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Encountering Community:  
Nationalism, Race, and Humanity in Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Literature

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Walter Emerson Merryman

March 2022

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Johannes Endres, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Sherryl Vint, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Susan Zieger

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2022

The Dissertation of Walter Emerson Merryman is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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For Ashley, for all the time we'll have together

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Encountering Community:  
Nationalism, Race, and Humanity in Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Literature

by

Walter Emerson Merryman

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature  
University of California, Riverside, March 2022

Dr. Johannes Endres, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Sherryl Vint, Co-Chairperson

This dissertation analyzes the representation of community in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature. I analyze how novels by Kamila Shamsie, Zadie Smith, Chimamanda Adichie, Iain M. Banks, and Mohsin Hamid represent community in a context of globalization and find that community is imagined as a site of encounter with cultural heterogeneity. The novels are read comparatively with texts from the field of biopolitics, a field of continental philosophy that analyzes how notions of personhood, race, and humanity in the history of philosophy shaped governmental policy and vice versa. The first chapter develops literature and philosophy as a formal method for literary critics, defining the method as a conversation of concepts between texts. The following chapters read the novels in the context of philosophical arguments about community; the



relationship between race, knowledge, and ethics; and concepts of personhood. The conclusion analyzes the implications of the chapters and argues that, in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature, encountering community faces characters with problems of using language in increasingly hybrid and complex communities, problems of uneven knowledge in and about shared spaces, and that the novels imagine more inclusive systems of citizenship and political territory as a result of advancing technology.

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## **Introduction**

### Community in Twenty-first-century Anglophone Literature and Biopolitics

This dissertation investigates the representation of community in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature and argues that novels by Zadie Smith, Kamila Shamsie, Chimamanda Adiche, Iain M. Banks, and Mohsin Hamid represent nation-states as sites of heterogeneous communities created by histories of migration, experiences of racial and gendered identity, and political technologies. As a result, twenty-first-century Anglophone literature denaturalizes the idea that political communities are continuous with national, ethnic, racial, or religious communities. Community is an abstract term, and throughout this dissertation it will refer to nation-states, local geographies, ethnic and religious groups, racial identities, and the citizens of states. Novels of twenty-first-century Anglophone Literature represent contemporary communities as sites of encounter with cultural heterogeneity. I focus the critical agenda of this project on the discontinuity of political and cultural communities in order to show how the novels at hand evoke instances of nationalist consciousness as motivated by the idea of incompatible groups of people, investigate race and gender as embodied differences that correspond to socially contingent problems of knowledge, and represent conceptual problems of personhood and human rights as problems of technology.

Scholarship on literature and nation-states has been significantly shaped by Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities* where he historicizes the nation as a kind of community rooted in people's perceptions of others. The "nation" is rooted in

people's imagination, Anderson writes, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Anderson shows how this idea of communion is partly a construct of the novel and print technology. Anderson gives several readings of nineteenth-century novels that created "a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside" (30). What is important about this fixed and fused world is the perception of cultural homogeneity it induces, a homogeneity in which the main character in an Indonesian novel "belongs to the collective body of readers [as] *Indonesian*" (32). This creates a communion of shared identity and belonging. And in a novel from Mexico, Anderson analyzes a

picaresque *tour d'horizon* - hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negroes [that] is nonetheless not a *tour du monde*. The horizon is clearly bounded: it is that of colonial Mexico. Nothing assures us of this sociological solidity more than the succession of plurals. For they conjure up a social space full of comparable prisons, none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence) of the oppressiveness of this colony. (30)

Anderson's point is that the nation is not coterminous with the world and is represented as a social space with a distinct identity. The sociological solidity refers to the fusion of the worlds of the text and reader, to the particular simultaneous sense of time within the novel, and to the cultural identity within that literary world (26). This is a constructed world in which "Indonesian" is a singular, comprehensible referent, and where the description of setting helps stabilize the comprehensibility and homogeneity of such referents. It is important to note that the nation-state in the novels Anderson examined is not isolated from the world, but it does come across as homogenous in its interiority—

here is *our Mexico, our Indonesian young man*. The nation shapes the scope of the novel. The nation emerges from how shared media shapes collective thinking, and Anderson's point is that nineteenth-century print media shaped thinking in such a way that that nation "is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). For Anderson, the nation is stabilized in the imagination because novels create a feeling of cultural homogeneity in their literary worlds and create characters that readily conceive of their shared belonging in that space, even if such characters never meet.

This dissertation examines novels that oppose Anderson's analysis in many ways, in how the imaginations of characters and readers are not drawn to communion but to encounters with cultural heterogeneity, to struggles over who belongs to a community and over how to define community. The departure from Anderson is both by design and a matter of findings. The design was selecting novels which prominently feature migrants who experience some cultural dissonance in their destination state. The finding is that we can now define community as a site of encounter with cultural heterogeneity, and novels confront us with the conceptual task of defining community in a way that does not require this encounter to be viewed as a conflict needing resolution by favoring one group over others but does raise the conceptual task of defining personhood in a way that does not tie it to a normative concept of community or humanity. That deep, horizontal comradeship that Anderson finds integral to the perception of the nation as a kind of community is less evident and less emphasized in twenty-first-century fiction, and instead

twenty-first-century fiction represents community as a site of encounter to with cultural heterogeneity. Whereas Anderson centers the nation as the object of his analysis and finds that it is a community rooted in the imagination, I analyze novels that center community as a site of direct and mediated experience, where characters interact, are aware of each other, and are often in some kind of conflict. The main departures from Anderson are the importance of encounter, direct or mediated, instead of imagination and the priority I give to community as a site of encounter rather than the nation as a kind of community. Anderson claims that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). Novels of the twenty-first century often feature encounters with cultural heterogeneity in places such as multi-ethnic London that forestall the possibility of imagining cultural sameness and stable belonging, and so prioritizing the imagination as Anderson does is not as productive for twenty-first century fiction. As a result, I center the encounter with cultural heterogeneity throughout this dissertation and define community as the site of those encounters. As a result, I refer to community as characters who talk to each other, who know of each other by degrees of association, who live in the same city, or who read or hear about each other through mass media. Community in this sense is largely about geography but most importantly about contact among people and peoples. In one sense, I still focus on the fact that, as Anderson notes, novels can represent characters living in a simultaneous time but never meeting. However, this simultaneity is not stabilizing for these communities; instead, characters are aware of

others who have different, even antithetical values, who might view their race as a problem, and who may have different legal rights.

The representation of community in twenty-first century literature reflects its cultural context of globalization where increasing migration and mass media both accelerate encounters of cultural heterogeneity. Migrants have been called the main character of the twentieth and the twenty-first century by both literary critics and political philosophers (Frank 1, Nail 1). Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Arjun Appadurai argues for a social “theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics” that have a “joint effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (3). Appadurai acknowledges that “the story of mass migrations (voluntary and forced) is hardly a new feature of human history. But when it is juxtaposed with the rapid flows of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities” (4). The novels I analyze in this dissertation feature characters whose subjectivity is shaped by encounters with migrants, by their own migration, and by media such as television and internet.

In twenty-first-century literature, encounters with cultural heterogeneity undermine the idea that a place or a people can have a single identity or be defined as a particular community. In Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, the narrator, speaking in a twentieth-century context, explains that

this has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigration experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fist pond, ...and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision

course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals. (Smith 272).

In light of migration, heterogeneity is found in local places such as playgrounds, in the identities of individuals, and throughout nations. What was for Anderson the kind of place that might indicate “our Mexico,” or, in this case, “our England,” now indicates a history of global human movement. The result is that twenty-first century literature often invites readers to reflect on the diversity that appears within nation-states and cities as a result of this migration. Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* uses the geography of London to articulate the differences within the city:

A kayak glided high above the stationary traffic of the North Circular Road, two ducks paddling in its wake. Eamonn stopped along the canal path, looked over the edge of the railing. Cars backed up as far as he could see. All the years he’d been down there he’d taken this aqueduct for just another bridge, nothing to tell you that canal boats and waterfowl were being carried along above your head. Always these other Londons in London. (Shamsie 59)

For Eamonn, seeing the same bridge from a different perspective is disorienting; it reveals his ignorance of the city he calls home. The city is an enigma—it is not something that can be fully known or understood; instead, it contains undiscovered otherness, a quality that will become a threat in the context of the novel’s plot about terrorism. Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents particular communities and places as problems of knowledge, as places and peoples that cannot be fully known by any one character or even the reader. As a result, the novels at hand challenge us to reconsider how we describe communities and normative concepts of community. In this dissertation, I read literature of the twenty-first century for how it complicates the identity of communities, where a geographic community contains many peoples and defies the



ability of any one character to fully understand it and where that plurality and that epistemic barrier invite scholars to reconsider normative concepts of what makes a community and standards of belonging.

Rather than stabilize imagined communities as homogenous and shared spaces, twenty-first-century Anglophone literature presents community as a concept requiring interrogation and reconsideration. There is a vast body of literature about migration, especially after the events of the twentieth century, and what makes twenty-first century literature somewhat distinct is how it represents communities living in the wake of mass migrations that are also ongoing and evolving in terms of departure countries, destination countries, and manner of travel. Literary critic Françoise Král argues “that community as a solid overarching framework which precedes individuals and offers them a sense of stability and certainty is on shaky ground” (100). Communities in contemporary fiction conspicuously depart from one important element of the nation-state: “one of the key features of the nation state, one which is disrupted in a context of migration and influx of diasporic populations...is the continuity between individuals and the community, a continuity achieved through language and common values” (Král 105). While some critics of globalization worry about the homogenization of cultures by market forces, the local has hardly disappeared. What we find instead, argues Peter Boxall in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, is a set of “intractable contradictions between the local and the international, and the stubborn persistence of forms of locally embedded material being, that refuse to be eroded by the arrival of a liquid capitalism” (8). Migration has always been eroding that idealized homogeneity of people and place, and twenty-first century

fiction now faces us with the challenge of redefining communities as sites of global and local tension as a necessary conceptual task.

The increasingly global context of contemporary literature has changed how literary critics define the bodies of literature that we study. Critics have begun to focus on how English literature “is becoming defined less by a nation [Britain and the United States] than by a language, in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds write” (Jay 33). Rather than focusing on the nation as distinct from the outside world, contemporary novels often “present...global social awareness as naturally and obviously given” (Gupta 30). This awareness comes from how novels have both local and global settings and “deal with protagonists and events caught in the machine of multinational business, located in the confrontation of global political forces from above and below, placed in the cosmopolitan spaces of global cities or moving fluidly across national and cultural boundaries, etc.” (Gupta 13). The prominence of global movement in fiction has led critics to develop new taxonomies of literature such as the “transcultural novel.” According to Sissy Helff, the transcultural studies can be understood as a continuation of postcolonial studies, and we can call a novel transcultural, “first, if the narrator and/or the narrative challenge(s) the collective identity of a particular community; second, if experiences of border crossing and transnational identities characterizes the narrators...and third, if traditional notions of home are disputed. All of these indicators have a high impact on storytelling” (83). In this dissertation, I use the term twenty-first-century Anglophone literature to reflect the recency of the novels at

hand, their geographic sources, and the increasing intimacy of the global and the local within their narratives.

Because of globalization, there was a time when cultural critics such as Appadurai were diagnosing, calling for, mourning, or celebrating the end of the nation-state. This cultural critique has some bearing on the language we use or can use to describe the communities found in literature. Writing in 1996, Appadurai speculated

that the nation-state, as a complex modern political form, is on its last legs. The evidence is by no means clear, and the returns are hardly all in... Nation-states, for all their important differences (and only a fool would conflate Sri Lanka with Great Britain), make sense only as parts of a system. This system (even when seen as a system of differences) appears poorly equipped to deal with the interlinked diasporas of people and images that mark the here and now. (19)

Appadurai's reasoning about the flaws of nation-state systems is not so far off the mark.

The work of contemporary political philosophers points to the increasing number of migrants and refugees as an unsolved problem for the international nation-state system.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the growing numbers of refugees and migrants, the nation-state has not ended.

This may be because, besides the incredible institutional power and means for violence that nation-states have, the binding of a people to a juridical institution to a territory does not need to be as impervious or inflexible as scholars like Appadurai thought. In

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant* begins with the following statistics: "Today [2015], there are over 1 billion migrants. Each decade, the percentage of migrants as a share of the total population continues to rise, and in the next twenty-five years, the rate of migration is predicted to be higher than during the last twenty-five years" (1). In 2018, Seyla Benhabib wrote about the increasing permanence of refugee camps: "The largest refugee camp in the world, Kenya's Dadaab, is twenty years old and houses 420,000 refugees. The Palestinian refugee camps in Southern Lebanon are in many cases seventy to fifty years old, depending on whether the refugee population was created in 1948 or 1967" (102). Quite like Hegel's discussion of poverty in the emerging nation-states of the nineteenth-century in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* where "the poor [are left] to their fate" (267), the global condition of refugees has become a problem obviously and, for the current nation-state system, unproblematically unsolved. It is simply the cost of doing business for nation-states that some people find themselves exiled, living forever in what are supposed to be temporary camps or trying to make a living in countries where they are legally invisible.

*Extraterritorial*, Matthew Hart offer a literary-historical account of extraterritorial practices of nation-states and argues that

Idealized accounts of territorial statehood...lead us to mistake globalization as a crisis for the national state, when much of what passes for that “crisis” is in fact perfectly ordinary. As a result, cultural theorists and critics have tended to miss, or misrepresent, the extent to which the phenomena we group together under labels such as “globalization” are often the products or projects of sovereign states and national elites. (25)

Just because a growing number of refugees kept in some kind of extraterritorial limbo is a humanitarian crisis does not mean that there is a crisis for the nation-state.

On the other hand, just because something is not a crisis for the nation-state does not mean that it is not shaping the consciousness of people, including those who write and study fiction. Readers in the twenty-first century read in a time when the existing nation-state system is conspicuously not meeting the needs of many and when the nation-state is more obviously an unreliable indicator of communities with a horizontal sense of comradeship. Even if humanitarian crises pose little or no threat to the nation-state system, the mass media that Appadurai notes continuously makes us aware of crises within, at, and beyond borders. These crises emerge from people departing communities, trying to enter new ones, and debates about who belongs to a community. Not only is there global migration and heterogeneity within states, there is media to tell us about it, about people seeking refuge in our own countries, about people displaced on the other side of the world. And there is so much media and such a complicated geography of literacy for consuming that media that we no longer think of neighbors as reading the same newspaper the way Anderson describes (Anderson 35). A conceptual problem that emerges from this context is the difference between knowing a community in a

descriptive sense and identifying a community with a normative concept, holding it to account as a particular identity, and the language and narrative structure of fiction is a useful resource for parsing this difference and critiquing those normative concepts.

There is another moment in *Modernity at Large* where Appadurai's analysis of the contemporary nation-state proves helpful for thinking about the conceptual critiques of notions of community that can be made through readings of literature. Appadurai writes that "the relationship between states and nations is everywhere an embattled one. It is possible to say that in many societies the nation and the state have become one another's projects. That is, while nations (or more properly groups with ideas about nationhood) seek to capture or co-opt states and state power, states simultaneously seek to capture and monopolize ideas about nationhood" (Appadurai 39). The new communities imagined by twenty-first-century fiction draw on ideas of nations, states, and groups of people all becoming one another's project. Instead of a dialectical image of nations and states working on one another, twenty-first-century fiction conjures more rhizomatic worlds, where nations, states, and diverse groups of people interact, and these more complex and networked interactions are where the novels at hand motivate some compelling philosophical critiques. Over the course of the chapters, this dissertation argues that twenty-first century fiction deconstructs the notion of "a people;" represents encounters with embodied difference as problems of and opportunities for knowledge with ethical implications; and imagines communities such as multi-national states and extraterritorial personhood.

By focusing on how literature represents ideas and normative effects of ideas of community, people, and personhood, this dissertation reads literature with a philosophical agenda. Literature and philosophy make for complicated interdisciplinary partners because of their apparently opposing commitments to fictional description and developing logically coherent concepts. I approach philosophy as a task of developing descriptive and normative concepts and distinguishing the two is sometimes a task in itself. Both literature and philosophy are valuable resources for thinking through what constitutes a community in the twenty-first century, globalized context in which we read, and there is a healthy trend of recent criticism that integrates readings of twenty-first century fiction and ethical arguments from continental philosophy. Alan McClusky situates the work of Caryl Phillips, J.M. Coetzee, and Philip Roth in relation to the ethics of Immanuel Levinas, arguing “that, to varying degrees, each writer employs formal techniques that situate the reader in positions of overt self-awareness vis-à-vis the protagonists, so as to replicate the transcendent encounter with the Otherness that Levinas describes” (3). Berthold Schoene draws on Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of the inoperative community to argue that contemporary fiction “projects a community that bears rupturing and indeed thrives on recurrent reassemblage – a community that ...has no telos” (21). These critics find a consistent ethical sensibility in contemporary literature. Peter Boxall’s *The Value of the Novel* argues that an ethical sensibility is a part of the novel form itself and that novels are untimely texts that register the emergence of new conventions and values (11). “In modernism as well as nineteenth-century realism,” he writes, “the very possibility of the novel emerges from its capacity to capture and express

a dialectical relationship between the existent and the non-existent,” and the movements of this dialectic are where we find the “capacity of the novel to articulate a kind of justice...a particular gift for ethical thinking” (129-130). In their exhaustive or deliberately selective descriptions of the characters’ inner lives and everyday conversation, novels realize elements of an unknown future carrying the possibility of greater justice. The work of these critics and others incorporates readings of fiction and philosophical concepts. There are already many critics working with an interdisciplinary method that can be called literature and philosophy, but this method has not been effectively formalized. One of the goals of this dissertation is to deliberately work in this intersection and with this methodological designation in order to show how literature can motivate conceptual work and critical agendas for culturally and historically relevant philosophical work.

I approach literature and philosophy as an interdisciplinary conversation of concepts and as my critical method in order to analyze novels for how they manifest, evoke, and critique concepts of community, a people, and more inclusive notions of humanity. Inclusion, in this case, refers to concepts that are less normative in their effects, that can describe the variations of humanity—its bodies, races, genders, and cultures—without homogenizing differences. Inclusion is often a culturally and situationally contingent project. It can refer to the need to develop systems of civil rights that give more protections to more people or to ways of using language that better account for varieties of self-identification, for example gender identity.

This dissertation integrates readings of twenty-first-century Anglophone literature and continental philosophy in order to critique and specify philosophical concepts regarding normative notions of community, encountering otherness, cultural heterogeneity, and discontinuous political and cultural communities. I draw on texts from the field of biopolitics, an historical and philosophical field of research that draws on political science, the history of science, and the history of philosophy. In general, work in biopolitics investigates how normative notions of what constitutes a community, a human, a species, or a citizen have shaped governmental policy and cultural development and vice versa. There are two historical events that have motivated this field of research: the first is the research agenda of physiological sciences in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, physiological discourses that divided humanity into races and then specified racial hierarchy; the second is the mass denaturalization policies and genocides of the second World War. Obviously such events have happened, and continue to happen, across the entire planet, and so biopolitics can be understood as Western philosophy's framework for analyzing and responding to these historical changes and their global impact. The work of biopolitics is motivated by the fact that the thinking and the concepts that justified the mass denaturalizations and genocide of World War II were not isolated exceptions or even really unique. Many governments across Europe took citizenship away from unwanted peoples, peoples who were unable to find refuge in other states and who were then legally killed in the Holocaust. In their historical works, Michel Foucault and Roberto Esposito have connected those physiological discourses to the rationale at work in the Nazi state. In



their philosophical works, Esposito, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou have tried to develop concepts of personhood and ethics that can stave off repetitions of genocidal governmental policy. There is a kind of founding fear in biopolitics, fear of the fact that such mass death was not a problem for governmental policy, that it followed from the constructed legal status of people who used to be citizens, and that the workings of contemporary capitalist states can be understood as on a spectrum with Nazi policy, a spectrum of policy that specifies kinds of life that can be deprived of state protection and allowed to die. As a result of this fear, there is also a felt need in the philosophical work of biopolitics, a need to develop a concept of humanity that is impersonal, that allows for a descriptive diversity of people without a normative hierarchy, and a need to found an ethics that can stave off concepts of political communities that are necessarily based on a culturally or racially homogenous community.

I compare twenty-first-century Anglophone literature with concepts from the field of biopolitics because the fictions call up the conceptual problem of how to define a community that feels more divided than anything else and then call up that felt need for more inclusive concepts and ethics. Furthermore, the novels I address here incorporate the concepts of community, race, and citizenship in ways that further or critique the research agenda of biopolitics, raising questions about who belongs to a community, why, and what differences between people within a geographic or shared political space are made meaningful. The opening of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* foregrounds differences within communities in a way that integrates the post-Anderson literary context and the philosophical context of normative belonging:

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and . . . it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to [Ifemelu], perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of Brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell . . . She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty.

But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair.  
(Adichie 3)

The variety of named cities indicates cultural heterogeneity within the moniker “American” in a way that a person in Baltimore is unlikely to imagine their community as shared with a person in Princeton. Additionally, throughout these cities, there are barriers to membership in a “hallowed” community, barriers that have effects on the travel of racialized bodies. Belonging is not a given and being American is not an uncomplicated identity. Writers in the field of biopolitics are invested in researching how distinctions are made about what kinds of life belong to a city or a nation and how those distinctions are enforced, usually through technology. By invoking a divided community with standards of membership and exclusion, the opening of *Americanah* integrates the post-Anderson literary research agenda with the philosophical agenda of biopolitics.

The first chapter discusses the method of the dissertation as an interdisciplinary reading of literature and philosophy. Literary studies and philosophy often take the liberty of the other’s object, with citations of philosophers populating literary criticism and philosophers using literature for examples and thought experiments. There is also consistent publication of articles, monographs, and edited collections under the themes of literature and philosophy or philosophy and literature. However, literature and philosophy as a method often goes undescribed and there is a need to formalize its goals and ways of

reading. The goal of this chapter is to make this method more accessible to literary critics because most instances of literature and philosophy are philosophy and literature, written by and for philosophers working in the area. The chapter reviews the methods and goals of each discipline and offers literature and philosophy as a conversation of concepts. One of the weaknesses of discussions of literature and philosophy is that writers tend to define it as a conversation between what counts as “Literature” and what counts as “Philosophy” as genres of writing instead of as a negotiation of academic disciplinary standards and expectations. I emphasize the disciplinary context of these fields as a way to formalize this method. Because we write in a disciplined, institutional context, a context where those disciplinary norms often work toward insightful analyses and findings, an interdisciplinary reading of literature and philosophy is one where the direction of the argument can productively be driven by one of those fields more than the other at any given time. Simply put, we need to be aware and be careful of which direction the concepts are travelling in the conversation at any one time, and there is no need to hold the disciplinary expectations of each field as equal throughout the process. Work in literature and philosophy is most productive if it is direct and deliberate about using philosophy to understand literature or using literature to imagine concepts in response to philosophical arguments. These are the two ways I practice this method throughout this dissertation, although questions from the field of philosophy of language and about the ontology of literature are also categorized as literature and philosophy. As a result of these disciplinary expectations, the chapter considers arguments about how literature can produce knowledge about the world outside of it and identifies Ottmar Ette’s work as an

ideal instance of such an argument because of how Ette respects the distinction of fictional, literary worlds and still finds a means to use literature as a source of knowledge that can be put into practice outside of literary worlds.

The second chapter reads Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*), analyzing how various characters take racial and religious differences to be sources of necessary social and political conflict in contemporary Britain. These characters reproduce, I argue, a rationale of incompatible groups that Michel Foucault describes in his "17 March 1976" lecture on war and race in biopolitics. I show how the text of *Home Fire* evokes and critiques a nationalist consciousness incompatibility motivated by anti-Muslim sentiment. The novel further critiques this consciousness by showing it to be a misunderstanding of the complexity of the community, and both *Home Fire* and *White Teeth* articulate the problem of mixing normative and descriptive language when talking about others, where sometimes language that sounds like it is describing the presence or facts of a community actually works to hold members of that community to an ideological or cultural standard. The second half of this chapter reads *White Teeth* in response to Roberto Esposito's arguments about community. In *Communitas*, Esposito distinguishes between communities defined by some shared trait and "the common," a kind of conceptual negation of content, so far undefined by philosophy, that emerges when one tries to imagine a community to which anyone can belong (149). *White Teeth* gestures at this idea of the common by representing communities and individuals as instances in a history

of movement of information, both genetic and mediated, such that no community can be defined by some proprietary trait or identity.

The third chapter compares what I call an ethics of knowledge in Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Americanah* and Alain Badiou's *Ethics*. At face value, this comparison seems to offer only contrast because race is a main theme in the novel and Badiou claims that race and embodied identities are not productive sources of thought. However, I find in Badiou's ethics room to challenge this view. I offer a reading of *Americanah*, arguing that it represents race and gender as boundaries of knowledge, where awareness of the world is shaped by one's body and its socially contingent status and meaning. I read the novel to show how it represents becoming aware of distinctions of raced and gendered experiences as a means to new and valuable knowledge, a kind of new knowledge that can contribute to Badiou's ethics. If one is committed to Badiou's ethics, I argue, then one can and should also be committed to attending to how embodied identity shapes experiences of shared spaces and political systems as a source of new knowledge about the world.

The fourth chapter examines concepts of personhood and citizenship in Iain M. Banks's Culture series and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. Although the concept of personhood is often described as a quality inherent to human beings, this essay will show how that concept of personhood and the subsequent practices of citizenship are contingent on the Culture's technology. The chapter draws on theories of the *dispositif* to describe personhood and technology and proposes a distinction between *technical* and *conceptual dispositifs*. Drawing on Carl Freedman's work on science fiction, I deploy the

reading of the novels as a utopian theory that offers a critical perspective on Hannah Arendt's work on human rights and citizenship and on the work of philosophers who have sought to develop more inclusive normative concepts of personhood. Although these philosophers have done significant philosophical work to develop more inclusive *conceptual dispositifs*, the utopian critique created by the novels suggests that our thinking would be better directed toward the technology used to put those concepts into practice. The last section of the chapter shows how *Surface Detail* represents the Culture's technology creating a form of "extraterritorial" citizenship.

The conclusion of the dissertation reviews the findings of the chapters regarding how twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents community. I argue that, taken together, the novels represent community as a site of encounter, a site more defined by its contingency than homogeneity, and as a site that creates new tasks of thinking for members of the community. Although it might be tempting to generate new concepts of community in response to global human mobility, such new concepts can only be of limited value. Encountering cultural heterogeneity, experiencing confusion, anger, and frustration in complicated communities as the world shrinks and expands and makes new demands of us—these are not experiences that can be cured or that will go away. Instead, the literature here invites us to remain in the space of encounter and reflect on what is demanded of us in the moment and space of encountering otherness.

## Chapter 1

### Literature and Philosophy as a Method:

#### A Conversation of Concepts Between the Disciplines

Literary critics and philosophers frequently take the liberty of the other's object. Critics draw on philosophy to motivate, prioritize, and situate interpretation. Philosophers find in fiction examples for ideas and thought experiments for troubling them. References to the other field often populate the pages of work in each discipline, but critics and philosophers ask different questions about different objects of research. This chapter seeks to formalize literature and philosophy as a method for the field of literary studies. There are several reasons why this is needed. Literature and philosophy is a method that is currently practiced under a variety of other names in the study of literature in general. In this chapter, I reference some examples of such work in order to show how new historicism as a method and reparative reading as a disciplinary, professional attitude are entirely compatible with literature and philosophy. Another reason why a formalized method of literature and philosophy is needed is because philosophy and literature is already an established field, but it speaks largely to philosophers and tends to use the publishing standards of philosophy as a discipline. There is room for literary critics to more fully consider their place in the interdisciplinary relationship, what they can contribute and get out of it. What kind of knowledge do we lose out on by not giving more credence to this interdisciplinary work that is already ongoing in literary studies? The main reasons for the boundary between fields are their distinct disciplinary

investments and an essential difference in the objects they study—literature studies fiction and philosophy usually seeks to study our shared non-fictional world. Having a difference of kind between the research objects is troubling for scholars, but this is a difference that can be productively navigated if we consider and utilize the disciplinary goals of arguments of each field.

In the following sections, I review some examples of literature and philosophy and the disciplinary goals of the fields to formalize literature and philosophy as a method. I address philosophy first and literature second in order to spend more time on the latter. Specifically, I advance two claims. First, literature and philosophy, or, depending on your prejudice, philosophy and literature, is a field that should define itself according to the disciplinary goals of each field, not their grand objects of study. Scholars working at the intersection of the fields tend to do the latter, defining literature and philosophy as grand artifacts of human culture, and although this is true, it is not that helpful for research writing. Literature and philosophy is a challenging intersection to work at, and prioritizing disciplinary norms makes the work clearer when it comes to working with and comparing texts across fields. A key point here is that research into literature and philosophy produces arguments that can apply to different objects; the findings may be primarily about the content and form of a novel, or the findings could produce a conceptual critique that can be applied in the realm of philosophy or cultural studies. How these arguments develop is contingent on the texts at hand.

Second, I argue that literature and philosophy is primarily a conceptual conversation, a way of developing and critiquing concepts formulated in philosophy and



instantiated in literature. One key challenge to working with this conceptual conversation is that statements about literature do not provide direct knowledge about the world of us readers; the boundary of fiction is strict, even if we accept that authors typically write what they know and even if we strongly feel that there is something to learn from fiction. How can literature produce knowledge about the world outside of itself, where philosophy tends to work? (This recalls the oldest documented dispute between the fields, Socrates' case for throwing the poets out of an ideal city.) In order to meet this burden of how literature and philosophy can be productive, I argue that the field is a way of developing concepts to try out in other contexts. By this, I mean that a concept may be instantiated in a novel in a way that suggests an interesting revision or critique of that concept as formulated by a philosopher. The source for this view is Ottmar Ette's work on literature as a study of life, and it is a short walk from the study of life as Ette describes it to concepts from philosophy. This is a way of doing theory, of taking concepts from one field and applying them to others, and throughout this dissertation, I apply concepts as they appear in literature to political philosophy, to views of ethics, and to the philosophical agenda of developing an inclusive concept of personhood.

### **Literature and Philosophy, Some Examples and Definitions**

We can begin to define literature and philosophy with some examples that show how productive the field has already been. Literature and philosophy can appear as a philosophically inflected reading of literature such as a Heideggerian reading of Zola or an examination of the metaphysics in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. The first,

Roderick Cooke's "Utopia Banished: Reading Zola Through Heidegger," uses Heidegger's concepts of "standing-reserve" and "Enframing" to interpret Zola's representation of railways as a critique of "progress" (65-6). Cooke reads Zola through Heidegger's language to describe the "reductive consequences" of humanity integrating with advancing technology (73).

The second, Ian Moore's chapter "Heraclitus and the Metaphysics of War in *Blood Meridian*," argues that through "the guise of [the character] Judge Holden, Cormac McCarthy presents us not only with a coherent, if disquieting metaphysics, but also with an ethos to live in accord with it" (93). To construct this metaphysics of war, Moore appeals to several monologues by Judge Holden, monologues both stunning and disturbing, claiming that war is an ontological arbiter of meaning. These readings claim that some philosophical concept exists prominently in the novels as a matter of plot, theme, or form. Both examples of this work involve historical research, either through empirical connections between the literature and the philosophy (Moore's reading of McCarthy), or as an attempt to historicize attitudes about developing technologies (Cooke's readings). Even though Moore's reading is more directly philosophical in a disciplinary sense, both readings also rely on the novels manifesting some conceptual coherence.

Literature and philosophy can also be found, expectedly, in philosophers' writings on literature. Gilles Deleuze, in the essay "Immanence: A Life," identifies an instance of an impersonal life, one that has not achieved individual identity, through a reading of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (27). Deleuze relies on this example to fill out his

particular views of immanence and the virtual, and the example is helpful for parsing his unique terminology in the dense essay. Following Deleuze, Gregg Lambert has put this concept of “a life” into conversation with political philosophy and theories of biopolitics (135). In this case, a reading of a novel offers an example for thinking through recurring challenges in philosophy. Lambert’s work, which I will return to as a useful example again later, is characteristic of recent trends in literary criticism that pay attention to what readings of literature do. This trend of criticism is motivated by Eve Sedgwick’s critique of paranoid reading, and when applied to literature, this critique seeks and can produce more affirmative concepts, pushing literature into the territory of philosophy.

Despite these and other examples of productive work drawing on literature and philosophy, the field is quite hard to define. In “Philosophy and Literature: Problems of a Philosophical Subdiscipline,” Melville Chen writes that because this field “lacks coherence and appears fragmented, each of its studies is best characterized as a sketch or an attempt, and critical discussions are at a premium” (472). Chen is quite right about the fragmentation of the field: there is a wealth of anthologies on literature and philosophy as an interdisciplinary field, places where we could hope to find some statements of stable method or concern, but the authors, main topics, and works cited are so diverse that it is difficult to identify stable ground for extended discussion or debate. Consider this conclusion from David Rudrum’s introduction to *Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates*:

The book as a whole is an attempt to represent the burgeoning field of ‘literature and philosophy’ at its most diverse. It does not attempt to offer nor advance any particular philosophy of literature, nor to philosophize any particular aspect or body of literature, nor to dragoon philosophy into the service of literary criticism

or *vice versa*. Its aim is to appeal to philosophers and literary critics of every stamp and shade...without privileging either discipline over the other, and to provide a guide to the vast spectrum of thought involved in contemporary debates between literature and philosophy. (6)

Much of the language here is expansive rather than precise. “Diverse,” “burgeoning,” “vast spectrum,” “every stamp and shade,”—these words widen the scope of a conversation rather than defining it. “Dragoon” is the most obvious signal of a kind of staunch skepticism toward narrowing the conversation. The most consistent presences in such collections are unsurprisingly Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, given their focuses on language and poetry. I will define this term more later, but these are arguments that can be usefully classified as belonging to work in the history of philosophy, especially philosophy of language, not necessarily to literature and philosophy. This is also a good example of how even work that uses the name literature and philosophy tends to be motivated by arguments targeting philosophy. I have no objection to this in itself, but it leaves literary critics wanting for a clear understanding of how they can contribute, what they get out of it, and, in many cases, wanting for a sense of a shared method.

Works that reflect on literature and philosophy as a discipline are often less methodologically helpful than they could be because of how the fields are defined. For one thing, definitions of each field of research prove to be variable and unreliable. Some scholars define the interdisciplinary field by beginning with what it is not, and there is some insightful agreement, although not consensus, that philosophy and literature is neither philosophy of literature nor philosophy in literature. Philosophy of literature, according to Chen, is concerned “with the ontological status of a work of literature” and

“possible worlds in fiction” (474). Philosophy in literature, writes Richard Eldridge, refers to “literary works...taken as mere instances of philosophical stances that are more articulately and adequately worked out elsewhere, as one might, for example, take Sartre’s *Nausea* as an illustration of *Being and Nothingness*” (13). The problem with these approaches, according to Eldridge, is that they “detract from full attention both to the powers and interests of literature and to the uneasy affinities and disaffinities between philosophy and literature” (13). Although these are helpful terminological distinctions, I would argue that they are neither foolproof nor entirely reliable. For one thing, scholars working with texts in philosophy and literature should have some account for how concepts in one field may apply to the other. Even if the question of the ontological status of fiction is not interesting to a scholar, it is the kind of question that may come up at a conference, a talk, or in peer review. Regarding Eldridge’s critique of philosophy in literature, Eldridge disregards both the value of literature and philosophy for the purposes of literary criticism and the possibility that the novels might contain or formally do something not captured in the philosophical argument. Chen and Eldridge here are both motivated by a desire to make the relationship between philosophy and literature a relationship of equality. This is simply not feasible—it is the nature of scholarly research that the significance of an argument is highly unlikely to be equally valued by two fields (not counting narrowly defined yet highly integrated specialties) such that insisting on perfect equality stifles the method rather than facilitates it. Separating literature “in,” “of,” and “and” philosophy is a bit like separating form and content—we might have different lexicons for each, but they always appear together. Although this chapter is

about literature and philosophy as a method, as an argument, it is a work of the philosophy of literature where the main point of the claims I make is about the idea of literature, what literature contains, and what scholars can make of literature.

Definitions of literature and philosophy also tend to be so abstract that it is difficult to translate them down into clear research tasks. This challenge comes from the scale of relevant definition. In order to be inclusive of all the aspects of the field, definitions often rely on abstraction that results in a lack of fine precision. Robert Burch defines literature and philosophy as “a discourse bounded by the interplay of meaning and truth” (3). The semantic meanings of “meaning” and “truth” are so variable that this definition is unlikely to create stable conversation. Claudia Brodsky, who frequently appears in publications of this crossroads, offers a typical definition of literature as the study of the particular and philosophy as the study of the general (252). Although these terms seem more common-sense, they are not necessarily any less contentious. Simon Critchley has written about how philosophy is most effective when it relies on the particular to question the general (15). Definitions like Burch’s and Brodsky’s define literature and philosophy as abstract discourses, and this can hamper scholars looking for a tangible way to work between the fields.

Eldridge attempts to be more detailed and offers a definition of philosophy that will be useful throughout this dissertation. Eldridge writes that “philosophy undertakes to specify ideal commitments, or the commitments that it would be most effectively worthwhile to have, even if their fulfillments remain contingent and interruptible” (4). On the other hand, literature “undertakes to track what is likely to come, tragically or

comically, of the bearing of particular passions in circumstances that remain always in part intractable” (4). Eldridge’s definition of philosophy is useful because it describes a kind of argument that philosophers may formulate, and this idea of commitment is compatible with the conceptual work of philosophy and at stake in later chapters.

Eldridge’s definition of literature comes across as very plot based, however, as if literary critics are in the business of theorizing cause and effect in plots (not that that would be impossible for a narratologist or someone working on naturalism). In a later section, a longer discussion of methods of criticism will stabilize how literature and philosophy fits in.

Eldridge does use an insightful phrase to describe literature and philosophy together: “forms of attention;” and once the two fields appear together, the kind of labor involved becomes a little clearer. He writes: “both philosophy and literature at their best have engaged with each other to develop forms of attention to human life and to human commitments and passions while avoiding both empty idealism and empty particularism” (5). This phrase “forms of attention” is powerful, referring to what is represented in literature and what commitments are defined in philosophy. The question remains, though, of how to analyze these two forms of attention together. In order to show how these fields interact in a disciplinary, research context, the next two sections review the critical methods of philosophy and then literary studies.

## **Ways of Doing Philosophy**

Speaking of philosophy requires some distinctions to be made immediately, as there are several kinds of philosophical work. Fortunately, distinguishing between these types of philosophy proves helpful for considering the potential of interdisciplinary work. We can usefully distinguish between work in the history of philosophy, analytic philosophy, and continental philosophy. Work in the history of philosophy refers to interpretations of philosophical works, to attribute to either a single author or specific text a coherent argument or project. Works that interpret Nietzsche on the issue of agency, for example, are working on the history of philosophy.

Second, in anglophone academia, most philosophers work in analytic philosophy. This manner of philosophy, Karen Feldman explains, defines “the task of ‘doing philosophy’” as “defending positions on particular philosophical issues” (416). This has created a further distinction as “writing about philosophy—for instance, working on the history of philosophy—is considered a separate and less important task than ‘doing philosophy’” (416). Doing philosophy, the practice of argument and defending positions on issues takes priority over other tasks, including interpreting texts from philosophy’s own history. According to Hayden White, “analytic philosophy favors a correspondence theory of truth, in which truth has two components: unambiguous propositions governed by a logic of identity and noncontradiction” (411). The emphasis on truth and noncontradiction can pose some problems for interdisciplinary because there is no problem for a literary critic to identify a contradictory concept within a text. White writes that for analytic philosophy, “*concepts* and conceptualizations are at issue. Even though it



is generally conceded that the concept of the concept is vague or ambiguous, conceptual clarity and purity of rational thinking are the principal aims of modern philosophical discourse” (412). Clarity and rationality make propositions defensible. These propositions produce concepts, and a philosophical conversation can evaluate whether a certain concept is adequate to reality or a specific investigation. Conceptual work is one way that the critical tasks of philosophers and literary critics begins to merge. When a literary critic identifies a concept within a novel, they may try to clarify what is contained in that instance of that concept, such as a concept of ethics or “the human.”

Finally, there is continental philosophy. This can be taken as a geographic distinction referring to philosophy from the European continent, but it also refers to a significant distinction of manner and topic of inquiry. Continental philosophy draws heavily on the history of philosophy, on the tradition of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and all the French and Italian philosophers who can never stop returning to them. Heidegger is perhaps paradigmatic of this tradition in that he responds both to the history of philosophy and to poetry to substantiate his arguments. Continental philosophy is both a major resource and the source itself for work in the history of concepts, which Feldman describes as “a study of both the historical development of concepts and their representational functions” (420).

Although there are works that compare analytic philosophy, or philosophers who write in an analytic style, to literature (such as Toril Moi’s book *Revolution of the Ordinary*), continental philosophy has had and continues to have the most conspicuous influence on literary studies because of its influence on what we call “theory.” Literary

critic Jonathan Culler defines “theory as work that succeeds in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those in which it originates” (*Literary* 3). The success of the matter seems important here: theory is something genuinely insightful across fields. A successful iteration of theory will be persuasive; if unpersuasive, it runs the risk of being labelled something like misguided free association. Whenever we work across disciplinary lines or analyze multiple different kinds of objects, assuming disciplines do offer insight into their objects, we are theorizing something. The reasoning behind this definition becomes even clearer when we consider how much of literary theory is drawn from the fields of linguistics, psychoanalysis, Marx’s philosophy, and social science. Continental philosophy, according to Hayden White, “tends to move toward alliances, if not unions, with other disciplines or arts that provide ‘contents’ more in line with the ‘great question’ of the meaning-of-life kind featured by premodernist philosophy,” disciplines including “literature, religious studies, and art” (414). As a result of these persistent alliances between continental philosophy and other fields, critics have argued that “no clear line can be drawn between continental philosophy and” what we call “theory... [The] issues that continue to be central to this tradition of philosophy are also that that animate much discussion in studies of literary and visual culture from a theoretical perspective” (Elliot and Attridge 13). Continental philosophy is the branch of the field that is often most useful to literary studies motivated by theory and that is most open to conceptual transfer with other fields.

## Literary Studies and Criticism

Literature proves to be an exceptional source for theoretical, interdisciplinary thinking since readings insightfully draw on the language of other disciplines. Furthermore, the premise of literature's capacity to express a variety of meanings opens it to interacting with theoretical concepts. Jonathan Culler characterizes literary criticism since 1850 as "the task of telling us what works mean. If the work is expressive, then criticism elucidates what it expresses...What the discourse of the text appears to say is never what the work says: the literary critic must articulate the significance of these mute words" ("Introduction" 906). Culler situates this search for meaning within what Jacques Rancière calls the "expressive model" of literature and criticism, where "works may express everything from the ideology of a historical situation to the fundamental negativity of language" ("Introduction" 906). The logic of a hermeneutics of suspicion—the imperative "to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see"—is evident here as well (Felski 1).

The designations "critic" and "criticism" deserve specific attention because they better describe our disciplinary practice than just the word literature. Institutionally, Mark Hewson explains, criticism took over as the dominant research paradigm between the 1930s and 1950s with the rise of New Criticism, replacing "the positivist research model of philology and historical scholarship" (32). New Critics asserted the insights of their method of close reading against previous historical research methods (40). Hewson argues that having such a rigorous method is how critics were and are able to maintain their stance of producing worthwhile knowledge in the university setting.

Together, the labor of criticism and the perspective of the expressive model paved the way for the proliferation of interdisciplinarity now seen in literary studies and the commensurate proliferation of meanings found in texts. Within this model, criticism operates with a principle that liberates scholars to appeal to a variety of concepts from theory, a “principle that makes literary criticism fundamentally interpretive yet also hostile to the idea that the work has a message: there is no simple message but a variety of configurations that the work may express” (Culler, “Introduction” 906). Within the expressive model, literary scholars are able to use theoretical concepts or useful terminology from other fields to expand readings of literature. The fundamental assumptions that literary scholars hold about literature make the study of literature open to language from fields such as continental philosophy.

We are now in a position to assess multiple ways that literature and philosophy can be practiced by scholars in literary studies. As indicated by the examples in the beginning of this chapter, texts from literature and philosophy can be studied in the manner of new historicism. Joseph North has referred to new historicism as “the ‘historicist/contextualist’ paradigm, by which I simply mean that almost all of the most influential movements in literary studies since the 1980s have proceeded on the assumption that, for academic purposes, works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read” (1). In the words of its practitioners, this means tracking “the social energies that circulate very broadly through a culture, flowing back and forth between margins and center, passing from zones designated as art to zones apparently indifferent

or hostile to art” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 13). For this kind of work, literature is primarily an historical or cultural artifact to be compared to other artifacts in order to create a sense of a culture in time. Works from literature and philosophy can be studied as historical sites of the transmission of social energies when there are tangible connections between the texts.

An example of this kind of work is the wave of scholarship on George Eliot and Baruch Spinoza. Eliot translated Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and this connection has motivated scholarship by literary critics and philosophers, appearing in journals symptomatic of the philosophy and literature trend (such as *Philosophy and Literature*), and plausibly motivated the formal publication of Eliot’s translation of Spinoza in 2020 (although it was previously available online). For scholars working with Eliot and Spinoza, knowledge of close reading as practiced by literary studies and philosophy and historical research are often necessary, such as in Virgil Nemoianu’s “The Spinozist Freedom of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*.” Nemoianu argues that “Eliot provides us with a more complete realization of the conception of freedom she shares with Spinoza than the philosopher can” (80). This difference of the capacity to express a concept is, for Nemoianu, an effect of how the novel “instantiates” the concept of freedom in a cast of characters rather than trying to explain it in a systematic way (79-80). Nemoianu’s argument is one example of how literature and philosophy is inseparable from a philosophy of literature and philosophy in literature. Nemoianu resorts to an argument about the expressive capacities of the novel form in order to substantiate his thesis regarding *Daniel Deronda*’s representation of Spinozist freedom. A significant aspect of

Nemoianu's argument is its implications for the novel form, indicating that the novel can instantiate a concept in a way that is comparable with philosophical texts.

Although historical connection is essential for many works of literature and philosophy, often, conceptual connection or conceptual work is the only connection, such as the Heidegger and Zola article I referred to earlier. This creates an even greater need for the persuasiveness of an argument to be effective but does not have to be an objection to the interdisciplinary work. Meike Bal describes interdisciplinary work in the humanities as traveling concepts, a term that captures the kind of thinking done by literature and philosophy. The concept of concepts, Bal claims, is most worth thinking about when we are in conversation with others who do not share all of our intuitions or assumptions about them. Bal argues that "interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than methods" (5). This distinction against methods is a rather strong claim that could merit its own discussion, but Bal's proposal does make it possible to connect disciplines and retain the benefits of their methods. We can travel between disciplines productively if we situate methods in relation to how they generate and make use of concepts.

The benefit of working with concepts is that they foster both precision and conversation via moments of imprecision. When concepts are "explicit, clear, and defined, they can help to articulate an understanding, convey an interpretation, check an imagination-run-wild, or enable a discussion, on the basis of common terms and in the awareness of absences and exclusions" (23). On the other hand, we can hardly take clarity for granted. The concept of the "subject" is the most obvious example here: where

many people use the term, just as likely do we all have in mind something different, even if we belong to the same discipline. This difference of intuition comes from the fact that “subject” is a theoretical concept, with distinct roots in several fields and appearances in even more. Concepts are not proprietary to any one field. They “are not fixed,” Bal writes: “They travel - between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ” (24). Distinct disciplines and academic communities make different work of concepts and derive them from their objects through different methods. Once we get to a shared term though, we can put differences of method and claim into clearer relief and “move from a muddled multidisciplinary to a productive interdisciplinarity” (25).

Bal’s formulation of traveling concepts makes one more point relevant to thinking about the implications of the “and” of literature and philosophy. I have suggested that this “and” should not be taken of a strict requirement of equality when writing about the fields because, even when aspects of both are relevant, we are not necessarily going to make claims of equal interest to both. For Bal and her work in cultural studies, concepts manifest in objects that are instances of that concept, and this determines the goal of claims we can make: “The counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text or work or ‘thing’ that constitutes the object of analysis. No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its - the object’s - own terms” (8). If we are drawing out a concept in a novel, we are making a claim about a novel and to some degree, obligated to the rigors of literary analysis as much as conceptual

thinking. If we are working through a formulation of a concept by a philosopher, we are bound to the different standards of interpreting argument. What exactly we do with concepts when reading and writing about literature and philosophy depends on the object of our claims, the kind of reading from which a concept emerges, and where we intend to travel with it. There is no harm done to literature or philosophy by scholars being clear about the disciplinary direction of their arguments.

Literature and philosophy is also able to respond to a growing desire expressed in literary studies, the desire for readings and research to do something affirmative. This desire has emerged in response to Eve Sedgwick's critique of paranoid reading. Sedgwick describes this as "the detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure... [These] infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling have become the common currency of cultural and historicist studies" (143). Alternative practices to paranoid reading have emphasized a different direction for the use of the reading. One contrast, offered by Christopher Castiglia, calls for more hopeful reading, one that could "contribute to the ethics of the possible" (226). One way to think this desire regarding readings of literature and philosophy is to ask: What does this concept in this novel make possible that its counterpart in philosophy does not?

Sedgwick's own alternative, reparative reading, has a psychoanalytic valence that is striking for its motivation: "[Reparative reading's] fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self" (149). Sedgwick's example of this is the "queer-identified practice of camp" (149). The



reference to an “inchoate self” is a sign of Sedgwick’s particular agenda, but, taken more broadly, the idea of scholarship focusing on developing concepts for something—a self, a community, a critical agenda—that is in progress or emerging applies to the kind of work literature and philosophy can generate. By setting resources for an inchoate self as a standard for scholarship, Sedgwick gives scholarship a normative purpose in addition to the production of knowledge, and this is where the connection to philosophy appears. Conceptual work in philosophy is often normative: it hopes to develop concepts that can achieve something, to create some standard for evaluating aspects of reality. Recurring examples of normative concepts in this dissertation come from Roberto Esposito’s work on the idea of the impersonal and community. Across several books, Esposito has sought to develop concepts of personhood and community that are less exclusionary, that do not specify kinds of persons or proprietary bases for community. Instead, the goal is for a concept to create a sense of obligation to a genuinely universal community (as opposed to one where a particular passes itself off for a universal). Readings of literature can productively seek out and evaluate concepts in fiction for their normative effects or implications. This is a manner of reading that interprets a text according to a conceptual vocabulary and, with reference to interdisciplinary resources, evaluates the normative effects of the concepts found therein.

Scholars working at the intersection of literature and philosophy often seek out the normative implications of instances concepts found in literature. This task motivates some of the utopian critiques found in chapter four. When evaluating the normative implications of instances of concepts, it is helpful to recall Eldridge’s definition of

philosophy as specifying ideal commitments (4). What commitments does this concept in this novel inspire or motivate? Gregg Lambert has applied this kind of question to Deleuze's claims about the concept of a life in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*:

Has it not been philosophy's highest task to become equal to this image of a purely impersonal life...in order to provide an adequate concept that would also be the basis for the creation of new...social relations? Could this image become revolutionary or "political" under certain definite conditions, especially when the real possibilities of ... transformative politics ...seem to be lacking? (135)

Just what is this task? To turn an image into a political norm, into some kind of commitment that can be translated into specific political structures and practices. Lambert renders this image of the impersonal as both philosophical and literary, using a moment in a novel to formulate a task for philosophy. It relies on an image to convince us of something. But what is the precise content of that image? How does it represent a life as something that could be politically normative? Engaging a question like this requires both literary interpretation and persuasive argument, both literary studies and philosophy. Literature's capacity to generate images of alternative social relations makes it a valuable resource for philosophical critiques of political norms and concepts, likely explaining the variety of scholars who pursue work with a similar motivation to Lambert's.

So far, I have tried to establish literature and philosophy as a conversation of concepts. This is one way of addressing the different status of statements about literature and statements about the world analyzed by philosophy. It is a useful tenet of narratology, for example, that novels create fictional worlds. The content of novels, in this sense, is quite far from the content that philosophy argues about—the good life, the practice of

wisdom, the search for truth—the practice of everyday life regarding which philosophy can specify a commitment.

However, examining concepts in an extratextual context does not have to mean giving into the assumption that literature accurately represents the world outside of its pages. What I practice throughout this dissertation, and what I propose is really key to literature and philosophy is the interpretive opportunity to transmute one of a novel's many possible meanings into a critical perspective that can be placed in the context of philosophical arguments. This amounts to finding some sort of meaning in the text that could be sustainable as a perspective in an extratextual context, a perspective that a person could hold, for various good or bad reasons. The content of these concepts is what makes literature and philosophy comparable, and the difference between how concepts appear in literature and philosophy makes this kind of interdisciplinary work a valuable producer of knowledge in way that reminds us that the methods of disciplines also define the limits of the insight generated about their objects of study.

This kind of reading requires three tasks for the interdisciplinary literary critic or philosopher. If one chooses to begin with literature, the first task is isolating the concept in the text. A formal and historical task, novels can be situated in an historical context or subject to a close reading with a relevant theoretical lexicon, or both. The second task is to define the content of the concept and possibly articulate it as a kind of commitment. The third task is comparing the concept to philosophical arguments that share a theorizable language, or an agenda of commitment, and this is where the critic takes up the burden of being persuasive, seeing connections and substantiating them. The first task

is literary, and the second and third are the labor of inter- or multi-disciplinarity. However, the latter tasks do not leave the literary behind, because the content of the concepts found in literature is inseparable from their form, from their narration. If one begins with a philosophical concept, then the process has a prior step of defining the concept as it is understood in a philosophical text or argument and setting an agenda of what to look for in literature.

Undertaking this kind of comparison lifts a concept from a literary text into a context of argument from philosophy. Philosophy has some reason for skepticism here. Because something appears in a novel is hardly a good reason to take it seriously. Instead, what would make a concept from a novel compelling for this kind of scholarship is how it responds to other relevant instances of that concept and if it advances a philosophical debate relative to a goal. A concept from a novel may not be able to reliably inform us of previously unseen elements of our world, but if we articulate that concept as an argument or a critical perspective, then it could motivate us to ask different questions about topics of debate, to create new perspectives, and to stretch our thinking about relevant commitments.

Formulating literature and philosophy as a conversation of concepts make a strength out of what critics have seen as a barrier between the fields. Hayden White argues that the distinct manner of invention for each field is one of the reasons why interdisciplinary work is so difficult:

Whereas philosophical invention consists of the creation of new concepts adequate to the conceptualization of an ever-changing reality, literary invention consists more of pushing the limits of discourse beyond the hierarchy of genres inherited from earlier or exotic writing traditions and of creating new figures

incarnating the anomalies and ambiguities of emergent social forms and cultural processes. (413)

For White, it seems that the aesthetic invention within literature distinguishes it from philosophy. However, the coincidence of aesthetics and the “anomalies and ambiguities of emergent social forms” is what makes literature such a useful conceptual interlocutor for philosophy. The formal innovations of literary worlds, or even the repeated use of familiar literary devices in new texts, can draw the critic’s attention to new concepts emerging therein.

With this argument, I am not making the case that literature itself contains extratextual knowledge. Instead, I am trying to define a task of thinking that might result in new extratextual knowledge following a rigorous questioning of concepts and commitments. I think of this, and practice it in the following chapters, as trying out knowledge, as developing a critical agenda and then applying that agenda to existing concepts, cultural artifacts, or existing instances of social and political norms. This is a way of asking what we stand to learn if we deploy a concept, as found in a novel, in another context. In this way, literature and philosophy can be drawn to cultural studies to examine how concepts are instantiated in a non-fictional context. This does not mean taking for granted that literature informs us directly of culture or politics; it means using literature and philosophy to develop concepts for applying a critical questioning to culture.

## Literature and Philosophy for Twenty-First-Century Literature

Connecting literature and philosophy this way can be understood as an extension of a methodological argument about literature made by Ottmar Ette. Ette's views of literature also help make clear why literature and philosophy is an apt way of reading twenty-first-century Anglophone literature. Namely, literature and philosophy can help develop new concepts of community, social and political units, and what encounters with cultural heterogeneity demand of people.

In "Literature as Knowledge for Living, Literary Studies as Science for Living," Ette argues for reading literature with an eye for the knowledge it might produce. The fact that we typically do not read it this way, according to Ette, is because of the perception that the life sciences have a monopoly on the ability to produce knowledge about life. "Through the term *life sciences*," he writes, "a constellation of biotechnological disciplines has appropriated the term *life* in an effective, deceptively self-evident way, increasingly robbing the humanities of any authority to produce knowledge about life" (983). Ette argues that this "narrow[s]...*bios*, a broadly conceived understanding of life that includes specifically cultural dimensions, to a bio- and natural-scientific concept" that leaves out the valuable input the humanities has to offer (983). In opposition to this, "a culturally sound concept of life" would be "also oriented toward literature" (985). For Ette, it is a misunderstanding of the idea of life, a deceptive narrowing of its meaning, that sanctions literature as a source of knowledge.

Here is where Ette approaches the essential question of how literature either can produce knowledge about the world outside of it or be beneficial for learning about life

without supplying that direct, empirical evidence. Ette argues that texts contain “intratextual” knowledge for living, where “the challenge is to understand the dynamic modeling of literary characters as complex choreographies of individuals who possess different kinds of life knowledge... The novel juxtaposes their knowledges in ever-new twists and turns of the plot and experimentally tests, reflects, and modifies them in its fictional laboratory” (987-8). The readings of *Home Fire* and *White Teeth* in the next chapter can be understood as analyses of “knowledges” of community and nation in an intratextual setting. If a “knowledge” can be defined within a piece of literature, then it can also be used as a concept to compare and contrast with concepts from philosophy. As a result, literature, can generate knowledge in terms of concepts which can further motivate critical analysis for fields such as culture studies. Ette does not use this language of concepts or comparison, but these additional steps of literature and philosophy as a method would be necessary for literature to be a source of “sciences for living” (983).

The conceptual conversation of literature and philosophy is also necessary for literature to meet the demands of “one of the most urgent problems of the twenty-first century: how radically different cultures might live together with mutual respect for each other’s differences” (983). Ette claims that the innovations of literature are particularly helpful “in multi-, inter-, and transcultural contexts where life-forms and situations rapidly pluralize” (985). If literature is helpful in this context, it is because the intratextual laboratory of the text acts out the exhaustion of the descriptive and normative capacities of existing concepts of cultural aspects of life. This sense of exhaustion or at least inadequacy of existing concepts of community is especially apparent in the context

of twenty-first century globalization, wherein political philosophers find a “blurring of traditional notions of political subjects and social units” (Sloterdijk 310). As I argued in the introduction, the sense of the nation-state coming to an end, even if it has not and seems unlikely to do so, can be understood as a clear dissatisfaction with existing political systems and concepts of community. Those very aspects of life that are not effectively studied by the hard sciences may also require new concepts to reflect new communities, encounters with cultural heterogeneity, and the possibility of new norms for ethics, and the interdisciplinary space of literature and philosophy is a valuable resource for this when it is understood as a conversation of concepts that allows scholars to try out new knowledge.



## Chapter 2

### Governing Citizens and Managing Community:

#### Biopolitical Rationale in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire*, an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, opens with a familiar scene for readers in a post-9/11 context. Isma Pasha, a British Muslim woman, is detained at an airport in London, causing her to miss her flight to the U.S. No specific reason is given to her for her being detained; it is simply the case that security personnel need to interrogate her. One part of the interrogation reveals a key aspect of the security rationale at work: the need to verify if there is a discrepancy between Isma's citizenship and her nationalism:

“Do you consider yourself British?” the man said.

“I am British.”

“But do you consider yourself British?”

“I've lived here all my life.” She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive. (5)

The question inquires about a possible discrepancy between Isma's citizenship and her feeling of national belonging; a person might “be British” by having a British passport and citizenship, but it is possible she thinks of herself differently, as a member of some other group before being British. For the airport security officer, it is necessary to verify if Isma considers herself as other than British because, since she is Muslim, she might belong to a group, in this case radical Islam, who consider the British their enemies. This inquiry appears motivated by a concern that a deviation from British identity might also

entail an antagonism toward the British, and the security rationale on display in this interrogation projects the possibility of antagonism onto Isma. Isma is careful to refer to herself “as a Brit” throughout the interrogation (6).

There is a certain rationale within this question, a way of thinking where a hybrid identity of British and Muslim is impossible. Something about the identity of each group makes it impossible for them to coexist within a single person. This chapter investigates this rationale of incompatible groups in *Home Fire*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, and Michel Foucault’s “17 March 1976” lecture on biopolitics. Each of these texts discusses or represents the idea that a difference of group membership necessitates incompatibility with or threat to another group. By incorporating these ideas of incompatibility and necessary threat, the novels offer an opportunity to examine how aspects of biopolitics from Foucault’s lecture manifest in other contexts. Work in biopolitics often focuses on the technology and governance, since those are the objects of Foucault’s lecture. However, there are aspects of Foucault’s lecture that address the way of thinking that emerges from biopolitical governance, and *Home Fire* and *White Teeth* both evoke and critique this rationale. The novels do not reify the idea of incompatible groups; rather they represent it as an idea that motivates characters, that drives how characters perceive and evaluate one another. Even further, both *Home Fire* and *White Teeth*, by various means of representation, represent this idea of incompatible groups as a misunderstanding of the complexity of the environment around the characters.

## **I. Ontologizing Incompatibility**

In his lecture, “17 March 1976,” on “State racism” and “war” (239), Foucault describes a new manner of politics, what he calls biopolitics, that we can use to theorize attitudes toward others and otherness. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century context of Foucault’s lecture, biopolitics is defined as manner of governing a population and the understanding of the population that emerges in this governance. Throughout the lecture, Foucault critiques what I will define as an ontologizing rationale that follows from the biopolitical view of population, a rationale that, by defining what life must die in order for other life to live, ontologizes incompatibility into the difference between groups of people. For the purpose of this chapter, the most important aspect of the idea of population that Foucault describes is that a population can contain groups that are perceived to be necessary threats to one another, a view that emerges once politics uses a rationale that ontologizes ideas of kinds life and takes that distinction as a normative basis for culture and political organization.

The idea that groups of people are somehow incompatible with one another emerges from techniques of governance that treat populations as sites of control. Foucault defines biopolitics as a “new technology” that emerged “in the second half of the eighteenth century” and was “addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on” (242-3). A birth, a death, a case of illness, these events are “aleatory and “unpredictable” in the lives of individuals but can be statistically studied

for a given population. The knowledge produced from such study is put to use in “regulatory mechanisms . . . established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field. In a word, security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life” (246). In this way of thinking, the life of any individual is evaluated and understood according to the normative health and growth of the population.<sup>2</sup> Once the idea of a population also entails a norm of health and homeostasis, it legitimizes evaluation and control of individuals and necessitates a measure of security against aleatory events and change within that population.

The language Foucault uses to describe this idea of populations connects to *White Teeth*'s representation of science, specifically to the character Dr. Marcus Chalfen, a biologist studying cancer in mice in order to “eliminate the random” (Smith 283), a course of research motivated by “the firm belief in the *perfectibility* of all life” (Smith 260). In the narrative of *White Teeth*, this concern for eliminating the growth of cancer parallels characters trying to preserve a cultural homeostasis in the various communities cohabitating in London, and in both novels, the most significant threat of the random and the aleatory comes from shifting cultural identities as a result of migration and subsequent cultural mixing. Such changes result in either security threats, in *Home Fire*, or impurities in the community, in *White Teeth*. The normative homeostasis of the

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<sup>2</sup> There is a certain tension of language here, where the target of biopolitical governance is the population and where biopolitical governance functions in a way that significantly affects individuals. Especially when applying a theoretical vocabulary to a novel, we are most likely, and in this chapter are, looking at the effects on individual characters.

population that we will examine in these novels, then, is determined not by life-span or illness but by a homogenous cultural identity that requires security against difference.

Within Foucault's lecture, difference is discussed as an effect of racism. Foucault specifies two functions of racism here (255). The first function is that racism

is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control ... The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. (254-5)<sup>3</sup>

In this quote, we can see an element of what I refer to as the ontologizing rationale operative within biopolitics—a break within the “population” is “introduced.” The break is an idea created by a domain of knowledge, in this case the sciences and philosophy, and then the idea of the difference of groups is applied to the field of the living, used to attribute qualities to groups within that field as if those qualities were their distinctive ontology. This is a process of thinking, a way of evaluating individuals according to their group membership and the status of that group relative to a norm.

The second function of racism is the relationship created between these groups. It is a relationship of necessary conflict, a new kind of war, and this is the source of what I call the perceived incompatibility of populations. Once the idea of “races” is introduced into the human race, groups can be evaluated for the purpose of preserving a normative homeostasis of a population. In the passage above we saw the terms “good” and “inferior” used to describe different races from this perspective, evaluations reflecting a

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<sup>3</sup> The primary example that Foucault offers of this difference of races is the opposition between the German race and the Jewish race, and opposition created by the Nazi party and State (260).

normative view of the “good” and an ideal homeostasis. The difference of groups does not just lead to evaluation; it specifies a “break between what must live and what must die” (254). This relationship of necessity, of necessary death, is, as Foucault puts it, a “biological-type relationship” and the source of the incompatibility of groups. As long as both groups are alive, one of them must die or the other will die. Throughout the end of the lecture, Foucault uses the terms “enemies” and “threat” several times, creating the sense of a relationship of incompatibility. When connecting this relationship to the role of war in society, Foucault says that, in the biopower system, “war...is not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary, but of destroying the enemy race, of destroying that [sort] of biological threat that those people over there represent to our race” (257). One population, by simply existing, is a threat to another. This is a theory of existence and the existence of otherness, where the existence of the other group, as opposed to some obviously harmful action on their part, is the threat. In *White Teeth*, this threat manifests between nationalists and immigrants, eliciting “the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation,” where infection is simply the inevitable result of the presence of these two kinds of life; and “immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*,” where the demise is inevitable without regulating against the reproductive emergence of anything other than sameness of identity (Smith 272). These are fears motivated by the perception of a difference of kind between groups, where the two identities cannot coexist and preserving sameness of identity is made into a cultural and political priority. Other groups become threatening when some aspect of their identity is ontologized, made into a metaphysics, and as a result, in order for the

biologically threatened group to survive, it must take putting the other to death as an end for its political organization.

Once a way of thinking attributes necessary threat to the existence of other groups, we have a rationale that ontologizes incompatibility into difference. Throughout the end of the lecture, Foucault's language begins to emphasize the rationale that evaluates and ontologizes groups more and more. He shifts into asserting, somewhat speculatively, that "the play between the sovereign right to kill and the mechanisms of biopower...is in fact inscribed in the workings of all States. In all modern States, in all capitalist States? Perhaps not. But I do think that—but this would be a whole new argument—the socialist State, socialism, is as marked by racism as the workings of the modern State, of the capitalist State" (260-1). By specifying that racism manifests in several kinds of States, Foucault creates a continuity that appears both in the manner of governance and in the rationale within the governing activity. Foucault refers again to this internal thinking process when he points out that "socialist *thought*, which is after all very much bound up with the themes of biopower, can *rationalize* the murder of its enemies" (262, emphasis mine). When Foucault branches out to examine how biopower manifests in other iterations of the State, one source of continuity between these iterations is located in the thought motivating them and the rationale of distinguishing kinds of life and attributing a necessary incompatibility to their difference.

Furthermore, several times throughout the lecture, Foucault uses the first-person or the first-person possessive to parrot the way of thinking he is describing. In a key passage, the first-person even appears in quotation marks: "The more inferior species die

out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as a species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate” (255). It is unclear who exactly the “I” is—it can be read as articulating the logic of a State in the biopower system when the State is identified with a specific race. However, by using the first person, Foucault also shows a way of thinking that individual persons could hold, especially when they think normatively, when they evaluate themselves and others as members of populations. This rationale works as a means of understanding others, evaluating others according to a norm of homeostasis and seeing variance as deviance and threat.

Novels are an effective means for representing interiority, for attributing thoughts to characters that would be otherwise inaccessible. As a result of this representation, we can read literature for how characters are motivated by a rationale such as the one Foucault describes and read further for how the novel might critique this rationale. In *Home Fire* and *White Teeth*, all the characters that I discuss in this chapter are British citizens, and yet they still think of themselves and others around them as belonging to groups that are incompatible. Since both novels are set in a London of very recent history, the killing and war that make the primary context of Foucault’s lecture are both distant and significant in the novels. They are distant in that characters are not often confronted with the horrific violence typical of outright war, but significant in that all the characters are aware of such horrific violence in history, in other countries, and as an ongoing possibility because of the continuing enmity between certain groups connected



to Britain. As a result, the rationale that equates cultural difference and necessary threat is on display throughout both novels. The following sections of the chapter read *Home Fire* and *White Teeth* for how various characters ontologize others and how the novels critique the rationale motivating this behavior.

## II. A National Consciousness of Incompatibility in *Home Fire*

*Home Fire* is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* and recreates its conflict of two opposing and compelling, although not necessarily convincing, views about the rules regarding burial of an enemy of a state. In *Antigone*, Creon, the leader of Thebes, forbids Antigone from burying her brother, Polyneices, because Polyneices led and died in a rebellion against Thebes' former ruler. In *Home Fire*, Parvaiz Pasha leaves the United Kingdom to join an ISIS cell in Raqqa, Syria.<sup>4</sup> He eventually flees ISIS and is killed by them trying to enter the British consulate in Istanbul. After this, the British home secretary and Creon reincarnation, Karamat Lone, refuses to allow Parvaiz's body to be repatriated to the U.K. because he has revoked the citizenship of all dual nationals who have left the U.K. to join ISIS, and, Karamat claims, Parvaiz is a dual national of Pakistan, even though he was not born there and has never spent significant time there (Shamsie 192-3). In *Home Fire*, the role of Antigone is taken up by Aneeka, Parvaiz's

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<sup>4</sup> His departure is preceded by the most interesting part of the novel that I do not follow up on in this chapter, a sustained recruiting campaign where a distant relative recruits Parvaiz with emotional manipulation, trauma bonding, some conspicuous misogyny, and outright fabrications about what life is like after joining ISIS. All of this happens when Parvaiz encounters a time of vulnerability and aimlessness after graduating secondary school and makes for an interesting account of how radicalization could happen. Descriptions of radicalization appear in *White Teeth* as well, and there is worthwhile critical work to be done examining the representation of radicalization as an aleatory event in a population. However, the specific topic of this chapter is the representation of perceptions of incompatibility and subsequent critiques thereof, making radicalization, as interesting and important as it may be, tangential.

twin sister, and they have an older sister as well, Isma. The other element of the story, Antigone's engagement to Creon's son Haemon, is recreated in Aneeka seducing Karamat's son Eamonn, although it is one of those "first it was seduction and now they really love each other" tropes. As in *Antigone*, the end of *Home Fire* is equally tragic, although in a very different way.

There are two main ways of describing the conceptual conflict of *Antigone* and *Home Fire*, one that has a distinct line of criticism and another that engages with the biopolitical work of Foucault, Agamben, and Roberto Esposito. First, and most prominently, *Antigone* has been read as a conflict between the rights of kinship and duties to the state, an opposition that, when attending to the context of the play, is mapped onto an "antithesis between divine and human law, tragically portrayed by Antigone and Creon" (Hoy 179). Commentary in this line of criticism includes a chapter from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* ("The Ethical Order") and work by Judith Butler, who reads the tragic finale of the narrative as "a limit that requires to be read as the operation of the political power that forecloses what forms of kinship will be intelligible" (29). In this reading, intelligibility is a function of legal legitimacy and an effect of how state security discourse shapes affective investment. Readings in this line of criticism focus on how the connections of kinship are limited by duties to the state.

The second way to describe the conceptual conflict in the narrative of *Antigone* and *Home Fire* is as a conflict over what kind of life is proper to a state and the standard of that propriety. Whereas the conflict in *Antigone* comes from asking whether someone can carry out rites of burial to an enemy of the state, the conflict in *Home Fire* hinges on

the contemporary phenomenon of denaturalization, a political process that renders belonging to a state ambiguous or even illusory. The issue is not just committing an act of violence against the state but also citizenship as a modern, Western political practice. Although the conflict over kinship is a driving force in *Home Fire*, this second conflict becomes prominent in the novel because of certain formal features that create a national consciousness of incompatible groups living within the same state, specifically the formal representation of interior thought and mass media. In this representation of a consciousness of incompatibility, *Home Fire* incorporates concepts from the ontologizing rationale and the idea of incompatible groups that I isolated in Foucault's lecture.

Early critical responses to *Home Fire* have focused on the concept of populations because of how prominent it is in the novel and because of the novel's context in the British literary marketplace. Dave Gunning writes that Contemporary British Fiction by black and minority writers is often read with an ascribed "burden of representation," where the author and text are expected to speak for and represent a specific community. Authors, Gunning argues, may have appeared to meet this burden in some texts, especially early writings, but often also conspicuously divert from this task (783). Rehana Ahmed argues that *Home Fire* displays a self-conscious ethics of representation in response to this burden, focusing on the novel's "awareness of and anxieties about how it will be read" (3). The novel creates an ethical, self-conscious representation of a population, Ahmed argues, by limiting the scope of its own representation, whereby it "eschews the anthropological, deflecting readings which interpret fictional Muslim characters and communities as representative of their culture or faith. By foregrounding

the layers of mediation through which we observe the other, the narrative withholds an ‘authentic’ Muslim subject” (7). The layers of mediation that appear in the novel include characters watching each other on Skype and on the news as well as the insertion of tabloids and Twitter into the narrative, mediations meant to create access to and inform of others while often only misleading. By emphasizing misleading mediation throughout, Ahmed argues, *Home Fire* represents its central population ethically “by retaining the opacity of [cultural] difference and thereby obstructing its anthropological consumption” (8). To connect this to a critique of the idea of population, Ahmed’s reading of the novel focuses more on the knowability of a population and belonging to a population that is not easily understood by its neighbors. In this chapter, I read *Home Fire* and *White Teeth* for the ways they critique identification with groups as an ontological status, as a definitive statement on being, instead representing populations as material, historical contingencies and always evolving.

### **A. The Representation of a National Consciousness**

*Home Fire* evokes characters’ perception of incompatibility based on a national identity and also stages a perception of incompatibility at the scale of the nation by incorporating individual perceptions with representations of popular media. The novel features several characters who view a British-Muslim identity as incompatible with being British. By representing several characters’ thinking this way, and by representing the media environment around them as reinforcing this perception, the novel creates a national consciousness of incompatible groups.

*Home Fire*'s recreation of Creon is Karamat Lone, a British citizen of Pakistani ethnicity. The novel introduces Karamat as a politician who has deliberately integrated himself into British culture, estranging himself from his Pakistani and Muslim background. This estrangement offers one of the first moments where the idea of incompatible populations appears. When Isma and Eamonn first meet, Isma recalls a scandal surrounding Karamat early in his career, when he represented a Muslim-majority constituency and was the target of tabloid coverage criticizing him for "entering a mosque that had been in the news for its 'hate preacher'." LONE WOLF'S PACK REVEALED, the headlines screamed" (36). Karamat's response to this is admirably clever by the standards of ambitious politicians: "The Lone Wolf's response had been to point out that the picture [of him entering the mosque] was several years old, he had been there only for his uncle's funeral prayers and would otherwise never enter a gender-segregated space. This was followed by pictures of him and his wife walking hand in hand into a church" (36). There is something specific in Karamat's response to focus on: Karamat is the one who raises the issue of gender-segregated space. Instead of only refuting the criticisms of him in the press by sharing pictures of him entering a church, Karamat feeds the anti-Muslim perspective by criticizing the continuation of gender segregation in mosques. By using gender segregation as a means to critique "the backwardness of British Muslims," Karamat appeals to the idea of gender equality to separate himself from Muslim culture and identify himself with British culture. The gendered segregation makes for an easy target of a Western consciousness that has integrated feminist or postmodern critiques, critiques, that, however well founded, can

still be utilized for the sake of constructing a discourse of incompatible difference between groups. Having this anecdote about Karamat early in the novel roots the character in his nation-state, identifying him with the state similarly to Creon, while raising the issue of kinds of cultures that are antithetical to British values, a way of distinguishing incompatible populations.<sup>5</sup> By the time of the novel's beginning, Karamat has been voted out of his Muslim-majority district, re-elected in a majority white district and is described in press as "strong on security," a phrase which, given Karamat's critiques of Muslim culture and the post-9/11 context of the novel, indicates a biopolitical rationale viewing Muslims as a population posing a threat that requires security (35). Karamat's domestic political rhetoric produces an idea that aspects of Muslim identity necessitate security to protect Britain.

When Eamonn meets Isma, he reflects on the fact that their parental history makes it impossible for them to become close. His reflection articulates a consciousness of incompatibility motivated by a biopolitical rationale through the use of narrative techniques for representing inner thought: "Despite their attempt to clear the air, the history of their fathers had made things between them far too strange. He tried to imagine growing up knowing your father to be a fanatic, his death a mystery open to terrible speculation, but the attempt was defeated by his simple inability to know how such a man as Adil Pasha could have existed in Britain to begin with" (60). There is a shift between these two sentences into what has been classified as psycho-narration" (Fludernik 29).

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<sup>5</sup> The novel recreates Creon's son Haemon through this story of British integration as well. Karamat marries an Irish-American and they give their son an "Irish spelling to disguise a Muslim name—'Ayman' became 'Eamonn' so that people would know the father had integrated" (16).

The shift is evident in how the repeated noun phrase “the attempt” is cognized from two different perspectives. The first sentence reads as Eamonn recognizing that his and Isma’s attempt to clear the air was ineffective. In the second sentence, the narrator reports, via psycho-narration, the process of Eamonn’s continued thinking after this recognition. Monika Fludernik explains that psychonarration is “a recurring strategy that allows for an ironic view of the characters’ minds” (29). By shifting into psycho-narration, the text creates distance between Eamonn’s thought and the reader that allows the reader to gain some additional insight into Eamonn’s thinking, in this case, insight into an imagination limited by the perception of incompatibility, and we see the limits of his imagination in more ways than one. First, we can ask why Eamonn cannot imagine how someone such as Adil Pasha could have existed in Britain. This is more about Eamonn’s inability than Adil Pasha, since, as events in the novel indicate, Adil Pasha has existed in Britain. This barrier of imagination can be attributed to Eamonn’s *perception* of Adil Pasha and Britain as incompatible, such that each, for Eamonn, is somehow repulsive to the other. Furthermore, we have no reason to think that Isma or her siblings consider their father to be a “fanatic” the way Eamonn does. The very language that Eamonn attempts to use to empathize with Isma makes it impossible to succeed, either because they would use different terms to describe Adil Pasha or, at the very least, because they would most likely attach different meaning to them. By using psychonarration to create a mediated perspective on Eamonn’s thinking, the text shows how Eamonn’s consciousness is structured by the perception of incompatible groups rooted in a sense of nationalism.

*Home Fire* continues the construction of a national consciousness of incompatible population by integrating a concept of essential or ontological difference into parts of the novel that represent public discourse. When Karamat Lone gives a graduation speech at his secondary school alma mater, he is shockingly direct in his construction of a difference that is intolerable in Britain:

You are, we are, British. Britain accepts this. So do most of you. But for those of you who are in some doubt about it, let me say this: Don't set yourself apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated codes of behavior you cling to, the ideologies to which you attach your loyalties. Because if you do, you will be treated differently—not because of racism, though that does still exist, but because you insist on your difference from everyone else in the multiethnic, multireligious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours. And look at all you miss out on because of it. (90)

The only differences that can be tolerated are the ones we already tolerate, the thinking goes. By invoking the “multiethnic, multireligious” aspects of the United Kingdom, aspects which have even come to define literature set in London, Lone constructs his nation as a suitably diverse synecdoche for humanity and creates a distinction between tolerable differences and intolerable ones, a standard for rendering populations incompatible. There are, on the one hand, everyday tolerable differences that do not enter the sphere of significant critique, and then there are differences beyond the pale, beyond the nation, that indicate something beyond tolerable difference, which the passage renders as more significant to identity. For Karamat, it is the further difference that creates a standard of incompatibility. Implied, but unspoken, in the passage is that the outdated codes of behavior, the bases for incompatible groups, include things like churches separating congregations according to a unified notion of sex and gender, like the one Lone criticized earlier in the novel. The spoken language creates a connection



between visible markers of identity and inner identity: “dress,” “think,” “loyalties,” Karamat speaks as if these can be condensed where one implies the other and a garment on the surface implies a loyalty in the depths of being. Based on what Karamat says, the necessary incompatibility of groups could look like a hijab.

The content of Karamat’s speech is obviously charged; however, just as important is the news coverage of the speech, representing the effects of public political speech and a national consciousness of incompatible populations enacted on the scales of mass media and individual behaviors. *Home Fire* follows Eamonn as he watches the news coverage:

More than twenty-four hours after the speech that ended with those sentences, the media attention had barely died down. Across the political spectrum, except at its extreme edges, the home secretary was being lionized for his truth-telling, his passion, the fearlessness with which he was willing to take on both the antimigrant attitudes of his own party and the isolationist culture of the community he’d grown up in. #YouAreWeAreBritish was trending on social media, as was #Wolfpack and its Asian offshoot, #Wolfpak. The phrase “future prime minister” was everywhere. (90)

The narrative here, although it comes in a section focused on Eamonn, refers to no character in particular but to the media that shapes the environment of people in a place. Along with the hashtags, this language creates a sense of a national mediascape, referring “both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information... and to the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai 35). Mediascapes offer “those who experience and transform them...a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places,” and these elements are often “disaggregated” according to the complexity of the context (Appadurai 35). In this case, the mediascape comes across as surprisingly unitary in its

validation of Karamat's speech.<sup>6</sup> The phrase "political spectrum" functions similarly to Karamat's "multi" phrases, indicating the majority of a national population, the various media arms of political perspectives, and the tolerated and normalized differences therein. The passage shows a mediascape validating the perception of incompatible populations by fetishizing this individual, truth-teller image in the character of Karamat Lone.

In addition to the representation of this public sphere, the novel connects the effects of Karamat's speech down into interactions between individuals. When Aneeka, who wears a hijab in public, arrives at Eamonn's apartment after Eamonn watches the news coverage of the speech, she says: "Some guy spat on me in the tube," indicating a manifest sense of abjection in the populace (Shamsie 92). This leads to a conversation where Aneeka says "There are people like me and people like you. I've always known it. Why do you think I did all this 'Let's be secret' stuff? I wouldn't have lasted five minutes in your life if you had to tell your family and friends about me," to which Eamonn replies, "I know" (93). Both characters express awareness of a perception of Aneeka's wrongness, of the way she is othered in their national context, and of how Karamat only said out loud something that had already been continuously, albeit silently, acknowledged by them, even in this private and intimate space. By representing the effects of Karamat's

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<sup>6</sup> The sense of a mediascape in the novel is later sustained by individual chapters that consist entirely of tweets about the Pasha family, tabloid coverage of them, and interviews that Karamat gives (chapters in the "Aneeka" section of the novel: 7.iii, iv, vi, x, xiii, xv). Although there is some variety of perspective contained in these clippings and excerpts chapters, such as a statement Isma gives in x, the most striking of the chapters is xv, a tabloid article referring to how Aneeka "used sex to try and brainwash [Eamonn] into convincing his father to allow her terrorist brother in England;" the article describes Parvaiz as "evil" and "fortunately killed" (214). In general, this representation of the national mediascape later in the novel reiterates the content of Karamat's speech.

speech in the combination of public media and interactions between individuals, *Home Fire* builds off of earlier representations of Eamonn's interiority to create a biopolitical rationale at the level of the national consciousness, motivated by a perception of incompatible groups.

## **B. Democratic and Totalitarian Biopolitics**

*Home Fire* goes further than only creating a national consciousness of incompatibility in Britain. The novel also takes up one of the most challenging aspects of Giorgio Agamben's work, the idea that there is some "inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism" (*Homo Sacer* 10). A sense of solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism is difficult to imagine if one assumes that the key distinction is free and fair elections. However, for Agamben, this distinction is overwhelmed by the task shared by both kinds of state, the task of managing life. Agamben's main examples here are the changes in government that occurred around World War II. For Agamben, once politics becomes biopolitics, the inner solidarity becomes clear:

only because biological life and its needs had become the politically decisive fact is it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with which this century's totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies. In both cases, these transformations were produced in a context in which for quite some time politics had already turned into biopolitics, and in which the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life. (*Homo Sacer* 122)

What made it possible for parliamentary democracies to transform into totalitarian states and then transform back after the war? For Agamben, the answer is that government is actually in the business of managing life and the distinction of democracy versus totalitarianism is only a distinction of manner, not task. Here, some of Foucault's language makes it more comprehensible: both democracies and totalitarian states are at least in the business of deciding which life should be left to die. This is the inner solidarity that *Home Fire* creates between Britain and the ISIS controlled city where Parvaiz stays.

The policy of letting die while living in an ISIS controlled state is described bluntly. After a building near Parvaiz is bombed and collapses, he hears a woman crying out for help. When he goes to help her, he is stopped because "She has taken off her face veil. You can't approach her" (176). The gendered segregation from earlier in the novel manifests more tragically here, as a woman is left to die because men are not allowed to see here. The kinds of life must be separated before both can be made to live. If they cannot be separated, then women are allowed to die.

In Britain, citizenship is the means by which life is allowed to die. As the novel progresses, Karamat Lone faces controversy over his refusal to allow Parvaiz's body to be returned to Britain and his corresponding stance that people who leave Britain to join ISIS may not be allowed to return. This policy is what raises the issue of citizenship being used to distinguish the British population from those that are incompatible. In a television interview, Karamat clarifies his policy to a reporter asking about the frequency

of people being unallowed to return to Britain. The interview, like some of the other media in the novel, is represented differently than the standard narration:

-So we have yet another case of a British citizen who

- I'm going to cut you off there, Nick. As you know, the day I assumed office I revoked the citizenship of all dual nationals who have left Britain to join our enemies. My predecessor only used these powers selectively, which, as I have said repeatedly, was a mistake. (193)

The effect of revoking people's citizenship is that it leaves them permanently without protection, permanently in a state where their hold on life may be temporary. Although Lone claims this only applies to dual nationals, this does little to guarantee safety for many. In the novel, Parvaiz, Aneeka, and Isma count as Pakistani nationals because their family is from Pakistan, not because they have a home there or have ever lived there. Parvaiz is killed by ISIS while trying to enter a British consulate in Turkey, but even if he had made it inside, he would not have found protection there, and that is the point of the policy.<sup>7</sup> *Home Fire* reads as a grim novel in its portrayal of Western democracies. While *Antigone* features the collapse of a state because of the intransigence of a single leader, *Home Fire* creates a democratic state where the mentality at stake is national, found in the celebration of political leaders in mass media. Furthermore, the novel is quite clear in paralleling the task of managing life for democratic and totalitarian states.

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<sup>7</sup> Agamben gives an account of denaturalization laws leading up to World War II in *Homo Sacer*, identifying these as a key aspect of the solidarity central to his thesis: "The first introduction of such rules into the juridical order took place in France in 1915 with respect to naturalized citizens of 'enemy' origin; in 1922, Belgium followed the French example...in 1926, the fascist regime issued an analogous law with respect to citizens who had shown themselves to be 'unworthy of Italian citizenship'; in 1933, it was Austria's turn; and so it continued until the Nuremberg laws on 'citizenship in the Reich' and the 'protection of German blood and honour' brought this process to the most extreme point of its development" (132).

### III. Controlling Groups and Normative Language in *White Teeth*

Throughout *White Teeth*, Samad and Alsana Iqbal struggle to accept how their children are influenced by British culture. Although both dislike how their children are pulling away from Bengali culture, Alsana acknowledges this as inevitable. When Alsana says that their son Millat is “second generation—he was born [in England]—naturally he will do things differently,” Samad responds: “don’t speak to me of second generation! One generation! Indivisible! Eternal!” (240-1). Samad’s response has two effects here, one descriptive and the other performative. Firstly, we can read him as objecting to using generations to identify a division within his family and culture. This description comes across as arguing with reality because it is unclear what “generation” can mean if not the difference of children from parents, and this leads to the second point. More performatively, Samad linguistically constitutes his children as undivided from himself. Samad erases the difference that generation makes within a family and culture, and by doing so, mixes descriptive and normative language in a way that asserts that his children should not realize themselves as distinct from him because they are still a part of his generation.

This moment encapsulates a common conflict that many characters experience throughout *White Teeth*, a conflict over what I call units of population. When Samad refuses to acknowledge the difference of generations, he constitutes himself and his children as a single generation, a single unit of population. The term generation does a specific normative and descriptive work here: it designates a unit of population where that unit is subject to control—or, in Alsana’s view, beyond control—against aleatory

events such as cultural deviation. I use the unit of population throughout this part of the chapter to refer to a kind of thing that communities, nations, families, and individuals are, to articulate their membership in a collective defined by some shared identity or quality. The term unit of population does similar work in this part of the chapter as the term group did in the previous part, but I switch terms here to better engage the plot of *White Teeth*. Throughout the novel, characters refer to their community, their national identity, and their ethnic and religious communities with normative language and a need to secure the essential qualities of these units of populations against change. Characters display a biopolitical rationale when they debate and argue about the constitution of various units of population, about generations, community, the nation, and individuals, and in each of these instances, the unit of population is described as a container of cultural homogeneity, of genetic and social sameness of identity, and designated as a site requiring maintenance and control against change. The performative element of Samad's comment about generations is also normative: by constituting himself and his children as part of a single generation, he applies a norm of sameness of identity—in this case cultural identity—to them as if they all are and are supposed to be one homogenous unit. When *White Teeth* represents conflicts over units of population, it does so in moments of linguistic complexity where apparently descriptive language enacts normative judgment and works to performative effect.

I focus on the language of units of population to show both their everyday quality and the conceptual work they do in the novel. Characters refer to their community, their family, and their nation impulsively, as these are the things of casual conversation.

However, references to these units of population also often indicate characters struggling and failing to understand the complexity of the people and groups around them. Critics have noted that *White Teeth* features characters who struggle to make sense of their social sphere because it is increasingly marked by “the ambiguity inherent in a pluralistic society” (Bergholtz 541). *White Teeth* is often read as a novel that embraces a postmodernist perspective, as “[Smith] picks apart traditional understandings of the world by poking holes in language, religion, culture, history, and other structures through which people typically give meaning to their lives” (Paproth 10). Coincident with these failures of understanding on the part of characters are their attempts to control the environment and people around them. When discussing their children’s growth, Alsana says to Samad, “you always try to control everything!” (Smith 240). And Marcus Chalfen describes his research as an exercise in control: “I plant a cancer and a cancer turns up exactly when I expect it” (Smith 283). Both Samad and Marcus fail to control the people and lives around them, and these failures are symptomatic of their misunderstanding of the complexity of the units of population with which they interact.

This raises a question about how to understand community when the typical means to such understandings fail, a question that connects the novel to Roberto Esposito’s philosophical work on community. In *Communitas*, Esposito uses the term “community” to describe this kind of designation in general, arguing that “Once identified, be it with a people, a territory, or an essence, the community is walled in within itself and thus separated from the outside” (16). For Esposito, the separation of peoples, territories, and cultures reflects the idea that communities are based on a



homogenous content that is harmed by change and difference, resulting in the requirement that the community, whatever shape it takes or whatever the basis of its essence, be a site of control. Throughout *White Teeth*, I read references to nations, religious groups, and individuals as characters' attempts to wall off those units of population to change because these references often mix descriptive and normative language. The repeated misunderstanding of characters indicates a need for a new concept of community as a general term.

In a sense, *White Teeth* is a postmodern novel about creeping nihilism, where characters' attempts to understand and control their community are consistently met with failure. However, *White Teeth* does not incorporate this nihilism to endorse a fatalist perspective about the possibility of understanding community or humanity. Instead, and in keeping with Esposito's critical agenda for the term nihilism, these failures of understanding are also an opportunity to imagine humanity in a new and productive way. This is how *White Teeth* is able to both integrate and challenge the biopolitical rationale of populations as discrete, incompatible, and necessarily managed. By staging the failure of units of population as means for making sense of one's community, *White Teeth* undermines the efficacy of controlling and distinguishing between populations by representing units of population as always already incorporated into transmissions of difference, difference that can be cultural or genetic and transmitted through bodies or written words. As a result, amidst all the failed attempts by characters to make sense of themselves, their children, and their community, *White Teeth* offers an image of humanity as a mass avenue of cybernetic transmission.

### **A. Collective Units of Population in *White Teeth***

*White Teeth* stages the failure of the idea of units of population at the level of the community, the nation, and the individual when characters take these as instances of the essential identity of a group. These failures manifest in the emergence of cultural difference within an ethnic or national community and the emergence of culturally hybrid characters. The desire for cultural homogeneity is quite obvious within Samad, who makes several comments about his views of community and ethnicity being homogenous, comments that mix normative and descriptive language. Specifically, Samad refuses to describe aspects of his environment in terms that allow for heterogeneity, even when that difference seems intuitive or impossible to ignore. Early in the novel, at a meeting for parents at his kids' school, Samad argues against celebrating a Harvest Festival because it seems pagan and Muslim holidays are underrepresented on the school's calendar. The leader of the meeting tries to dodge the religious aspect:

“...To be honest, Mr. Iqbal, we like to think of these things as more about *community* than *religion* as such.”

“A man's god *is* his community!” said Samad, raising his voice. (Smith 109)

What is striking here is how Samad is using the term community in a way that feels at odds with what the reader sees and in a way that regulates the boundaries of community. While the reader sees Samad in a community defined more by geography and circumstance than by religion, where he meets with the parents of his children's peers and drinks in a bar with Jamaicans, for Samad, his kids should not have to participate in the harvest rituals because that is outside their community, meaning that community does

normative work by designating a limit of social engagement based on an ideal of religious sameness. Key to this limit is the idea that community designate homogeneity, a homogeneity that makes communities incompatible with one another and necessitates control. Like his comment about generations, we can see Samad mixing descriptive and performative language, where the performative effect seeks to achieve the description. On the one hand, Samad is clearly interacting with people outside his religion; on the other, by integrating religion and community Samad separates populations from one another in a way that maintains a perceived homogeneity within them.

This kind of regulation is more focused on culture than on the racialized biology that Foucault discusses. However, this narrative of the desire for cultural regulation appears alongside the plotline of Dr. Marcus Chalfen's cancer research and alongside some conspicuous references to the racial identity of the United Kingdom. These parallels create a sense that these conflicts coincide, such that what is at stake throughout the novel are attempts to regulate the population against many kinds of threats, biological, cultural, or racial. As Marcus explains to Irie Jones, the mice he studies are merely an instances of the activity of genes, mutagens, and cells, an effective framework for thinking biopolitically:

if you *re-engineer* the actual genome, so that *specific* cancers are expressed in *specific* tissues at *predetermined* times in the mouse's development, then you're no longer dealing with the *random*. You're *eliminating* the random actions of a mutagen. Now you're talking the *genetic program* of the mouse, a force activating oncogenes *within* cells... You eliminate the random, you rule the world... One could program every step in the development of an organism: reproduction, food habits, life expectancy. (282-3, emphasis in original)

For Marcus, the mouse is a body subject to programming, “a biological site for experimentation into heredity, in disease, into mortality” (346). Marcus perceives the individual mouse as a unit of life that can be monitored and maintained. The narrative satirizes Marcus and his attitude, connecting them to the history of Nazi research and having the mouse escape at the end of the novel. *White Teeth* parallels this plot of biological regulation with Samad’s concerns for religiously homogenous community. The reader is also alerted to conflict over the racial makeup of the nation. There are several references to British politician Enoch Powell in the novel, famous for his “Rivers of Blood” speech that, as Benjamin Bergholtz explains “imagines a community of white Britons ‘made strangers in their own country’ by Britain’s postwar, post-*Windrush* immigration policy (Powell 377)” (547).<sup>8</sup> Early in the novel, after Archie Jones marries Clara, a child of Jamaican immigrants, his boss explains that his new wife makes people uncomfortable at work events, saying: “I’m not a racist, Archie . . . I’d spit on that Enoch Powell . . . but then again he does have a point, doesn’t he? There comes a point, a saturation point, and people begin to feel a bit uncomfortable” (61). The shared narrative focus on the racial identity of the nation, control over the growth of cancer, and incompatible differences between religious and secular communities creates a resonance and a sense of a biopolitical rationale throughout the novel, manifest in the desire to regulate against an unwanted, corrupting population. “Eliminate the random,” as a phrase, rises above its specific context to illuminate the desires motivating the narrative

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<sup>8</sup> Powell’s speech is collected in: Powell, Enoch. *Reflections of a Statesman: The Writings and Speeches of Enoch Powell*. Ed. Rex Collings. London: Bellew, 1991.

more broadly, where the random operates as the aleatory emergence of any non-trivial difference within populations.

The biopolitical rationale of populations as containers of homogeneity is also manifest at the level of the idea of the nation. An encounter between Millat, Magid, and Irie when they are children with a senior British veteran shows how an idealized homogeneity can ground an idea of the nation and be used to regulate the associated population. When the kids go to distribute food for the Harvest Festival, they meet an elderly veteran who—by means of extensive racial slurs—discusses World War II with them and who rejects the ethnic heterogeneity of the British army:

“My dad was in the war. He played for England,” piped up Millat, red-faced and furious.

“Well, boy, do you mean the football team or the army?”

“The British army. He drove a tank. A Mr. Churchill. With her [Irie’s] dad,” explained Magid.

“I’m afraid you must be mistaken,” said Mr. Hamilton, genteel as ever. “There were certainly no wogs as I remember—though you’re probably not allowed to say that these days, are you? But no . . . no Pakistanis . . . Quite out of the question. . . The Pakistanis would have been in the Pakistani army, you see, whatever that was.” (144)

According to Mr. Hamilton, the armies of World War II were divided along coinciding lines of nationality and ethnicity. He rejects the idea that the army, as a nationally inflected unit of life, could be ethnically heterogenous. Whereas for Samad, as cited above, the homogeneity of a unit of population was a goal, Mr. Hamilton takes it as a matter of fact about his past. This insistence that the British were in the British army and the Pakistanis in the Pakistani army suggests that armies are elements within a homogenous nation. And similar to how we had to read the multiple effects of Samad’s language about generations above, so we do as well here. Mr. Hamilton is not only

making an argument about the past of his country; his language has a specific regulatory effect where Mr. Hamilton degrades Millat as a knower, as someone who could provide information about the British army. By not being allowed to contribute to the history of Britain and the British army, Millat is also not allowed to speak the history of his own family and ethnic group. This scene thereby replicates the relationship of colonization and the writing of history that Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates he himself is the extension of that mother country” (Fanon 51). In this case, Mr. Hamilton takes himself as the extension of the mother country, reserves the right to speak about history, and deprives the Pakistani and mixed-race children from doing so, even though they are also speaking about their own history and are a part of that “mother country.” *White Teeth* represents the continuation of colonizing logics in a multicultural context where the people at the periphery of the Empire have moved to the center, a movement that historically was accepted for the sake of creating a labor force, but where the privilege of history continues to be asserted by the racist and nationalist colonizer. To complicate history pollutes the population. Here, the regulation of the population works by regulating who can speak about the population, walling off the British against the Pakistani immigrants who would complicate its history and the history of its population, even as they are a part of that population of people who fought for Britain. This dissonance draws out the essential feature of *White Teeth*'s representation of units of population that I argue for here, where characters speak of units of population, at various scales of collectivity, as if

they are homogenous when they are clearly not, and this speech works to enforce further homogeneity in the idea and realization of that collective unit.<sup>9</sup>

There is another moment in *White Teeth* that shatters the idea of homogenous and distinct units of life, this time by breaking the boundary between characters created by narrative focalization. Typically, Zadie Smith's fiction feels highly controlled, where each scene follows a given character or characters through some significant event. The omniscient narrator speaks with authority, and Bergholtz astutely notes that the "sweeping scope and essayistic style of *White Teeth*'s narrator depend upon elements of the certainty and abstraction" that the narrator critiques in characters (566). The narrator goes to some length to make sure the reader knows who they are reading about and scenes are crafted to bring one or more characters from point A to point B. At the beginning of a scene, the reader knows who they are reading about and sticks with that person until some kind of break on the page. Other characters may be introduced mid-scene, for instance in a scene when Irie Jones is looking for Millat on their school grounds (Smith 243-4), but this introduction is never surprising. *White Teeth* is even structured around the growth of specific characters, featuring a table of contents with section headers: "Archie," "Samad," "Irie," and "Magid, Millat, and Marcus." This creates a feeling that focalization is means to constructing discrete units of populations

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<sup>9</sup> This scene has some significant further connections to other moments in the novel pertaining to history and the intersectionality of populations. It is not the only scene where someone appears ignorant of history in a way that also regulates who can speak about it. There is a scene where Irie asks if the persons described in a Shakespeare sonnet (Sonnet 127) are black and is told that this would have been impossible (226). It reads like a scene included to demonstrate an erasure of people of color from history in public education.

within the novel, clearly encasing one or more characters for the reader's view in a consistent and stable way.

One scene in *White Teeth* breaks with this manner in a way that represents the distinction between units of population as artificial constructs. After the kids leave Mr. Hamilton's home, they encounter Samad as he is on an adulterous date with their music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. This encounter is not featured as an encounter between characters so much as a suture in the narration that jars the reader. The passage contains a lengthy description of "the Mad" that populate London, some of which I will omit for the sake of space, but I preserve here the key lines that indicate the reportage of the children's experience and the abrupt shift toward Samad:

Now, the children knew the city. And they knew the city breeds the Mad . . . But these people *announced* their madness—they were better, less scary than Mr. J. P. Hamilton—they flaunted their insanity, they weren't half mad and half not, curled around a door frame. They were properly mad in the Shakespearean sense, talking sense when you least expected it . . . Samad knew all of this. (145-6)

The narrator uses the children's frame of reference throughout the lengthy description of the Mad of the city, comparing the Mad to Mr. Hamilton and to Shakespeare to reference the reading the children are doing in school. And then Samad appears, introduced with the repeated verb "knew" in a way that recalls the beginning of the passage and accentuates the experience of ruptured focalization. Shortly after this interruption, there is a line break and Samad is introduced as the reader would normally expect, and that passage ends with him and the kids seeing each other in an unsurprising surprise encounter. By rupturing the narrative report of what the kids know about the city, the insertion of Samad reveals focalization for the artifice it is, a frame placed around



specific characters that, for a time, makes them appear as a discrete unit of population. Important here is the fact that the apparently divided characters—Samad and Poppy Burt-Jones v. Magid, Millat, and Irie—think they are on independent excursions, and Samad, especially, wants to keep his affair a secret. The characters themselves assume that they are in the distinct groups created by the narrative focalization, and the narration sutures them together in a way that reveals that such groups are not reliably distinct, that their isolation from one another is temporary, circumstantial, and a formal artifice, a way of looking at things and people rather than the things and people themselves.

I have reviewed several kinds of units of population that *White Teeth* stages and critiques to show how various characters linguistically attempt to regulate these units by conferring upon them a sense of essential homogeneity, be it cultural, religious, racial, or ethnic. I read these as attempts to define the groups according to an essential identity. In each instance though, the reader sees a complexity and heterogeneity in the population that some character is denying, and through this *White Teeth* stages the failure of ideas of units of population and shows the complexity of community in a globalized setting.

Characters' desire to regulate their community according to some perceived meaning manifests what Esposito describes as the essential dynamic for the creation of community. Esposito writes that, typically,

community...is taken as the demarcating line and the defense against the advance of nihilism; something replete (it could be a substance, a promise, a value) that doesn't allow itself to be emptied out by the vortex of nullity. It is another configuration of that conflict between the 'thing' and 'no-thing' . . . Indeed, community is the thing itself that is opposed to its own destruction. (136)

In this line of thinking, community has some quality about it that is definitive, that is meaningful and needs safeguarding, and that is attached to its members. This is the “thing” of community, a quality or essence antithetical to nihilistic nullity. Samad makes various comments indicating this mindset, saying to Archie about second generation Bengali’s who are less traditionally religious: “They don’t go to mosque, they don’t pray, they speak strangely ... No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!” (Smith 159). Later, in the scenes where the novel references the release of *The Satanic Verses*, Samad says to Alsana, “It is not a matter of letting others live. It is a matter of protecting one’s culture, shielding one’s religion from abuse” (195). For Samad, there are specific qualities inherent to his community that require maintenance against changing behaviors and against threat. Esposito claims that community is “the site ... of the superimposition between thing and no-thing” (137). He is arguing that community is created when a specific content or meaning is imposed where there was originally none. In *White Teeth*, when characters refer to units of population in language whose performative aspects are regulatory, they impose meaning. The novel makes this act of imposing clear by showing how that imposed meaning is incongruous, how it fails to describe the complexity of the people, environment, and history around the character. By drawing out this imposition, *White Teeth* highlights the normative work that the idea of community does when it appears in language that mixes descriptive and performative functions and highlights that idea’s failure to describe the complexity of the population in a given environment.

## B. Cybernetic Humanity

The presence of such failures throughout the novel can be overwhelming and could lead to a pessimistic reading that emphasizes its nihilism in an epistemically fatalist sense. However, if we shift away from the conflicts characters experience and view the language used to describe the characters and their history more broadly, a stable image of humanity does appear, an image of humanity as a cybernetic mass of transmission. Cybernetics emerged as a field of research into communication and information theory after World War II. Cybernetics is a field with a deep conceptual lexicon that evolved through several “waves” and that, along with sociology and biology, gave way to systems theory, most notably practiced by German theorist Niklas Luhmann. For our purposes here, the relevant facet of cybernetics is that it “sought to understand human being as a set of informational processes” (Hayles 4). The premise of information processing allows biological and social functions to be understood as indistinct. Novels tend to integrate this idea by representing the movement of information between bodies,<sup>10</sup> a movement that appears in *White Teeth* as reproduction, migration, and written communication in leaflets. The movement of information is prevalent in *White Teeth* in the recurring references to genetics, mass media, and the leaflets that circulate throughout the novel.

Integrating the idea of the human into the movement of information can be understood as a posthumanist perspective, insofar as it does not take intentional

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<sup>10</sup> The cybernetic movement and incorporation of information is prominent in American novels such as Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (Chaney) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Melley). The idea that humanity is indistinguishable from information is also a major part of works by Mohsin Hamid. His novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* contains a chapter that begins with the line “We’re all information.” (159). Cybernetic thinking has diffused into novels written in English from a variety of cultural contexts and not just into what is obviously science fiction (although definitions of that genre can be expansive).

autonomy as humanity's defining feature. Although there is criticism of *White Teeth* from a posthumanist perspective, it is motivated by a Freudian critique of autonomy as it appears in the novel rather than on the role of information technology (Buchanan 14, 21). Furthermore, the role of the leaflets in the novel is understudied by critics. When comparing references to genetics and the leaflets, what emerges is an indistinction of the effects of information on populations that creates a cybernetic image of humanity by integrating humans into a mass movement of genetic and written information. In *White Teeth*, the concepts of biopolitical populations and cybernetic humanity clash, and, as I aim to show in this section, cybernetics wins out as a means of representing humanity because instances of population are consistently rendered always already hybrid by various kinds of information.

The movement of information stands out in passages featuring more explicit references to the heterogeneity within units of population, where heterogeneity functions as a threat. Attending to moments where heterogeneity is more conspicuous finds that it can be achieved by genetic or written information. Although genetics mostly appear around the character Marcus Chalfen, Alsana Iqbal also gives them some thought:

Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically *BB*; where *B* stands for Bengaliness) marrying someone called Sarah (*aa*, where *a* stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (*Ba*), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (*aa*), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (*Aaaaaaa!*), their Bengaliness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype. (272)

Alsana defines Millat's identity by a pattern of genetic information in a way where distortions to that pattern constitute a loss of essential identity and continuity with

community. The use of the term “legacy” in this context indicates that Alsana, like Samad, views instances of community in terms of how they reproduce or dissolve a pre-existing and predefined identity of the population, the past extending into the future as a standard of evaluation. In this case, Alsana evaluates future generations according to how they reproduce that identity as a genetic pattern.

When we consider other descriptions of Millat and “Bengali” in the novel, we find that these have already been altered by media and genetic information. The result is that both genetics and information outside of the body are represented as capable of the dilution that Alsana fears, thereby constituting the human characters as the product of genetic and mass mediated information. Millat is already split in a way similar to the *Ba* distinction, but this split is psychic and the result of media. As Millat grows up, he finds himself torn between his fascination with Western popular culture, specifically American mafia films, and his chosen commitment to an extremist Muslim organization, Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN).<sup>11</sup> Although Millat remains committed to KEVIN in his actions, internally, he is quite divided. “In fact,” that narrator tells the reader, “the problem with Millat’s subconscious (and he didn’t need [an analyst] to tell him this) was that it was basically split-level. On the one hand he was trying real hard to live” as members of KEVIN “suggested” and to “purge [himself] of the taint of

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<sup>11</sup> The acronym of the name, KEVIN, leads members of the group to regularly say: “We are aware....that we have an acronym problem” (245). An audience member at a conference pointed out to me that this is another example in *White Teeth* of a linguistic signifier being obviously inappropriate to what it is intended to signify.

Like Marcus’s mouse, Millat is “KEVIN’s big experiment” because his commitment to them is seen as a victory against Western influence and the more moderate religious influence of his family. The language of experiment used around Marcus’s research and Millat creates an equivalence of religious and scientific thinking as “narratives of fundamentalism” that Bergholtz identifies (549), and, furthermore, is another moment that creates a resonance of biological and cultural regulation.

the West” (366-7). On the other hand, Millat often hears the opening lines of *Goodfellas* in his head, but instead of “**As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster,**” he hears: “**As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim**” (368-9, emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> Millat is already a site of dilution and hybridity, where his individuality is actually defined by how he integrates apparently incompatible cultural influences from mass media, a site where pop culture and religion mingle in a postmodern equivalence. By describing Millat this way, the narrator creates a sense that characters, even though we might think of them as some kind of totality thanks to the linguistic work of proper nouns, are not homogenous units of population but more like sites of integration, where inner complexity reflects outer cultural mixing, where the inside is a function of the movement of information in mass media outside and the individual cannot be understood as an unadulterated instance of any community or population.

Alsana’s fears of genetic dilution are surprising because an earlier passage in the novel suggests that she already knows that her children cannot be considered genetically pure. Genetic purity turns out to be impossible thanks to the history of human migration, and this lack of purity has implications for how the novel represents units of life ranging from the nation to ethnic identities to the individual. At one point, Samad says to Alsana, “You’re a Bengali. Act like one,” which prompts Alsana to ask “And what is a Bengali...?” and read from their encyclopedia:

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<sup>12</sup> In this passage, the narrator reports information about Millat rather than the novel directly representing Millat’s experience or consciousness. Although neither Bergholtz or Paproth cite this particular passage, it is a good example of a contrast they both draw, a contrast between characters in the novel who are constantly denied certainty about their surroundings and a narrator who speaks with total certainty (Bergholtz 566, Paproth 22).

The vast majority of Bangladesh's inhabitants are Bengalis, who are largely descended from Indo-Aryans who began to migrate into the country from the west thousands of years ago and who mixed within Bengal with indigenous groups of various racial stocks. Ethnic minorities include the Chakma and Mogh, Mongoloid peoples who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts District; the santal, mainly descended from migrants from present-day India; and the Biharis, non-Bengali Muslims who migrated from India after the partition.

“ . . . it looks like I am Western after all!” (196)

Alsana rejects the idea that there is a pure Bengali identity that can be attached to her because of a mixed genetic history. As such, the hybridity in Millat's subconscious was already present in him in his genetic history, creating an equivalence between genetic information inside a person and mediated information outside where both instigate change in the population. Critics have interpreted *White Teeth* as showing “that there is no ‘racially pure’ English culture anymore” (Bâ-Curry 290). However, this passage, along with the loss of Englishness, indicates a greater loss of identity than any one nation or ethnicity. Instead, because of the history of human mobility and mass media, the movement of information throughout humanity makes it impossible to successfully identify a people with a place with an essence, to establish a continuity of ethnicity, homeland, and identity. It is this impossibility with which characters struggle in their desire for some certainty as all the populations around them turn out to have always already been mingling with one another. From the nation down to the individual, *White Teeth* turns units of population into synecdoches of the history of movement, a history of Empire, of ideas in mass media, and of human coupling. This representation of units of population makes each character and the community of the greater London area an ephemeral freeze-frame in a flow of information.

This broader view is sustainable when the human is understood as constituted by information rather than given exceptional status against it. The result is a posthuman, cybernetic narrative, where characters are individual persons, containers of hybridity, and pathways for information that evolve communities, populations, and nations. The main carrier of information in the novel, besides genes, is leaflets. The leaflets radicalize characters and, like Millat's experience with gangster films, sever them from families and communities of origin, this radicalization being one of the aleatory events in a population that various characters try to control. Examining the impact of leaflets on characters and community finds that they are just as much a cause of strife and splitting in populations as genetics or celebrating pagan holidays.

The novel makes leaflets conspicuous in its opening pages and various characters assert their prominence in everyday life throughout the novel. When the novel opens with Archie Jones, the narrator explains that he works "designing the way all kinds of things should be *folded*—envelopes, direct mail, brochures, leaflets" (Smith 12). Later in the novel, Magid Iqbal gives Mickey, the owner of O'Connell's bar (where Archie and Samad go to feel at home), a leaflet about Marcus Chalfen's public mouse presentation and Mickey says: "Oh, fuck me, another leaflet? You can't fucking move—pardon my French—but you can't *move* for leaflets in Norf London these days. My brother Abdul-Colin's always loading me wiv'em an' all" (373). The characters in *White Teeth* appear to be awash in a sea of information.

These leaflets are instrumental in creating heterogeneity within populations. Within the Chalfen family, where the parents Marcus and Joyce view their family as a



homogenous unit, leaflets fracture. Joshua starts handing out leaflets about abuse in the animal processing industry (333), and Marcus views this as a deviation from “right-thinking Chalfenism” (348). Leaflets also help split Millat’s subconscious. When he joins the group KEVIN they give him some leaflets on women: “*Who is Truly Free: The Sisters of KEVIN or the Sisters of Soho?*” and “*Lycra Liberation? Rape and the Western World,*” and members of KEVIN ask Millat if “things [are] becoming clearer?”:

“Clearer” didn’t seem to Millat to be exactly the right adjective. Earlier in the week he had set aside some time, read both leaflets, and felt peculiar ever since. In three short days Karina Cain, a darling of a girl, a truly good sort who never really irritated him (on the contrary, who made him feel happy! Chuffed!), had irritated him more than she had managed in the whole year they’d been shagging. And no ordinary irritation. A deep unsettleable unsolvable irritation, like an itch on a phantom limb. And it was not clear to him why. (307)

The irritation that Millat feels appears to be a growing sense of misogyny, but we can also interpret it as the transfer of information into Millat, a representation of information where it becomes bodily. Millat experiences the resulting irritation as a part of an inner depth and beyond his comprehension, like a body part. The reference to the phantom limb creates a phenomenological description of ambiguous bodily boundaries, where the irritation manifests both inside Millat and outside his body in a “nowhere” that is also a “somewhere ‘there’” (Sobchack 64-5). The content of the leaflet is not necessarily convincing to Millat, in an ideal view of a rational consciousness that weighs arguments and judges them, but it is persuasive in the sense that the information in the leaflets works its way into Millat’s affective inner life and sense of his own body. Millat experiences the information rather than cognitively understands it. In this case, as information moves

between mediums, the body becomes an affective substrate for the experience of that information.

Considering this representation of the networked human leads to a similar finding about units of populations as earlier analyses of references to community, nation, and focalization. The individual human is not a discrete unit of population and is instead a pathway of information. We saw earlier how the language characters use to describe apparently discrete populations always failed to acknowledge the complexity therein, and we can see now that this is because units of population function as sites of transmission, pathways of genetic and written information. By representing units of life as heterogenous and networked, by revealing their formal construction, *White Teeth* undermines the narratively recurring biopolitical rationale where references to population indicate a shared identity. In *White Teeth*, the biopolitical rationale is undermined by the image of cybernetic humanity as ideas of homogenous populations give way to the movement of information, revealing any instance of population to be a site of transmission.

### **C. The “Common” in *White Teeth***

Esposito’s conceptual agenda in *Communitas* concludes with trying to think through alternative concepts to community. For this, Esposito refers to “the common” and to nihilism, but his work with these reads as unfinished as the end of the text. For Esposito, when a community is identified with an essence and walled off from the world around it, it is distinguished from what he calls “the common.” He writes: “the common

is not characterized by what is proper but by what is improper, or even more drastically, by the other; by a voiding, be it partial or whole, of property into its negative...In the community [of the common] subjects do not find a principle of identification...They don't find anything else except that void, that distance, that extraneousness"

(*Communitas* 7). The common is meaningless—it possesses no distinct quality of identification and so it cannot distinguish any group of people from any other. It is an earnest use of the idea that referring to everything also refers to nothing. *White Teeth* gestures at this quality of the common by deconstructing the language used to describe particular communities throughout the novel.

This is a moment where a novel may be able to achieve something that philosophy cannot. Esposito describes the common in almost entirely negative terms and suggests that it is an ongoing conceptual problem for philosophy: "It is this nothing held in common that is the world that joins us in the condition of exposure to the most unyielding absence of meaning and simultaneously to that opening to a meaning that still remains unthought" (*Communitas* 149). Given how the common is opposed to coherent meaning or identity, it proves to be difficult to describe as a coherent concept. However, characters in *White Teeth* regularly confront an absence of meaning, where community, family, and nation do not mean what a character assumed because these words fail to designate a homogenous group and fail to capture the complexity of the surrounding literary world.

A key point about the common for Esposito is that the absence of meaning is not a problem; instead, it is an opportunity for understanding the world in a way that older

concepts of community made impossible. Esposito argues that this confrontation with an absence of meaning is the opportunity of nihilism. Although nihilism entails the destructive aspect that we know so well, namely, the end of every generalization of sense, the loss of mastery with regard to the complex meaning of experience,” that does not capture nihilism’s full epistemic effects on those seeking alternative concepts of community (*Communitas* 149). Nihilism is also a moment of significant learning because

it is when every meaning that is already given, arranged in a frame of meaningful reference, goes missing that the meaning of the world as such is made visible...an existence free from every meaning that is presumed, imposed, or postponed; of a world reduced to itself that is capable of simply being what it is: a planetary world without direction, without any cardinal points. In other words, a nothing-other-than-world. (*Communitas* 149)

The epistemic process of nihilism, the process of losing taken for granted meanings and seeing the world without the burden of old identities, inaugurates the possibility of understanding the common.

*White Teeth* shows several characters struggling with the destructive aspects of nihilism. Samad, Marcus, and Alsana all experience a loss of the ability to generalize about their families, about groups of people they thought were homogenous collectives. The more positive aspects of this nihilistic process are withheld from the characters and offered to the reader. The novel couples the loss of meanings with the image of cybernetic humanity, with the image of characters as instances in the movement of information. The result is that *White Teeth* creates a world that can only be understood as nothing other than what it is when that world is understood as nothing other than the movement of information.

## **From Groups to the Individual**

Both *Home Fire* and *White Teeth* incorporate the concept of a biopolitical rationale and critique it in the process of their narrative and in their form. In *White Teeth*, the focus on incompatible groups is found in regular reference to ethnicity, religion, and nation. I have used the term units of population to show how characters use the idea of family, community, nation, and the individual to index a normative identity relative to the emergence of incompatible difference. Throughout the novel, characters discuss, rage, and vent their frustrations at the emergence of these aleatory events where the heterogeneity of a community is revealed and linguistically disrupts even the most casual discussions of what counts as a community or a family. *White Teeth* incorporates the thinking of a biopolitical rationale to undermine it in its postmodern style, creating a sense that the idea of homogenous groups is epistemically inadequate for knowing others and one's surrounding community. The novel's epistemic critique is not entirely negative though, and it endorses a cybernetic view of humanity by way of its references to genetic and written information. As a result, the novel fosters a wide view of humanity, representing individuals as instances in a history of the movement of information.

*White Teeth*, also, in a scene of earnest sentimentality from when Samad and Archie were in the army together, points the reader to the individual as an appropriate unit for understanding others. Samad is a complicated character within the novel, voicing many of the normative views of community that I have cited here. However, he also has

some calmer moments that turn out to be more insightful.<sup>13</sup> When Samad and Archie are hiding out in an abandoned church together during the war, and between Samad's doses of powdered morphine, Samad says to Archie: "that land they call 'India' goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have found two men the same among that multitude, then you are mistaken. It is merely a trick of the moonlight" (85). There are no two people the same among a multitude, the thinking goes. Even though Samad refers to India, still a place of particular diversity in its cohabitating populations, over the course of the novel this view emerges as the only appropriate view to take of the populations referred to by the everyday language of community, nation, ethnicity, and religion. By representing so many characters as holding a biopolitical rationale, maintaining their community against aleatory events, *White Teeth* makes the individual into a unit of population that is necessarily an aleatory event within a population and therefore the epistemic standard for understanding one's community and others.

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<sup>13</sup> Irie Jones is the character to whom critics usually attribute the most epistemic stability. Coming from the mixed culture the novel represents rather than directly experiencing its mixing, she seems to have a greater, more stable and reliable understanding of the conflicts and communities around her.

### Chapter 3

#### Disparity and Disorganized Thinking:

#### Problems of Knowledge and Ethics in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Alain Badiou's *Ethics*

This chapter analyzes the representation of disparate knowledge on the part of characters in Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Americanah* and argues that this disparity provides an opportunity to both critique and make a case for the utility of Alain Badiou's formulation of ethics. This connection is challenging because Badiou is specifically dismissive of the kind concerns for race and other notions of socially contingent identity that *Americanah* raises. However, both Badiou and *Americanah* show a concern for a problem of knowledge that can present in social situations. *Americanah* proves to be a novel where characters who spend a lot of time together know surprisingly little about one another and the others' respective experiences. I refer to this lack of knowledge as a disparity and offer it as a term for the general epistemic condition of characters in shared fictional worlds because characters' ignorance of others is such a familiar trait. I find in Badiou's philosophy a persistent concern for problems of knowledge, although he does not use this term. I interpret his notions of the event and ethics to show that an imperative to being open to new knowledge is persistent throughout his philosophy. *Americanah* represents encounters among characters distinguished by race, gender, and nationality as sites where a problem of knowledge becomes apparent and as opportunities for new knowledge and Badiou's particular notion of ethical thinking. If Badiou is committed to

the kind of ethics he articulates in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, then he should be concerned with how the novel represents race and other embodied, socially contingent identities as conditions of social interactions where problems of knowledge become apparent. What is most useful about this comparison is how the novel and Badiou's philosophy make problems of knowledge more apparent in each other, and so instead of only repeating the narrative of characters ignorant of one another, we are able to see how the structure of individual experience contributes to this ignorance and see how learning requires a commitment to a disorganized epistemic experience.

### **Context for *Americanah* and Badiou's Philosophical System**

*Americanah* is usually interpreted within the critical agenda of Afropolitanism. Simon Gikandi explains that Afropolitanism is an "attempt to rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis" that has prevailed since "the political and economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s" (9). Characters in Afropolitan literature are typically migrants who "live a life divided across cultures, languages, and states. [To be Afropolitan] is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time" (9). This agenda raises significant issues as both a practice for criticism and a kind of representation. Afropolitanism functions as an alternative, both in terms of critical agenda and almost in terms of the object of study, to "Afro-Pessimist work [that] depicts the persistence of gross inequality, segregation, and gratuitous violence as the undying "after-life" of slavery, which liberal society never consigned to the past" (Shulman 119).



Although Afropolitanism is a widespread term, it is also quite contentious and has been criticized for its “collusion with consumerism” (Dabiri 104), and for prioritizing migration to the United States and United Kingdom over migration within the continent itself (Fasselt 235). In an interview following the publication of *Americanah*, Adichie says the term does not describe her (Barber). Katherine Hallemeier captures the tension emerging from the ways that Afropolitanism obviously applies to *Americanah*, pointing out how it tells a certain kind of story and the subsequent criticisms:

The stunning economic security and creative employment that Ifemelu enjoys arguably support the claims of critics who maintain that Afropolitan novels such as Adichie’s address an exclusive realm of class privilege and fail to account for broader political and economic realities. Yet, Ifemelu’s relatively blithe prosperity also arguably supports those who maintain that Afropolitan literature challenges problematic expectations that African literature ought to always account for such realities. (236)

Hallemeier’s description is largely accurate, but it is worth mentioning that Ifemelu experiences distressing economic insecurity as an international university student in the United States. Once Ifemelu graduates from college though, Hallemeier’s phrasing of “stunning economic security and creative employment” aptly describe Ifemelu’s lifestyle as she has, for a while, a wealthy boyfriend and later makes a substantial income from her blog.

In this chapter, my agenda is both more formal and more abstract than the socio-cultural research agenda of Afropolitanism. I read *Americanah* here for how it represents disparities of knowledge across characters in a shared literary world, and for how it represents this general condition as an inducement to ethical thinking. The variety of identity positions in the novel—white, black, documented and undocumented immigrant,

man and woman being the most prominent—raises a critical agenda that Peter Boxall also identifies in Adichie’s earlier novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which “contains a number of different narrative positions—all compromised, all partial—which reach for but fail to find a form in which they might join” (*Twenty-First Century* 180). This reaching is a part of the narrative but also a further task for criticism, and in this reaching, we find an opportunity for thinking through some disorganized ethics.

Badiou is a systematic philosopher and neologizes like Heidegger. His neologisms can feel especially burdensome because of their proximity, circling, as many of them do, his idea of the event. Everything emerges around the event and what can be described as the commitment instigated by an event. Roughly put, an event is a moment when a person is seized by a truth that is both immanent to a situation and previously unknown according to the laws and knowledge of the situation. In light of this seizure, persons can make a commitment to act purposefully with this truth in mind, such that their behavior no longer responds to their immediate corporeal needs or comforts, but to an idea to which they remain faithful (*E* 41-3). There are several terms that Badiou uses frequently when describing an event including “void,” “Truth,” and “the Good.” I will cite and interpret these terms as they become relevant to the details of the argument here.

Badiou’s philosophical system seems to set his work against the critiques of racism and social context that can emerge from a novel like *Americanah*. One critic aptly writes that Badiou’s goal is “to think not about *beings* but about *being*, a language that can be achieved only by subtracting (or abstracting) all the particularity and difference possessed by the members of a set. To think about being, therefore, it becomes necessary

to depose differences” (Currie 129). Badiou’s goal for worthwhile knowledge lies within the realm of universal being. This is not compatible with a novel about ongoing race relations in the United States. There is a key passage in *Ethics* where Badiou puts this directly, writing that racial “differences hold no interest for thought” (26). The reason why difference holds no interest for thought is based on Badiou’s systematic philosophical investment in the idea of the event, where the event is defined as a moment when what was unknown becomes known. “Genuine thought,” Badiou writes, “should affirm the following principle: since differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant” (*E* 27). Badiou’s investment in the “coming-to-be of that which is not yet” sets the stated goals of his work against the study of an issue such as race that is (often, not always) already visibly present as our bodies.

Critics engaging Badiou’s thought have mostly maintained this distance between Badiou’s work and issues of race or, as they sometimes pejoratively put it, identity politics. Instead, Badiou is seen as a political philosopher whose work is an “attempt to think the revolutionary” (Persjin 49); and, for others, the guideline for interpreting Badiou’s work is that fact that “the politics here evoked has nothing to do with a politics of identity” (Lecerle 918).

For other critics, however, Badiou’s investment in politics bound to a notion of abstract being poses a problem for the limits of other parts of his works, specifically, his ethics. Matthew McManus describes a “problem [that] relates to the intersection between ethics and politics in [Badiou’s] work. The problem is that the latter often subsumes the

former” (112). As a result, critics such as McManus have tried to retain “useful aspects of [Badiou’s] thought” (119). I follow this agenda in this chapter. I do this by interpreting Badiou’s ethics as highlighting a problem of knowledge, and this, I argue, is compatible with Badiou’s view of the event. I then argue that *Americanah* represents race relations in a way that highlights the same problem of knowledge. Thus, *Americanah* represents attending to race in a way that is compatible with Badiou’s ethics. If Badiou [or Badiou’s systematic philosophy] is committed to his ethical view, then there is room for interdisciplinary critics to consider whether he should try out knowledge of race as interesting for thought. Even though racial difference is what there is, *Americanah* also represents it as a source of unknown knowledge, and remaining open to unknown knowledge is key to Badiou’s ethics.

It is important to articulate the burden of proof required for the argument here. Since Badiou is so direct about race holding no interest for thought, he sets an incredibly high bar for himself. Critics only need to find a moment where a critical agenda regarding race is compatible with an element of Badiou’s philosophy to challenge Badiou’s sanction against race. I find that moment of compatibility in Badiou’s investment in the unknown and *Americanah*’s consistent representation of a disparity of knowledge between characters, a disparity that emerges along lines of racial identity, gender, and cultural context.

### **Badiou's Ethics and Concept of the Void in *Americanah***

Badiou's view of "the Good" is the primary place where race in *Americanah* is compatible with his philosophy. For Badiou, the Good is an effect of an attitude toward knowledge. In *Conditions*, Badiou uses "the Good" as "a designation of this essential point: that there is no Truth of Truth. There is a halting point, an irreflexive point, an empty void" (16). Here we can see the epistemic aspect of the Good, that it does not refer to a particular content nor a specific piece of knowledge. Rather, I would argue that it is more of an attitude toward new knowledge, such that the Good is achieved only in the continuous discovery of new knowledge and being open to that discovery. The "void" functions, in Badiou's terminology, to refer to the continuous presence of the unknown. The Good, just like truth, emerges from an event, and "since a situation is composed by the knowledges circulating within it, the event names the void inasmuch as it names the not-known of the situation" (*Ethics* 69). Here we have the challenge of terminological proximity again, where terms pile up on one another. The point is that an event is an emergence of unknown knowledge, where truth refers to what was previously unknown and the Good is the attitude, manner, and bearing that a person or a political system has toward this unknown and the position of being unknowing. The void names a persistent and inescapable problem of knowledge that is a part of living, and, as a result, there is no finality to the Good. Instead, "the Good is, strictly speaking, the internal norm of a prolonged disorganization of life" (*Ethics* 60). A "Good" life, an ethical one, is

disorganized because it yields itself to the continuous novelty of what was once unknown.

The importance of what is unknown in Badiou's philosophy is reiterated by the terms the void and one other, infinity. We can understand infinity as an aspect of situations that guarantees the void. "Every situation," Badiou writes, "inasmuch as it is, is a multiple composed of an infinity of elements, each one of which is itself a multiple" (*Ethics* 25). Every situation has multiple elements—we can take this description in a straightforward way and as a reminder that truth may emerge from any element in a situation. The escalation from multiple to infinity suggests that however much knowledge we may have of a situation, we can never have genuinely total knowledge of it. The void emerges from the incomprehensibility of the infinity of elements taken together. Void refers to a persistent unknown; infinity refers to the conditions of our unknowing. This is why Badiou writes that "*the power of the truth distributed by the event in a situation does not exhaust all of this situation*" (*Conditions* 56-7, emphasis in original). We can never catch up to what we do not know, so truth and the Good are objects of prolonged and disorganized searching. The Good, as I interpret it here, is practiced when a person is open to the void, to new sources of knowledge. By emphasizing the void and new knowledge as necessary for the Good, I separate parts of Badiou's philosophy. Not only is his goal knowledge of being abstracted from embodiment; it is also new knowledge in general—and this creates new openings for investigating the importance of embodied identities.

Unknowing helps cross the bridge from Badiou's abstractions to the novel form because of the novel's capacity to represent characters' ignorance and learning experiences. Alison Shonkwiler points out that "classic realism's investment in psychological interiority together with its exterior narrative control is designed to address mismatches between perception and reality" (xvi). This mismatch between perception and reality is usually visible only, or at least mostly, to the reader; in *Americanah*, we see, along with this mismatch, something else where both readers and characters can see the disparity among characters' perceptions of their shared literary world. Over the course of the novel, this disparity among characters becomes a clear problem of knowledge shared by all characters, and this problem of knowledge is also an opportunity for Badiou's notion of the Good.

There are moments in *Americanah* when race is brought up in an opaque way, where characters discuss the presence of racism without being specific. These are moments where race can indicate a disparity of knowledge between characters. One such moment occurs when Ifemulu attends a party during Barack Obama's campaign for president. It reads as a scene written to dispel the myth that Obama's election indicated an end of racism in the U.S.. A

stylish poet from Haiti...her Afro bigger than Ifemulu's...said she had dated a white man for three years in California and race was never an issue for them.

"That's a lie," Ifemulu said to her.

"... I came from a country where race was not an issue. I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone...But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will

say we're overreacting or we're being too sensitive... We let it pile up inside our heads. (359-60)

At the beginning of the conversation, the topic appeared to be the existence of racism. However, Ifemulu argues that this is the wrong conversation. Whether or not there is racism depends on who you ask. This is not because the truth of the matter is relative; it is because the realities of racism are experienced by those who often feel unable to speak up. This problem of racial equality or the existence of racism is actually a problem of silenced perspective and the ignorance of some to what others know directly about the presence of racism in everyday life.

Ifemulu's perspective about what goes unsaid about race in relationships stems from her own experiences, and the novel emphasizes how Ifemulu experiences the ignorance of intimate partners. There are several scenes where, when Ifemulu is dating Curt, a white man, the two of them experience racist interactions or interactions where the effect is to exclude Ifemulu, and Curt is either oblivious to the fact that this could be racism or incredulous towards the idea: "she wanted to tell Curt how slighted she felt...But she did not, because he would tell her she was overreacting to tired or both. There were, simply, times that he saw and times that he was unable to see. She knew that she should tell him these thoughts, that not telling him cast a shadow over them both. Still, she chose silence" (364). I'll examine the effect of Curt's responses to Ifemulu more in the next section. From Ifemulu's perspective, the reader sees Curt as unaware of the impact of race in everyday life. Curt's ignorance of the impact of race constitutes a void for him, a presence of something unknown within the situation, something that he cannot yet grasp. The point here is not the internal conflict Ifemulu feels about her silence; the



point is the different perceptions Curt and Ifemulu have of their shared world. If Curt were to take on the impact of race, it would constitute a kind of event, a powerful new knowledge of his situation that was previously unknown. The importance of learning for Badiou's philosophical system, his notions of the event and the void, connects to the missed opportunities for learning that characters in *Americanah* experience. For Badiou the void names the persistent possibility of learning more, and when *Americanah* draws out the disparity of knowledge of race between characters, we can see how race is a problem of knowledge for some characters, a void worth learning from.

The novel does not settle for creating a divide between characters who are aware of race and those who are not. Rather, the novel creates a sense of disparity among characters in order to show how all characters fail to comprehend or notice parts of their shared world. The result is that *Americanah* offers a critical agenda of intersectional analysis as a means for remaining open to the void. The novel also draws attention to gender and cultural context as indicators of a void in a character's perspective.

The gendered perspective becomes apparent in Ifemulu's relationship with Blaine. Blaine is friends with a black security guard, Mr. White, at his university's library and does not understand why Ifemulu does not attend a protest for him after he is taken in by police for questioning. Instead, Ifemulu "merely preferred to go to [a colleague's] going-away lunch" (426). This incenses Blaine:

"How is this lunch suddenly so important?... You know, it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don't really take seriously, it's like choosing an *interesting* elective evening class to complete your credits." She recognized, in his tone, a subtle accusation, not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her

Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American. (427-8)

Ifemulu's absence from the protest is not really a mystery. Although the causality is never directly stated, it is clear enough why Ifemulu does not care for Mr. White. Prior to the protest, Ifemulu "had met Mr. White a few times. 'Does she have a sister?' Mr. White would ask Blaine, gesturing at her... Whenever they shook hands, Mr. White squeezed her fingers, a gesture thick with suggestion... a claiming, a leering, and for this she had always harbored a small dislike, but she had never told Blaine because she was also sorry about her dislike" (424). Mr. White's objectifying behavior is unnoticed by Blaine, and this gendered aspect of Ifemulu's interactions with him is never discussed. Here we see a similar boundary of knowledge that appears along the lines of an embodied identity, where Ifemulu experiences something that another character is unable to observe. If Curt and Blaine were to see these things that Ifemulu experiences (right in front of them), they would have new knowledge, the essential aspect of Badiou's system of the event and ethics.

Ifemulu's own ignorance is often revealed as well, and this points to how cultural context can create barriers of knowledge between characters, a more commonly acknowledged aspect of diasporic literatures. When Ifemulu is dating Curt, she hears him use the word "blowhard": "She was struck by the word, by the irredeemable Americanness of it. Blowhard. It was a word that would never occur to her. To understand this was to realize that Curt and his friends would, on some level, never be fully knowable to her" (256). The last two lines of this passage create a sense of Ifemulu comprehending a disparity between her and Curt. It is not the case that Ifemulu is still

getting to know Curt; instead, there are parts of him that are simply unknowable because of coming from different cultural contexts.

The importance of cultural context, and Ifemulu's own learning experiences, are reiterated late in the novel when Ifemulu returns to Lagos. Ifemulu briefly works for a women's magazine and is often confused by the editor's direction. One day, while speaking to a coworker, her confusion is cleared up:

“It makes no sense that Aunty Onenu likes to run three profiles of these boring women who have achieved nothing and have nothing to say. Or the younger women with zero talent who have decided that they are fashion designers.”

“You know they pay Aunty Onenu, right?” Doris asked.

“They pay her?” Ifemulu started. “No. I didn't know. And you know I didn't know.”

“Well, they do. Most of them. You have to realize a lot of things happen in this country like that?” (516).

Having lived in the U.S. and returned to Nigeria, Ifemulu has become ignorant to what is taken for granted by others around her. In this passage and the passage about Curt, it is Ifemulu's ignorance that is revealed, more in the manner of the classical realism that Shonkwiler describes. However, taken together, the passages about race, gender, and cultural context create a sense of characters always having some kind of void in their awareness. Race, gender, and cultural context, the presence of a socially contingent “what is,” as Badiou would put it, are sources of void for many characters, persistent sources of unknowing that make themselves known by comparison, when one character sees something another does not, or as a barrier to knowledge of a world shared with others. The novel creates a disparity of knowledge among its characters in a way where learning from others' perspectives could constitute an event, if a character were to take that on.

Badiou and the critics who follow the goals of this work insist that knowledge comes from abstracting away from what is, from what is changeable, to discover being. However, there is so much of what is unknown in those very conditions that Badiou forecloses on that we are faced with a contradiction in Badiou's system. The two goals of Badiou's system, being and new knowledge do not entirely coincide; or, at least, following the work of critics like McManus, I am separating them here. The standard of new knowledge creates further opportunities for ethics and moments of event than the standard of abstract being. If coming to new knowledge is really the point, and if it is a source of ethics, then *Americanah* represents attending to race, gender and present cultural context as a means to ethical thinking.

Mental health also functions as a source of void in the novel because it often poses a barrier for characters' knowledge of one another. Several characters struggle with mental health and trauma in the novel, and these experiences are often enigmas to other characters. *Americanah* uses free indirect discourse to connect Ifemulu's perspective to her limited knowledge of others. Late in the novel, Ifemulu's cousin Dike survives a suicide attempt. Ifemulu debates the cause of his depression with his mother, and key to the passage is Ifemulu's and Aunty Uju's lack of definitive information:

“Ifemulu, his suicide attempt was from depression,” Aunty Uju said gently, quietly. “It is a clinical disease. Many teenagers suffer from it.”

“Do people just wake up and become depressed?”

“Yes, they do.”

...

“His depression is because of his experience, Aunty!” Ifemulu said, her voice rising, and then she was sobbing, apologizing to Aunty Uju, her own guilt spreading and sullyng her. Dike would not have swallowed those pills if she had been more diligent, more awake. She had crouched too easily behind laughter, she had failed to till the emotional soil of Dike's jokes” (470-1).

For Aunt Uju, depression has an explanation without a cause. The depression of others is real and powerful for them, but it is not something that has a clear, step by step, causal explanation. Even this explanation of the events in the characters' shared literary world does not yield much information. For Ifemulu, the novel uses free indirect discourse to show Ifemulu's perspective and misunderstanding of the situation. Ifemulu's thoughts, her speculation that she could somehow have changed the course of Dike's life, surely misunderstand the situation, as a tragedy like this is outside the scope of any one person's agency. But what is accurate in Ifemulu's consciousness is her estimation that she does not know what Dike is feeling, the motivations for his jokes, the emotional effects of his everyday life or the mysterious cause of his depression. Dike never divulges his motivations for attempting suicide, and his therapist advises Ifemulu not to ask (469). The presence of depression is not debatable, but its qualities and causes are mysterious and kept inside the characters' perspectives. Instead, Ifemulu cares for her cousin with this lack of knowledge, and the reader sees an ethics of care that reckons with the kind of distance between characters that I am calling disparity.

Mental health also proves to be a barrier to self-understanding after dramatic changes or experiences of trauma in the novel. Early in the novel, Ifemulu, experiencing a particular financial challenge as an international student in the United States, prostitutes herself, an experience which traumatizes her, leaving her depressed for an extended period of time. When Ifemulu's friends inquire about her sudden change in behavior, the novel says that "[Ifemulu] would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story"

(195). Aptly, the novel refers to a blog post about depression but does not include it in the text; instead a comment left on it describes someone else's experience.

Years later, [Ifemulu] would blog about this: "On the Subject of Non-American Blacks Suffering from Illnesses Whose Names They Refuse to Know." A Congolese woman wrote a long comment in response: She had moved to Virginia from Kinshasa and, months into her first semester of college, begun to feel dizzy in the morning, her heart pounding as though in flight from her, her stomach fraught with nausea, her fingers tingling. She went to see a doctor. And even though she checked 'yes' to all the symptoms on the card the doctor gave her, she refused to accept the diagnosis of panic attacks because panic attacks happened only to Americans. Nobody in Kinshasa had panic attacks. It was not even that it was called by another name, it was simply not called at all. (194-5)<sup>14</sup>

If a person experiences something they thought did not exist, that they have no framework for, how can they understand themselves afterward? Mental health, throughout the novel, creates a kind of caesura, a break between characters and sometimes within the self-awareness of characters. The difficulty for characters to understand struggles with mental health is only an exaggerated instance of the basic state of characters in literary worlds: ignorance of one another, a key aspect of disparity in the novel form.

Theorists of literary worlds have generated some language for classifying features like this. Eric Hayot uses the term "incompleteness" to describe a problem of knowledge that occurs when reading fiction:

Call this the "price of apples" problem: what is the price of apples in the London of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*? We can never know, whereas for apples in 1937 London we at least presumably can find out. That's the difference between completeness...and incompleteness. Because all literary worlds are incomplete in this sense (and there is not much satisfaction in going around pointing it out over

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<sup>14</sup> Later in the book, Ifemulu references *Things Fall Apart* as evidence that depression also happens in Nigeria (524). One of the experiences shared by characters in *Americanah* and *Things Fall Apart* is the power of what silences them.

and over), we can focus on the way a given text manages incompleteness—whether it, for instance, assumes it, dramatizes it, ignores, and so on. (61)

In this chapter, I am pointing out moments of what Hayot might call incompleteness in order to demonstrate the opportunities for knowledge that they present. The incompleteness that *Americanah* most conspicuously dramatizes is characters' knowledge of others, as well as incompleteness in characters' self-awareness. Disparity can be understood as a particular kind of incompleteness referring to characters' differentiated and incomplete knowledge of their shared world.

Hans Blumenberg's formulation of literary worlds suggests that this disparity, as an epistemic limit that all characters experience, is an essential part of how novel's create fictional worlds. "Fixing (or causing) a world (*Welthaftigkeit*) as a formal, overriding structure is what constitutes the novel," Blumenberg writes (48). Distinctive of this world is the fact that, for the characters and the reader, this world indicates a sense of "totality of a world that can never be completed or grasped in its entirety—a world that can be only partially experienced and so can never exclude different contexts of experience" (Blumenberg 33). The world of the novel is inherently open to the possibility of its own differentiated observation. As novels take on a variety of characters with different perspectives in different social positions, characters on their own are given less epistemic purchase on that world. As a result, one of the features of literary worlds is the creation of a "reality as an intersubjective context [that] can lead to an idea of it as the experience of the resistance of any given object" (Blumenberg 44-45). When reading fiction, we often read characters' experience of the resistance of their world to being known. I use the term disparity to refer to the differences of knowledge that the

intersubjective, partial observation of a shared world creates among characters. When novels such as *Americanah* draw our attention to the disparity created by intersubjective, partial observation of shared spaces, they illuminate a problem of knowledge. The persistent presence of this problem of knowledge in *Americanah* is what makes it so useful for considering the role of knowledge in Badiou's system, a surprising yet compelling connection.

### **Evil as Epistemic Violence**

Badiou's notion of evil is also useful for understanding the ethical importance of knowledge in *Americanah*. Specifically, Badiou's notion of evil can be understood as epistemic violence that emerges along differences of race and social context. Given the context of Badiou's orientation around truth as unknown knowledge, we can interpret Evil as primarily an epistemic activity, that is, as epistemic violence. Kristie Dotson defines epistemic violence as "a type of violence that attempts to eliminate knowledge possessed by marginal subjects" (236). This can be done by refuting their perspective or undermining their status as a knower. Gayatri Spivak describes it as an "asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity" that functions to solidify "one explanation and narrative of reality...as the normative one" (35-6). At stake in this activity is who gets to produce knowledge, whose insights are validated, and the standards for participating in the social production of that knowledge. One of the phrases Badiou uses to describe what happens when thinking does not acknowledge the void of truth is "disaster of thought" (*Conditions* 17). If Badiou is committed to



diagnosing instances of evil with his system of ethics, then the racist and nationalist outcomes of epistemic violence in *Americanah* should hold interest for ethical thinking.

Evil, for Badiou, is a distortion of truth and the event. Evil happens when someone exercises fidelity to a simulated truth, betrays a truth they know, or claims comprehensive knowledge of a situation (*Ethics* 71). Essential to truth and the event is that no truth can ever exhaust the situation from which it emerges, that “the production of a truth-process...does not have the power to name all the elements of the situation. At least one real element must exist...which remains inaccessible to truthful nominations” (*Ethics* 85). Badiou calls this element the “unnamable” (*Ethics* 86). The unnamable seems to do similar terminological work as the void, asserting the importance of epistemic humility in any given situation. “Evil” occurs when a person exerts their perspective in order to silence other perspectives, they claim to destroy the unnamable (*Ethics* 86). This creates a disaster of thinking in part because it limits what may be known in a given situation, clearly antithetical to Badiou’s valuation of the Truth as a persistent unknowing. He writes: “At the root of every disaster there lies a substantialization of Truth, that is, an ‘illegal’ passage from Truth as an empty operation to truth as the coming to presence of the void itself” (*Conditions* 17). Substantializing a truth refers to refusing to acknowledge new knowledge in a situation, where the void is dispelled by a claim of comprehensive or even sufficient knowledge. If the void is made fully present, then there is no new knowledge which can be acquired about a situation. Evil is the effect of refusing the ongoing operation of the void, and it can manifest as a function of knowledge. Badiou’s view of Evil can be understood as a form of epistemic

violence because Evil is opposed to a notion of the Good motivated by an unending openness to new knowledge. If new knowledge is refused, shut down, or dismissed out of hand, there is the activity of Evil. Claims of comprehensive knowledge and subsequent epistemic violence are the evil in *Americanah*.

There are several passages where Ifemulu attempts to contribute knowledge in conversation with others and finds herself shut down. These moments represent knowledge of race and intersectionality as opportunities for further learning that are conspicuously dismissed. In an argument with Curt, Ifemulu explains how knowledge about dark-skinned women is missing in popular media: “So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous...Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me...This [article] tells you about different hair products for *everyone*—and ‘everyone’ means blonds, brunettes, and redheads. I am none of those” (Adichie 365). The knowledge deficit here is conspicuous. Not only can women with dark skin not find useful information in the pages of most popular magazines, readers of those magazines also exist in a media ecosystem where dark skinned women are unacknowledged and made invisible. The homogenized images in the magazines indicate a lack of knowledge production about, and not only for, darker women of color. In the scene, Ifemulu’s point about this knowledge deficit is that Curt does not know that he does not know, but this is not received well, and Curt ends the conversation by putting the topic aside: “Okay, babe, okay. I didn’t mean for it to be such a big deal” (366). Curt does not engage the knowledge given in the scene or the prior absence of knowledge. This is a refusal of a void, where a new element of a situation is

given a name, in this case “lack of representation,” but Curt does not take on this knowledge. As critics note, Badiou’s ethics and philosophy often target or are motivated by large political movements, but in this case, “Evil” appears in a small moment of conversation.

When Ifemulu is with Blaine, the problem is not race but Ifemulu’s status as a Non-American Black. The importance of a “non-American” status becomes clear through several conversations with Blaine and his sister, Shan. At one point, Ifemulu and Blaine debate the notion of truth, and Ifemulu is perplexed by the American requirement of unbending, unambiguous honesties.

“It’s different for me and I think it’s because I’m from the Third World,” she said. “To be a child of the Third World is to be aware of the many different constituencies you have and how honesty and truth must always depend on context.’...Blaine shook his head even before she finished speaking and said, “That is so lazy, to use the Third World like that” (396).

It is unclear why this counts as “lazy,” for Blaine. However, if we examine the effects of the moment, we can see a restriction on sources of knowledge and insight. The Third World is not something Blaine has access to the way Ifemulu does; it exists in the conversation as a source of unknown knowledge. By dismissing Ifemulu as lazy for invoking the Third World, Blaine secures the status of his own knowledge and marginalizes Ifemulu’s ability to offer new information about situations. Ifemulu invokes an intersectional analysis here that recalls Roxanne Gay’s description of the complexity of identities in *Bad Feminist*. Gay writes: “people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about” (23). Gay’s point is that different social positions, including citizenship and national belonging, provide different information about the world. We can understand this

information as one source of what goes unnamed in situations, the element of Badiou's notion of truth that prevents any one truth from claiming comprehensive knowledge. But Blaine does not accept this kind of epistemic challenge in conversation with Ifemulu. The result is a position which insists that it has enough knowledge to know that it is not missing anything.

Shan also calls out Ifemulu's difference in a way that belittles her perspective. At the end of a conversation about the ideological uses and abuses of fiction in America, someone suggests Ifemulu blog about it. Shan, previously the center of the conversation, intrudes:

“You know why Ifemulu can write that blog, by the way?” Shan said. “Because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she'd just be leveled angry and shunned.”

The room was, for a moment, swollen in silence.

“I think that's fair enough,” Ifemulu said, disliking Shan, and herself too, for bending to Shan's spell. (418)

Shan is described as a hurtful person, and, in this scene, unable to degrade Ifemulu's knowledge because of the popularity of her blog, Shan degrades Ifemulu's status as a knower. By saying that Ifemulu does not feel the conflict of race the way American Blacks do, Shan undermines Ifemulu's status to offer insights about that conflict. The effect is a similar epistemic closure as those seen with Curt and Blaine but achieved by different means. This is an activity of Evil, an epistemic closure within a situation which cuts off the production of knowledge. Badiou's goals include offering a philosophy of truth within the unknown that contains an imperative to ongoing learning, and the result of that is that his system turns out to be compatible with the epistemic value that can

emerge at encounters with differences of identity. Repressing perspectives identified by their difference, by intent or outcome, instigates a disaster of thought in the sense that it instigates a violence that stops the production of potentially valuable knowledge about a shared world.

### **Disparity and Disorganized Thinking**

Here I propose the term disorganized thinking to describe the epistemic experience of the kind of ethics that emerges from comparing *Americanah* and Badiou's system. For Badiou, ethics and the Good are tied to the event, to being open to the experience of new knowledge and acting on it. *Americanah* describes encountering others with different experiences and contexts as a consistent source of an unknown and, as such, an opportunity for new knowledge and ethical thinking. Apart from this problem of knowledge that *Americanah* and Badiou identify in their own way, we can also identify a shared effect of this new knowledge, a disorganization of one's thinking away from oneself and one's experiences of the world. *Americanah* draws attention to a disparity of knowledge of a shared world among its characters in a way where learning about others and working to overcome that disparity would require the kind of ethical commitment that Badiou calls the Good.

In the above sections, I pointed to several scenes where characters viewed their shared world differently, and importantly, scenes where characters were ignorant of elements of their shared world and where characters were confronted with their own lack of understanding. These boundaries of knowledge often appear along lines of race,

gender, and descriptors of demography. In addition to this, *Americanah* also draws attention to disparity as a general condition of people in a shared world, where all individuals can experience disparity as a problem of knowledge, a problem of not knowing what others experience. I connect this formal aspect of the novel to Badiou's philosophy because Badiou insists so clearly on ethics as an attitude toward learning, toward having to develop new knowledge, and as an attitude toward being unable to claim full knowledge of a situation. This commitment to developing new knowledge is disorganizing; it means that a way of being, including attitudes towards others and behaviors one thinks are acceptable, can be unsettled at any time because of a radical acceptance of epistemic humility and the experience of new information about the world. The way that Badiou describes ethics as disorganizing is the kind of attitude that could allow characters in a novel, or anyone inhabiting a shared world, to work against the condition of epistemic disparity.

I have made little mention of *Americanah*'s blog so far, even though it has received substantial critical attention. Caroline Levine argues that the language of the blog does the defamiliarizing and critical work of realism and helps "unsettle entrenched perceptions so that we can see the world more clearly" (588). Levine finds "the plainness and straightforwardness of [the blog's] descriptive prose" to be "politically effective" at countering our habits of ignoring the presence and impact of racism in everyday life (594). The blog posts included in the novel are quite powerful in this regard, and the plainness and straightforwardness of their language is also helpful for our agenda here. In addition to this, there are some formal questions that can be researched about the blog

and other representations of new media in novels. such as how blog posts extend and innovate on the form and effects of epistolary novels as Iain Watt describes (176).

There is a blog posts that addresses differences of knowledge that appear along lines of race in the novel. However, given the context of the characters' general ignorance of each other, I argue that the language of this blog post also points to a problem of knowledge experienced at the individual level, a problem of knowledge that is not contingent upon, but is almost certainly always exacerbated by, differences such as race and gender.

Dear American Non-Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life...you have not suffered precisely because you are an American Black.....don't put on a Let's Be Fair tone and say "But Black people are racist too." Because of course we're all prejudiced...but racism is about the power of a group and in America it's white folks who have that power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they're white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime...Try listening...And remember it's not about you. (403-6)

The post appears to concern itself with how the experience of anti-black racism is unrelatable to those who are white, the point being that people who are white do not have comparable experiences. However, the language of the post is not necessarily limited to just this context. The last two phrases I excerpt here can be read as offering a more general imperative about thinking in a world shared with others. The phrase "remember it's not about you" offers a task of thinking when encountering others that is not necessarily contingent on a context of white ignorance of black experience. Rather, the phrasing of the imperative to "remember it's not about you" can describe a task of

thinking to which all persons could commit, in the sense that all persons, including Ifemulu, will encounter moments that reveal their ignorance about others in a shared world. The use of the second person in the blog post articulates a generalized condition of ignorance of the world on the part of individuals, a generalized condition of encountering a world that can defy a character's attempts at comprehension.

In the narrative representation of characters encountering a shared world from this epistemic position, what comes out is characters' attitudes toward taking on new knowledge. Badiou's terminology for Good and Evil is helpful for describing these attitudes and for using these representations to think through the kind of commitment a person might try on when encountering others. Katherine Hallemeier's reading of *Americanah* points out how the conflict of the novel emerges from people struggling to break out of their own perspective and what they take for granted. She makes this point about both Curt and Blaine:

Curt's experience of whiteness has left him unprepared to function in a relationship in which his goodness, which is to say his material resources and limited empathy, does not ensure the total and constant affirmation he desires and expects. (239)

Blaine's experience of growing up black in America has left him unprepared to function in a relationship in which his goodness, which is to say his advocacy for racial justice, does not result in the absolute solidarity he desires and expects. (240)

There are different burdens of proof for claiming that a perspective or idea is not helpful in any way and for claiming that a perspective can add new information about a situation. What is so insightful about Hallemeier's reading here is how she identifies both Curt and Blaine as, at times, making the previous claim that a different perspective adds no new



information. What is so challenging for Curt and Blaine is that there might be a kind of goodness in the world that is entirely beyond them, a form of empathy they have never practiced. Although part of the point of these representations in *Americanah* and Hallemeier's reading is that Curt and Blaine have privileged lives, Hallemeier's reading is also important for how she aptly describes the difficulty Curt and Blaine face: they are unprepared to think differently; the perspective of the world which confronts them through Ifemulu is too novel to be comprehensible. It is a void, something unnamable to them. As a result, Curt and Blaine both manifest what, in Badiou's terms, we can call a substantialized Truth, where the Truth no longer designates "a halting point, an irreflexive point, an empty void" (*Conditions* 16). Instead, the Truth is the accumulation of Curt's life experience and perspective for Curt and the accumulation of Blaine's life experience and perspective for Blaine. If someone in a situation "convokes not the void but the 'full' particularity or presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a *simulacrum of truth*" (*Ethics* 73). Convoking the full substance of a situation performs the specific epistemic task of declaring both all of the content of a situation and how to observe that content, determining which perspective can be brought to bear on the situation. It is the simulation of total knowledge.

Badiou's formulation of Evil as a false monopoly on truth powerfully resonates with events of racialized and gendered epistemic violence in the novel, suggesting that there are connections between his philosophy and the conditions of embodiment that he disavows as useful for thought. Badiou's equation of the Good with disorganization and the importance of learning in his concept of the event open up his philosophical system to

compatibility with considerations of socially contingent embodied identities. The Good, as Badiou formulates it, is antithetical to the kind of epistemic stability upon which Curt and Blaine insist. To reiterate, Badiou writes that “the Good is, strictly speaking, the internal norm of a prolonged disorganization of life” (*Ethics* 60). When characters shut out others as sources of new or contrary information, they prevent disorganization. They stabilize the Truth as they experience it. And when the novel shows us the disparities of knowledge among characters, it shows us how productive it would be for characters to disorganize their own thinking away from themselves and their own experiences. For Curt or Blaine and sometimes also Ifemulu to understand others and their perspectives would require a profound disorganization at a personal level. All of the experiences in Curt’s and Blaine’s lives cannot give them evidence of the world as Ifemulu interacts with it (or vice versa). This condition of existence, corporeal individuality, organizes the information literary characters, and persons, have about worlds shared with others in a way where ethical thinking also entails radically disorganizing one’s thinking away from the evidence of their own life. It would require foregoing the world one’s experiences have taught them to see, and it would require navigating disparities of knowledge that appear along differences of race, gender class, and cultural context.

## Chapter 4

### The *Dispositif* of Citizenship:

Technology and Personhood in Iain M. Banks's *Culture* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Iain M. Banks's science fiction novel *Surface Detail* draws into relief the difference between refugee and citizen when the main character, Lededje Y'Breq, is naturalized into the futuristic, space-faring utopia called the Culture. The Culture is the subject of nine novels and one novella by Banks, containing stories set across hundreds of years and rarely sharing characters. In the opening of *Surface Detail*, Lededje is murdered outside of the Culture on her home planet, Sichult, where she was a slave. After her death, she wakes up in a virtual environment in the Culture. Lededje learns that at the moment she died, a device in her head called a neural lace was able to “code her brain state and transmit it across three and a half thousand light years” to the Culture and, importantly, do so “without documentation” (78). When Lededje wakes up, a representative of the Culture has to ask for her name but also informs her that she now has the rights of a citizen of the Culture. This transition manifests what Roberto Esposito has called the *dispositif*—typically translated as “apparatus”—of personhood, and the novel integrates what he describes as the “widespread idea that the category of person has the conceptual (and therefore, sooner or later, also practical) function of bridging the still dramatically gaping chasm between the concept of human being and that of citizen, set out so starkly by Hannah Arendt at the close of the second World War” (*Third Person* 3). Person functions as a third term between human being and citizen in order to create a

sense of rights inherently due to human beings. “This means,” Esposito writes, “that a concept like that of human rights is only conceivable and viable through the lexicon of personhood” (*Third Person* 3). Upon arriving in the Culture, Lededje discovers that she has also crossed the bridge of personhood, or, as Hannah Arendt put it, that she has “the right to have rights” (296). Esposito notes that there are conceptual and practical aspects to this, aspects which *Surface Detail* and its sequel, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, draw out through their conceptually dense language of personhood and descriptions of technology necessary to put those concepts into practice. This chapter analyses how Banks’ Culture novels and Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West* represent concepts of politically inclusive humanity as tied to the technologies of states. This pairing is due to the fact that both Banks and Hamid use utopian settings to create alternative mechanisms of political inclusion, which I refer to here as *dispositifs*.

Reading these novels for how they represents personhood utilizes them as sources of utopian critical theory. In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, Carl Freedman argues that science fiction’s tendency to evoke cognitive estrangement incorporates the critical aspects of what Lukács finds in realism and of what Ernst Bloch finds in utopia. The result is a critical impulse in science fiction that draws our attention to “a Lukácsian dialectic of historical identity and historical difference” (50). The settings of novels contrast themselves to the reader’s reality as a different material iteration of “driving historical forces that link the two eras in a concrete continuum that is social, economic, political, and cultural in nature” (Freedman 44). A science fiction novel need not present itself as our future, but its “era” establishes a connection through a rationalized

presentation of recognizable, yet differently realized historical forces. As a result of this historical iterability, “the cognitive estrangements of the genre work in the manner of utopian critique to foreground and demystify the actual, and thereby to point toward some authentic plenitude with which the deprivations of mundane reality are contrasted” (Freedman 72). In the case of *Surface Detail*, the contrast is when a refugee with zero documentation is treated like a citizen because of her personhood. Personhood, as an historical and political practice, appears in the novel in a way that creates a utopian perspective on contemporary politics and political philosophy by drawing our attention to how notions of personhood are contingent on technology and territory. For Esposito, and Arendt, the concepts of personhood and human rights have been far less effective than they appear in *Surface Detail* or *Exit West*. The lack of success of these concepts to fully tie rights to humanity has motivated significant conceptual work by philosophers seeking a normative justification for something like human rights, something that could still do the work of the *dispositif* of personhood. The material emphasis on technology that emerges from the science fictional estrangement in the Culture novels and *Exit West* offers a new perspective on this philosophical labor. Additionally, as a result of the capabilities of its technology and its interplanetary context, the Culture’s *dispositif* of citizenship interacts with the political construct of territory differently than typical liberal manifestations of citizenship.

## **Conceptual and Technical *Dispositifs***

Along with Esposito, philosophers such as Agamben and critics have used the term *dispositif* to refer to normative concepts and material technologies operative in politics and the social shaping of subjectivity. This essay draws on these theories of the *dispositif* to show how citizenship in novels emerges from, as Davide Panagia puts it, “the operational logics of technical objects” (715). Work using the term *dispositif* is usually an interpretation, and then extension, of Foucault’s use of the term. By *dispositif*, Foucault refers to a “heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, [and] scientific statements” and indicates a “formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*” (“Confessions” 194-5). I propose that within the wide range of work on *dispositifs* we can distinguish between *technical* and *conceptual dispositifs*. This distinguishes two generalizable types and can help examine how they interact, how certain concepts of personhood are contingent on certain technologies and how state technologies may or may not be able to ensure the rights entailed by a concept of personhood, human rights, or civic rights. Making this distinction brings greater clarity to how novels such as *Surface Detail* and *Exit West* represent *dispositifs* of citizenship as the effect of multiple *dispositifs*.

Esposito’s work on the *dispositif* of person refers to a normative *conceptual dispositif*, identifying the “concept of person...as the crucial passage through which a

biological material lacking in meaning becomes...sacred or is to be valued in terms of its qualities” (“*Dispositif*” 18). *Conceptual dispositifs*, as I use them here, refer to normative descriptions of life relative to the nation-state, designating bearers of rights or rightlessness, and often appealing to domains of knowledge such as biology or humanist philosophy to establish hierarchies of persons via race or reason. The result is that, rather than being a means of conferring human rights on all people, personhood functions as an “immune mechanism” instigating a “simultaneously inclusive and exclusive circle” (Esposito, *Third Person* 102). This immune mechanism captures and separates, for example, *bios* and *zoe* as Agamben put it, separating bodies bearing rights and bare life (*Homo Sacer* 7).

Agamben provides a strong resource for deploying the term *dispositif* because he writes about what we can categorize as both *conceptual* and *technical dispositifs*. His writing about bare life and refugees in *Homo Sacer* designates *conceptual dispositifs*, normative descriptions of life relative to the state. His essay “What is an Apparatus?” focuses more on *technical dispositifs*, by which I refer to technology broadly considered, devices we may interact with in various ways, or, as Agamben puts it, “anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings,” including “prisons...confession...juridical measures...but also the pen, writing...computers, cellular telephones, and—why not—language itself” (14). Agamben’s use of the word “capture” draws attention to the interface of body and technology in an expansive sense,

such that it may stretch from our basic writing tools to the spectacular technologies that appear as part of the “stylistic register” of science fiction (Freedman 31).

Writing in response to Agamben’s formulation of the *dispositif*, Michael Shapiro aptly describes part of our present questioning: “the question to pose is not *what* is a proper human life but rather *how* is “life” constituted at various historical moments by the various [state and commercial] agencies and practices that determine the proper versus improper life?” These questions, however, should not be taken as mutually exclusive, and each is imbricated with the other. Fully answering the “how” a proper life is constituted requires defining what that proper life is, and, in turn, a concept such as personhood may dictate how technology is used. The readings I offer of the Culture novels and philosophical work on Arendt show how the normative concept of what counts as a proper life or person emerges from a context of technology and territory.

### **Welcome to the Culture**

*Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* are the last two novels of the Culture series. The eponymous Culture is society of planets, spaceships, and artificial environments called Orbitals. It is free from work, money, and strictly defined corporeal identity—people can change their sex, skin tone, live as long as they want and perform gender at will. In a reading of the first three Culture novels, Sherryl Vint argues that the variety of skin tones and gender performances in the Culture is undergirded by an assumption of a universal interiority that undermines the possibility of a critical



perspective on race, gender, or sex emerging from the novels (88). In this chapter, we will see how this idea of a universal interiority appears in the last two novels.

Life within the Culture is usually spent pursuing pleasures like art, travelling, and playing various sorts of games. It is governed by a coalition of mostly benevolent artificial intelligences known as “Minds.” These Minds appear as distinct characters in the novels and pilot spaceships with names indicative of some personality. In *Surface Detail*, a diplomatic ship is named *Sense Amidst Madness, Wit Amidst Folly* and a warship goes by the name *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints*. These ship Minds interact with human characters in the form of avatars with their own, shorter names. Because the Culture is constituted by disparate astronomical objects, it does not have clear borders. Banks uses the context of an interplanetary society to explore the relationship between space and politics. In the essay, “A Few Notes on the Culture,” he writes that “the Culture, in its history and its on-going form, is an expression of the idea that the nature of space itself determines the type of civilisations which will thrive there.”

The more provocative aspects of the series and the main conflicts of its plotlines come from the Minds’ habit of interfering with other societies whom they view as technologically and morally inferior by, for example, supporting certain candidates in elections or staging coups. Alan Jacobs uses an apt metaphor, saying that the Culture has a foreign policy like “that of the United States in the recent Bush administration: just as Bush wanted to spread the good news of American democracy to the rest of the world, and was willing to put some force behind that benevolent imperative, so too the Culture” (51). This habit of interference changes over the series, the early novels featuring

deliberate interference or outright war and the later novels being marked by slightly more restraint on the Culture's part. In *Surface Detail*, an eccentric Culture Mind is visiting Sichult and Lededje asks it to take her with it when she leaves. The ship's avatar refuses because her owner "is the richest man in the...Sichultian" society and because—and this can only be said with some conspicuous irony—"It is not regarded as good form to go interfering in the societies of others unless one has a very good reason, and an agreed-on strategic plan" (Banks 89). The Culture Mind secretly puts a neural lace in Lededje's head rather than risk conflict with Sichult. Although this does nothing for Lededje while she is alive, it does change her circumstances after she dies.

### **The Culture's *Dispositif* of Citizenship**

The matters of citizenship and personhood arise as soon as Lededje arrives in the Culture. After her murder in the beginning of the novel, she experiences her resurrection as waking up into a digital environment created by the Mind of *Sense Amidst Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*. The word "SIMULATION" is fixed at the bottom of her field of vision (Banks, *Surface* 60). Besides that, Lededje's body is different: "First of all, she was entirely the wrong colour. She ought to be almost soot black. Instead, she was . . . she wasn't even sure what you called this colour. Dirty gold? Mud? Polluted sunset?" (Banks, *Surface* 60). She is also missing the tattoo that marked her as a slave on Sichult. Although she is unaware of it at the moment, this seemingly wrong body is because the Mind in whose substrates she now resides does not know anything about her. Eventually the Mind's avatar, named Sensia, explains where she is and that her mind was digitally

transmitted into a Culture ship because her body died. Joseph Norman argues that we can read this scene as a pseudo-religious moment of “virtual limbo” (158). *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* do utilize religious imagery and themes, but this scene can also be read as an immigration interview where the religious tones are used to represent practices of citizenship in the Culture. Through conversation with Sensia, Lededje and the reader are given a discourse on the logic and mechanics of personhood and citizenship in the Culture. The Culture’s rhetoric of citizenship reveals a transhumanist perspective of personhood that prioritizes the mind over the body. Although Sensia describes this personhood as an inherent quality of Lededje’s being, *Surface Detail* shows how that *conceptual dispositif* emerges from a context of *technical dispositifs*, and I argue that having a neural lace is what makes a person a citizen of the Culture because it is the technology that ensures rights and protections.

One of the significant moments in the awakening conversation comes when Sensia states that Lededje is entitled to certain rights within the Culture. Lededje is entitled to these rights because of the kind of person she is, more specifically, the kind of mind she has. Sensia says: “You’re in a nearly unique situation so there’s no particular precedent, but zero documentation or not you’re essentially a fully functioning, viable independent mind-state and incontrovertibly sentient, with all that implies regarding rights and so on,” including the right to be “revented,” the “term for being brought back to life in a physical body back in the Real” (Banks, *Surface* 91). “Essentially a ...viable mind-state” is a key phrase here, indicating a *conceptual* and *technical dispositif*, a standard of personhood that qualifies Lededje for citizenship. The “essentially” makes a

philosophical claim about Lededje's being. She is the right kind of being, Sensia suggests, the kind that can think, that can make decisions and pilot a body. Lededje is entitled to rights because she meets this normative concept of already being a person. The other meaning of "viable mind-state" is more technical: facilitated by the neural lace, her mind-state is complete enough and constituted by the kind of data that the Ship can hold in its substrate, awaken into a simulation, and, if the mind-state so chooses, revent with a new body. Lededje's moment of becoming-citizen is contingent on the technological compatibility of the neural lace, her mind-state, and the ship Mind and its substrates. Sensia's language sounds like an investment in a universal concept of person as mind, but this concept can only function thanks to the technology at hand. Appearing next to the phrase "zero documentation," all this signals the Culture's aspirational attitude toward a universally inclusive practice of citizenship because these rights would inhere in all beings like Lededje. "Zero documentation" is an estranging phrase within the text, because Lededje's rights are contingent on technology, and it is not clear what counts as documentation for the Culture, or what exactly such documentation would be worth. If the being of the person is all that matters, if the viability of the mind-state is sufficient, then the "zero documentation" phrase is less meaningful within the setting of the novel and more meaningful as an estranging contrast to the reader's world, a contrast that creates a perspective of utopian critique wherein some sense of universal being would be grounds for citizenship and rights.

*The Hydrogen Sonata* also establishes the rights of mind-states in the Culture, although with less legalistic language than *Surface Detail*. In Culture novels, it is not

uncommon for characters to have their mind-states copied, transmitted, and uploaded to a temporary body when transporting the person's body would be too time consuming. After the relevant task is accomplished, the temporary body may be discarded and the mind-states re-integrated. In *The Hydrogen Sonata*, one character, Scoaliera Tefwe, has her mind-state copied twice and transmitted to distinct locations and bodies, and when the time comes for re-integration, she has to grapple with not being her only self anymore:

She should never have trusted herself. She ought to have known what she was like...Scoaliera Tefwe...looked at the two holo images of herself facing her and scowled. "So. Neither of you?"

"Certainly not me."

"Certainly not me."

They didn't say it at quite the same time, but then the ships they were housed within were at quite different distances.

The original Scoaliera Tefwe, who thought of herself as the real one – but then, both the others would as well – sighed in exasperation and flicked the images off. (375)

Once a mind-state is copied or instantiated outside of the original person, it has a right to its own being. Although the original Scoaliera Tefwe is able to review the experiences of her other selves, her other selves cannot be compelled to give up their distinct existences because, as Sensia said to Lededje, they are viable mind-states "with all that implies regarding rights." Mind-states are the prioritized citizens of the Culture, and one of their rights is to make decisions about their psychic continuity and embodiment.

The rights possessed by copies of mind-states represented in *The Hydrogen Sonata* are an evolution within the Culture series. The copied mind-state was not always considered its own person in Banks's universe. In one of the earlier novels, *The Use of Weapons*, a human agent for the Culture, Diziet Sma, has to be in two places at once. She agrees to have herself scanned (Banks, *Use* 31), and a "stand-in" is created, described as

“electronic, mechanical, electrochemical, chemical; a machine; a Mind-controlled machine, not alive in itself” (Banks, *Use* 28). Having a machine stand-in is different than what the characters in *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* experience, and it subsequently possesses fewer rights as the agent requires that the stand-in not have sex with anyone (Banks, *Use* 32). This leads to an exchange that makes for an interesting comparison with the conversation among the Scoaliera Tefwes in *The Hydrogen Sonata*:

“Okay, the drone said . . . “It is, after all, in a sense, your body.”  
“That’s just it, drone,” Sma said . . . “It *isn’t* my body” (Banks, *Use* 32).

In the later novels, characters have their minds copied and can have their memories reintegrated into a single person only if the copy so chooses. The consent of the created person is required because copied mind-states are persons in themselves. In this moment from an early novel, the concept of personhood is messier. Sma is able to deprive the copy of the right to consent, suggesting that the copy is not autonomous, not really a self. Over the course of the series, as the novels feature more sophisticated technology for recreating bodies and mind-states, the concepts of rights and personhood develop accordingly.

The emphasis on the mind-state as the citizen follows from the Culture’s transhumanist perspective on personhood.<sup>15</sup> Sensia argues that Lededje is essentially

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<sup>15</sup> Cary Wolfe defines transhumanism in *What is Posthumanism?* as an extension of rational humanism, understanding human perfectibility as “[achievable] by escaping or repressing not just [humanity’s] animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (xv). Katherine Hayles gives a short history of the idea of a disembodied mind in *How We Became Posthuman*, showing that the transhumanist perspective builds on the belief “that the locus of the liberal humanist subject lies in the mind, not the body” (3). Once the technology exists to download a mind from its original body, the mind

unchanged between her corporeal death and virtual resurrection. Explaining the process of the neural lace capturing and transmitting a mind-state, Sensia says to Lededje, “There is almost certainly less difference between the you that died and the you that you are now than there would be between your selves at one end of a night’s sleep and the other” (Banks, *Surface* 78). In one sense, this is absurd—Lededje is in quite different circumstances upon waking in the Culture without her body. However, given the Culture’s investment in the being and rights of mind-states, Sensia’s emphasis on Lededje’s digital self as her essential self is only fitting. In *The Hydrogen Sonata*, a person’s mind-state is referred to as “a copy of [his] soul, basically” (Banks 115). Later, Lededje asks Sensia about the tattoo that marked her as a slave, and Sensia can only offer: “[that] info didn’t travel” (Banks, *Surface* 92). The condition of embodiment lies outside the scope of the neural lace and, as a result, the body remains heteronomous, as Kant put it, different from the rational self (Kant 56-7). This makes the humanist and transhumanist perspective of interior subjectivity into a political norm for citizenship. Esposito explains the political impact of this perspective: “subjective right, rather than being inherent to the entirety of the human being, applies only to the upper part, which is rational or spiritual in nature, exercising its dominion over the remaining area, which is devoid of these characteristics and therefore thrust into the regime of objecthood” (*Third Person* 11). Sensia describes Lededje as essentially and entirely that upper part, a disembodied rationality deserving of rights.

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becomes a pattern of information and, as is Hayles’s point, the essential aspect of the human is understood as disembodied.

*Surface Detail* explains the Culture's investment in the mind-as-self in a narrative break recognizable as a generic element of science fiction world-building. This excursus offers a speculative history of the soul. Although a concept like the soul may feel out of place in what can be described as a "secular...technologically hyper-sophisticated civilisation" (Duggan, "Postmodernism" 558), the Culture's reason for believing in some kind of soul, or essential inner self, comes from their technology: "Even if your civilisation had somehow grown up without the concept, it was kind of forced upon you once you had the means of recording the precise, dynamic state of someone's mind and either placing it directly into the brain of another body, or storing it as some sort of scale-reduced – but still full – abstract inside an artificial substrate" (Banks, *Surface* 123). The reason the Culture takes the mind to be the essence of the self is because it really can transplant minds from one body to another, and Culture ships even keep a "standard stock of mindless bodies" for such procedures, showing their disposability and object status that Esposito points out (Banks, *Surface* 92). The "soul," as the Culture uses the term, did not exist as such prior to this technical achievement. This transhumanist perspective also creates a sense of analogy between humans and the ship Minds. In the essay "A Few Notes on the Culture" Banks suggests that humans and Minds have the same kind of being, writing that "Culture starships - that is all classes of ship above inter-planetary - are sentient; their Minds...bear the same relation to the fabric of the ship as a human brain does to the human body; the Mind is the important bit, and the rest is a life-support and transport system." *The Hydrogen Sonata* reinforces this transhuman equivalence when it describes a ship Mind (the *Caconym*) that has "agreed to house the mind-state –



the soul, albeit reduced – of another Mind (the *Zoologist*) inside it” (Banks 136). The fact that the means to distinguish body and mind applies to ships and humans alike creates a notion of soul that is not just human, that indicates how both ship Minds and humans are the citizens of the Culture, and it shows that the means, the *technical dispositif*, has created the *conceptual dispositif* of the soul, because otherwise equating the ship Minds and humans is described as ridiculous, given that a Mind thinking at the pace of a human is seen as “sheer laziness” (Banks, *Hydrogen* 138).

The term soul seems to indicate a theological aspect of the Culture’s *dispositifs*. Although the Culture is a secular society (with the plots of *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* appearing critical of religion), the term ‘soul’ appears frequently, raising questions about the term’s meaning within the Culture and as a *conceptual dispositif*. Agamben etymologically connects the term *dispositif* to the Greek term *oikonomia* in a “theological genealogy of economy” (“Apparatus?” 8). Agamben creates a sense of continuity between the theological Christian context where *oikonomia* referred to the “economy of redemption and salvation” and the technological *dispositifs* of contemporary capitalism where the shared goal is “to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (“Apparatus?” 10, 12). The continuity is based on making humans useful to an exterior purpose, on making people a means whether it be for the political institution of the church or for the production of capital. In the Culture, at least for its citizens, this sense of exploitation is absent and the continuity Agamben describes is broken, because even if the Culture is a utopia where subjectivity is inescapably

technological, that technology is used to ensure the rights and freedom of decision-making for souls. The re-emergence of the soul in the Culture, as an effect of technology, makes people into ends rather than means. Most often, references to souls are made when a Culture Mind is backing up another Mind or human in case they die. Writing about the representation of rights in literature, Lynn Hunt argues that “we are most certain that a human right is at issue when we feel horrified by its violation” (26). We will likely, for example, feel horrified by the way Lededje was sold into slavery in Sichult’s capitalist economy. In the context of the Culture itself, the novels conspicuously work to the opposite effect, making the rights of Culture citizens an issue in order to respect them and referencing souls to show technology ensuring the rights commensurate with the Culture’s concept of personhood.

This emphasis on the disembodied mind as the politically valued person resonates with readings of other Culture texts, particularly Jude Roberts’s reading of cultural exclusion in *Consider Phlebas* and “The State of the Art,” texts featuring acts of cannibalism that establish “the inhumanity of the other” (196). The scenes of violence and consumption that Roberts references are fleshy, heavy with bodies being picked apart or already disincorporated into bowls, plates, and other tableware. When these Culture texts create a sense of otherness, they incorporate seemingly thoughtless bodies; when they describe the rights of personhood, they refer to the disembodied soul.

Having a neural lace is what makes a person a citizen of the Culture because the neural lace is what allows the Culture to offer protection and the right to life beyond a single body, because, without the neural lace, the disembodied self that the Culture

considers to be the essential self simply would not exist. Lededje has not really arrived with zero documentation. She has arrived with the necessary and sufficient documentation of having had a neural lace in her head. In order for this technology to work, it must interact with a person's body, the very body that the Culture's *conceptual dispositif* marginalizes. In conversation with Lededje, Sensia describes how a neural lace works: "A full back-up-capable neural lace grows with the brain it's part of, it beds in over the years, gets very adept at mirroring every detail of the mind it interpenetrates and co-exists with" (Banks, *Surface* 78). Sensia uses "brain" and "mind" interchangeably here, raising the question of where the body ends and the mind and soul begin. The necessity of a neural lace integrating with a body over many years shows that the technical mechanism of capturing a person's mind is essential to the Culture's *dispositif* of citizenship. Sensia's language in conversation with Lededje describes the viable mind-state as if it were its own existence, something that persons could have or have not, but that mind-state is primarily a product of the neural lace, with all that implies regarding Lededje's new personhood also being a product of that technology. If there is an aspiration toward universal inclusion in Sensia's language, it is because the Culture takes its *dispositif* of citizenship to include the essence of every self. The Culture maintains a transhumanist understanding of persons because its *technical dispositifs* allow it to dispose of bodies while keeping mind-states viable. As Lededje is naturalized into the Culture, we can see how its concept of personhood and *dispositif* of citizenship are contingent on the *technical dispositif*.

## **Administering “the Right to Have Rights”**

The contingency evident in the Culture’s *dispositif* of citizenship invites some reflection on the philosophical labour put into developing politically inclusive *conceptual dispositifs*. Since Hannah Arendt’s writing on human rights, philosophers have sought a *conceptual dispositif* that can achieve the work of personhood. However, the utopian and critical framework of increased attention to the *technical dispositifs* in the Culture novels suggests that this conceptual work needs to acknowledge its technological context. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt shows how human rights failed to create a more inclusive practice of citizenship that could account for stateless people and refugees. The concept of human rights, as Arendt discusses it, emerged during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in Europe, from the French Revolution to the two World Wars. Ostensibly meant to ensure equality and inclusion for all—although discrimination by race, ethnicity, and gender persisted—human rights were developed to provide norms for national politics, even if how this worked varied by state. The perplexity is that human rights turn out to be difficult to distinguish from “civil rights—that is the varying rights of citizens in different countries” (Arendt 293). What was supposed to be normatively prior, human rights, appeared only as an effect following how states administered civil rights. For refugees and other stateless people, there was no one obviously bound to ensure their “right to have rights” (Arendt 296). The perplexity of human rights is that they had been defined as “‘inalienable’ because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings

lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them” (Arendt 291-2). This is in part caused by how sovereignty was located in modern nation-states. Sovereignty did not belong to universal humanity, but to “the people”: “Man appeared as the only sovereign in matters of law as the people was proclaimed the only sovereign in matters of government...In other words, man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people” (Arendt 291). At this moment, Agamben points out, defining membership in “the people” became “the highest political task” (*Homo Sacer* 130). Importantly, these *dispositifs* of “the people” are typically defined by territory. The function of human rights and personhood, meant to connect the spheres of humanity and citizenship in general, turns out to be nationally contingent.

Conceptually, Arendt’s work shows that we are at a loss for a “normative justification of rights” because the “*right* to have rights cannot be of the same order as the rights possessed by those who are already members of a polity” (Benhabib 104, 106). This kind of normative justification would have to supersede notions of “the people” that discriminate by categories such as race or ethnicity. This is where Arendt’s writing has inspired significant conceptual work by philosophers hoping to provide that normative justification. Esposito has sought to develop a concept of the impersonal to “neutralize [the *dispositif* of the person’s] exclusionary power” (*Third Person* 12). Agamben argues that the figure of the refugee is a useful starting point for such thinking, that it functions

as “a limit concept that radically calls...for a long overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted” (*Homo Sacer* 134). Along a different conceptual route, several scholars have followed Étienne Balibar’s notion of equaliberty, suggesting that everyone shares “an equal claim to political activity,” and therefore, a right to have rights (Gündogdu 183). These *conceptual dispositifs* share a goal of binding rights to the human, of dismantling exclusionary notions of humanity, and of grounding a polity that is not imbricated with an exclusionary hierarchy of types of persons. This work is compelling and even persuasive in theory, but, because it is a continuing conceptual problem that has not achieved consensus despite the innovations on display, a different way of thinking is needed.

Considering these normative *conceptual dispositifs* against the utopian elements of the Culture novels, we can see the importance of how science fiction draws our attention to the *technical* counterparts of *conceptual dispositifs*. Although many of the philosophers who respond to Arendt practice critical theory from a materialist perspective, it seems that, in this case, they have relied too much on conceptual justification when the technological means to adequately ensure the relevant rights are also in question. The problem with personhood, its failure of connection and reiteration of separation, and with equaliberty or considerations of the figure of the refugee is not some conceptual weakness. Rather, what is required is a different direction of thinking because “citizenship is the materialization of sovereignty” in a territorial context (Stevens 219). As we saw above, the efficacy of the Culture’s *dispositif* of citizenship is rooted in

their technology, and one thing that recent philosophers have missed is the importance of limited technology in Arendt's account.

Arendt points to the limits of technology in her discussion of naturalisation. Prior to the conditions of the World Wars, naturalisation in European nation-states was a small-scale process. It functioned as “an appendage to the nation-state's legislation that reckoned only with “nationals,” people born in its territory and citizens by birth. Naturalisation was needed in exceptional cases, for single individuals whom circumstances might have driven into a foreign territory” (Arendt 284). Once the mass displacements of the wars began, this tool became ineffectual. Nation-states suddenly faced immense numbers that overwhelmed their capacity to register people: “The whole process broke down when it became a question of handling mass applications for naturalisation: even from the purely administrative point of view, no European civil service could possibly have dealt with problem [of stateless populations]” (Arendt 284-5). The problem Arendt points to here is not necessarily one of identity or immigration status, although those were not irrelevant. What necessarily matters in this description is the inadequacy of state technologies to process applications and register people as residents or new citizens. Even if states took concepts of human rights seriously, Arendt's point is that the technology of the states was not able to ensure them, and thus what I am calling adequate *technical dispositifs* were lacking. In these conditions of mass displacement that Arendt writes about, conditions that global events like climate change will replicate and surpass, the technological and administrative capacities of states

become a limiting factor to *dispositifs* of citizenship when states lack the technology to adequately meet the obligations created by concepts such as human rights or equaliberty.

A recent example of this technological limitation can be seen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Many states have struggled to register new unemployment applications because the unemployment systems are too old (as in, up to forty years) to handle the surge of applicants. Adding to the problem, the programming language the systems use, called COBOL (Common Business Oriented Language), is old enough that only older generations of computer programmers are likely to be familiar with it, and it has not been taught in American universities since the 1980s (Lee). The barrier here is not how the nation conceives of its citizens (although such arguments are certainly adjacent to this example). The barrier is that the nation's capacity to ensure protections for citizens is limited by the efficacy of its technology.

We can understand Arendt's discussion of refugees and *Surface Detail's* naturalisation scenario as sitting at opposite ends of a spectrum of technological scarcity and efficacy. What stateless people experienced as a limit to naturalisation, as Arendt describes it, is, for Lededje, the very means by which she becomes a citizen of the Culture because the Culture has technology adequate to its concept of personhood. Fredric Jameson argues that utopias in fiction are "motivated" by 'specific dilemmas and offer to solve fundamental social problems...by the persistent and obsessive search for a simple, single shot solution to all our ills" (11). *Surface Detail* and, as I will show in the next section, *Exit West* raise the problem of rightlessness and personhood with their representations of sudden and abrupt departures and arrivals, and single shot solution



they share is infinitely capable technology, technology that can ensure either mass egalitarian democratic participation or the fundamental right of viable mind-states to continue existing if they so choose. Philosophers have sought to solve the problem of personhood with new *conceptual dispositifs*, but *Surface Detail*'s utopian perspective reveals another required direction of thinking, directed towards developing *technical dispositifs* and the administrative capacity to utilize them in order to realize equaliberty or to meet the conceptual challenge Agamben finds in the figure of the refugee.

### **Humanity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* stages a similar utopian critique as Banks's Culture novels by way of a very different style and setting. *Exit West* has a present day, or at most near-future setting, but incorporates an element of the fantasy that raises the issue of the rights of refugees and their connections to their destination countries. Similarly to the Culture novels, *Exit West* roots a normative concept of universally human rights in the technology of states. In *Exit West* humanity emerges in the materialization of horizontal connections among people.

*Exit West* follows the young couple Nadia and Saeed as they travel through a series of mysterious doors to escape their home country, which is not named but described as an ambiguous Middle-Eastern country driven to civil war by emerging militants. As violence takes over Nadia and Saeed's city... "rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country... A normal door... could become a special door, and it could

happen without warning, to any door at all” (Hamid 72). Nadia and Saeed travel through these doors to the Mykonos island in Greece, to London, and eventually to Marin county in northern California. The novel’s narrative tracks the breakdown of existing communities, the temporary emergence of new communities among migrants, and an idealized emergence of new political units where the ties of people to territory to state are fuzzier. Like the Culture novels, in a few key passages, *Exit West* draws attention to the mechanics of political inclusion, how it happens that refugees and immigrants are given rights, and from that political inclusion, an idea of an inclusive humanity emerges.

*Exit West* directly addresses the idea of humanity in a passage that resorts to the kind of speculative solution to society’s ills that Jameson describes. Near the end of the novel, Nadia and Saeed live in Marin, California, where an immigrant community is working to create a

plebiscite...which sought a ballot on the question of the creation of a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from. How this assembly would coexist with other preexisting bodies of government was as yet undecided. It might at first have only a moral authority, but that authority could be substantial, for unlike those other entities for which some humans were not human enough to exercise suffrage, this new assembly would speak from the will of all the people, and in the face of that will, it was hoped, greater justice might be less easily denied. (220-1)

The passage raises several connections to political philosophy and political science, including new ways of voting and new kinds of political territories. The idea that a new polity may emerge within and democratically interact with existing polities hints at a system that political scientists call “stakeholder citizenship,” a system that “allows not only for overlapping membership [within different polities], but also for nested

membership in polities contained within larger polities” (Bauböck 686). There is also the direct language of “humans” who are “not human enough,” a phrase indicating that, for political systems that ensure civil rights, common humanity is not really the standard. This new assembly’s dedication to common humanity is not only a distinction of attitude, however. In a line that shortly follows the above passage, someone shows Saeed a “a little device” that “made it possible to tell one person from another and ensure they could vote only once, and it was being manufactured in vast numbers, at a cost so small as to be almost nothing” (Hamid 221). *Exit West* does not take up the philosophical labor of redefining common humanity, instead, it speculates about technologies that could actually manifest something like the “will of all the people,” that would make it easy for everyone to participate in democratic systems. For *Exit West*, this image of humanity where no one is not human enough can only be realized with technologies that ensure the possibility of equal civic participation.

*Exit West* represents the political status of migrants by emphasizing connections to infrastructure. When Saeed and Nadia first arrive in London, they live in an area that is cut off from the city’s power grid and services. The disconnection recalls descriptions of the divide between white and black parts of colonial sites from Frantz Fanon’s work: “in London there were parts as bright as ever, brighter than anyplace Saeed or Nadia had seen before,...and in contrast the city’s dark swaths seemed darker, more significant...In dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed. The trains kept running, skipping stops near Saeed and Nadia but felt as rumble beneath their feet” (146). Political exclusion becomes very tangible here by way of the description of

people disconnected from people by the distribution of technology and resources. Later, the city of London expands to accommodate the immigrants, and the initial change in the immigrants' status comes with their inclusion in infrastructure: "Nadia worked on a mostly female crew that laid pipe, colossal spools and pallets of it in different colors, orange and yellow and black and green. Through these pipes soon would run the lifeblood and thoughts of the new city, all those things that connect people" (181). *Exit West* consistently draws attention to the significance of access to civic technologies as a standard indicating political inclusion. The novel does not deal with naturalization processes in destination countries but does give ample space to infrastructural integration in terms of voting and resources. In these descriptions, humanity is a creation of states and political organizations that equitably distribute technology. The significant achievement of migrant communities in London and Marin is the creation of tangible connections among people, internet cables that allow the exchange of opinion, lines that supply power, and machines that express political opinions equally—*dispositifs* that level the field of humanity. This can be usefully distinguished from a shared sense of identity, comradeship, or even a clear idea of who deserves civic rights in a polity. Like *Surface Detail*, *Exit West* directs our attention to the mechanisms of citizenship and humanity rather than the concepts that try to bind states to ideas of human rights. The novels prioritize the concept of *technical dispositifs* as useful for political inclusion rather than *conceptual dispositifs*.

## Technology and Territory

The capacities of the Culture’s technology also impact another dimension of personhood, the coincidence of citizenship and territory. Robert Duggan has written about how Banks’s Culture novel *Matter* “attempts to think of political space in three”—rather than two—“dimensions, both in the depths of outer space and in the inner space of [a] planet” (“Geopolitics” 900). The political activity of the Culture’s *dispositifs* is shaped by their astronomical—rather than geographic—context. Typically, a stable territory is understood as necessary for practices of citizenship. Shourideh Molavi explains: “Manifestations of liberal citizenship...posit a certain connection between a distinct geographical and territorial entity, or a sovereign nation-state, and the practice, rights and obligations of citizenship” (27). There is a kind of “oneness” binding citizens to a “territorially bounded civil society and state with rights and obligations in these spheres as well” (Shils 12). Agamben writes that *dispositifs* manage bodies in a way that “purports to be useful,” and in this case, that use is the consolidation of people and territory. Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* famously argues that the novel and the newspaper were technologies that helped create a shared idea of a shared national consciousness, solidifying practices of sovereignty “evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory” (19).

The setting of the Culture novels disrupts this consolidation of territory, sovereignty, and citizenship. In “A Few Notes on the Culture,” Banks contrasts the premise of Culture’s political structure with those bound to a single planet:

The thought processes of a tribe, a clan, a country or a nation-state are essentially two-dimensional, and the nature of their power depends on the same flatness. Territory is all-important; resources, living-space, lines of communication; all are determined by the nature of the plane...Essentially, the contention is that our currently dominant power systems cannot long survive in space.

Banks reiterates the importance of territory found in the work of political theorists, and his description suggests that territory defines the scope of what is useful for a state. For the Culture, however, there is no specific territory to protect or consolidate with a notion of “the people.” For the Culture, territory, is a function of technology. When Lededje first wakes up in the Culture, Sensia explains her own surprise:

“You just immaterialised here, my dear...in a one-time, one-way emergency-entanglement vicariously inherited legacy system event of what us Minds would generally call Laughably High Unexpectancy. And most bizarrely of all you came with what one might call no paperwork, zero documentation,” an arrival “entirely without precedent in roughly the last fifteen hundred busy years.” (Banks, *Surface* 66-67)

The stylistic register of the Culture novels is on display here in the Mind’s sense of humor. Significantly though, this moment also shows that Sensia was unaware of the exact reach of Culture technology and that anyone from the planet Sichult had a neural lace. While Lededje was still on Sichult, the neural lace made her “extraterritorial,” such that apparent political territory does not determine the full context of her personhood or citizenship (Hart 12). Coupling this unexpected reach of technology with the Culture’s aspiration toward universal political inclusion, the result is a political system where territory is marginalized by the Culture’s *dispositif* of citizenship and where territory extends contingently and mutably, as far as the *technical dispositifs* can reach. Instead of subordinating technology to territory, the scenario of naturalisation in *Surface Detail*

subordinates territory to technology. For the Culture, both citizenship and territory are a function of technology.

Since Arendt, critics and philosophers have sought a normative *conceptual dispositif* to justify more inclusive practices of citizenship. But more inclusive concepts cannot overcome the limits of the means and technologies we have to work with. Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* argues that one of the cognitive effects of utopian fictions like *Surface Detail* is that they imperfectly point toward "the *transformation* of actuality into utopia" (69). This direction is imperfect because novels like *Exit West* and *Surface Detail* cannot give us the means to download our minds, verify our souls, or realize universal suffrage, but they can at least direct our thinking, contra directions like the concept of the impersonal, toward the limits and opportunities of our *technical dispositifs*, foregoing the priorities of a stable notion of people and sovereign borders and relying instead on technology's capacity to confer rights and protections on those who would be citizens.

## Conclusion

### Encountering Community and its Task of Thinking

This dissertation has examined the representation of community in twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction, framed as an investigation into community in a post-Anderson literary context. The post-Anderson qualification is a matter of design, not of findings, and the recurring presence of migrants and conspicuous socio-cultural difference within the setting and plot of each of the novels examined here was the starting point for their assembly into a larger project. This conclusion has two parts. First, I review the findings about community as a site of encounter in the novels. Second, I consider how these findings offer tasks of thinking that can be taken as productive alternatives to the task of conceptual invention regarding the idea of twenty-first-century community. When I use the term “community” in this conclusion, I use it differently than Anderson. I use “community” to refer to conditions of encounter—to groups of people who are neighbors, who live in the same city, who are citizens of the same state, who see each other while walking in a city, and who might experience each other as interdependent. This is primarily a geographical community, but I include the last qualification because awareness of others outside of one’s state and awareness of states’ influence on one another are increasingly common and significant in the twenty-first century in a way that requires definitions of community to flexibly accommodate geography and international connections. The point of this conclusion is to articulate the task of thinking that confronts readers after analyzing encounters of community in



twenty-first-century Anglophone literature. The point is not only to explicate qualities of community in this body of fiction but also to show how those qualities create an ongoing critical agenda that offers itself as an alternative to the task of philosophical invention.

### **Encountering Community in Twenty-first-century Anglophone Literature**

Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents community and identity as problems of language. The challenge for language users, for people who speak to and about each other, is to use language in a way that can capture increasing variety within a community and in a way that is increasingly precise. In *White Teeth*, there is a conspicuous tension about naming communities. On the one hand, a character, referring to the variety of migrants who appear in the novel, says “Accept it...We’re all English now, mate” (Smith 160, emphasis in original). On the other hand, Alsana Iqbal says to Samad at one point, in a line often quoted by critics, “you go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale” (Smith 196). Faced with these two points of view, readers might be tempted to dismiss them as merely aesthetic, as another instance of the novel’s various postmodern elements, but these two lines also raise a problem of language. “English” refers to a variety of mixed-race and culturally hybrid characters in the novel and refers to no one in the novel, if the term is supposed to do the work of describing their particular or essential identity. The term “English” is therefore both more flexible and capacious but also critiqued as a useless signifier. As I mentioned in my concluding comments in the earlier chapter on

*White Teeth*, critics have interpreted this aspect of the novel as a critique of “Englishness,” but this also poses a challenge for using language: How can we describe communities when names refer to both more and more people and fewer and fewer people, or no one at all? This problem of language pulls language users towards the requirements of using terms in increasingly general ways and towards the need to use language more precisely, to capture particulars more effectively.

The need to use language more precisely when describing identity is also evident in *Americanah*, where Ifemulu writes about herself as a “Non-American Black.” This is an instance of using increasingly hyphenated or listed terms to capture important elements of a person’s sense of self and their cultural contingency. If language is going to refer appropriately to various identities, then language will also get more specific and innovative to acknowledge particularity. The task that twenty-first-century Anglophone literature generates regarding community as a problem of language is using terminology at each end of the spectrum of general and particular at the same time. The increasing hybridity of communities means that the names we use for communities will refer more and more widely while we also have to use language appropriate to increasingly particular identities within those groups.

Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents encountering community as a problem of knowledge of others and of others’ experience in a shared space. This problem of knowledge has similar conditions to the problem of language described above. Is calling everyone and no one “British” a problem of terminology or a problem of the idea of a British identity? In the novels analyzed in this dissertation, both the problem

of language and the problem of knowledge persist. I suggest that the novels point to both a knowledge deficit regarding how to ascribe some minimal shared quality to a community and to an uneven distribution of knowledge within communities that results in people who interact in daily life having different perspectives of their shared world. The narrator of *White Teeth* describes Archie and Samad as affectively motivated by their increasing confusion of the world around them:

[Archie and Samad] came [to O'Connell's bar] because they *knew* this place. They knew it inside and out. And if you can't explain to your kid why glass will shatter at certain impacts but not others, if you can't understand how a balance can be struck between democratic secularism and religious belief with the same state, or you can't recall the circumstances in which Germany was divided, then it feels good—no, it feels *great*—to know at least one particular place, one particular period, from firsthand experience . . . to be the authority. (Smith 204)

Part of the desire that motivates *White Teeth*, the desire that drives its narrative, is—as critics have aptly pointed out—the desire for certain and reliable knowledge. The narrator positions Archie and Samad in a deficit of knowledge relative to the communities that they encounter, relative to the religious communities in the London area and to the German state that they see on television. How to describe community itself is not just a problem of language, it is a problem of how cultures with apparently incompatible values can get along and a problem of interacting with more and more of the world via mass media while lacking specific knowledge of that world.

There is also a problem of knowledge as it is distributed unevenly in communities. In the chapter on *Americanah*, I cited several passages where some characters are aware of gendered and raced experiences in everyday life and others are not. *Americanah* represents a problem of knowledge within communities where there is

uneven knowledge of the impact race and gender make on everyday life. For those who are visibly non-white or present as women, knowledge of the impact of race and gender comes from personal experience. The personal experiences of different characters give them different evidence of what their community is like, including whether race and gender continue to impact everyday life. The result is that people who encounter one another in the same community acquire uneven knowledge about that community. The problem of knowledge is a problem of the community being knowable—how is it that religious and secular groups can interact, be neighbors, not get along, and still be a community? The problem of knowledge is also a consistent lack of knowledge of others created by different life experiences. Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature humbles its characters relative to the community and people around them.

By foregrounding this problem of knowledge, the novels I analyzed here are not distinct from the history of the novel form. The novel is often called a vehicle of interiority for how it represents aspects of characters that are not actually accessible in our world. The plot of those novels, and here we could take *Middlemarch* and *Vanity Fair* as examples, is often motivated by a desire, in those cases a desire for happy marriage, that is doomed because of a character's lack of knowledge, because of their naivete about others, social norms, and the challenges of living in a capitalist economy. A knowledge deficit on the part of the main character or many characters is an essential part of the novel form. Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature repeats this structure by positioning characters in a knowledge deficit regarding the communities they encounter around them and regarding the difference that visible identities can make.

Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents communities as sites where, as Appadurai put it, nations and states have become each other's project (39). Novels such as *White Teeth* and *Home Fire* draw attention to the multiple nations and groups living in one state, and one way to read the political units in these novels is as multi-nation-states. *White Teeth* has been read, including in this dissertation, as a novel about multi-ethnic London. The reference to plurality there, in the "multi," refers to an ongoing separation of groups. Even though they are all citizens of the United Kingdom, characters of varying religions and ethnicities often speak of one another not as equals and without any sense of comradeship but normatively, speaking of others as following the wrong religion or following religion in the wrong way. Late in the novel, a leader in the Muslim extremist group KEVIN refers to Dr. Marcus Chalfen by saying: "The greatest evil of the infidel is here in this very borough of Brent. I will tell you, and you will not believe it, Brothers, but there is a man in this very community who believes that he can improve upon the creation of Allah" (Smith 393). It seems very unlikely that Marcus Chalfen would consider himself part of KEVIN's community, and the speech appears to refer to both the religious community with the term "brothers" and the geographic community of "Brent." There are two relationships of "community" here. First, there is a "preaching to the choir" moment, where the speaker and the audience share a set of religious and cultural values creating a stable sense of horizontal comradeship, to use Anderson's description of community. Second, there is the geographic community, "Brent," and this is where the territory and state become a project of the culture or nation. In *Home Fire*, we also see the term "British" used to do cultural

work, to require a sense of nationalism and an appearance of cultural assimilation even of those who are already citizens. In these novels, cultures encounter and claim the state, citizenship, and geography. Anderson writes that the nation “is imagined as *sovereign*” (7), and this sensibility persists, where groups that use normative language and evangelize according to normative values work at and claim the territory and people with whom they interact. These novels represent the British state as a site of multi-national competition for cultural dominance, and this might appear to validate Appadurai’s claim that the nation-state is coming to an end, but the institution of the state itself, in all of the novels I have examined here, is represented as a sustainable site of cultural conflict, mixing, and hybridity. The term “nation-state” might need revision or replacement in light of this, but if that is the case, then it is only because we have been referring to the socio-political unit inappropriately, neglecting the cultural heterogeneity already there.

Finally, twenty-first-century Anglophone literature uses utopian critique to imagine more inclusive political systems, systems that respond to human mobility by more readily conferring civil rights on immigrants and that better connect people in new, and more imaginative, kinds of territories. The representation of rights in Iain M. Banks’s *Culture* novels connects the idea of human rights to technologies of the state and frames state technology rather than the concept of personhood as the more productive avenue for critique when it comes to expanding rights (be they civil or human rights). Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* gestures at the formation of new polities in light of mass migration, where it feels like “the whole planet [is] on the move” (Hamid 169). In light of all this movement and increasing global interdependence in general, communities face a

challenge of organizing political structures that can effectively connect people who live in different countries but are affected by one another's decisions. This idea has been addressed at length in political science research, and Jürgen Habermas has used the European Union as an example of how citizens of different states, distinct from their state organizations, "lack an arena in which they can even recognize their shared *social* interests across national boundaries and transform them into *political* conflicts" (551). It is a challenge of designing political organizations that can effectively connect people as political peers and establish a sense of solidarity reflecting "a horizontal view of citizenship...which accords as much significance to the relations between citizens as to the vertical relationship between the state and the individual" (Lister 51). *Exit West* raises this issue of redesigning polities by speculating about a world where there has been so much global movement that old state structures are rendered obviously inadequate, a kind of intense exaggeration of the conditions Appadurai writes about in *Modernity at Large*. The closing of the novel imagines this problem of creating new polities as being solvable by an equitable distribution of voting technology that makes political peers of people across communities. In both the Culture novels and *Exit West*, more inclusive political systems are imagined as effects of how states utilize technology.

### **The Task of Thinking in Twenty-first-century Anglophone Literature**

Twenty-first-century Anglophone Literature points to several aspects of community that can be understood as research problems or problems for critical thinking—how to use language in a changing context, how to adapt ethics to uneven

knowledge in shared worlds, how to design political organization to facilitate solidarity. By defining these research problems, twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents contemporary community as a site that instigates a task of thinking. I take this phrase from an essay by Heidegger from the end of his career. For Heidegger, “philosophy is metaphysics,” and “metaphysics thinks beings as a whole—the world, man, God—with respect to Being, with respect to the belonging together of being in Being” (432). However, by the end of his career, this kind of thinking had been displaced by “the technological-scientific rationalization ruling the present age” (Heidegger 448).<sup>16</sup> Although Heidegger offered a new philosophical research agenda for thinking based on his own work (shifting from “being” to “presence”), he closes his essay in a way that indicates that this revision of thinking will be a continued need: “The task of thinking would then be the surrender of previous thinking to the determination of the matter for thinking” (Heidegger 449). The point of Heidegger’s lecture is that philosophy may encounter a time when it does not know what, exactly, to address or study and its task is determining a new agenda for itself.

In the case of reading literature and philosophy around the idea of twenty-first-century community, I suggest that philosophy may have encountered a topic where one of its modes of research—normative conceptual invention—is less reliable than the task of redetermining the task of thinking, the latter being precisely what the readings of

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<sup>16</sup> Heidegger says that “the fundamental characteristic of this scientific attitude is its cybernetic, that is, technological character” (434). The use of the word cybernetic is striking because it is so easy to associate Heidegger with the early twentieth century, for the good reasons of the publication of *Being and Time* (1927) and wariness towards his affiliation with the Nazis. However, given the post-World War II prominence of cybernetics in German thinking and its international influence, Heidegger’s late-career essay serves as a good example of responding to one’s situation, of asking after the use of thinking in a particular context.



literature here have inspired. Reading twenty-first-century Anglophone literature for how it represents community against existing conceptual work from continental philosophy confronts readers with the same kind of moment that Heidegger identified, where there is a choice between previous research agendas, especially regarding previous agendas of conceptual invention, and redetermining what is worth thinking about in this new and evolving context. Reading literature and philosophy together makes the latter more feasible and more productive.

Given the kinds of communities represented in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature, normative conceptual invention may not achieve the ends sought by philosophers who appear to be seeking more inclusive communities. For example, if we briefly consider Chapter 2, the concept of the common that Esposito gestures at and that *White Teeth* realizes might refute the idea, evoked in *Home Fire*, that groups of people are necessarily enemies. However, new concepts of community cannot meet all the needs or challenges created when encountering cultural heterogeneity, at least as they are represented by twenty-first-century Anglophone literature. These challenges manifest more finely as uneven knowledge, as inadequate language, and as unsatisfying political organization and these are problems that demand precision and an attitude open to new circumstances and ongoing learning. I also offered an example of how literature offers an alternative to conceptual invention regarding ongoing tasks of research in Chapter 4.

One of the reasons why Badiou's *Ethics* appears in this dissertation despite his stated views on the importance of race is because his formulation of ethics is primarily a statement of attitude toward taking on new knowledge, something that twenty-first-

century Anglophone literature requires of characters when encountering community on an ongoing basis. Being open to disorganization, as an attitude toward new knowledge, is a better means to respond to new encounters with cultural heterogeneity in community than any single concept. Rather than seeking new concepts, scholars working at the intersection of literature and philosophy, especially when working with a body of literature defined by its recency, can surrender previous tasks of thinking and assess what is needed in the literary worlds they encounter, not only responding to existing concepts but defining new agendas of critical thinking to try out in an extratextual context. Twenty-first-century Anglophone literature represents the encounter of community as a site that demands the continuous redetermination of the task of thinking.

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