishing industry and the imperatives of literary fiction as she interrogates the myriad ways late capitalism's temporal structures and technologies complicate and fragment that relationship. The conclusion of *Look at Me* refuses any resolution to the splitting of Charlotte Swenson's selves. Both the separation of her profitable image from her authentic voice and their fundamental inextricability are the very conditions of survival realized for Charlotte by her re-enactment; their fragmented unity enables Charlotte continuity between her past and her potential future. *Look at Me* produces Egan's own moment of rupture, a technical reproduction that unshackles her from an as-yet undistinguished career, opening up her future for literary distinction. Through it, Egan produces a profitable rendering of her "authentic" voice, exteriorized and commodified in the pages of the novel as the literary voice of prestige.

Conclusion

Twenty years later, Egan is a genuine literary star, and her fiction continues to wrestle with questions of technological mediation, self-creation, and authenticity. Reflecting on *Look at Me* in a 2022 interview, Egan explains what writing the book taught her:

> We can try to perform our inner lives, but we can't actually reveal them. We can create a simulacrum, which is so much of what I see on social media, and that simulacrum is entertainment. It's exciting because we all love the whiff of authenticity, and the more mediated our culture feels, the more we crave it, but we can't actually give it away. We cannot actually break through the barrier of our individual aloneness. ("Candy from Strangers")

While she restates in a different interview, "[t]he essential solitariness of humans is clouded more and more by technological connection," what really interests Egan is the "individual loneliness" of human consciousness ("Inside Someone Else's Head"). More than any other technology, Egan is interested in the technology of the novel, or "the real consciousness-exploration-device, which is the novel itself" ("Jennifer Egan on Digital Technology").

Once again, Egan resembles the Charlotte we meet at the end of *Look at Me.* "I mean let's face it, this is *all* artificial," Egan says in an interview with literary scholar Zara Dinnen, which took place at an academic conference convened solely to discuss Egan and her work. "We're creating a simulacrum of the mind-blowing complexity of human experience filtered through perception. In some way, verisimilitude is the most artificial of all: to try to contain all of that randomness and chaos and sensation in a thin skin of forward-moving narrative" ("This is all artificial"). While *Look at Me* provided the "thin skin" upon which to project Egan's image as

a literary author, Egan's voice provides the blood that keeps it alive in the technologically mediated, financially motivated contemporary publishing industry, with all its contradictions.

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