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A Social Disruption: The Decentering of the Individual in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction and its Challenges to Humanism, Posthumanism, and Neoliberal Individualism

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THE DECENTERING OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN  
FICTION AND ITS CHALLENGES TO HUMANISM, POSTHUMANISM, AND  
NEOLIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
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BY  
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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis carefully considers the presence of neoliberal individualism in contemporary dystopian fiction, paying particular attention to its influence over the characterizations of dystopian protagonists. Considering the emphasis on the individual's perspective in both dystopian fiction's formal legacy, as well as the prioritization of the individual above all else in neoliberal society, this thesis reads Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), Hiroko Oyamada's *The Factory* (2013), Lin Ma's *Severance* (2018), and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013) as case studies the decentering of the individual's position in dystopian narratives. This marked shift in focalization simultaneously disrupts the logic of neoliberal individualism, a form of individualism unique for its encouragement of society's hyper-individualization, while taking cues from posthuman understandings of the human and nonhuman. Thus, the narrative space left by the decentering of dystopian protagonists is utilized by these four texts to imagine socially cohesive futures built around notions of interconnection and interdependence rather than isolation and separation. These novel forms of futurity do not conform to the isolating nature of the contemporary realities they are responding to. Instead, they present modes of existence that transcend both dystopian fiction's as well as neoliberalism's structures to present fluid understandings of humanity's interrelationship with the human and the nonhuman alike.

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## Introduction

Dystopian literature is unique for its catalog of thought-provoking texts whose fictional worlds provide a means of escape while simultaneously remaining grounded in rich social commentaries. Contemporary dystopian fiction, specifically dystopian fiction published between the years 2010 to 2020, has demonstrated a pattern of directing its critique at the economic conditions surrounding it. Considering the presence of neoliberalism in nearly all aspects of our lives, whether consciously or not, contemporary dystopian texts are critical of the all-encompassing institution and the principles that comprise it. It would be too extensive to discuss all these ideas and principle at length in this paper, so this thesis focuses exclusively on the idea of individualism under neoliberalism. Specifically, this paper is interested in how an understanding of neoliberal individualism can help provide deeper readings of the texts in question, and the social commentaries that underlie them, though these critical commentaries can extend to. While the genre is renowned for texts whose progressive approaches challenge social and political norms, contemporary dystopian fiction has also demonstrated this progressive attitude regarding the genre's signature literary elements, such as its traditionally humanist leaning. This thesis finds that in critiquing the economic circumstances under which it was written, contemporary dystopian fiction, whether consciously or not, simultaneously disrupts the genre's humanist legacy that has traditionally favored the perspective of the individual over the collective. Diverging from the humanist foundation laid before it, this thesis finds that contemporary dystopian fiction marks a posthuman turn in the genre. That is, contemporary dystopian fiction embraces the aspects of posthuman thought that destabilize the humanist conception of the collective by questioning traditional understandings of what constitutes

“human” and “nonhuman.” The texts chosen for this project reimagine their characters as intertwined with the collective around them, human and nonhuman alike.

In determining how contemporary dystopian fiction interacts with the idea of individualism, this thesis critically considers four dystopian texts: Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* (2013), Hiroko Oyamada’s *The Factory* (2013), Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018), and Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013). In doing so, this thesis has multiple aims. First, it is interested in dystopian fiction’s historic role as a vehicle for crafting futuristic stories intended to critique issues related to the present. Considering this, this paper is interested in exploring commonalities between the socio-political critiques present in each of the chosen works of fiction while also paying close attention to their depictions of work and the workplace, notably their fixation upon the isolating nature of this space for the individual. That being said, these narratives afford significant space to depictions of the effects of the workspace on the individual and their personal space separate from the workplace, which this thesis is equally invested in dissecting.

Secondly, this essay highlights contemporary dystopian fiction’s disruption to the genre’s historically humanist tendencies. Bearing in mind that humanism subscribes to an understanding of the individual as distinct and separate from the environment around them, some have drawn connections between neoliberal individualism, the disintegration of social cohesion associated with it, and the humanist roots from which both originate (Nida-Rümelin 16-17). Considering that these texts are critical of contemporary work culture, their critiques extend to the global economic system contemporary labor exists under, neoliberalism, which aims to reduce society to individual market actors competing against one another. This results in individuals’ internalization of market ideals that work to erase the possibility for collective action. Dystopian

fiction's scalar focus on the individual presents an opportunity to reimagine the individual as interconnected with the collective human and non-human. By reconfiguring the individual as intertwined with all facets of a posthuman world, these texts not only disrupt the genre's humanist legacy, but they also tacitly challenge neoliberalism's narrative of individualism. Ironically, this challenge is most noticeable in these texts through the way in which they characterize their protagonists at a distance from both human and nonhuman collectives, as well as from the reader. However, the distancing of protagonists in these works also decenters their position in the narrative, thus leaving significant narrative space, which these texts utilize to reimagine potential modes of interconnection even within neoliberal structures. It is in this way that the stakes of contemporary dystopian critiques have a foot in literary as well as sociopolitical conversations.

Dystopian fiction has frequently been defined as a means of providing social commentary by way of a compelling narrative that immerses the reader in the journey of an individual(s) through a dystopian landscape reminiscent of the reader's present. As Gregory Claeys and Margaret Atwood have noted, this is due, in large part, to the genre's close association with the novel form, which has historically been known for its individualistic tendencies (Claeys 269, Atwood 93). Atwood stresses that the novel form is "always about an individual, or several individuals, [and] never the story of a generalized mass" (93). As a result of the novel being the genre's literary form of choice, Claeys writes that "dystopian literature is often about rational, autonomous individuals" (269). Considering this emphasis on exercising individual agency, while dystopian novels may include casts of characters and expansive settings, seminal texts in the genre have tended to perpetuate the novel's legacy as a form that, as Frida Beckman writes, "emerged with the industrial revolution in the West" and is unique for "its interest in the



particularities of individuals in a context in which these particularities are subject to sociopolitical moldings” (531). In addition to Beckman’s noting of the interplay between literature and the economic circumstances under which it is produced, of particular interest to this thesis is the understanding of dystopian fiction<sup>1</sup> as a literary tradition defined by narratives center around the development of their protagonists within an authoritative society intent on eradicating all forms of difference (167). It follows that dystopian texts regularly depict the collective in a negative light.

Influenced by the novel form’s individualistic structure, and in addition to the need for a backdrop against which their characters can develop, dystopian texts have tended to negatively portray any form of social collective. Typically, this collective is often depicted as an extension of the despotic ruling entity fueling the dystopia. This trend stems from the fact that, as M. Keith Booker writes, “Western dystopian fiction... can be taken as pragmatic of many of the tendencies of bourgeois literature, and especially of the tendency toward suppression of any positive (utopian) figuration of collective experience” (59). Like Claeys, Booker strongly associates the dystopian genre with the novel’s individualistic legacy in defining the “the paradigm of dystopian fiction [as] an oppositional confrontation between the desires of a presumably unique individual and the demands of an oppressive society” (59). The origins of this narrative convention date back to the genre’s early examples, such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). These texts exhibit Western dystopian fiction’s “individualist bias,” which renders

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<sup>1</sup> While Atwood and Beckman are speaking here about dystopian fiction in novel form specifically, the positioning of protagonists against an oppressive social collective extends to various forms of dystopian texts. For more on this, see Claeys 269-271.

the genre prone to imagining futures in which “collective experience of any kind tends to be depicted as a nightmarish suppression of individual liberty” (59). The lineage of the novel form make it and the genre antithetical choices for criticizing contemporary institutions, such as neoliberalism, determined to undermine the development of new “collective models” of existence (59). Yet, it is through their intense focus on the individual that these novels urge the reader to reimagine the individual as interconnected with both the human and non-human elements that surround them.

To better understand the significance of the reimagining of the individual’s position within the narrative, as well as in lived experience outside of literature, it is necessary to first provide a brief overview of the sociopolitical circumstances they are responding to. The publishing dates of each novel place them in the 2010s, a time recent enough that it is still fresh in the collective memory, yet a time already quite different from the moment surrounding the creation of this thesis. The years 2010 to 2020 are especially important considering their following the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Considering that this was the largest economic recession to occur since the Stock Market Crash of 1929,<sup>2</sup> there is little question as to the connection between the common thematizations of economic dystopias in contemporary texts and the economic conditions under which they were produced. Additionally, many comparisons between these novels and neoliberalism have already been made.<sup>3</sup> However,

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<sup>2</sup> See “The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report” for more.

<sup>3</sup> Amy R. Wong writes of *Severance* that Candace’s experience with having to forgo a career in art in favor of a more accessible career in publishing “might be familiar to any academic who is trying to be a leftist in a neoliberal world” (4). Additionally, Kathrin Maurer and Christian F. Rostbøll note the presence of “neoliberal economization”

whereas critics have focused on various aspects of neoliberalism in the novels, little attention has been paid to the interplay between both neoliberalism's and dystopian fiction's fixations upon the individual and the imaginative limits regarding futurity that arise as a result.

In addition to providing an overview of the material conditions surrounding the production of these texts, it is first necessary to define neoliberalism, individualism, the relationship between the two, and the literary stakes involved in connecting each. While this thesis recognizes the difficulty involved in defining the neoliberalism, yet it also understands the need for a working definition of the various facets of the ideology before even beginning to construct a critique of it. Therefore, for the sake of space and clarity, this thesis takes cues from David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism as the "[d]eregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provisions" (3). Particularly relevant is Harvey's idea of neoliberalism's "creative destruction" (3), or the way in which neoliberalism "bring[s] all human action into the domain of the market" (3). Wendy Brown diagnoses this as the neoliberal domination of all realms of life, from "the political, the social, and the subject" (693). It achieves this through "the explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality on all these spheres" (693). Rachel Greenwald Smith's characterization of individuals living in a neoliberal society, whom she states view themselves primarily as "economic subjects" that prioritize personal success to the exclusion of all else (5-6). Ultimately, the individual in a neoliberal society measures their self-worth according to their economic success. As Fisher writes, "[i]f you do not succeed, there is only one person to blame" (36).

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and "surveillance" in *The Circle* (15), something David Harvey labels as neoliberalism's "pursuit of surveillance technologies (leading some to claim the emergence of a new kind of 'information society')" (Harvey 3-4).

In other words, neoliberalism has worked to privatize all aspects of life, and consequently, as Smith notes, individuals “[see] themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system” (Smith 2). Under these conditions, “[i]ndividual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings” (Harvey 65). In this way, the *individual* that neoliberalism imagines can be thought of as a character archetype composed of the aforementioned qualities, the inverse of which, in the words of the late Mark Fisher, is “a new (collective) political subject” (53). For Fisher and many other theorists, social cohesion is the antidote to neoliberal individualism.

This “collective” political subject that Fisher envisions is only realizable if the individual can be convinced of the disconnect between neoliberal narratives and how they take shape in actual lived experience. Convincing the individual then depends upon first highlighting that all neoliberal narratives are intended to, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, “change the soul” (Harvey 23). Included in the soul’s transformation is the erosion of any semblance of a collective identity through the neoliberal prioritization of the individual. Mathias Nilges reminds us of Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of neoliberalism’s “abstraction and reality,” in which he proposed that neoliberalism can be understood as existing in two forms: first in the fictional, or “subjective,” and then in lived experience, or the “objective” (364).<sup>4</sup> While this could be said of any dichotomy between an idea and its reality, this is an especially effective lens for understanding neoliberalism’s aggressive dissemination of fictional narratives intended to persuade society of the benefits of individualism. Bourdieu notes that the “conflation” of the fictitious foundation

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<sup>4</sup> Nilges writes further about neoliberalism’s claim of “championing individualism and celebrating a diverse set of identities,” while in reality routinely “contracts individuality... into a constitutive logic of reductive self-similarity” (364).

upon which neoliberalism rests and how it plays out for society results in the internalization of neoliberal ideals as truths (364).

Neoliberalism's "individual" is then a fictional abstraction internalized by the public that has consequently worked to separate everyone from the human and non-human environment around them. It is helpful to think of individualism in terms of characterization and narrative. That is, given that neoliberalism prioritizes a humanist, exceptionalist view of the individual, the neoliberal individual is perceived to be distinctly separated from the human and non-human around them. Because of this, neoliberalism tends to foster the growth of a society "comprised entirely and solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas" (Wrenn 1233), individuals are inwardly focused on their own lives to the exclusion of people, places, and things that surround them. This is justified in neoliberal language such as Thatcher's claim that there is "no such thing as society, only individual men and women" (Harvey 23). Therefore, a narrative critical of neoliberalism not only requires defining and destabilizing the fictional elements underlying neoliberalism, but it also requires reframing the individual as interconnected with the entirety of the human and nonhuman elements around them.

One easily drawn comparison between the texts chosen for this project is their shared thematization of the work and the workplace. In fact, the amount of narrative space that the subject of work occupies in each text suggests the topic is as much a determinant of whether these texts are dystopian as any of their other thematic elements. The neoliberal influence on the contemporary workspace and the culture it fosters delineates it from earlier forms of work for the increased competition resulting from the magnification of neoliberal pressures due to an increased proximity to larger scale market operations. Ultimately, these pressures surface within the individual and work to transform them into neoliberalism's ideal market actor.

The neoliberal transformation of the individual, both within and outside of the workplace, is fundamentally what these texts are responding to. These pressures are all related in some fashion to the doctrine of neoliberal individualism, which differs from other iterations of individualism for its hyper-fixation on the individual. Unique about neoliberal individualism is the way in which “neoliberalism amplifies this tendency for capitalism to individualize, casting individuals as exclusively responsible for themselves” (Greenwald Smith 3). This shift in responsibility is visible in each of the texts covered in this paper, as their narratives consistently thematize futuristic societies built upon exaggerated versions of these neoliberal pressures. The increased intensity of these pressures in these texts is most noticeable in the way their narratives position and develop protagonists against the pressure to conform to ideals resembling neoliberal individualism.

Before continuing to the body of this essay, it is necessary to provide some context concerning the works chosen for this project. *The Circle* follows protagonist, Mae, as she rises through the ranks of The Circle, the eponymously named technology company bent on achieving global control through digital superiority, namely surveillance.<sup>5</sup> As her time at The Circle progresses, Mae transforms into a completely willing subject for the company, going so far as to become an early adopter and face of the company’s SeeChange program, which places miniature cameras all around the world—not excluding the individual’s body. All of this is done under the false pretense that increased surveillance is what is best for society, as the narrative repeatedly reminds us that “transparency leads to peace of mind” (69). This erasure of boundaries offers a

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<sup>5</sup> Although it is not a primary concern of this thesis, it is still worthwhile to mention The Circle’s—the technology company--- uncanny similarity to actual technology conglomerates such as Facebook or Google. The resemblance extends as far as The Circle campus, which bears a close resemblance to Facebook’s headquarters (Masterson 2-4).

complete view of Mae's interiority, which ironically offers less and less in the way of complexity as Mae becomes increasingly indoctrinated by the company's enticing ideals and consequently loses all sense of individuality. Eventually, Mae becomes completely consumed by The Circle. Central to the plot, Mae's transformation into the model Circler mirrors the pressure to conform to the competitive, self-centered archetype favored in a neoliberal society. While Mae's transformation incites discussions of agency and autonomy in the contemporary workplace (as well as society at large), considering the vital role that technology plays in Mae's newfound sense of self at The Circle, her transformation also opens discussions on what constitutes "human," and where technology fits into current understandings of "human."

In keeping with the theme of transcending human and non-human boundaries, Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), set in an alternate version of New York City in the year 2011, centers around the novel's protagonist and narrator, Candace, as she navigates an outbreak of Shen Fever, a virus that "transforms its victims into fevered time-loop zombies" (Yazell and Hsu 37). Those who succumb to the virus are reduced to zombie-like states that show them performing nostalgic, routinized, and repetitive behaviors. Mirroring this repetition is Candace's propensity for engaging in routine to the point that long after the city has succumbed to the virus and all her coworkers have left or fallen ill, Candace continues to arrive at the office every morning to perform her work duties (Ma 232). Critics have noted capitalism's exploitative relationship with repetitive movements (Yazell and Hsu 37). While this connection is of interest to this thesis, I extend this discussion to explore the neoliberal conditions leading to Candace's zombie-like proclivity for repetition, as well as the posthuman implications involved in the disruptions to these routines.

Venturing away from themes of technological dystopia and zombie apocalypse is Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013). Like *Severance*, the story takes place in an alternate version of New York City, where the environmental calamity is experienced through the perspective of the novel's protagonist, Mitchell Zukor. Central to the plot is Mitchell's job at the exploitative "FutureWorld," a high-level insurance firm that, like neoliberalism, survives by perpetuating the narrative that they can protect the individual in the event of climate catastrophe. In reality, the company just capitalizes on the fears of innocent New Yorkers, which Mitchell comes to realize early in the narrative (Rich 24). In what operates as both a critique of privatization under neoliberalism as well as a comment on the ineffectiveness of relying solely on economic solutions to climate related issues, neither FutureWorld nor any other private or governmental entity can protect the citizens of New York from the increasingly frequent crises that plague the city. One such crisis, Tammy, an uncharacteristically powerful tropical storm, floods the city and catalyzes Mitchell's posthuman bridging of the gap between the human and the nonhuman.

The immersion of the human and the nonhuman demonstrated in all the texts thus far is continued in Hiroko Oyamada's *The Factory* (2013). Considering that it is the only selection in the group not written in the United States but instead from Oyamada's home country of Japan, the decision to include *The Factory* in this project was made because both neoliberalism and dystopian fiction are global systems, and the experience of workers abroad, in this instance, Japan, are more interconnected with the lives and jobs of American workers than one might initially realize. For example, as mentioned earlier, dystopian literature traces some of its modern roots to various countries, such as Russia (*We*), England (*Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), and Canada (Margaret Atwood). This does not include the many non-Western examples



of early dystopian works excluded from the canon due to the intersection of colonialism and the “characteristics of the fundamentally bourgeois form within which they write” (Booker 58). Regarding neoliberalism’s “distinct form of globalization” (Harvey 156), the need for neoliberal states to have other neoliberal states with which to do business has created a need for neoliberalism to aggressively insert itself socially, politically, and economically around the world (Harvey 66). The extension of neoliberal ideals abroad brings all individuals living within these states under similar conditions, so while the experiences conveyed in *The Factory* are not often directly translatable to the other three texts in the group, all four texts are nonetheless critical of the same institution that works equally to psychically transform those living under it. This commonality could alone produce significant scholarship on posthuman interrelations under neoliberalism and beyond.

Returning to the plot of *The Factory*, the novel depicts the convoluted and disorienting nature of administrative work in a Japanese production facility referred to only as “the factory.” Mirroring the novel’s chaotic setting, and immediately disrupting the trend demonstrated in the other three texts of a focus on a single protagonist, *The Factory*’s nonlinear narrative structure subtly and confusingly switches between the perspectives of three characters, Yoshiko Ushiyama, Furufue Yoshio, and lastly, Yoshiko’s brother, whose storylines at the factory do not intersect until the novel’s conclusion. In addition to the omission of the factory’s name, the factory’s purpose, product, and a plethora of other odd occurrences are never explicitly mentioned or explained. These mysteries prove to be sources of stress and confusion for readers and characters alike. This anxiety is compounded by the narrative’s multi-faceted ambiguity that transcends boundaries of time, space, human, and non-human to imagine the interconnectedness of a posthuman world.

The three body sections of this thesis explore different dimensions of contemporary dystopian fiction's reconfiguration of the individual. Section 1 outlines the genre's historically humanist prioritization of the individual above all else, namely dystopian fiction's traditional centering of individual protagonists set against a negatively depicted social collective. This humanist, and markedly bleak, understanding of the relationship between individual and collective is eerily reminiscent of neoliberalism's same favoring of the individual. Contemporary dystopian fiction challenges these preexisting structures by decentering the individual's place within the narrative. This decentering leaves significant narrative space with which contemporary dystopian fiction consistently focalizes the social collective.

Section 2 then highlights the ways in which contemporary dystopian narratives undermine neoliberal individualism by recentering the social collective within the narrative. This section attends closely to the narrative space opened by the decentering of the individual, which the four texts analyzed fill with an emphasis on the interconnection between the individual and the collective. Specifically, the protagonists in these texts are routinely shown lacking the same agency purportedly afforded to them by neoliberalism, and they are unable to enact the societal-level change expected of them by neoliberalism. As a result, and in a stark departure from neoliberal ideals regarding the primacy of individual agency, these texts present social collectives with increased agency over the individual, thus refocusing the reader's attention toward the potential to realize meaningful change through reconfiguring the individual's position within the social collective. The reconfiguration of the individual does not end here, however.

Lastly, section 3 reads closely what it labels the individual's reconfiguration in these texts within not only the human collective but also the nonhuman collective. Section 3 covers the literary, social and implications of this representation, and reads it as a disruption to both

humanist and neoliberal atomization of the individual. However, it simultaneously considers this representation as a disruption to humanist, posthumanist, and transhumanist discourse surrounding what it means to be human, what it means to be nonhuman, the latter of which is not simply the inverse of the former, as elements of either bleed into the other, and both are further complicated by the introduction of technology into the conversation.

By outlining the interplay in these four dystopian texts between the genre's humanist legacy, neoliberal individualism, and the genre's posthuman turn, this thesis hopes to demonstrate urgency of imagining a more socially cohesive future in addition to the potential for contemporary dystopian fiction to serve as a vehicle for doing so.

## Part 1

### Dystopian Fiction's Humanist Legacy and the Decentering of the Individual in Contemporary Dystopian Narratives

One readily apparent commonality visible across each of the four texts chosen for this paper is what seems on the surface like a narrative fixation upon one single character, save for *The Factory*, whose narrative split's attention across three characters. Even in the case of *The Factory*, though, the novel makes clear in the beginning that we will experience The Factory through the perspective of its three alienated protagonist(s), a focus that is reminiscent of the lone, humanist characters of traditional dystopian works.<sup>6</sup> The focus on the individual in these texts seems on the surface like strict adherence to the genre's humanist legacy that prizes the individual's separation from all around them.<sup>7</sup> One would expect this scalar focus on the individual to present a challenge for dystopian novels aiming to critique the reach of global systems, such as those seen in these novels: the international reach of the publishing industry in *Severance* (Ma 12), the international world of private insurance in *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Rich 25), the all-encompassing technology sector in *The Circle* (Eggers 68), and the global interconnection of the production sphere in *The Factory* (Oyamada 5).

If one reads the aim of these texts, or one of multiple aims, as calling attention to the isolated nature of contemporary cultural norms, then dystopian fiction seems like the suboptimal vehicle of choice for its perpetuation of the same individualism that these texts are responding to. However, contemporary dystopian fiction utilizes the genre's traditional structure to highlight the

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<sup>6</sup> See Claeys

<sup>7</sup> See Booker 59 for more on intersection of humanism and dystopian fiction.

individual's isolation under neoliberal conditions. This comes in the form of protagonists whose lack of emotional depth places them at a distance from the reader, thus departing from traditional dystopian literary structures to present a new understanding of the individual's narrative positioning.

In the case of *The Circle*, Mae's journey through the dystopian environment that is her workspace results in complete isolation not only from emotional connection with others, but also a connection with her own emotions. The initial part of *The Circle*'s narrative revolves partially around Mae's lack of fulfillment working at a public utility company and her desire for a career change to something more glamorous. Mae's dream is to secure a position at the famed Circle, a company "less than six years old," but whose logo is "already among the best known in the world" (2). A tension immediately arises between the innovative technology realm that The Circle represents and the perceivably archaic, mundane realm of public services (2), a sector left undernourished by neoliberal deregulation and privatization.<sup>8</sup> When describing her experience at the utility company, the narrator notes that even though Mae "couldn't stand" the job (11), she still had a difficult time asking her friend Annie for help getting a role at The Circle. This is due in part to the fact that Mae has never "been one to ask for something... to be rescued, to be lifted" (11), which immediately indicates her individuality as central to her character, something that proves itself true as the novel progresses.

Mae's view of herself as an independent individual capable of alone improving her social situation is similar to the individual imagined by neoliberalism in that both internalize their economic and social situations as the result of their own personal strengths or shortcomings.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the defunding of public sectors under neoliberalism, see Harvey 3, 70, 129.

Much like the way that under neoliberalism, “[i]ndividual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings” (Harvey 65). Mae and her parents both label a request such as this one as “a kind of neediness, pushiness— *nudginess*... something not bred into her” (11). One should note that Mae’s parents are “quiet and proud” people “who took nothing from anyone” (11).<sup>9</sup> The repeated motif of upward trajectory seen in these passages is especially noticeable in Mae’s determining of her self-worth based upon her ability to independently improve her occupation. This is accented by her parent’s description of her individuality as something “bred into her” (11), which foreshadows the familial pressures that will later cause Mae to be especially susceptible to The Circle’s propaganda (362) and immediately establishes Mae’s character as focused and determined. However, while these qualities initially enable her to rise through the Circle’s ranks, they eventually result in Mae’s all-consuming obsession with work that strips her of any individuality in favor of The Circle’s ideals. When read in the context of neoliberalism, Mae’s development reads as a microcosmic example of contemporary society’s splintering into isolated individual units whose sole focus is to improve their market value.

Considering that Mae’s obsession with work results in her loss of individuality by the novel’s end, it feels appropriate to read her development through a neoliberal lens. That is, by the novel’s end, Mae comes to fully embody what Mary V. Wrenn describes as the “atomistic” individual, whose “self-interested” motivations consist solely of “forward[ing] their own agendas (1233). For Wrenn, interesting here is the internalization of neoliberal logic by the individual,

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<sup>9</sup> Mae’s parents highlight the fact that individualism is not a new concept, and the individualism that is associated with neoliberalism is just the latest descendant of the ideology’s numerous iterations and interpretations. For more on this, see Lukes 53.

which follows that “the locus of control is the individual exercising agency through (free) market operations” (1233). Wrenn’s concern with both the lack of agency under neoliberal conditions, as well as the neoliberal myths of social mobility through purchasing power that perpetuate the issue, feels applicable to Mae’s situation, as The Circle’s consumption of Mae’s depth and interiority results in her becoming an exacerbated version of Wrenn’s individual.<sup>10</sup>

The upward, linear mobility that Mae expects herself to independently realize is reminiscent of neoliberalism’s reframing of responsibility of social mobility as solely that of the individual. According to neoliberalism, through the individual’s market actions, they alone can determine their socioeconomic trajectory and target. However, as Mary V. Wrenn writes, the “neoliberal narrative of privatised, hyperindividualism perpetuates the illusion of authentic and efficacious agency” (1234). Wrenn also notes that according to neoliberal logic, “the locus of control is the individual exercising agency through (free) market operations” (1233). The result is a society “comprised entirely and solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas” (Wrenn 1233). When considered across all four texts chosen for this project, this characterization most aptly resembles Mae’s development, namely her growing obsession with work as the novel progresses.

While the tension in the initial pages of the novel lies in anticipating how Mae will inevitably penetrate The Circle’s sphere, this is quickly resolved—and Mae’s rugged individualism consequently compromised—when Mae reaches out to Annie for a job (12). This marks the beginning of Mae’s descent into the world of The Circle and her journey toward fully embodying the humanist, “self-interested, [and] atomistic” values central to neoliberal individualism. Frida Beckman writes that “Mae stands for the individual who is governed by the

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<sup>10</sup> For more on Mae’s character, development, and lack of depth, see Sommer 54.

delight at the opportunities of such a culture and who, without even a twinge of concern, ultimately becomes its ambassador—'The benign, friendly face of it all'" (481). The way in which Mae comes to represent the face of the company, Beckman notes, is the ultimate embodiment of neoliberalism's promise of increased agency for the individual, though, it is only increased according to the individual's capacity to exhibit the appropriate market actions (Wren 1233). Nevertheless, this consolidation of power in Mae's character is a facade; another of the Circle's marketing ploys that, like neoliberalism, promises increased autonomy for the individual (Wrenn 1233). As a result of her narrow focus on upward mobility, Mae finds herself under ever-growing levels of control that gradually strip her of any individual identity separate from her role at The Circle.

Mae eventually becomes a puppet whose every action is determined by what is best for the company, including, but not limited to, bidding an angry mob to hunt down her ex-boyfriend for refusing to participate in SeeChange (461) and in an incredibly revealing moment toward the novel's end, her inability to comprehend the unethical implications of using Circle technology to gain access to a recently coma-induced Annie's brain without her permission (496). Interesting here is the fact that Mae's focus has shifted from a prioritization of her own best interest, as seen in her initial focus on independently achieving social mobility, to placing the company's needs before her own and others'. Consequently, Mae's indoctrination carries with it her eventual transformation into nothing more than a physicality through which The Circle can propagate its agenda. In this way, Mae's lack of individuality by the novel's end, which shows itself in her growing lack of emotional depth, mirrors the novel's overall lack of depth and "rather simplistic aesthetic and narrative design" (Maurer and Rostbøll 4). However, this simplicity seems to be a stylistic choice intended to fully immerse the reader in Mae's robot-like interiority. Regardless,



the shallow characterizations of Mae and the text as a whole categorize both as part of a larger trend apparent in these texts: characterizations of protagonists that place them at an emotional distance from the social collective, as well as the reader.

Bearing in mind the importance placed upon one's market actions in a neoliberal society, it is important to return for a moment to the myth contributing to the individual's acceptance of responsibility for global issues: that one can significantly influence the course of world events by exerting control over where and how they spend their money. This is not to say that spending habits do not have a global impact when considered on a societal level, and these habits are exercised at the level of the individual. However, this is to say that regarding Fisher's recycling example, the individual's sense or personal efficacy is based on a false sense of control. This overlooks the fact that, not only does responsibility rest with a small but wealthy elite, power and control reside with them as well, as it is neoliberally motivated advertising that catalyzes the idea of capitalistic, individualistic climate solutions in the first place. Neoliberalism is the source of the issues the individual must account for through their consumption, yet it is simultaneously neoliberalism that decides how and where money should be spent to account for the blame it continuously mislocates. Much to their disbelief, the individual is never alone able to enact any meaningful societal change because aside from the need for a collective entity to do so, the individual's constant mislocation of the problem's source within themselves leaves any effort made on their part misdirected. Even when considered on a societal level, the collective mislocation of their consumption efforts ultimately works to transfer more wealth to the private sector, thus further entrenching the existing elite in their places (Graeber XXV). This cycle is kept in motion by the individual's willingness to participate, which stems from a belief that they, too, can influence the course of history strictly through economic means. However,

neoliberalism depends upon the individual not realizing the falsehoods supporting neoliberal narratives. Regarding literary stakes, this comes in the form of identification with an individual protagonist with whom the reader is supposed to immediately emotionally identify.

While the literary implications of the individual's belief in neoliberal narratives may seem vague at first, when considered specifically in relation to the way in which readers identify with a novel's central character, the connection becomes clearer. For example, as Greenwald Smith notes, the "personal" nature of the "neoliberal novel" is the fact that it "is envisioned as having value for its capacity to provide emotional connection rather than merely for its focus on the interior life of a discrete individual" (38). These emotional connections are prized because of their potential for self-improvement, specifically "neoliberal self-improvement," which is "often understood to necessitate strategic alliances with others" (Greenwald-Smith 38). Clear here is the underlying irony of neoliberal individualism, which is that it purports to liberate the individual while emphasizing connections with others, however, these connections are economically motivated, self-interested, and mostly devoid of any emotional depth. Thus, the "failure" of the characters in these texts to emotionally connect in a more traditional literary fashion unsettle the neoliberal expectations of what a narrative should achieve. This lack of emotional depth is especially apparent in *Severance*, where Candace's convoluted development places her at varying distances from the reader, though never as close as traditional neoliberal novel.

*Severance*'s prologue makes use of a first-person point of view introduces the reader to Candace's centrality to the plot, while simultaneously foreshadowing the flat emotional character that will keep Candace at a distance from the reader. The novel begins with Candace stating that "[a]fter the End came the Beginning, [a]nd in the beginning, there were eight of us, then nine- that was me - a number that would only decrease" (3). Candace then goes on to describe how the

survival group came to be, and how the group “[h]ad seen it done in the movies, though no one could say which one exactly... “[a] lot of things didn’t play out as they had been depicted on screen” (3). This tension between fiction and reality thematized in the plot is reflected in Candace’s unreliable narration, which is revealed later in the prologue when she admits that none of her initial statements were true. In fact, as Candace states, “I was not there at the Beginning... I was not there for any of the Googlings or the Walmart stalking” but instead arrived by the time the “infrastructure had already collapsed” (7). By the time Candace joins the survival group, the “internet had caved into a sinkhole” (7).

Just as the initial description of the group calls attention to the tension between fiction and lived experience, Candace’s recanting of her previous statements calls to the reader’s attention that they are reading a work of fiction instead of being steered toward complete immersion in the narrative. Consequently, this narrative unreliability separates the reader not only from identifying with the novel, but also from Candace, as we cannot be certain that anything Candace says from here on out will be true. This separation between the reader and Candace is mirrored by Candace’s separation from herself, which the text’s motif of repetition continuously emphasizes.

Both before and after the outbreak of Shen Fever, Candace is continually engaging in routines both within and outside of the workplace. Scholarship on *Severance* has highlighted capitalism’s exploitation of these routines. As Bryan Yazell and Hsuan L. Hsu write, “the repetitive movements of the fevered and the routines of labor (whether in an office, home, shop, or factory) suggest that, in addition to being caused by capitalism, the disease merely exaggerates capitalism’s tendency to extract value from repeated movements” (39). As a result of these routines, the novel “blurs the distinction between humans and the fevered... [and] Candace’s

devotion to the routines of commuting and office work... seems to parallel Shen Fever's distinctive symptoms of rote repetition and a 'fatal loss of consciousness' (19)" (Yazell and Hsu 38). In a pattern observable across all four novels, the workplace serves as a means of losing oneself to routine, as noted by Candace with her statement, "I was good at losing myself" (Ma 23). Additionally, Emily Waples writes of how the thematization of routine in the novel is exemplary of the "mindless mechanization" associated with "the automation of late capitalism broadly, and the ritualized procedures of urban corporate culture in particular" (125).

At times, the novel demonstrates an awareness of its own inability to escape the influences of market rationality. For example, in response to Candace claiming that Jonathan's trip to Puget Sound to help a client is not separate from the market logic of exchange, Jonathan states that "[y]ou only think like that because you live in a market economy" (12). This is ironic for the fact that Jonathan lives under the same market system as Candace, as she immediately points out (12). It is also ironic for the way in which, on the following page, Jonathan reveals the extent to which his own thinking has been warped by market logic. When coaxed by Candace on what his personal vision of the future entails, he proceeds to paint a bleak picture of "more Urban Outfitters, more Sephoras, more Chipotles" and "just more consumers" (13). With his humorous jab at the dismal state of futurity under neoliberalism, Jonathan embodies the neoliberal individual's inability to imagine a future beyond neoliberalism's ultimatum of "no alternative" (Fisher 8), thus demonstrating how entrenched neoliberal narratives have the potential to become within the individual.

Keeping with the theme of repetition visible in *Severance* and *The Circle*, *The Factory*, utilizes repetitive language to convey the monotonous nature of the contemporary workplace and the resulting isolation of the individual within it. The novel is particularly invested in the

disorienting effect this environment has on the individual that consequently places them at a distance from others. This is evident in the way that Furufue Yoshio, one of the novel's three protagonists and a scientist at the factory, reflects late in the novel about the stresses and loneliness concomitant with his existence in the workplace:

At the factory, I wake up, eat breakfast, walk around, maybe ride around on the bus, grab lunch at the usual cafeteria, take another walk, go back home to work on samples or plug data into my computer, Then I eat dinner, take a bath, go to sleep, and get ready to start the whole thing over again. How long can this go on? My live-in lab next to the cleaning facility has a kitchen and a bath. The cafeteria is a five-minute walk. It's close enough to the residential areas that once in a while you'll see married couples there. (66)

In addition to the list-like, staccato sentences that complement the dissociation inherent to pressures of Furufue's monotonous routine. Furufue's repetitive existence and lack of separation between home and workspace do not allow time or space for meaningful interaction with others. This isolation is reflected in Furufue's distance from "residential areas," as well as the only mention of other people being a vague, impersonal description of "married couples" that Furufue does not even interpersonally communicate with but is instead only able to "see." Thus, Furufue's distance from the social collective inflects his character development and plotline with a notable lack of interpersonal interaction. The void that the absence of emotional connection in this passage, and others like it in Furufue's plotline, leaves is palpable to the extent that the reader is drawn to what is missing: other people. In this way, this passage is a case study of the dire consequences neglecting collective interaction. Furufue's loneliness here is equally experienced by the novel's other protagonists, which is demonstrated through the juxtaposition

of their separation with the cohesion that defines the novel's conclusion. Similar notions of cohesion also inflect the other narratives covered in this thesis, a topic that will be further explored in the next section.

## **Part 2:**

### **The Recentering of the Social Collective in Contemporary Dystopian Narratives**

Now that the consistent disruptions to both the neoliberal and the dystopian genre's emphasis on the individual, it is important to next consider the narrative space that the decentering of the individual in each of these narratives leaves. That is, the decentering of the individual in the four texts analyzed here allows for narrative space in which to shift the focus from the individual toward the human collective surrounding the individual. Consequently, the individual is reimagined as interconnected with the human collective. Turning again to the negative view of the collective harbored by seminal dystopian works, the interdependent relationship between the individual and the human collective runs counter to the genre's formal legacy. While the challenges to individualism in these texts have pressing literary stakes, as with every topic considered in this project, these challenges have sociopolitical stakes as well. By departing from traditional models of dystopian literature that position the protagonist as the novel's foremost concern, these texts consequently disrupt the neoliberal, and markedly humanist, championing of the individual above all else.

As mentioned earlier, neoliberal ideals posit that the individual is alone responsible for their own social mobility, although the individual can influence their position in the social strata through market actions. If one is unsatisfied with their position, then it is strictly the result of their not being able to outcompete others. In typical capitalist fashion, the neoliberal solution to any problem is to simply spend more. It should be noted that the power that neoliberalism attributes to spending habits extends beyond the individual's responsibility over their own lives. The act of spending is the primary means of exerting agency in a neoliberal society. This is

nowhere more noticeable than in neoliberal responses to climate change. These responses to an ever-worsening climate crises have revolved around the hyper-individualized notion that individuals are alone capable of enacting societal-level change through their market actions.

In a complete perversion of naturally existing power dynamics, neoliberal responses to climate change assign authority to humankind over the natural environment, and this authority begins within the individual and how and where they acquire and spread value. Building upon neoliberalism's transfer of onus to the individual outlined in Part 1 of this paper, it is useful to consider Mark Fisher's idea of neoliberalism's deflection of responsibility to the individual, specifically in reference to his example of neoliberalism's insidious influence over global recycling initiatives. He writes that "in making recycling the responsibility of 'everyone', structure contracts out its responsibility to consumers, by itself receding into invisibility" (66). Again, neoliberalism's fictional elements emerge in lived experience at the site of the individual. Over time, the individual internalizes this personal responsibility to the extent that they bear the onus of neoliberal consequences that are magnified with every repetition of this process. As society is encouraged to avoid certain products in an effort to mitigate the effects of climate change, they simply adapt by purchasing other goods and services produced by the same or similar companies that produced the initial product that is suddenly forbidden. Thus, individuals misdirect their climate efforts and unwittingly transfer yet more wealth to a small elite, all the while the state of the environment steadily worsens. While this may seem bleak, and truth be told, it is, there is still hope. Fisher writes that a possible remedy for society's brainwashing is the aggressive dissemination of the actual realities underlying neoliberal narratives (16). With this in mind, it is interesting to consider contemporary dystopian fiction as a case study of the lack of the individual's lack of power over their natural environment.



Whereas neoliberal fictions assign complete agency to the individual, including power over the environment, it is significant that contemporary dystopian narratives present the inverse. In other words, these texts depict characters unable to control the natural environment, or even stop the dystopia from continuing. In fact, the protagonists in these texts have very little capacity to enact any positive, meaningful, societal-level change, as there is no instance of this occurring in any of these texts. The fact that the dystopian elements in these four texts live on beyond the ends of these novels suggests that saving the day is not the intention of any of these texts, possibly because the actual lived realities surrounding these novels feel as though they are getting worse by the day. Regardless, the lack of agency that protagonists in these texts reflects the decentering of the individual in dystopian narratives, yet it simultaneously raises the question of whom or what, then, these narratives intend to focalize.

In *Severance*, nature's power of humankind allows for the neoliberal barriers, which, in turn, allow for the collective perspective to be focalized. Following a severe storm unrelated to Shen Fever, Candace observes out of her window the commotion on the streets below:

“[a] day off meant we could do things we'd always meant to do. Like go to the Botanical Garden, the Frick Collection, or something. Read some fiction. Leisure, the problem with the modern condition was the dearth of leisure. And finally, it took a force of nature to interrupt our routines. We just wanted to hit the reset button. We just wanted to feel flush with time to do things of no quantifiable value, our hopeful side pursuits like writing or drawing or something, something other than what we did for money. Like learn to be a better photographer. And even if we didn't get around to it that day, our free day, maybe it was enough just to feel the possibility that we could if we wanted to, which is another way of

saying that we wanted to feel young, though many of us were that if nothing else.” (Ma 199)

Aside from the noticeable presence of neoliberalism’s ever-increasing encroachment upon the worker’s personal space (Crary 124), Candace’s repeated use of the first-person plural in this passage demonstrates her resonance with the social collective. Here, Candace is a starkly different character than her isolated self in the workplace. Instead, as result of nature’s disruption to work’s routines, a disruption which will be further explored in Section 3, Candace is able to break free of her own routines that stifle any possibility of developing collective models of existence. Candace is not depicted in this passage as the genre’s typical protagonist with whom the reader is supposed to identify above all other characters and elements of the novel (Foley 261). Instead, Candace identifies the commonalities between herself and the collective (“we wanted to feel young” (199)). Most interesting here, though, is Candace’s in-depth descriptions of potential ways in which to fill one’s “leisure” time affords the crowd, or the collective, a higher amount of subjectivity than is characteristic of most traditional dystopian texts. In this way, the collective that Candace observes comes to represent one cohesive entity that operates as a character in and of itself. However, the collective voice is presented to the reader through Candace’s subjectivity. While Candace’s role as a narrative vehicle for expressing the thoughts of the collective establishes her inclusion in said collective, it simultaneously distances the reader from the collective themselves, as they are not afforded the ability to voice their own thoughts.

Keeping with the theme of subjectivity in *Severance*, while the social collective in the novel could be afforded more of it, the subjectivity afforded to the social collective in the novel is not distributed equally across social groups. For example, following a trip to her company’s factory site in Shenzhen, China, Candace is confronted with the cultural disconnect between

herself and the factory's workers. During the walkthrough, Candace notes that "[t]he workers looked up at [her] with benign expressions" (85). She wants to smile back, but she worries this gesture would seem "condescending" because "she didn't know them," and she "didn't know what their jobs were or what their lives were like" (85). She notes that she was "just passing through," and in a fashion typical of her character thus far in the narrative, deflects the possibility of confronting the emotional toll of this encounter by reducing her role in the entire process to a "benign" performing of her occupational duties: "I was just doing my job" (85). Candace's inability to communicate with the workers is due, in part, to the fact that Candace "had been six when [she] left China," so her "mandarin vocabulary [is] regressive, simplistic" (Ma 86). However, as scholarship on the novel has shown, Candace's experiences in Shenzhen "connects routinized office spaces with similarly routinized movements that spread through... Chinese industrial centers" (Yazell and Hsu 37).

On the surface, Candace's inability to understand the workers in Shenzhen is simply the product of cultural differences. Digging deeper, Candace demonstrates, as Aanchal Saraf writes, "a push for decolonization and a willingness to look directly at the abstractions that capitalism produces" (22). That is, the lack of interiority afforded to the factory's workers highlights their cultural disconnect from Candace, yet, both parties are nevertheless brought together in the same location to perform vastly different occupational roles within the same company, yet roles that depend upon one another for the entire operation to function accordingly. Ironically, for Candace here, the interconnectedness of international neoliberal trade networks forces her to confront the very global disparity in quality of life that their exploitative practices create.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the exploitation inherent to neoliberal globalization, a topic relevant to this thesis but much too extensive to accurately discuss here, see Harvey 70, 80, and 159, as well as Chomsky 68 and Saraf 14-17.

Saraf puts this passage, in concert with other interactions that Candace has abroad, in conversation with how Candace's identity straddles both Chinese and American backgrounds (14). Building off of Saraf's work, this passage demonstrates Candace's imaginative limits in how she perceives the factory workers, as she is unable to provide the reader with any significant glimpse of the workers' interiorities. Whereas Candace's internal focalization extends to include the interiorities of her fellow New Yorkers, she does not provide access to the thoughts and motivations of the factory workers. Instead, the factory workers individual identities are reduced to their job titles and basic emotional expressions. At the same time, however, these imaginative limits highlight the scale of neoliberal involvement in global production centers. Candace, though she speaks and understands Chinese, exists in so different a cultural sphere so distinct from the factory workers that the two groups are unable to relate to one another. But as Saraf notes, both are indirectly intertwined with one another (14), as either group depends upon the other for economic stability. So, Candace's attempts to understand the individual subjectivities of the factory workers is indicative of an emotional connection that while obscure, is nonetheless real for Candace and the workers. Nevertheless, neoliberal pressures work to ensure that Candace and the workers never realize the full potential of this connection, thus confining both parties to their separate realities. This separation is reflective of the repeated motif of separation throughout the novel that shows Candace at a distance from everyone she interacts with, reader included.

The motif of separation in *Severance* is one reason the text operates as a case study on the capacity for interconnection within neoliberal structures. The moments that most highlight Candace's isolation, such as when she views the crowd below her apartment or when she attempts to understand the factory workers, are the moments when the reader is most drawn to

Candace's occasional lack of centrality in the narrative. Instead, the reader's attention is drawn to the collectives that Candace encounters, as well as said collective's importance to the narrative as a whole. Like the separation here, readers of both *Severance* and *The Factory* will note their similar distancing of protagonists, the collective, and the reader from one another.

In *The Factory*, the underlying theme of isolation that defines each of its protagonist's plotlines is compromised by the narrative's conclusion. Following a series of events in which the three disconnected protagonists travel to a bridge on the periphery of the factory's property, the narrative ambiguously switches between the perspective of the three characters as they confusingly cross paths for the first time (102). This interaction provides the reader with new perspectives of the characters, as we are now seeing them from the view of the others. The subtle switches between narrators often makes it unclear who is speaking, consequently blending the perspectives of each individual narrator into one narrative entity. Such a shift is noticeable in the way that Furufue's plotline and timeline are "out of joint" (Bachem 95) with the novel's other characters yet are simultaneously sporadically and seamlessly interjected throughout the story. In a manner similar to *The Circle*, *Severance*, and *Odds Against Tomorrow*, *The Factory* urges readers to consider the primacy of the individual in dystopian narratives by complicating the distinction between individual protagonists and all of the novel's protagonists. Thus, *The Factory* displaces the reader's emotional attachment with the individual and refocuses it on the social collective.

While this unification complicates the narrative's consistent individualized focalization, it simultaneously resolves the tension driving the novel up to this point surrounding the question of how each character and their plotlines are related, to which the novel responds that they are all interrelated. However, *The Factory*, along with *Severance*, *The Circle*, and *Odds Against*

*Tomorrow*, all take current frameworks surrounding the interconnection and interrelationship between protagonist and social collective and expand them to include posthuman conceptualizations of the nonhuman.

### Part 3

#### **Animal, Ecological, and Technological Actors: The Nonhuman and the Individual Reimagined**

On one hand, it could be argued that these texts adhere to the genre's formal legacy for their use of individual protagonists that are characterized as emotionally distant from the collective, thus emphasizing their uniqueness compared to the collective. However, as this thesis has established thus far, these texts instead complicate the genre's traditional depictions of the individual's position in both the narrative and the collective by consistently highlighting the interconnection between the individual and the human collective. This turn toward a more social understanding of human interrelationships departs from the genre's humanistic legacy, which has tended to cast the human collective in a bleak light opposite protagonist(s) with whom the reader is intended to identify with more than anything else. While the emphasis on social cohesion seen in contemporary dystopian fiction unsettles the humanist legacy of the genre, it simultaneously disrupts neoliberal conventions regarding individualism. It is here that contemporary dystopian fiction finds itself at the intersection of humanism, individualism, and neoliberalism. However, there is yet another dimension to this discussion: contemporary dystopian fiction's posthuman turn.

In addition to being interrelated with the collective human, these novels imagine the individual as interconnected with the collective nonhuman. In addition to demonstrating a common thematic emphasis on the human collective, these four novels also share the commonality of an intense emphasis on the nonhuman environments that their characters exist amongst. Considering this, these texts can be thought of as exemplifying the qualities of what Pramod K. Nayar calls *critical posthumanism*, which "seeks to move beyond the traditional

humanist ways of thinking about the autonomous, self-willed individual agent in order to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology” (*Posthumanism*, 3-4). In a comparable manner to the individual’s lack of agency over the collective, these texts show both the individual and the collective intertwined with, and thus losing agency to, their non-human environments. It is through this connection that contemporary dystopian fiction reimagines both the humanist and the neoliberal tendencies to separate the human from the non-human while celebrating the former’s distinction from the latter.

In the case of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, a major aspect of Mitchell’s character growth is strongly influenced by his relationship with the natural environment, which he grows to become figuratively enmeshed with by the novel’s end. In the beginning of the narrative, Mitchell views the unpredictability of environmental disaster as something needing to be controlled, as “[r]isk was all that interested him; it was all that he wanted to do... [r]eally it was all he *could* do” (italics in original 18). Mitchell’s determination to control the non-human stems from the fear of the power that it has over him. The narrator’s emphasis on *could* demonstrates Mitchell’s inability to exert any agency over nature, as the only thing that he *can* do is calculate “risks” for a company that does not actually do what it claims to do, never mind the fact that all the risk calculation in the world will not stop the storm that the novel hinges upon from occurring. Mitchell’s need to control “risk” as a means of avoiding it reads marks him as separate from nature at the outset of the narrative. But, as Mitchell soon comes to realize, he cannot escape the influence that the nonhuman has over his existence.

Much like disruption to life in New York City that the storm “Mathilde” causes in *Severance* (Ma 208), *Odds Against Tomorrow* depicts the chaos that ensues following storm



“Tammy,” (145). When the storm finally breaks, the narrator notes that “the wind started playing tricks... it pushed down from above like a giant sole crushing a bug—Mitchell the bug” (145). Here, Mitchell looks “directly at the abstractions that capitalism produces” (Saraf 22). That is, Mitchell can no longer live behind the fictional realities prevalent in a neoliberal environment. He can no longer subscribe to the idea that the nonhuman environment is something he can control through calculation. Instead, he is at the whim of Tammy’s “playing tricks” with him. The personification of Tammy’s winds as having enough agency to outwit the human element not only mirrors the destruction that Tammy causes to the city around Mitchell, but it also marks a shift in the power dynamic between the human and the non-human. The dynamic shifts here to the point that Mitchell is stripped of the agency the narrative has so far assigned to him by donning him a powerful position at FutureWorld.

Contrary to Mitchell’s anthropocentric approach to manipulating nature displayed up to Tammy’s, the storm’s devastation is a narrative landmark for the way it operates as a catalyst for the rest of the novel, as well how it acts as a catalyst for the novel’s posthuman turn. As a result of his being forced to interact with nature on a more intimate and interdependent level, the language used to characterize Mitchell changes to position him more enmeshed with the natural environment than before. For example, at one point in the text, he likened to the non-human, and donned the title “Mitchell the bug” (145). As opposed to the humanist view that privileges the human over the non-human, Tammy is both smarter and stronger than Mitchell. As a result, both Tammy and Mitchell transcend human and non-human barriers to confuse the humanist barriers regarding “what distinguishes humans from other beings, a concern with the condition and

singularity of ‘man’”<sup>12</sup> (Nayar 3). What may seem like typical instances of literary metaphor, when considered within the context of the novel, these examples of posthuman existence align with the transition of the non-human elements of the narrative from the background to the foreground due to Tammy’s arrival.

Inundated by flood waters, New York City post-Tammy forces the human population of the city to adapt to altered power dynamics that show them submitting to overwhelming force of the natural environment. In yet another of the text’s examples of the non-human’s agency over the human, the city’s avian population are more capable of surviving in the decimated metropolis and thus return before the humans. The narrator notes that “[t]he birds had returned, at least some of them. Seagulls, king-fishers, even a few pigeons. In the absence of traffic and human voices, their calls filled the air. The melodies weren’t particularly joyous- it was mostly a furor of confused squawking, their imbecilic brains having lost all sense of orientation. Still, they were a reminder of a life that existed beyond the fog and the alien gray river” (167). The silencing of the “traffic” and “voices” allows more narrative space for the birds, which on one level provides the birds with complex interiorities. However, on one hand, the passage demonstrates the narrator’s anthropocentric bias in their lack of understanding what they view as the “imbecilic” birds. The narrator further demonstrates this bias through their interpretation of the birds’ actions. While anthropomorphizing the birds provides them a degree of emotional depth, the characterization of the bird’s emotional state is filtered through the narrator’s humanist lens that fails to understand them in their reaction to disaster, but instead assigns a negative value to the birds’ characters.

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<sup>12</sup> Nayar later addresses the problematic legacy of the word “man,” stating, “‘man’ here stands ideologically for all human beings, occluding the fact that it represented, and continues to represent, unmarked white, European, heterosexual, able-bodied men” (3).

This is, in part, because of the novel's preoccupation with the humanist control of nature. The narrative tone toward nature changes, however, as the interconnected relationship between human and non-human actors becomes more actualized.

On the other hand, the mere fact that the narrator is identifying with the birds demonstrates the novel's intended theme of cohesion between the human and the ecological non-human. The "reminder" of hope that the birds symbolize indicates a connection between the human and the natural environment previously unseen in the text, as the narrator consciously portrays nature in a positive light in a manner that runs counter to its destructive characterization thus far in the text. However, the optimistic connection between the human and the ecological is strictly figurative at this point in the narrative, as the birds are located at a part of the city currently uninhabited by any human element, which is why it is the narrator that presents their return and not Mitchell or any other character. Regardless, the bird's return to the city foreshadows Mitchell's development of an interdependent relationship with the environment around him.

Emerging from Tammy's floodwaters safely due to his "Psycho Canoe," Mitchell lays claim to a plot of land on Flatlands Avenue in New York City (100, 305). He works the land, which causes him to actualize the final phase of his growing connection to the natural environment. This connection eventually results in the two becoming metaphorically intertwined:

Did he really want to obliterate this festering micro-universe? Or might it be nicer to simply join it? To stretch out under the sky until night came and all the creeping things mistook him for a second log so explore and infest. If he were to lie there, simply lie there on the wet ground until he lost consciousness, how long would it take for anyone to

notice? Who would discover his absence? Who would care?... Days would pass, maybe weeks, maybe weeks before someone found him. By then, his corpse would have already merged, like the rotting oak, into the marshy soil. (292)

Departing from the humanist tendency to exert agency over nature, Mitchell here is finally conscious of his interconnectedness with nature. No longer does he wish to control it. Instead, the culmination of his experiences with nature's force is his development into an individual that views nature as equal to rather than inferior. More importantly, however, Mitchell displays here a desire, whether exaggerated or literal, to become completely enmeshed with the natural environment around him, to simply "lie there" and await his eventual "merging" with the nonhuman ecological like a "rotting oak."

When read through a posthuman lens, Mitchell's desire to become one with the environment is indicative of the increased potential for new modes of interpersonal relations in a posthuman society. Magdalena Mączyńska reads the above passage as a "drastic, if short-lived, thought experiment [that] takes the reader beyond the order of the Anthropos and into what Donna Haraway calls the Chthulucene, an acknowledgement, and embrace, of the non-hierarchical tentacular connections of kinship that bind all beings in life and death" (2). Of particular interest to this thesis is Haraway's emphasis on the "tentacular connections of kinship" that come to define the latter portion of the novel. In a comparable manner to Haraway, Aanchal Saraf writes of the way that Candace's unborn child in *Severance* symbolizes the "nonnormative modes of kinship that are punctuated by loss and longing, replicating and reimagining the consequences of diasporic estrangement precipitated by colonial encounter," but most importantly, modes of kinship that operate outside capitalism's expectations of what human and nonhuman relations should be (20). The differing "modes of kinship" seen in both novels

challenge neoliberalism's assertion that all relations should be interpreted in terms of their market value. However, Mitchell's growing connection with the land he settles on following Tammy does not conform to neoliberal assumptions. There is no capitalistic motivation for his learning to tend and live off the plot he settles on. Instead, Mitchell treats this as an opportunity to live beyond the confines of capitalism by recalling from memory details on how to farm included in letters from his love interest, Elsa (280). Separate from the influence of neoliberalism, and capitalism altogether, Mitchell's interpersonal kinship with Elsa allows him to sustain himself living off the land and begin the phase of his character development that eventually shows him figuratively binding with the nonhuman, a unification that is further intensified in *The Factory*.

Whereas *Odds Against Tomorrow* affords an increased amount of agency to the environment than is typical for earlier dystopian works, *The Factory* further increases this agency. The text achieves this primarily through its focalization of the nonhuman perspective and consequential bridging of the perceived gap between the human and the nonhuman. The nonhuman element in *The Factory* primarily takes the form of the wildlife that coexist with the workers on the factory grounds. However, these animals, and their means of survival, are a source of mystery and confusion for the workers, such as the elusive "Coypu" (50). These "really large rodents," one worker notes, "were imported to Japan before the war for their fur," although the various other Coypu origin stories provided throughout the text complicate the legitimacy of this source (50, 64). Regardless, the one thing that all the factory's workers can agree upon is that following the Coypu's arrival, the animal quickly "went feral," and "now they're everywhere" (64). This is in addition to the elusive "Washer Lizards" that "live in the cleaning facilities" and feed on "lint" (80), and "The Factory Shag," a relative of the cormorant, which

sustains itself by eating food waste (84). Like the unstoppable agency attributed to nature in *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the animals residing on the factory grounds are resilient to the point that it is humanly impossible to control their growth. In other words, they are here to stay. However, unlike Tammy's havoc on New York City, the animals living on the factory grounds live a much more subtle existence that allows them to almost assimilate with their human counterparts. The mystery surrounding these animals is one of many mysteries in the text, all of which are reflected in the text's nonlinear, overlapping form.

Mirroring the factory's animal infestation is the narrative's, which affords significant space to the factory's many animals and their backgrounds. The presence of the animals in the narrative is marked by their seemingly random intrusions into the story that only add to the nonlinear, disjointed narrative structure (or lack thereof). For example, chapter eight begins with another normal day for Yoshiko's brother proofreading documents at the factory. However, upon beginning an unsuspecting document, the narrative suddenly takes the form of the document itself for the next eleven pages, in which the complete histories of all the factory's animals is outlined in an incredibly detailed fashion (75-86). Whereas the passages leading up to the document are told from Yoshiko's first-person perspective, once the document begins, Yoshiko is not heard from for the rest of the chapter, and there is no logical segue between this chapter and the next. Instead, the perspective of the animals on the grounds is finally prioritized, and the thus far anthropocentric narrative is disrupted to include the nonhuman experience at the factory.

*The Factory's* emphasis on the narrative's lingering non-human presence foreshadows the major event in the conclusion of the story, in which Yoshiko's brother transcends humanist boundaries of human and non-human. Included in the section outlining the many animals living on the grounds are "the mysterious black birds" about whom little is known aside from that they

“seem to be their own breed” (Bachem 95). However, their mysterious existence in the background of the novel suddenly shifts by the conclusion when, in one of the last lines of the novel, Yoshiko’s brother states, “as soon as the shredder swallowed the last pages, I became a black bird” (116). Like Mitchell’s desire to physically conjoin his physicality and the non-human environment, Yoshiko’s brother dissolves humanist boundaries to embody the non-human. However, taking it a step beyond *Odds Against Tomorrow*, *The Factory* fully transcends humanist parameters in transitioning a human character to a nonhuman entity. What is significant here, though, is the fact that Yoshiko’s brother continues to refer to himself in the singular first person, past tense when describing his transition. Even though his physicality takes the form of the nonhuman, his mental faculties remain in human form. This speaks to the anthropocentric limitations involved in imagining and representing the posthuman in literature. Much like Candace’s embodiment of “The Fevered,” in which Candace ambiguously inhabits the subjectivities of both the human and the posthuman, an entirely posthuman subjectivity is never possible to depict separate from the human lens through which it is interpreted. Nevertheless, *The Factory*’s attempt to blur the lines between the human and nonhuman is indicative of the genre’s overall shift toward posthuman conceptualizations of futurity. That said, posthumanism is complex and multi-faceted, and consequently, there is disagreement within posthuman discourse as to what constitutes not only the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, but also the various boundaries that exist within posthumanism.

The posthuman turns mentioned so far in this section have centered around the individual’s interconnection with both the non-human animal and non-human environment, yet there is another dimension to this interrelationship: the overlap between posthuman and transhuman discussions regarding the technological non-human. Whereas posthumanism posits

an interconnection between the human and the nonhuman, transhumanism extends posthumanism's understanding of the nonhuman to include technology's influence. One such question that helps to better frame this discussion is whether one can be considered human as we understand humanity today without the technology that has now become essential to everyday life. While they would retain all the biological characteristics universally recognizable as human, their failure to participate in society's technological advancements leaves them ostracized from the collective, thus positioned opposite the collective in a similar manner to humanist conceptualizations of the same relationship.

While posthuman thought attempts to overcome the imaginative limitations of humanist frameworks, posthuman discourse must nevertheless navigate its own structures and limitations. The bounds of posthuman discourse, or the bounds attempted to be set by theorist which are constantly evolving, are highlighted in the interplay between closely related, yet very distinct, theoretical models, posthumanism and transhumanism. Whereas posthumanism can be thought of as a response to the limitations placed upon individuals according to humanist camps, transhumanism can be thought of as extending the freedoms of posthumanism's fluid understanding of human's capacity to change. Most notably, transhumanism extends the scope of posthumanism to include the technological in both the categories of the human and the nonhuman. Currently, there is considerable debate around whether to include the technological nonhuman in posthuman frameworks, as well as whether to differentiate between posthumanism and transhumanism more clearly. Some wish to erase the distinction altogether (Bostrom 7). Bearing this in mind, this thesis reads the desire to exclude the technological from posthuman frameworks as a remnant of the widespread influence of humanist understandings concerning what it means to be human that are rooted in language of separation rather than cohesion.



Whereas most posthuman theorists can agree on their disruption of humanist trends, there is less of a consensus on the inclusion of the technological in said disruptions. This is interesting to think of in connection with the lack of character depth that Mae exhibits following of her rise through the ranks of The Circle, as her elevation in stature within the company eventually blurs the distinction between her humanity and the technological influence that surrounds her.

Mae's individualistic transformation ultimately sees her prioritizing work over all other facets of her life. This is most evident in Mae's commitment to the company's "SeeChange" program as the first Circler to fashion one of the company's miniature cameras that commits her to full surveillance (68). As a result of this surveillance, Mae becomes completely consumed by her audience's perception of her. Following the results of a viewer quiz, in which the viewers of Mae's SeeChange stream can interact with her by voting on questions posed to them, Mae learns that to the question of whether Mae is "*awesome*" (408), 368 people, or three percent of voters, had not reacted to the question with a smile, but instead with the other of the two possible responses, a "frown" (408). To this, Eggers writes that Mae "felt numb... felt naked... [s]he was devastated" (409). In an environment that prizes excitement and happiness over all else, a frown is the worst possible reaction someone can receive. This jarring departure from the forced happiness of The Circle causes Mae to look "for a quiet place to collect her thoughts," yet even in her distraught emotional state, Mae ensures that she "smile[s] when she passe[s] fellow Circlers" (409). The novel then juxtaposes Mae's emotional outburst with the mechanical personality she dons at work by including in the description of her seeking refuge Mae's robot-like instinct that instructs her to "smile" for her colleagues regardless of how she feels. On one level, this passage demonstrates the product of Mae's self-centered transformation stemming from the constant broadcasting of her entire life to the internet. By translating her on-screen,

polished emotional state into the world “off-screen,” Mae displays her internalization of the fame that transparency has afforded her. In this way, she is the exemplary neoliberal individual whose existence revolves around themselves in their pursuit of wealth. While this passage presents the final stages of Mae’s individualistic development into the face of The Circle, it also blurs the lines between the human and the technological nonhuman to suggest that the two are more interrelated than previously thought.

## Conclusion

I recognize that the path to this conclusion has covered a wide array of topics ranging from dystopian fiction, the humanist legacy of the novel form, the humanist legacy of dystopian fiction, and how contemporary dystopian fiction's unsettling of these legacies simultaneously unsettles neoliberal structures regarding individualism by imagining a socially cohesive, posthuman future. The multi-faceted nature of this thesis is due to the multi-faceted nature of contemporary dystopian fiction's response to both the humanistic tendencies of the dystopian genre, as well as the isolating pressures of neoliberal individualism. It would be easy to write off these works as simply attempting to hook their audiences through the shock value of depicting eerily similar landscapes and circumstances to our present moment. However, the impact of the dystopian texts examined in this thesis, Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, Ling Ma's *Severance*, Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*, and Hiroko Oyamada's *The Factory*, extend further than their entertainment value, though, they are entertaining texts. On the contrary, the impacts of these texts extend to their sociopolitical critiques of contemporary economic circumstances, specifically their emphasis on the isolation of the individual under neoliberal conditions, which is reflected in their consistent positioning of protagonists at a distance from both the reader and the collective around them, both human and nonhuman.

Returning one final time to Mark Fisher, I would like to note the importance of collective solutions to neoliberal hegemonic structures. Fisher writes of the need for a "collective political subject" to counter the ills of individualism (53, 66). This need feels as pertinent to our current moment as they did at the time of their publication in 2009. However, for Fisher, this collective political subject does not yet exist, and in some ways, one could argue the same is still true

today. Furthermore, Fisher views our current collective imaginative capabilities to be insufficient for conceptualizing a new way of being beyond neoliberalism (2, 8). However, unlike Fisher, this thesis finds that contemporary dystopian fiction does, in fact, present interconnected social networks that challenge the isolating pressures of neoliberalism.

In this way, the four texts covered in this thesis challenge what a neoliberal novel should *do*. That is, by placing their characters at a distance from both the collective around them and the reader, these texts upset the neoliberal expectation that readers will emotionally connect with character(s) in the hope of taking with them a degree of self-improvement (Greenwald-Smith 37-40). While this sounds fine on one level, neoliberalism's co-opting of this reader-character relationship has resulted in a shift in literature toward championing the individual's perspective over that of the collective. For this reason, concerning dystopian fiction, the genre has historically exhibited a trend of casting the social collective in a negative light in favor of the individual. However, contemporary dystopian fiction, as demonstrated in the texts chosen for this project, turns away from this individualistic approach to literature. Instead, the genre of recent has shown a consistent turn toward posthuman conceptualizations of the individual's interconnectedness with the collective. The discussion does not end here, though, as the posthuman turn in dystopian fiction, which this thesis hopes to mark as a definitive trend in the genre today, inserts the genre in a contentious discourse regarding what exactly the nonhuman consists of and consequently, what it means to be human.

Given the complexity of the subject, an accurate analysis of posthuman representation in contemporary dystopian fiction and its sociopolitical implications deserves further research beyond this thesis. Moving forward, it is crucial to first widen the scope of the project to include more examples of contemporary dystopian texts. Additionally, this project would benefit from

the inclusion of music, film, and television into its discussion. Secondly, it is important that the focus of this project eventually evolves beyond a rigid focus on neoliberalism. This thesis understands that neoliberal hegemonic structures will always be relevant in discussions of art and literature. Long after they have aged out of the dominant role they play in our everyday lives, neoliberal ideals will occasionally reemerge in cultural artifacts, historical discussions, and wherever else their reach has extended. Therefore, while the subject has received a seemingly excessive amount of attention in literary studies, it will always be important not to lose sight of our neoliberal past. Yet, we must collectively move on from this extended period of neoliberalism domination.

Further research on this topic requires that this thesis, too, takes cues from the theme of futurity underlying the texts chosen for this work. In the same way that these texts operate as imaginative experiments of what an interconnected future may look like, this thesis must, too, shift its focus toward the future in order to determine where the perceivable posthuman trend in contemporary dystopian fiction is headed. In doing so, this thesis intends to situate itself at the forefront of the interplay between the genre's evolution and how this influences our lived experiences outside of literature. Ultimately, this project, like dystopian fiction, is interested in establishing new, cohesive modes of existence revolving around the interconnection of the individual, the human collective, and the nonhuman collective, while maintaining an openminded perspective regarding the complex, fluid, and ever-changing definitions of all three.

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