

**DIGITAL NATIVES:
IMAGINING THE MILLENNIAL IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION**

by

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ABSTRACT

Generational labels, e.g. ‘millennial’, provide a shorthand for conceptualising social change over time. The notion that a particular generation are ‘digital natives’ offers representable solidity for writers seeking to depict how today’s digital media technologies shape individuals and societies in increasingly complex, obscured, and unpredictable ways.

Synthesising literary and media theory, this thesis examines how recent novels construct, complicate and subvert techno-generational frameworks for representing social change. Chapters offer analyses of Jonathan Franzen and Nathan Hill’s fixations on digital natives from self-consciously ‘elder’ perspectives; Tao Lin and Olivia Sudjic’s use of ‘flat’ aesthetics to represent the affective perspectives of the ‘digital native’; Natasha Stagg and Tony Tulathimutte’s efforts to apprehend emergent material relations in digital platform capitalism; and Tommy Orange’s enunciation of an indigenous digitality.

Acknowledging limitations in popular use of the term, this thesis approaches the ‘digital native’ as a performative identity. Literary engagements with techno-generational frameworks do not only reflect pre-existing realities but play an active role in producing new social identities. They demonstrate that debates over generational labels in contemporary cultural discourse—particularly among those who might otherwise be described as ‘middle class’—produce models of social identification that frame a fast-changing and increasingly digital socioeconomic milieu.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Technological Change as Generational Change	7
Born Digital	18
Generational Representation.....	25
Imagining the Millennial	43
CHAPTER ONE Old Man Yells at Cloud: Technology, Realism and Ideology in <i>Purity</i> and <i>The Nix</i>	59
Clouding Realism	68
Time Bombshells	82
Let's Be Realistic.....	98
CHAPTER TWO Work with Pleasure: The Influencer and Platform Capitalism in <i>Surveys</i> and <i>Private Citizens</i>	117
Serial Entrepreneurse	122
Platform Capitalism	136
The Commercialization of the Body.....	152
CHAPTER THREE Interface: Flat Affect and the Mediated Other in <i>Taipei</i> and <i>Sympathy</i>	171
Flat Affect.....	176
Flat Screen	187
Flattened Difference	202
CHAPTER FOUR Digitally Native: Technology and Survivance in <i>There There</i>	223
Digital Indigeneity	229
A Hard, Fast Future	243
Survivance Technics.....	256
CONCLUSION The Limitations of Techno-Generational Frameworks	275
Generational Conflict.....	282
BIBLIOGRAPHY	292

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The Old Man and the Key’, <i>The Simpsons</i> , Fox, 10 March 2002.....	60
Figure 2: Credited to ‘elfling’ in Hunter, ‘Old Man Yells at Cloud’, <i>Daily Kos</i> , 2 October 2007 < https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2007/10/2/393228/-Old-Man-Yells-At-Cloud > [accessed 14 June 2019].....	60
Figure 3: Shawn Handyside, ‘Old Man Yells at Cloud’, <i>Halolz</i> , 11 November 2009 < http://www.halolz.com/2009/11/11/old-man-yells-at-cloud/ > [accessed 14 June 2019].....	60
Figure 4: ‘Route of the first three-network transmission in 1977’, <i>SRI International</i> < https://www.sri.com/sites/default/timeline/timeline.php?timeline=business-entertainment#!&innovation=internetworking > [accessed 3 July 2018]	69
Figure 5: ‘MAX Participant and Network Connections’, <i>Mid-Atlantic Crossroads (MAX)</i> , < https://wiki.maxgigapop.net/twiki/bin/view/MAX/Network > [accessed 3 July 2018].....	69
Figure 6: Home screen, Apple iPhone iOS 6 (2012).....	188
Figure 7: Home screen, Apple iPhone iOS 7 (2013).....	188
Figure 8: Kinfolk’s Instagram feed (@kinfolk) [accessed 5 December 2019]	196
Figure 9: Olivia Sudjic’s public Instagram feed (@olivia.sudjic) [accessed 5 December 2019]	196
Figure 10: Caspar David Friedrich, <i>View from the Painter’s Studio</i> , c. 1818.....	197
Figure 11: Instagram co-founder Mike Krieger’s first upload to the platform (@mikeyk, 16 July 2010) [accessed 5 December 2019].....	197

INTRODUCTION

Technological Change as Generational Change

If we are to believe today's literary press, a generation has at last found its representative in the Irish novelist Sally Rooney. Born in 1991, Rooney has been hailed as 'millennial fiction's most important voice', a 'Salinger for the Snapchat generation' who 'teaches us [that] millennials should be written about, not ridiculed'.¹ These labels—'millennial' and 'Snapchat generation'—offer a convenient shorthand for conceptualising rapid and ongoing changes to societies and cultures. Digital media technologies have been prominent contributors to this change. An entire economy built on algorithms exerts an enigmatic influence over our everyday routines and desires. Meanwhile, strange new terms such as 'deepfakes' and 'the blockchain' loom on the horizon as future 'disruption'. The idea of a generation of people 'native' to this new, digitized society resituates the otherwise obscure logics of these technologies in the observable behaviour of human individuals around us. Accordingly, numerous literary critics have emphasised references to the internet, social media and email in Rooney's novels, to assert that they have 'the ring of native digital literacy' and reflect 'the extent to which the younger

¹ Ellen Barry, 'How Sally Rooney became millennial fiction's most important voice', *The Independent*, 8 September 2018 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sally-rooney-millennial-fiction-ireland-abortion-referendum-a8522256.html>> [accessed 1 August 2019]; Paula Coccozza, in Sally Rooney, "'I have an aversion to failure": Sally Rooney feels the buzz of her debut novel' (interview with Paula Coccozza for *The Guardian*), 24 May 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/24/sally-rooney-conversations-with-friends-interview-salinger-snapchat-generation>> [accessed 1 August 2019]; Sian Cain, 'Sally Rooney teaches us millennials should be written about, not ridiculed', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/05/sally-rooney-millennials-normal-people>> [accessed 1 August 2019]

generation have subsumed technology into everyday life and thought'.² For these critics, Rooney's characters' familiarity with digital media practices marks them as sites for excavating the significance of these technologies for real societies and cultures.

In this dynamic, it is the representation of technology's mundanity, rather than novelty, that is seen as getting to the heart of its impact. Rooney's debut novel *Conversations with Friends* (2017) depicts a clashing of social bonds amidst the loosening influence of the Irish Catholic Church, the capitalist state, and the nuclear family. As its protagonist puts it, '[t]hings and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn't know and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through things before you understand them'.³ This invocation of 'systems' and 'networks' foregrounds digital media's deep-seated influence in this shifting landscape. Distinctions between 'online' and 'offline' life blur throughout *Conversations* as its protagonist struggles to manage her intimate relationships with others. These relationships are no longer 'confined to memory alone': each can be downloaded as 'one huge text file with time stamps' and approached as 'a Word document which we were writing and editing together'.⁴ Here, the collaborative and non-linear characteristics of an online word-processing application analogises an alternative understanding of social intimacy.

However, despite these references to digital media—and contrary to various attempts to elevate Rooney's dry prose style into a social media-derived generational aesthetic—*Conversations* remains a largely traditional novel.⁵ Rooney herself describes her output as

² Lauren Collins, 'Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head', *The New Yorker*, 31 December 2018 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/07/sally-rooney-gets-in-your-head>> [accessed 2 August 2019]; Jonathan McAloon, 'Conversations with Friends by Sally Rooney – reply to all', *Financial Times*, 21 July 2017 <<https://www.ft.com/content/c1266aa8-6c69-11e7-bfeb-33fe0c5b7eaa>> [accessed 23 September 2019]

³ Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), p. 321.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80; 185.

⁵ See: Collins, 'Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head', n. pag.; See also: Madeleine Schwartz, 'How Should a Millennial Be?', *The New York Review of Books*, 18 April 2019, pp. 39-40 (p. 39)

‘nineteenth-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing’.⁶ The historical particularity of the present provides a scattering of ‘reality effects’ that clothes the formally conventional coming-of-age story at the heart of *Conversations*. It is not even digital media that structures generational differences between the novel’s characters, but rather their economic situations.⁷ Nevertheless, *Conversations* appears to meet a demand for, as Laura Miller expressed in 2011, ‘realistic, character-based narratives’ that do not avoid ‘depictions of how technology is embedded in the lives of ordinary people’.⁸ The significance of references to digital technologies in novels such as *Conversations* lies not in their shocking novelty but rather their newfound givenness among the ‘ordinary’ people that realist fiction has traditionally represented.

The figure of the ‘digital native’ serves to mark the juncture at which digital technologies become ordinary. It forces a confrontation with what Caroline Levine terms ‘the strange familiar’, surprising readers ‘into recognizing precisely those entrenched habits of perception that mystify or occlude ordinary experience’.⁹ Zara Dinnen argues that works of fiction refer to digital media as ‘neither a properly delineated subject nor entirely absent’ because such an effacement is ‘the default mode of media in general’.¹⁰ Media themselves are difficult to visualise because they are what we use to make things visible. This difficulty is exacerbated regarding digital media. As users, we rarely apprehend the complex, networked

⁶ Sally Rooney, qtd. in Collins, ‘Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head’, n. pag.

⁷ As Paula Coccozza observes, when it comes to using technology Rooney’s characters are all ‘surprisingly conservative. All age groups favour email [...] No one has Snapchat’. See: Coccozza, in Rooney, ‘I have an aversion to failure’, n. pag. Meanwhile, Rooney herself expresses greater interest in the ‘economic’ characteristic of her generation than ‘non-essential characteristics’ like digital media usage. See: Sally Rooney, ‘Sally Rooney: “A Large part of my style has definitely developed through writing emails”’ (interviewed by Michael Nolan for *The Irish Times*) 13 November 2017 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sally-rooney-a-large-part-of-my-style-has-definitely-developed-through-writing-emails-1.3289962>> [accessed 29 January 2019], n. pag.

⁸ Laura Miller, ‘How novels came to terms with the internet’, *The Guardian*, 15 January 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/15/novels-internet-laura-miller>> [accessed 10 October 2019], n. pag.

⁹ Caroline Levine, ‘The Strange Familiar: Structure, Infrastructure, and Adiche’s *Americanah*’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 61.4 (Winter 2015), 587-605 (p. 593).

¹⁰ Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 3.

computational logic of our most familiar consumer devices except as after-the-fact translations on visual interfaces.¹¹ This leads Alexander R. Galloway to describe digital media as ‘unrepresentable’: ‘the logic of the thing that most permeates our lives will be the same thing that retreats from any tangible malleability in our hands and minds’.¹² This thesis interrogates realist fiction’s attempt to navigate this crisis through the figure of the ‘digital native’, whose habitual familiarity with digital media renders visible the very invisibility of their processes.

Rather than scouring the source code, many cultural commentators ground abstract discussions of technological phenomena such as ‘Moore’s Law’ and ‘Big Data’ in the often-bemusing habits of different age cohorts as they navigate seemingly eternal matters of work, courtship and family. This is not an extension in a gap in knowledge between the ‘two cultures’ of the sciences and humanities identified by C. P. Snow in 1959, however.¹³ Rather, techno-generational frameworks attempt to bridge a different gap: with the rise of today’s machine-learning techniques, the complexity of a single algorithm can lie beyond the scope of any human expert.¹⁴ In this context, familiar generational labels— ‘boomer’, ‘gen X’, ‘millennial’ and ‘gen Z’— provide digital technologies’ ineffable processes with some representable, human solidity. By interpreting limited reality effects as representative of a generation’s familiarity with digital media technologies, many contemporary literary critics have supplemented novels such as *Conversations* with paratextual discourses that conflate technological and generational change.

In contrast to this approach, which asks how literature can best reflect an existing generational identity, my aim in this thesis is to analyse seven novels that actively engage with these techno-generational discourses and in doing so contribute to an ongoing production of

¹¹ For examinations of this withdrawal, see: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); and Mark B. N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)

¹² Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 92.

¹³ Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

¹⁴ James Bridle explores the cultural and scientific implications of this gap in *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018)

generational identity. To do this, I build on insights from what has come to be termed ‘new formalism’ in literary studies. This approach understands aesthetic forms as not only the passive products of historical and cultural forces but as sites in which these forces are actively conceptualised, reshaped and extended.¹⁵ In this understanding, ‘form’ is not separated from ‘content’ because forms are also the objects of narrative. We tell stories about social arrangements and the way they structure our lives, while these forms also structure the stories we tell. Forms, as the prominent new formalist Caroline Levine writes, ‘can organize both social and literary objects, and they can remain stable over time’.¹⁶ Like formal arrangements in socio-political life, aesthetic forms are ‘real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally *unreal* in being artificial, contingent forms’. Moreover, forms can move out of socio-political life and into literary texts, where they order certain elements and clash with others. Levine describes this as a “collision”—the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology’.¹⁷ Such a collision produces unpredictable, complex effects and cannot be wholly reduced to a dialectic, which is itself one conceptual form among others.

Building on this new formalist approach, I will interrogate how contemporary novels deploy the generation as a particular form to, as Levine puts it, ‘organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter their context or audience’.¹⁸ When we speak of the ‘older’ or ‘younger’ generation—of ‘Gen X’ers’ or ‘millennials’—we imply boundaries within a human population. If pressed, we can usually identify defining calendar dates: ‘millennials’, for instance, might be said to be born between 1980 and 2005.¹⁹ This grouping of a population into generational ‘cohorts’ implies both a difference between them and a unity within them, so

¹⁵ For an overview of this approach, see Marjorie Levinson, ‘What Is New Formalism?’, *PMLA*, 122.2 (March 2007), pp. 558–569

¹⁶ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 18.

¹⁸ Levine, *Forms*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Stephen Fineman, *Organizing Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 49.

‘millennials’ are different to ‘Gen X’ers’ because they share one or more traits that ‘Gen X’ers’ lack, and so on. Since forms like the generation are ‘iterable, efficient ways of imposing order over heterogenous elements’, they can ‘break with any single context’ and carry into another.²⁰ However, when employed in new contexts such forms may encounter elements that they cannot coherently organise, leading to contradictions and unexpected effects. Rather than a given measure of historical change, then, the generation is an organising principle with a particular history and its properties and effects alter depending on the context of its use.

Used by politicians, academics and the public to conceptualise and represent the multifaceted changes that technologies bring to societies, the generation is both contingent on its socio-political environment and an active component within that environment. As a form it is reshaped by the media through which it is circulated even as it is employed to understand how that very same media reshapes individuals and social bonds. By examining this complex overlapping of generational and technological rhythms in ‘techno-generational frameworks’ in detail, this thesis will both contribute to our understanding of how this formal principle operates in both contemporary literature and socio-political discourse more broadly.

With this analysis, this thesis offers a novel intervention in a growing body of scholarship on the interrelation of contemporary literary fiction and the digital. This sub-field is preceded by texts such as William Paulson’s *The Noise of Culture* (1988) and Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone Film Typewriter* (1986), which read literary narratives as responses to shifting media environments across the twentieth century.²¹ Such scholars viewed technologies from the phonograph to the internet as not only new mediums for storytelling but producers of ‘discourse networks’ that transform the textual fabric of even traditional narrative genres,

²⁰ Levine, *Forms*, p. 64.

²¹ William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); see also: Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz (eds.) *Reading Matters: Narratives in the New Media Ecology* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1997)

including the novel.²² Works such as Joseph Tabbi's *Postmodern Sublime* (1999) and Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* (1984) saw late-twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction struggling with the complexity of computational systems as technologies of surveillance, commerce and control.²³ Today's scholarship builds on this existing work while also drawing on wider concerns and methodologies in critical theory. The cyborg feminism of Donna Haraway and posthumanism of N. Katherine Hayles explore our entanglements with technologies and other non-human entities to posit alternatives to the traditional humanist model of the delimited human subject.²⁴ The 'New Media' studies of Lev Manovich and Geert Lovink connect the co-evolution of computational principals and novel forms of cultural expression.²⁵ Within this broad field, a 'media archaeological' approach stresses the materiality of hardware while a 'software studies' approach focuses on how visual representations of new media are designed and programmed.²⁶ Building out of this work, scholars such as Alexander Galloway and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun focus on the ways in which digital technologies provoke and inform new forms of governance under neoliberalism.²⁷ These proliferating sub-fields in what has come to be called 'digital cultures' has provided myself and other literary scholars with the tools to uncover how literary narratives both challenge and reproduce different aspects of the digital.

²² Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990)

²³ Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006)

²⁴ Donna J. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 5-90; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1999)

²⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Geert Lovink, *Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligencia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003)

²⁶ Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (eds.), *Media Archeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Matthew Fuller (ed.), *Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008)

²⁷ Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008)

Crucially, as Seb Franklin writes, ‘the digital’ here does not only describe a technical substrate but also a ‘predominant logical mode’ for conceptualising deeper-rooted concepts like ‘identity’, ‘thought’ and ‘the social’.²⁸ Scholars working today confront what the digital means as a paradigm, a ‘form that delimits what is thinkable as the contemporary’.²⁹ They thereby eschew a residual suspicion among more traditional literary circles that ‘digital culture’ is something of an oxymoron. Such a view is often voiced by prominent authors such as Will Self and Jonathan Franzen, as well as scholars including Stephen Marche in his essay ‘Literature is not Data: Against Digital Humanities’.³⁰ In drawing insights from new media studies—as well as from diverse fields such as affect theory, posthumanism and queer theory—work produced by digital cultural scholars push beyond this impulse to ‘defend the literary from the technological’ and instead, as Tara McPherson, Patrick Jagoda and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes, ‘attend with some care to the precise ways in which literature and technology constitute one another’.³¹ One approach, taken by leading media scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles and Mark B. N. Hansen, has been to analyse this interrelation in works of experimental fiction and texts produced on digital media platforms.³² However, in its focus on experimentation and the materiality of media, this approach does not attend to the subtle tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity that is my focus.

Although often institutionally associated with literature, digital cultural studies’ expansive understanding of the text includes film, television, video games, platforms and other

²⁸ Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), pp. xviii, xiv.

²⁹ Zara Dinnen, ‘(The) Digital’, *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, ed. by Daniel O’Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 213-224 (p. 213)

³⁰ Stephen Marche, ‘Literature is not Data: Against Digital Humanities’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 October 2012 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/literature-is-not-data-against-digital-humanities/>> [accessed 28 May 2019]

³¹ Tara McPherson, Patrick Jagoda and Wendy Hun Kyong Chun, ‘Preface: New Media and American Literature’, *American Literature*, 85.4 (2013), pp. 615-628 (p. 616)

³² See, e.g.: N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Mark B. N. Hansen, ‘The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 45.4 (Winter 2004), pp. 597-636;

cultural objects alongside novels, poetry and theatre. Where scholars of digital culture do pay particular attention to print media or the category of literary fiction, as I do in this thesis, it is to problematise notions of medium-specificity and cultural cache. To analyse a novel is to situate it as one media object in conversation with numerous others. For example, in Chapter Three I will analyse how the narrative aesthetics of Olivia Sudjic's *Sympathy* (2017) subtly draw on the visual interface and aesthetic expectations associated with the image-sharing platform Instagram. Here, I follow the lead of scholars such as Caroline Bassett, whose study *The Arc and the Machine* (2007) examines how, far from one straightforwardly displacing the other, information and narrative interrelate as organisational forms in twenty-first century aesthetics.³³

Although techno-generational frameworks are deployed in numerous literary genres, my focus will be on contemporary realist novels. Realist narratives test conceptual forms at play in social discourse and institutions by putting them under the pressure of sustained, detailed representation, providing a unique arena in which generational rhythms interact and clash with other forms at work in everyday social life such as hierarchies and networks. In its commitment to representing the everyday, realism can foreground the use of digital media in its everyday use by non-experts, rather than by a limited few with insights into their 'inner-workings'. A more experimental or metafictional focus on the complexity of digital processes and the ways that they trouble novelistic representation can overlook the less shocking but nonetheless significant experience of routine encounters with digital objects. Zara Dinnen offers one approach to examining realist representation of the digital in *The Digital Banal* (2017), drawing on aesthetic theories of 'minor affects' to argue that 'normative cultural practices of representing everyday life—realist fiction, essay writing, reality TV, and barely speculative

³³ Caroline Bassett, *The Arc and the Machine: Narrative and New Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 3.

speculative fiction’ often depict digital media technologies in terms of ‘boredom, already-doneness, but this operation keeps in play the potential disturbances to come’.³⁴ Building on this approach, I will demonstrate how contemporary realism employs the generation as a form to represent the co-constituting of subjectivity and the visual and haptic interfaces of digital objects.

The majority of the realist novels I examine express concern with the ways that individuals’ reliance on consumer technologies disrupt the expected reproduction of the middle class in their represented societies. As Franco Moretti stresses, the ‘bourgeois’ has changed over the course of its history, and has always lacked a coherent, monolithic identity; however, as it shifts it produces certain figurations of itself in realist literature, ‘strengthening its features as a possible ruling class’.³⁵ Once composed of self-employed small business owners, it has more recently consisted of white-collar workers and civil servants. Following the introduction of digital technologies to production and social life, however, the bourgeois class finds itself shifting once again. The novels I analyse here are therefore not passive reflections of these shifts but rather partial and prejudiced representations that prioritise the perspectives of a bourgeois social milieu that finds itself increasingly populated by downwardly mobile university graduates. They use the figure of the digital native, whose identity is constructed through the form of the generation, to narrativise various facets of social life, from sexuality to labour. Some, namely *Purity* (2015) by Jonathan Franzen and *The Nix* (2016) by Nathan Hill, consider a digital native generation from afar, depicting them as representative of an alien and threatening consumer culture. Others, meanwhile, attempt to speak from a digital native perspective. Natasha Stagg’s *Surveys* (2016) and Tony Tulathimutte’s *Private Citizens* (2016) depict the pressures placed on a generation of middle-class individuals trained for digitized

³⁴ Dinnen, *The Digital Banal*, pp. 17, 10.

³⁵ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 3-4.

forms of labour. The listless protagonists of *Taipei* (2013) by Tao Lin and *Sympathy* by Olivia Sudjic grapple with the ethical implications of digitally mediated social relationships. Finally, the Native American characters of Tommy Orange's multivocal novel *There There* (2018) reinterpret and appropriate digital media in ways that threaten an ongoing imperialist order.

While, in what follows, I draw on some critical perspectives on the conservative characteristics of realist fiction, such as that offered by Moretti, I maintain that realism's impulse to describe individual experiences and to connect these to wider social forces makes it an active participant in the recodifying of literature's signifying systems around digital media. This thesis is therefore about realist literature *as* digital culture. It argues that we employ conceptual structures like techno-generational frameworks to narrativize about the impact that complex technologies have on society as a whole. It interrogates the way that the traditional concerns of Western literature—subjectivity, society, interpersonal relationships—are expressed through these conceptual structures. Finally, it analyses how the realist novel both reproduces and troubles the functioning of these conceptual structures.

If incorporating the digital into the literary changes its signifying systems, then the form and style of contemporary realist novels provide a unique theatre for examining how digital cultures overlap and clash with pre-existing conceptual forms like the generation. This thesis analyses realist representations to consider broader questions about techno-generational frameworks: What opportunities do they offer for rendering the social impact of digital media visible? In privileging digital media as a distinct and unique social actor, what do these frameworks obfuscate or overlook? How are these frameworks distorted or deconstructed in narratives entangled in anxieties about the cultural prestige of the realist novel? Finally, with an awareness of their limitations, might techno-generational frameworks have anything left to contribute towards emergent political identities? In addressing these questions, this thesis intervenes in scholarship on contemporary fiction and digital cultures. It demonstrates that the

digital is co-constituted with prior conceptual forms like the generation, which we use to understand broad and long-term changes to society. Today's realist texts, in their commitment to finding the language to describe the strange familiarity of the digital, participate in this co-constitution.

Born Digital

Marc Prensky concretised the idea of a generation shaped by their familiarity with digital technologies in his essay 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants' (2001). In the essay, he claims that 'the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the twentieth century' has produced an irreversible change in students. Having 'spent their entire lives surrounded by and using' digital media, these 'digital native' students '*think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors', i.e. 'digital immigrants' who must 'learn' to 'adapt' to today's new digital environment.³⁶ Prensky's dichotomy between digital 'natives' and 'immigrants' was popularised by a decade of marketing literature, news reports and citations by high-profile figures.³⁷ It also provoked a proliferation of rival terms, including the 'Net Generation', 'Instant Message Generation', 'Gamer Generation', 'Google Generation', 'iGen', and 'Homo Zappiens'.³⁸ The impulse towards these techno-generational

³⁶ Marc Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1', *On the Horizon*, 9.5 (September/October 2001), pp. 1, 3-6 (pp. 1; 3). Emphasis in original.

³⁷ See: Susan J. Bennett and Karl A. Maton, 'Beyond the "digital natives" debate: Towards a more nuanced understanding of students' technology experiences', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 26.5 (2010), pp. 321-331 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00360.x>>

³⁸ Don Tapscott, *Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009); Amanda Lenhart, Lee Raine and Oliver Lewis, 'Teenage life online: the rise of the instant-message generation and the Internet's impact on friendships and family relationships', *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, 21 June 2001 <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2001/06/21/teenage-life-online/>> [accessed 6 August 2019]; Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2018); Ian Rowlands, et al., 'The Google generation: the information behaviour of the researcher of the future', *Aslib Proceedings*, 60.4 (2008), pp. 290-310 <<https://doi.org/10.1108/00012530810887953>>; Adam Carstens and John Beck, 'Get ready for the

frameworks continues today: a 2014 article for *Vox.com* argues for replacing age-based labels such as ‘baby boomer’ and ‘millennial’ with new ones deriving from how technology changes ‘the way we communicate as a culture’.³⁹ The idea of generations has therefore become a vehicle for expressing a type of technological determinism.

The term ‘technological determinism’ emerged in the 1920s as one of many ‘academic insults and prohibitions’, in this case one used to accuse Marxist scholars of reductively attributing all historical progress to technological developments.⁴⁰ Later, Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1964) introduced to cultural theory the more explicitly technological-determinist claim that ‘it is the medium that shaped and controls the scale and form of human association and action’.⁴¹ McLuhan’s thought, though influential, has since been criticised for suggesting technology unidirectionally influences society from some asocial and apolitical outside. Raymond Williams, for instance, argues that viewing ‘media operations’ as abstracted from the institutions in which they are embedded ‘ratifies the society and culture we have now’ by suggesting any political action is futile.⁴² Weighing up these perspectives against more recent contexts, John Durham Peters suggests that technological determinism offers a ‘disruptive performance’ and that ‘when much of our infrastructure is digital and thus seemingly personal and flexible, the progressive stance might precisely be to argue for technological determinism’.⁴³ I aim for a similarly generous approach to the technological frameworks constructed in my primary texts, considering them on their own terms

gamer generation’, *TechTrends*, 49.3 (2005), pp. 22–25 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02763643>>; Wim Veen, *Homo Zappiens: Growing Up in a Digital Age* (London: Network Continuum, 2006)

³⁹ Kelsey McKinney, ‘Ignore age—define generations by the tech they use’, *Vox*, 20 April 2014 <<https://www.vox.com/2014/4/20/5624018/should-technology-define-generations>> [accessed 10 August 2019]

⁴⁰ John Durham Peters, “‘You Mean My Whole Fallacy Is Wrong’: On Technological Determinism”, *Representations*, 140.1 (Autumn 2017), p. 11.

⁴¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. by Lewis H. Lapham (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 9.

⁴² Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 127.

⁴³ John Durham Peters, “‘You Mean My Whole Fallacy Is Wrong’: On Technological Determinism”, *Representations*, 140.1 (Autumn 2017), pp. 10–26 (p. 22)

while also remaining alert to the ways their technological determinist impulses distort or obscure broader political, cultural and economic factors.

A key question to interrogate concerns what exactly is ‘digital’ about the digital native. In its technical definition, ‘digital’ means divided into discrete units, as in the fingers of a hand or the 0s and 1s of binary code. Digital signals are thereby distinguishable from analogue signals, whose continuous waves or waves or fields ‘analogue’ their origin.⁴⁴ However, since the digital native is not a person divided into parts, the usage of ‘digital’ relevant to this study is more colloquial. In *The Digital Dialectic* (2000), Peter Lunenfeld suggests that the digital is a temporary historical period, ‘a placeholder for whatever term we or posterity chooses to describe our immediate present’.⁴⁵ This digital is defined by its instability, its ‘always already dated qualities’: in 2000 its associated terms were ‘cyber’ and ‘personal’; today, they are ‘smart’ and ‘social’. Prensky’s digital native is born into this understanding of the digital, inheriting its tentative, abstract and unstable qualities.

Digital natives are individuals born into—and therefore, techno-generational logic dictates, most influenced by—a society structured by digital media technologies. However, with the rapid pace of technological development, it is unclear when exactly this structuring occurs. Those who grew up in the 1990s using personal computers were the ‘first’ digital natives, yet more recent commentaries describe those who grew up in the 2010s with regular access to smartphones as if they are *more* native to the digital.⁴⁶ The instability of the digital native category is also evident in generational labelling that privileges certain digital media or

⁴⁴ Florian Cramer, ‘What is “Post-digital”?’, *APRJA*, 21 Jan 2014 <<http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>> [accessed 8 May 2019], n. pag.; Alexander R. Galloway expands this distinction into a broader philosophical paradigm in *Laurelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. 52-8.

⁴⁵ Peter Lunenfeld, ‘Screen Grabs: The Digital Dialectic and New Media Theory’, in *The Digital Divide: New Essays on New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. xiv-xxi (pp. xvi; xx).

⁴⁶ For example, a report by polling company Ipsos MORI designates three sub-generations within the ‘millennial’ generation: ‘digital natives’, ‘digital guinea pigs’ and ‘original millennials’. However, they also state that ‘there is no “shelf” that distinguishes “digital natives” from the rest’. See: Bobby Duffy, Hannah Shrimpton and Michael Clemence, *Millennial: Myths and Realities*, Ipsos MORI Thinks, 16 July 2016 <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/millennial-myths-and-realities>> [accessed 21 July 2018], pp. 83; 100.

platforms, as in the terms ‘Google Generation’ or ‘Snapchat generation’. Such labels reflect the cycles of what Luis Suarez-Villa describes as ‘technocapitalism’: a mode of capitalist production centring around the commodification of ‘innovation’ in corporate research and development.⁴⁷ Technocapitalist production cycles are themselves framed using generational language, most prominently in ‘next-generation’ videogame consoles and wireless cellular technology.⁴⁸ However, these technological generations are less the product of natural progress than ‘planned obsolescence’, a commodified innovation which carefully times a new generation to succeed its predecessor at the peak of the latter’s ‘sales curve’.⁴⁹ Digital native-adjacent labels such as the ‘Snapchat generation’ conflate social generations with these technocapitalist production cycles, naturalising them as inevitable ‘progress’.

Prensky built this technocapitalist conflation of technological and generational progress into the digital native/immigrant binary, drawing on concepts about language acquisition: ‘Kids born into any new culture learn the new language easily, and forcefully resist using the old’, while ‘[s]mart adult immigrants’ use their children to ‘help them learn to integrate’ and ‘[n]ot-so-smart (or not so flexible) immigrants’ yearn for the ways of their ‘old country’.⁵⁰ He later reasserts that the metaphor is not ‘about capabilities, or even knowledge [...] [but] younger people’s *comfort* with digital technology, their belief in its ease, its usefulness, and its being

⁴⁷ Luis Suarez-Villa, *Technocapitalism: A Critical perspective on Technological Innovation and Corporatism* (Philadelphia: Temple University press, 2012), pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ Robert Alan Brookey, *Hollywood Gamers: Digital Convergence in the Film and Video Game Industries* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 110. For a longer history of hardware generations, see: Lucido Floridi, *Philosophy and Computing: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 42-44.

⁴⁹ See: Jakki J. Mohr, Sanjit Sengupta and Stanley F. Slater, *Marketing of High-Technology Products and Innovations*, 3rd edn (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2010), p. 258. ‘Planned obsolescence’ was originally conceived not only as a strategy of production but also as a desire ‘to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary’. Brooks Stevens, qtd. in Gilles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 153.

⁵⁰ Prensky, ‘Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1’, p. 4.

generally benign'.⁵¹ Digital natives like *Taipei*'s Paul—also a second-generation immigrant to the US—feel more home in 'the digital' than immigrants. As Siân Bayne and Jen Ross contend, Prensky's assumption that assimilation into a dominant culture is evidentially good reinforces 'a culturally specific, and racist, understanding of the character of immigrants' in which they are always of the past.⁵² The digital native metaphor reproduces a narrative of progress that justifies the imposition of Western technocapitalism on other cultures. I will further interrogate this narrative in Chapter Four, exploring how digital technologies of the dominant culture might provide tools for reconnecting to indigenous cultures under threat.

Techno-generational frameworks structure political discourses about the role of technology in reproducing cultural knowledge. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler describes this role when he writes that a cultural memory is stored and inherited through technical objects—an externalisation he calls the 'intergenerational cultural phylum'.⁵³ Individuals born into a culture learn its techniques for storing and accessing this external memory, for example through writing and reading. This externalised memory therefore always already preceeds and shapes an individual's cognitive and bodily memory. However, Stiegler differentiates between these techniques and modern technologies that 'systemically [order] memories' in ways that escape our conscious knowledge.⁵⁴ A reliance on these technologies, he argues, leads to a generalised loss of technical knowledge among all but those who own and control them. In other words, technocapitalism hijacks the intergenerational cultural phylum, disrupting the inheritance of

⁵¹ Marc Prensky, 'Digital Wisdom and Homo Sapiens Digital', in *Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technology and the New Literacies*, ed. by Michael Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 15-29 (pp. 17). In this essay he also replaces the 'generational divide' implied by the native/immigrants split with a transgenerational question over how individuals might be 'digitally wise' (p. 20). For criticism of the digital native, see: Sue Bennett, Karl Maton and Lisa Kervin, 'The "digital natives" debate: a critical review of the evidence', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39.5 (2008), 775–786 (p. 779).

⁵² Siân Bayne and Jen Ross, "'Digital Native" and "Digital Immigrant" Discourses: A Critique', in *Digital Difference: Perspectives on Online Learning*, ed. by Ray Land and Siân Bayne (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), p. 159-179, p. 166.

⁵³ Bernard Stiegler, 'Memory', in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 64-87 (p. 72).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

cultural memory through technical objects by alienating future generations from their production, transforming them from inheritors into consumers.

When cultural institutions emerge and survive through their relation to certain technical knowledge, the introduction of a new technology looms as an existential threat.⁵⁵ This fear resonates in traditional cultural forms such as the novel. In *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* (2004), Kathleen Fitzpatrick analyses representations of antihuman technology in post-war American fiction that betray ‘a cluster of anxieties about being displaced from some possibly imagined centrality in contemporary cultural life’. These novels take an ‘assumed stance’ of defending ‘the structures of traditional humanism’ in an attempt to shore up the (white, male) novelist’s ‘ostensibly faltering importance as a cultural critic’.⁵⁶ This anxiety anticipates those directed at new ‘digital native’ generations, who are elevated to an object of intrigue and fear for those who see themselves as part of an ‘older’ generation and therefore un-updated.

Critics of Web 2.0 have long echoed this anxiety. Coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999, ‘Web 2.0’ denotes a shift from the internet as an archive for storing and accessing information to a platform on which users can interact and produce their own ‘content’.⁵⁷ Alongside reducing the technical expertise necessary to use the internet, Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and YouTube compel users to perform simplified, repetitive and quantifiable actions such as ‘liking’ content.⁵⁸ Today’s enunciations of generational identity have become attached to these platforms. Natasha Stagg, whose novel *Surveys* I analyse in Chapter Two, describes herself as ‘part of a generation that defines stages of our lives as pre and post-something in terms of our

⁵⁵ Neil Postman argues this in less philosophical terms than Stiegler in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 18.

⁵⁶ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), pp. 201-2.

⁵⁷ Darcy DiNucci, ‘Fragmented Future’, *Print Magazine*, 53.4 (April 1999), pp. 32, 221-222 (p. 32) <http://darcy.com/fragmented_future.pdf> [accessed 12 November 2019]

⁵⁸ Geert Lovink, ‘A World Beyond Facebook: Introduction to the Unlike Us Reader’, in *Unlike Us Reader: Social media Monopolies and Their Alternatives* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), pp. 9-15 (p. 13) <http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/%238UnlikeUs.pdf> [accessed 12 November 2019]

evolving language (email, Instant Message, mobile, Google, social media)'.⁵⁹ Essayist Jia Tolentino similarly uses the emergence of Web 2.0 to frame her generation's loss of innocence, describing their movements from Angelfire to LiveJournal to Myspace and finally to Facebook, whose 'clean and official' structuring of online identity 'felt as if we were going to a virtual City Hall and registering our new, proto-adult selves'.⁶⁰ Here, digital natives grow up *with* the internet as not a static entity but as a peer in a symbiotic development.

Narrativizations of the digital native such as these display the complexities involved in defining the 'digital' by way of a generational framework. They conceive it as less a clear historical period than as a disruptive *event*: an unanticipated and unresolved 'rupture' to an existing state of being.⁶¹ Today's techno-generational frameworks differentiate subjectivities that emerge before, after and within the digital, but also how already-existing subjectivities are altered by it. However, the impossibility of precisely locating this event in time—when a 'digital' paradigm can be said to have 'happened' or have 'begun'—contributes to an inherent instability within Prenksy's notion of the 'digital native'. The term has instead become tied to the rhythm of technocapitalist production, an attempt to momentarily hit pause and orient oneself in a spectacle of constant innovation. It provides a form for conceptualising this change and imagining paths for continuity as established cultural norms dissipate or mutate, and many who view themselves as 'digital immigrants' place value in resisting the 'digital'. Yet authors who write from the perspective of 'digital native' characters appear to promise the expression of new modes of perceiving and knowing, translating them into shared cultural knowledge through the familiar structures of the realist novel. The 'digital native' therefore remains an

⁵⁹ Natasha Stagg, *Sleeveless: Fashion, Image, Media, New York 2011-2019* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2019), p. 51.

⁶⁰ Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (London: 4th Estate, 2019), pp. 7; 172.

⁶¹ Alain Badiou, 'The Event as Trans-Being', in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 97-102 (p. 99)

unstable and unresolved cultural archetype invoked to ground the ineffable impacts of digital technologies in the behaviour of individuals.

Generational Representation

Although techno-generationalist frameworks are far from evident in all contemporary fiction, they are common enough to deserve critical attention. Recent examples include Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016), which depict digital technology as a vector by which older protagonists find themselves alienated from their children. Recent years, however, have seen publication of fiction about 'millennial' and 'digital native' by those the labels purport to describe. This growing list includes Tao Lin, Marie Calloway, Garth Greenwell, Tony Tulathimutte, Halle Butler, Merrit Tierce, Andrew Martin, Alissa Nutting, Tommy Orange and Ling Ma, among others. While these generational labels derive from and predominantly circulate in a U.S. context, they find broader expression worldwide, as in the work of Candice Carty-Williams in the United Kingdom, Guillaume Morissette in Canada, Sally Rooney and Nicole Flattery in Ireland, Gonzalo C. Garcia in Chile, and Niviaq Korneliusen in Greenland. These authors each engage with generational discourses to differing degrees and in numerous forms and styles.

In a recent essay titled 'What Makes a Millennial Novel?', Olivia Sudjic—whose 2017 novel *Sympathy* I analyse in Chapter Three—both criticises and reproduces contemporary generational discourse. She references 'digital marketer[s]' and describes 'the great millennial novelist' as 'a product, used to sell other products to millennials'. Yet she nonetheless accepts as her premise that the millennial is a solid social identity, defining the 'millennial novel' according to the author's birthdate and identifying the generation's 'preoccupations': 'home, exile and feeling lost', an exploration of 'mundane' survival, 'deadpan humour, irony and

reflections on their own privilege’, and a focus on ‘broader structures and power dynamics that we are all part of’.⁶² Despite a few caveats about who generational identities are applied to, Sudjic assumes that a shared generation pre-exists its reproduction in literature. I will take a different approach, analysing my primary texts as actively engaged in the discursive production of generational identity.

My focus will be on contemporary realist representations of digital native generations such as ‘millennials’. Early, nineteenth-century realist novels depicted the social upheavals of the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ and Industrial Revolution. They replaced neoclassicism’s aristocratic and mythological scenes with ones representing ‘ordinary’ people, and shifted from romanticism’s transcendental themes to more immanent, everyday concerns.⁶³ Pam Morris writes that this shift in representation reflected the ‘democratic impulse of modernity’.⁶⁴ However, realist texts today continue to work within the ‘ideological enclosure’ of this contradictory and particularly bourgeois democratic impulse. Their representations relate ‘ordinary’ individuals to a ‘General Will’ assumed to produce capitalist democracy.⁶⁵ Even when depicting marginalised areas of society, they approach this ‘other’ from a generalised bourgeois perspective that values respectability, charity and individuality. Edward Said notes the imperialist dimensions of this when he writes that ‘descriptive realism’ seeks to ‘bring the Orient closer to Europe, thereafter to absorb it entirely and—centrally important—to cancel, or

⁶² Olivia Sudjic, ‘Darkly funny, desperate and full of rage: what makes a millennial novel?’, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/what-makes-a-millennial-novel-olivia-sudjic>> [accessed 20 September 2019], n. pag.

⁶³ For more on the origins and definition of literary realism, see: George J. Becker, ‘Introduction: Modern Realism as a Literary Movement’, in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. by George J. Becker (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 3-38; Pam Morris, *Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 47-94; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Luc Herman, *Concepts of Realism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1996)

⁶⁴ Morris, *Realism*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁵ For realism’s relationship to Rousseau’s concept of the General Will, see Frederic Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 281-2. I borrow ‘ideological enclosure’ from Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 52.

at least subdue and reduce, its strangeness' and 'hostility'.⁶⁶ Today, publishers offer 'minority' writers the opportunity to contribute, becoming 'representatives' of their group within realism's bourgeois parameters, or to remain marginalised.⁶⁷ Realist novels thereby extend their democratic impulse by absorbing the other, 'representing' their interests within the bounds of a fundamentally white, bourgeois cultural sphere.⁶⁸ The realist novels I examine over the following chapters apply techno-generational frameworks to represent and absorb a generation of digital natives whose perceived difference renders them 'hostile' to the bourgeois realist tradition.

The relevance of techno-generational frameworks for literary realism arises out of what Mark K. Holland has described as 'an intellectual climate of hyperperiodization' in literary and cultural studies, referring to neologisms identifying a recent break from the period of postmodernism/postmodernity.⁶⁹ Some of these periodisations refer to particular cultural movements, while others describe new modes of production and socio-political arrangements.⁷⁰ As Levine writes, periods are temporal forms employed to 'reveal rooted and local historical

⁶⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, 2003), p. 87.

⁶⁷ As Sarah Brouillette writes, "'Ethnic' or 'minority' writers and artists have often been burdened with the notion that they should articulate an ostensibly whole and organic community' and 'an existing roster or canon of texts is thought to lack diversity in a way that the inclusion of certain "representative" figures will correct, such that those writers are taken as speaking for a previously neglected group. Writers who thwart these prescriptions—as many do—tend to find themselves accused of inauthenticity'. Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 10-11.

⁶⁸ Here, I follow Raymond Williams's observation of a confusing between representative as 'standing-in' for and representative as 'typical' and. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), p. 225.

⁶⁹ Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 1.

⁷⁰ See, e.g.: Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2.1 (2010) <<https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>>; Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Altermodern', *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009); Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *sympleke* 12.1-2 (2004), 53-68; Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009); Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. By Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Robert Samuels, 'Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education', *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected*. ed. by Tara McPherson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), pp. 219–240).

specificity’, their beginnings and ends ‘continuous with the social life of institutions’.⁷¹ Many recent periodisations that are not constructed around the arbitrary ‘turn of the millennium’ lend particular significance to the institutional and personal use of digital technologies. However, increasing exposure to cultural difference—in part by way of these technologies—challenges the asserted stability of periodisation. Many scholars have opted instead for the moving and open-ended designation of ‘the contemporary’, described by Pedro Erber as both a ‘historical period’ and ‘the very impossibility of historical periodisation, insofar as the unity of its putative subject unravels itself in singularities irreducible to generalization’.⁷² The contemporary opens an ambiguous space to address the present without imposing temporal boundaries, instead attending to what Harootunian calls the ‘uncanniness of mixed temporalities’ in a ‘noncontemporaneous contemporary’.⁷³

This indeterminate intellectual climate has provoked renewed interest in realist fiction’s attempts to provide, as Erich Auerbach writes, a ‘temporal concentration, both of historical events themselves and everyone’s knowledge of them’.⁷⁴ Yet realism is a slippery term whose referent wavers between aesthetic and philosophical stances. As Raymond Williams notes, the term ‘realism’ can describe ‘both a method and a general attitude’. As the latter, realism strives to take ‘the real world’ as its object.⁷⁵ Pam Morris similarly defines realism as ‘any writing that

⁷¹ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 55-6.

⁷² Pedro Erber. ‘Contemporaneity and Its Discontents’, *Diacritics*, 41.1 (2013), 28-48 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/520911>> (p. 45). The contemporary remains a contentious term. Disputing Giorgio Agamben’s famous definition of the contemporary as the ‘untimely’—a distance to your own times that allows you to grasp their nature—critical theorists such as Harry Harootunian stress the ‘coevality and immanence’ of the subject and object in contemporaneity (see: Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is the Contemporary?’, in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39-54 (p. 40); Harry Harootunian, ‘Remembering the Historical Present’, *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007), 471-494 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/513523>> (p. 486)). Erber argues that this coevality is rendered unavoidable by recent globalisation and new media technologies: the culturally ‘other’ is no longer observable by Western culture at a distance but rather as an otherness within itself (see: Erber. ‘Contemporaneity and Its Discontents’, pp. 30-7. See also: Frederic Jameson, ‘The End of Temporality’, *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003), 695-718 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/377726>> (pp. 701-2)).

⁷³ Harootunian, ‘Remembering the Historical Present’, p. 486

⁷⁴ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 459.

⁷⁵ Williams, *Keywords*, p. 218-9.

is based upon an explicit or implicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about reality beyond the writing'.⁷⁶ This attitude towards representation derives from Enlightenment thought's emphasis on empirical and mutually-recognisable objectivity as the origin of reason.⁷⁷ As Frederic Jameson writes, the claims of realism are both aesthetic and epistemological: the genre promises to impart some degree of knowledge about social reality through accurate, yet fictional, representation.⁷⁸ It is this slippage between aesthetics and epistemology that makes realism such a fertile ground for investigating the iteration of conceptual forms like the generation. The generational differences represented in realist novels are not components in an allegory for a reality but are instead presented as embodying a structuring principal of that reality. However, as the generation is put to work in the temporal unfolding of a narrative, as it interacts with other conceptual forms, its particular affordances and limitations become more apparent. My aim is not to evaluate the epistemology of particular realist texts, but rather to use these texts as arenas for examining the functions that techno-generational frameworks play in constructing models of social reality.

Recent surveys of contemporary theories of aesthetic realism, such as those by Dorothee Birke and Stella Butler, and Sophie Valos, acknowledge the heterogeneous strategies and forms the term might be describe by speaking of realism(s).⁷⁹ The question as to whether or not any particular realist style successfully fulfils this commitment remains open. In literary scholarship, realism is usually associated with a genre that emerges in nineteenth-century France that is identifiable by certain conventions, including a linear chronology, an omniscient narrator, and respect for the 'fourth wall'. These conventions are connected to, yet nonetheless

⁷⁶ Morris, *Realism*, p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 217.

⁷⁹ Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter (eds.), *Realisms in Contemporary Culture: Theories, Politics, and Medial Configurations* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); Sophie Valos, 'Realism(s)', in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, ed. by Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 100-112.

distinct from, a broader realist commitment to representing social reality as it is. However, a conflation of the two is evident in recent attempts to synthesise the conventions of literary realism with the concerns of postmodernism, attempts which aim to shift from ironic self-referentiality to a more ‘sincere’ commitment to representing contemporary social life.⁸⁰ Describing this shift, Jeremy Green distinguishes between a ‘citra-postmodernism’ observable in the work of authors like Jonathan Franzen who seek to wield the affective potential of established forms, and an ‘ultra-postmodernism’ that continues to push aesthetic boundaries to produce challenging texts.⁸¹ What has come to be called ‘New Sincerity’ fiction wavers between these poles, seeking novel forms that nonetheless do not prioritise aesthetic experimentation over representation. However, as I argue in Chapter One, such a strategy can often resemble a veneration of convention as novelty.

Twentieth-century scholarship critiqued the attitude associated with literary realism for its complicity in a ‘functional rationalism’ that impresses bourgeois ideology on readers as natural.⁸² Periodisation serves as a tool in this naturalisation. Jameson writes that realism ‘requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, and an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order’.⁸³ In solidifying the present as a period with certain characteristics, realist texts close off the possibility of fundamental change. However, Lauren Berlant contends that the shared affective experience of crises represented in realism serve as exemplary locales of a historical present without giving that present a totalizing

⁸⁰ See McLaughlin, ‘Post-Postmodern Discontent’; Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, ‘Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?’, in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 1-13.

⁸¹ Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 14

⁸² Morris, *Realism*, pp. 18-19.

⁸³ Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, p. 145.

form.⁸⁴ She calls for a historical literary approach that traces the affective experience of the present as an ongoing crisis, in order to break the ‘becoming-object’ of normative historical anachronisms and instead open the present up as a ‘zone of action’ for alternatives.⁸⁵ This ‘becoming-object’ can be found in the techno-generational frameworks as alternative forms for structuring representations of contemporary social reality.

The conceptual form of the generation can bind together the epistemological and political claims of realism. On the one hand, realism claims to represent reality, insofar as it details it accurately: the novels in this thesis want to correct the record about digital natives by offering more accurate representations than have previously been available. At the same time, representation can be interpreted as ‘speaking on behalf of’ someone: these novels also want to voice the anxieties and perspectives experienced by a group of people, in this case a generation, within an established literary culture. They want to demonstrate that these concerns are relevant and important to the literary.

It is for this reason that I chose realist texts rather than those aligned with science fiction or speculative fiction, both of which embody aspects of generational thinking in literary narratives. It is realism’s impulse towards the banal that separates it from science fiction. Science fiction narratives about AI often anthropomorphise ‘machine intelligence’ to make it thematically legible. Realism’s deflationary starting point is ‘actually-existing AI’, its banal existence in more mundane settings. In many ways, contemporary realist narratives use science-fictional tropes about digital technologies as a foil by which they demonstrate their realism. In the narratives I examine, cutting-edge technologies are revealed to concentrate and deepen existing conditions rather than providing clear trajectories out of them. Similarly, although speculative fiction projects futures in order to comment on the present, the generation in this

⁸⁴ Berlant, ‘Intuitionists’, pp. 1-4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 5; 12

case provides a form for presenting a perspective in the future that that has not yet arrive, an alien subjectivity that could be produced. Younger generations in realist narratives, however, are presented as already here, existing alongside and intermingling with prior generations in mundane situations. Finally, I have also chosen realist fiction over memoir. While memoir, like realism, often engages in periodising and generationalising, the genre's focus on the first-person narrativization of a significant life means that it departs from realism's grander epistemological claims that its characters are representative of broad social trends.⁸⁶ I choose to focus on realism because of its commitment to periodising the present, to make all the futurity implied in the digital native sit within the mundane reality of the everyday. This creates a productive tension within the generation that speculative fiction and memoir are able to excuse themselves from. It is the generalising of realism that foregrounds the potential breakdowns in the techno-generational framework as a conceptual coupling, one that travels in and out of fictional narratives, inflecting debates about identity, culture and equality.

The recent novels I examine in the following chapters share in realism's commitment towards representing the present. However, they interpret this in different ways. The flat style of *Taipei* and the multivocality of *There There* diverge from many of the conventions of literary realism yet remain in dialogue with this genre's commitment to representation. Such texts are useful sites for examining techno-generational frameworks. As Levine writes, narratives provide 'sites, like social situations, where multiple forms cross and collide, inviting us to think in new ways about power'.⁸⁷ When deployed amidst the clashing forms of social organisation that realist novels are committed to representing, techno-generational frameworks confront

⁸⁶ Since submitting this thesis, two memoirs have been published that approach the primary concerns of this thesis: Anna Wiener's *Uncanny Valley* (2020) and Wendy Liu's *Abolish Silicon Valley: How to Liberate Technology from Capitalism* (2020). However, these books do not employ techno-generational frameworks to make broad claims about society. Nonetheless, they may prove to be significant examples in an emerging 'millennial memoir' genre.

⁸⁷ Levine, *Forms*, p. 122.

their limitations. For example, as I will argue in Chapter Two, the use of a character's disabled body in *Private Citizens* to symbolise their moral failings might clash with the need to detail material constraints of this character's life in a twenty-first-century metropolis, a clash that disrupts any neat metaphorical mapping of the body. In the same way, as each novel I examine progresses, the techno-generational frameworks they deploy become stretched and distorted by their realistic commitment to representing social reality—even when this commitment remains limited by the assumptions of bourgeois ideology.

Biological generations have featured in Western cultural discourse since the Old Testament, yet generations gained new significance in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries as a means of conceptualising accelerating changes to everyday social relations following the emergence of bourgeois capitalism.⁸⁸ Karl Mannheim concretised this usage in his 1927 essay 'The Problem of Generations', asserting that 'the *sociological* problem of generations' is 'based on' the 'biological rhythm of birth and death' but not 'deducible *from* it'.⁸⁹ He argues that 'mere contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant' when a population's experience of disruptive events is stratified by the different perspectives derived from age: 'Early impressions tend to coalesce into a *natural view* of the world. All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set', whether as 'verification' or 'negation'.⁹⁰ While older subjects interpret an event through their already-shaped worldviews, biologically younger subjects' 'fresh contact' with the same event exerts greater impact on their developing worldviews.⁹¹ However, those who share the same age-based 'location' may 'work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways', resulting in different 'units' within a

⁸⁸ Julián Marías, *Generations: A Historical Method*, trans. by Harold C. Raley (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1970), pp. 3-5.

⁸⁹ Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), pp. 276-322 (p. 290)

⁹⁰ Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', p. 298.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90; 293.

generation.⁹² Mannheim therefore primarily defines generations according to their material relationality to disruptive events, rather than perceived characteristics.

The generation has since transformed through its iteration within the ‘biopolitical’ apparatuses of twentieth-century demography.⁹³ Demographers William Strauss and Neil Howe’s bestselling 1991 book *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* posited a dubious cyclical framework of ‘idealist’, ‘reactive’, ‘civic’ and ‘adaptive’ generations, each expected to re-embody the characteristics of the previous cycle.⁹⁴ Here, they make Mannheim’s notion of a generations-defining crisis as a regular event, occurring every ‘forty to forty-five years’.⁹⁵ Owing to the popularity of *Generations* among a corporate-managerial class, today’s generational discourse remains largely structured by Howe and Strauss’s America-specific cohorts: ‘Silent’, ‘Boomers’, ‘13-ers’ (more commonly ‘Gen X’) and ‘Millennials’. They assert that ‘millennials’, ‘born in the mid-1980s’, would display ‘an instinct for teamwork and cooperation’, their location shaped by a cultural emphasis on good parenting. This particular generational framework begins with the assumption of a new social generation every ‘twenty-two years or so’ and ends with a discussion of crises that these already-existing generations respond to.⁹⁶ For instance, explanations are retrofitted for how ‘millennials’ react differently to events such as the Iraq war, the popularisation of social media, and the 2007-8

⁹² Ibid., p. 304.

⁹³ Biopolitical’ apparatus govern large populations through ‘forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures’. See: Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), p. 246. Although demography aspires to be independent, apolitical and scientific, its successful presentation as such has long relied on funding from political and corporate entities using demographic data to particular ends. See: Nancy E. Riley and James McCarthy, *Demography in the Age of the Postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 62; 75.

⁹⁴ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991), pp. 422–3. Howe and Strauss went on to publish further books about this cycle, and found the consultancy LifeCourse Associates, which claims to ‘interpret the qualitative nature of a generation’s collective persona to help managers and marketers leverage quantitative data in new and remarkable ways—and to lend order, meaning, and predictability to national trends’. See: ‘Mission’, *LifeCourse Associates* <<https://www.lifecourse.com/about/mission.html>> [accessed 8 August 2019]

⁹⁵ Strauss, and Howe, *Generations*, p. 35.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 14; 34.

financial crisis, rather than asking how these events might define new generational splits. Like all conceptual forms, the generation therefore imposes certain omissions and distorting effects on the material it purports to represent.

The Howe-Strauss frameworks remains relevant for this study as the prevalence of Prensky's 'digital native' plateaus in popular and academic discourses alongside an increased interest in 'millennials' beginning in 2012.⁹⁷ Over the past decade, these discussions have treated the 'digital native' and 'millennial' as synonymous terms.⁹⁸ Studies proclaim that technology 'may be the single most influential component in the life of a Millennial', and that the generation is 'profoundly shaped by, and comfortable with [digital technologies]'.⁹⁹ As Louisa Ellen Stein observes, recent sociology wavers between claiming that the generation's 'embedded digital dependence' might be 'put to good use' or that digital media informs 'millennial social isolation and ethical depravity'.¹⁰⁰ Many commentators view millennials' use of digital devices with paternalistic concern, suggesting that their 'addiction' to social media is fuelling the narcissism and entitlement the generation is often associated with.¹⁰¹ Here, the generation is deployed as a form for identifying a perceived aberration, for othering certain subjects due to their perceived difference from a social whole.

Generational discourse has been a feature of literary scholarship and literary culture for at least a century. Prominent examples include Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemmingway's 'lost

⁹⁷ Terry Judd, 'The rise and fall (?) of the digital natives', *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 34.5 (2018), pp. 99-119 (pp. 103; 107)

⁹⁸ Bobby Duffy, Hannah Shrimpton and Michael Clemence, *Millennial: Myths and Realities*, Ipsos MORI Thinks, 16 July 2016 <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/millennial-myths-and-realities>> [accessed 21 July 2018], pp. 84.

⁹⁹ Regina Luttrell and Karen McGrath, *The Millennial Mindset: Unravelling Fact from Fiction* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 24; Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber, *Generation We: How Millennial Youth are Taking Over America and Changing Our World Forever* (Emeryville, CA: Pachatusan, 2008), p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ Louisa Ellen Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), p. 7.

¹⁰¹ See, e.g.: Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 49-51; Joel Stein, 'Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation', *TIME*, 20 May 2013 <<http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>> [accessed 19 February 2019], n. pag.

generation' of 1920s authors and artists; Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes's 'Beat generation' of post-war countercultural writers; and Douglas Coupland's 'Generation X' of 1990s provocateurs.¹⁰² As Astrid Erll notes, the generation as a concept 'tends to remain invisible, a cluster of tacit assumptions underlying a ubiquitous formula'.¹⁰³ Just as even poststructuralist scholars continue to depend on conventional period markers, e.g. 'Victorian literature', to 'assemble their materials into effective cultural arguments', the generation remains a convenient structuring principle in literary studies.¹⁰⁴ It provides a useful form for establishing the scope of a study, however in this arbitrary usefulness its effect as a conceptual form often goes underexamined.

As Erll notes, generational discourse derives from the familial genealogy, reproducing a biological essentialist model of procreation and family kinship on the scale of society. For this reason, one of the most convincing critiques of generational discourse is made by Queer Theory, although Erll and others do not reference this contribution directly. Lee Edelman's critique of 'reproductive futurism', the rhetorical invocation of children and childhood as a means of universalizing and therefore reinforcing heteronormative familial and social

¹⁰² See Gertrude Stein, qtd. in Ernest Hemmingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 26; John Clellon Holmes, 'This is the Beat Generation', *The New York Times*, 16 November 1952, p. 10 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1952/11/16/archives/this-is-the-beat-generation-despite-its-excesses-a-contemporary.html>> [accessed 1 August 2019]; Douglas Coupland, qtd. in Mark Muro, 'Complaints of a New Generation; 'Baby Buster's Resent life in Boomers' Debris', *The Boston Globe*, 10 November 1991, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Astrid Erll, 'Generation in Literary History: Three Constellations of Generationality, Genealogy, and Memory', *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), pp. 385-409 (p. 386)

¹⁰⁴ Levine observes this reliance on the period in *Forms*, p. 55. Reliance on the generation is observable in scholars' arguments for underappreciated authors to be included in the 'beat generation'. Even as Erik Mortenson notes 'a burgeoning desire in Beat studies to do away with the rubric of the "Beat" altogether', while the 'generation' remains uncontested. Ronna C. Johnson, meanwhile, keeps the broad term 'Beat generation' despite identifying three sub-generations, which she argues 'clarifies the longevity of the movement and the continuity of its influences'. Finally, Kostas Myrsiades even frames his introduction to the 2011 edited collection *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays* around how to teach Beat Generation writers to 'Generation X students'. See: Erik Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), p. 9; Ronna C. Johnson, 'Mapping Women Writers of the Beat Generation', in *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*, by Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 8; Kostas Myrsiades, 'Introduction: Teaching the Beat Generation to Generation X', in *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays*, ed. by Kostas Myrsiades (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 1-20.

relations.¹⁰⁵ Eve Sedgwick offers another critique, noting that queer structures of kinship upset the “normal” generational narrative’, in which

our identifications with each other would be aligned with an expectation that in another fifteen years, I’d be situated comparably to where my sixty-year-old friend is, while my thirty-year-old friends would be situated comparably to where I am. But we are all aware that the grounds of such friendships today are likely to differ from that mode [...] Specifically, living with advanced breast cancer, I have little chance of ever being the age my older friend is now.¹⁰⁶

Generational narratives structured around family genealogies often reproduce a model of successive life stages that reinforce a (hetero)normative vision of what a life is.

However, rather than reflecting existing generational identities, literature can actively engage in their production. As Erll writes, ‘[l]iterature can carve out alternative spaces for imagining generation, showing that apart from being identified as this or that by sociology or genetics, there is also the option of self-identification in the fields of generationality and genealogy’.¹⁰⁷ Using Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* as her example, Erll traces the way in which literature served as a medium for solidifying the ‘lost generation’ as a cultural identity in Europe and beyond.¹⁰⁸ Once reified, this identity was then contested on the grounds of gender inclusion by Evadne Price’s *Not So Quiet . . . Stepdaughters of War* (1930). This, Erll, notes ‘brings to light a promise inherent in discourses about generationality, namely its potential inclusiveness across all strata of society’.¹⁰⁹ Erll’s analysis joins a limited body of work that reconsiders the generation as an object of literary study. In 2002, two volumes of collected scholarship edited by June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner updated Mannheim’s writing on generations in order to trace generationality across twentieth

¹⁰⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004)

¹⁰⁶ Eve Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You’, in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. by Eve Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1-39 (pp. 26-7).

¹⁰⁷ Erll, p. 404.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 391-2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

century cultures.¹¹⁰ These essays are valuable for their emphasis on the fractured characteristics of generational identity. Generational cohorts here are not presented as unified wholes, but rather as networks of inter and intra-generational tensions.

This body of scholarship does not, however, account for the ways in which more recent generational thought has become entangled in the language of marketing and consumer capitalism, taking on new characteristics that are worth interrogating. Often, contemporary literary scholarship employs the Howe-Strauss generational framework unquestioningly. For example, the prefab ‘Gen X’ identity organises numerous studies of a particular cultural group of American authors born in the 60s and 70s.¹¹¹ Elsewhere these identities are dismissed, yet not interrogated. Astrid Erll briefly suggests that the popular labels of ‘Generations x, y, and z [...] never capture the entirety of an age cohort. As a rule, they are attached to small circles of middle class white male Western people’.¹¹² There is merit to this observation, however, considering the affective investment in these labels in cultural and academic discourse, they cannot be merely dismissed as irrelevant. This thesis intervenes therefore intervenes in this growing body of scholarship on literature and generational identity or ‘generationality’ by detailing the overlap between narratives of technological progress and the recent phenomenon of the Howe-Strauss generational framework.

Just as hyperperiodisation responds to the expectation of a period ‘after’ postmodernity, a reliance on the generation demands market-oriented novelty, something Nathalie Olah notices when she asks, ‘[w]here is the great millennial novel, you, them and pretty much everyone else

¹¹⁰ June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *Generations, Culture and Society* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002); June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *Generational Consciousness, Narrative and Politics* (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002)

¹¹¹ Douglas Rushkoff, *The GenX Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994); Daniel Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2004); Terri Susan Zurbrigg, *X = what?: Douglas Coupland, Generation X, and the politics of postmodern irony* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008)

¹¹² Erll, p. 386.

with half a vested interest seems to be asking?’¹¹³ Prior to this thesis, academic literary studies has displayed little interest in this production of demand, in contrast to other disciplines in cultural studies. In media studies, for example, edited volumes such as *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics and Millennial Angst* and *The Millennials on Film and Television* demonstrate an effort to interrogate the cultural formulation of prominent generational frameworks.¹¹⁴ Introducing the latter, Kaklamanidou and Tally write that ‘representations of millennials [...] represent not so much a specific age group as a projection, in the realm of fiction, of how our culture has tried to construct this specific historical group’.¹¹⁵ This thesis follows this lead by interrogating, without reproducing or flatly dismissing, the generation.

A novel is described as ‘generational’ if it depicts the experiences of successive generations, or of a particular generational identity. Like the period, the generation as a conceptual form brings together a bounded wholeness—a distinct generational identity shared by its members—as well as a rhythmic change over time. As Sigrid Weigel’s stresses, generations must be understood diachronically as well as synchronically.¹¹⁶ As much as members are asserted to share characteristics, they are defined through their difference to previous and subsequent generations. Erll puts this succinctly: ‘no generationality without its genealogical other’.¹¹⁷ I will demonstrate how the digital native is produced out of this genealogical othering in Chapter One. The stratification of age structures a narrative around different ‘levels’, lending shape to any social change it represents. The ‘post-postmodernist’ turn back to a self-consciously traditional literary realism, exemplified by Franzen’s family

¹¹³ Nathalie Olah, ‘In This #Problematic Age, Where Is The Millennial Novel?’, *The Quietus*, 27 June 2018 <<https://thequietus.com/articles/24851-millennial-novel-problematic>> [accessed 1 August 2019]

¹¹⁴ Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, eds., *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics and Millennial Angst* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014)

¹¹⁵ Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, eds. *The Millennials on Film and Television: Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014)

¹¹⁶ Sigrid Weigel, ‘Generation’ as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945’, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 77.4 (2002), pp. 264–77.

¹¹⁷ Erll, p. 396.

novels *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), often reproduces this structure. However, Franzen's fifth novel, *Purity* loosens the association between the generational novel and the family unit and instead draws on a social generational framework to stand in for the family as the conceptual foundation from which the novel elaborates its periodisation of the present.

Alternatively, a novel might stage the 'uncovering' of a previously 'underrepresented' voice of a particular generation. Describing his 1991 novel *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland states that 'people born after 1960 [...] [are] tired of hearing about ourselves from others'.¹¹⁸ Here, a generational novel is conceived of as representing a particular 'generational consciousness'.¹¹⁹ In this way, the experiences of a new generation are recognised by and absorbed into the contours of established novelistic conventions. This process reflects earlier encounters between novels and media technologies. Examining twentieth-century modernism, Sara Danius argues that a new media technology splits open a different 'matrix of perceptual possibilities' that, in turn, informs the 'signifying system[s]' used in fiction. She further argues that this influence is generational: writers born when a certain media technology has already entered 'the ever-pregiveness of everyday praxis' are more likely to draw on its matrixes of perception, even when the technologies themselves are absent from a scene.¹²⁰ The idea of the digital native presupposes the 'pregiveness' of digital media practices among a generation. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes that media matter most when they become habitual, when 'users become their machines'. Although habituation may connote unthinking repetition or inflexibility, Chun stresses that 'habit, as a form of second nature [...] [can] create new

¹¹⁸ Douglas Coupland, qtd. in Mark Muro, 'Complaints of a New Generation; 'Baby Buster's Resent life in Boomers' Debris', *The Boston Globe*, 10 November 1991, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ Molly Andrews, 'Generational Consciousness, Dialogue, and Political Engagement', in *Generational Consciousness, Narrative and Politics*, ed. by June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 75-88 (p. 78).

¹²⁰ Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2002), pp. 10; 191.

structures and reactions in response to their environment'.¹²¹ Berry and Dieter similarly suggest that frequent interactions with digital technologies provide 'tacit modes of knowing and the iteration of habit – and thus also create *agnōsis*, or “not knowing”'.¹²² In these accounts, familiarity with digital media contributes to new sensibilities and signifying systems with which novelists can conceptualise and describe any object or event. I will analyse aesthetic engagements with this habitual familiarity in Chapter Three and demonstrate how novels employ the language and visual logics of digital media to render unfamiliar experiences meaningful.

Elsewhere, the 'digital native' can aid realist narratives in their attempts to fuse the particular experiences of individuals within a broader social milieu. This would reflect recent critical uses of the term: in their introduction to the *Posthuman Glossary*, Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova define 'digital natives' in terms of 'age-indexed differences [that] are structured by sizeable infrastructural divergences'.¹²³ Following an autonomous Marxist tradition, Kier Milburn reads generations through a 'techno-economic paradigm'.¹²⁴ New technologies introduced to workplaces created unskilled positions to be filled by younger workers with weaker affinity to their union, producing a conflict within unions between older, skilled, 'autonomous' militants and younger, unskilled, interchangeable workers. Technology as it enters the workplace therefore produces a 'generational lag' in the post-Fordist recomposition of class.¹²⁵ Furthermore, the spread of these technologies across national boundaries provides a certain homogeneity to this shifting experience of class composition. Critical analyses such

¹²¹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 1; 6.

¹²² David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, 'Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design', in *Postdigital Aesthetics*, pp. 1-11 (pp. 4-5)

¹²³ Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, 'Introduction', in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. (p. 5)

¹²⁴ Kier Milburn, *Generation Left* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 28.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

as these provide more nuanced models for approaching the digital native as emerging through the digital restructuring of material relations, rather than a psychological attachment to consumer technologies.

However, realism's effort to mediate between this psychological attachment and emergent material relations proves fraught. This is because 'the digital', as the objects of this attachment and as a significant actor in the emergence of these relations, remains stubbornly 'unrepresentable'. Therefore, realist fiction that wishes to represent digital media must confront the gap in perception between visual interfaces and the computational processes that these themselves are second-order representations of. In Chapters Two and Three, I will examine how the digital native's familiarity with and attachment to obfuscating interfaces offers provisional representations of how individuals relate to an emerging economic system. Here, contemporary realism adapts the conventions of realist representation in order to detail the experience of unrepresentability itself. This produces a flattened affect in place of the shock or awe usually associated with 'cutting-edge' technologies, foregrounding the alienating function of digital media within complex material relations.

Generational novels aim to realistically represent the experiences of a particular generation, either from a conventional omniscient perspective or the 'unveiled' viewpoint of a particular cohort. Rather than assessing whether texts provide realistic or accurate representations of a 'digital native' generation, however, I aim to interrogate how realist texts engage with the structure and consequences of generational identification itself. As a conceptual form, the generation offers contemporary novels a flexible alternative to the 'period' for representing the present, capturing a sense of the ongoing effects of the digital as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. However, today's generational identities have become tied to market demographics. Within this context, the 'digital native' and the 'millennial' are imperfectly conjoined. The narrativizations of this untidy overlap between discourses that I

examine in the following chapters tend to obscure particular effects of digital media technologies by affixing them to a problematically normative model of the depressed middle-class millennial. Nonetheless, through these failures they complicate straightforward digital-determinist accounts by locating technologies within the broader social milieu from which they emerge and within which they act.

Imagining the Millennial

Certain preoccupations arise from the techno-generational frameworks employed in the novels I analyse over the following chapters. However, these preoccupations are not essential to the generational identity of the authors. In most cases, they prove concerned with what the behaviour and worldviews of digital natives reveal about recomposition of the middle class. The exception to this is *There There*, which, as I discuss in Chapter Four, represents a community marginalised in dominant narratives of social change. Nevertheless, each novel stages a critique of the ideology and conditions of ‘neoliberal’ capitalism. They also use the generation to approach questions surrounding the politics of identity, from gender to race to disability. Finally, all these novels use techno-generational frameworks to consider the cultural status of the print novel in a digital media environment.

Over the course of the latter half of the Twentieth Century, Western nations like the U.S. and U.K. transitioned from industrial capitalist economies supported by a welfare state for workers towards post-industrial capitalist economies supported by flexible modes of production and diminished job security for workers.¹²⁶ Neoliberalism is an ideology that supported and continues to maintain this transition by arguing that the vicissitudes of the market produce

¹²⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 285.

socially beneficial results, and that deregulation and privatization of goods and services, and the weakening of trade unions, should be pursued and protected in all industries and institutions.¹²⁷ As this ideology is accepted by governments and social institutions, neoliberalism becomes what Wendy Brown describes as a ‘normative order of reason’, one that frames individuals as ‘an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavours and venues’.¹²⁸ Neoliberalism thereby expands from a theory of governance to a broader ‘common sense’ that conceives of areas of public and private life through an economic lens.

A prominent concern in recent literary studies has been to examine how recent fiction embodies and challenges this neoliberal common sense.¹²⁹ The novels I analyse all take place after the 2007-8 financial crisis, and resemble aspects of a genre Katy Shaw terms ‘crunch lit’: stories ‘concerned with the tensions, conflicts and fallouts related to an economic reversal of fortunes for capitalism in the new millennium’.¹³⁰ These novels are located in ‘recognizable Western financial sites’ and ‘[present] cultural representations as an alternative to dominant financialized narratives on events’.¹³¹ Although the novels I analyse do not all mention the financial crisis and recession, they all depict characters working in unstable forms of employment or demonstrate a deteriorating faith in capitalist economic systems. My focus will be to interrogate the ways these novels associate a digital native generation’s usage of technologies with this uneven experience of global capitalism.

¹²⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹²⁸ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), pp. 9-10.

¹²⁹ See: Emily Johansen and Alissa Karl (Eds.), *Neoliberalism and the Novel* (London: Routledge, 2016); Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Eds.) *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 2017)

¹³⁰ Katy Shaw, *Crunch Lit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 12.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The novels I examine all present U.S. cities as exemplary of neoliberal policy and ideology at work. Three of seven are set in the California Bay Area, close to Silicon Valley, which, as Dinnen writes, contemporary novels often treat not as a place but as a ‘becoming historical event’.¹³² Martin Eve and Joe Street similarly describe the ‘Silicon Valley Novel’ genre as depicting a ‘dialectic of enlightenment in which techno-progression is socio-regressive and [...] disruptive entrepreneurship and innovation holds out but little hope of a revitalised culture or aesthetics’.¹³³ Such novels direct their critiques of neoliberalism at lucrative tech corporations and the socioeconomic sub-system in which they accumulate behavioural data about individuals’ activity and then package behavioural ‘prediction models’ to clients seeking to target particular consumer segments.¹³⁴ A common trope in this genre is to imply a strict dichotomy between literary narratives and data, framing the former as a means of accessing the messy, contingent humanity that the latter obfuscates.¹³⁵ Many of the novels I examine stage an ultimate turning ‘away’ from the digital. Here, the generation is deployed both as a conceptual tool to consider the potential for achieving lasting social change. However, in these novels a generation turns against the devices and logics of platform capitalism, rather than the broader socioeconomic system that produced it and sustains it.

¹³² Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 105.

¹³³ Martin Eve and Joe Street, ‘The Silicon Valley Novel’, *Literature & History*, 27.1 (2018): 81-97 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306197318755680>> (p. 83).

¹³⁴ For detailed analyses of this system, see: Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

¹³⁵ For example: Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* frequently describes data in terms of refuse and pollution, while books are ‘a way to bridge the unfathomable gap’ between people; Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*, meanwhile, contrasts Silicon Valley’s drive to translate the entire ‘messiness of humanity’ into data—‘completion’—with the importance of mystery for storytelling and ‘the soul’. Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (London: Granta, 2011), p. 309; Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 491; 430.

Recent generational discourse has framed millennials as ‘the first [generation] to come of age fully under America’s 35-year experiment with neoliberalism’.¹³⁶ In *Kids These Days* (2017), Malcolm Harris argues that millennials have been burdened with the task of accruing ‘human capital’ through education and unpaid internships with no payoff, except for corporations.¹³⁷ Recent years have seen this argument rise to prominence in more mainstream media outlets, frequently framed as a retort to the dominant negative archetype.¹³⁸ Shaun Scott explains this change as a souring of expectation within a cultural hegemony as a cohort of middle-class, white, able-bodied millennials encounter forms of precarity and ‘disprivilege’ long-experienced by marginalised groups in America.¹³⁹ In many texts that aim to represent the generation, middle-class protagonists’ fetishization of fulfilling creative labour produces waves of anxiety and depression.¹⁴⁰ Katie Bloom argues that such narratives ‘evoke a sense of generational fatigue without getting into the details’, allowing ‘middle-class readers to feel like the *real* victims of capitalism instead of like participants and beneficiaries’.¹⁴¹ Realist representations of the ‘millennial’ generation’s experience of neoliberalism rarely extend further than delineating the deflated expectations of middle-class youth.

¹³⁶ Shaun Scott, *Millennials and the Moments that Made Us: A Cultural History of the US from 1982-Present* (New York: Zero Books, 2018), p. 226; Anne Helen Petersen, ‘How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation’, *Buzzfeed*, 5 January 2019 <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>> [accessed 9 August 2019]; Chloe Timperley, *Generation Rent: How Greed Killed the Housing Dream* (Kingston: Canbury Press, 2019)

¹³⁷ Malcolm Harris, *Kids these Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), Kindle ebook, loc. 594.

¹³⁸ For example, see: Michael Hobbes, ‘FML: Why millennials are facing the scariest financial future of any generation since the Great Depression’, Highline, *Huffington Post*, 14 December 2017 <<https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/poor-millennials-print/>> [accessed 9 August 2019]; Venessa Wong, ‘Here’s How Millennials’ Lives Were Changed By Recession 10 Years Ago’, *Buzzfeed*, 25 September 2018 <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/venessawong/millennials-lives-changed-by-recession-2008-2018>> [accessed 9 August 2019]; Derek Thompson, ‘Millennials Didn’t Kill the Economy. The Economy Killed Millennials’, *The Atlantic*, 6 December 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/stop-blaming-millennials-killing-economy/577408/>> [accessed 9 August 2019];

¹³⁹ Scott, *Millennials and the Moments that Made Us*, p. 84.

¹⁴⁰ Laura S. Witherington, ‘Girls: An Economic Redemption through Production and Labor’, in *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics and Millennial Angst*, ed. by Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 122-139 (pp. 126-7).

¹⁴¹ Katie Bloom, ‘All Precarity, No Pathos’, *The Nation*, 11 April 2019 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/halle-butler-new-me-book-review-millennial-fiction-temp-work/>> [accessed 13 August 2019]

Nonetheless, such representations express a shift between what Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith term the ‘third’ and ‘forth’ stages of the ideology. In the ‘third, sociocultural phase’, the ‘for-profit rationalities of commerce and consumerism’ shift from ‘political ideology to normative common sense’, informing how individuals understand themselves and their relation to society.¹⁴² In Chapter One I argue that this neoliberal common sense is advanced by *Purity* and *The Nix*, which depict digital natives as unable to encounter the inherent complexity of the world, a complexity that happens to align with neoliberalism’s figuring of the market as unregulatable.

The digital-native protagonists of the novels I examine in Chapters Two through Four, meanwhile, approach the complexity of the market as an anxiety-inducing fact. This reflects the ‘*fourth, ontological phase* [...] the market does not require specific economic pursuits, political commitments, or ideological beliefs; it only requires our presence, our being in and of it’.¹⁴³ Beyond characterisation, the narration is can itself prove exemplary of this deflated investment in neoliberal ideology, accumulating a cacophony of complaints about the experience of being young in twenty-first century America while representing sustained socioeconomic critiques as inauthentic products of that same system. However, amid this despondency, the realist narratives I examine occasionally prove themselves able to create momentary sites of change within the mundane. As I focus on in Chapter Four, characters are able to reappropriate disruptive technologies into cultural practices that are not geared towards market logics.

Alongside this concern with neoliberalism, the novels I analyse also engage with shifting modes of identification. Introduced by the Combahee River Collective in reaction to the specific subjugation experienced by black women in the United States, the now broad term

¹⁴² Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, ‘Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction’, in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, pp. 1-18 (p. 8)

¹⁴³ Huehls and Greenwald Smith, ‘Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction’, p. 9.

‘identity politics’ understands social identities as ‘the locus and nodal point by which political structures are played out, mobilized, reinforced, and sometimes challenged’.¹⁴⁴ This identity politics is often accused of being ‘divisive’, for fracturing a public and exaggerating differences. It has also been criticised in Queer Theory, with Judith Butler describing it as ‘produced by a state which can only allocate recognition and rights to subjects totalized by the particularity that constitutes their plaintiff status’.¹⁴⁵ Butler advocates a refusing of such state-mandated totalizations. Defending identity politics from such criticisms, Michael Hames-García argues that ‘any adequate theory of social identity must be able to account for multiplicity, understood as the mutual constitution and overlapping of simultaneously experienced and politically significant categories such as ability, citizenship, class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion and sexuality’.¹⁴⁶ Identities never exist in isolation, but are ongoing processes that overlap and clash. As will become evident in my analyses over the following chapters, the staging of these clashes in realist novels often destabilises techno-generational frameworks as neat organising principles for understanding social change.

Although early users of the internet conceived of it as a space for shedding or experimenting with social identities, media scholars have since detailed ways in which traditional social identities and hierarchies are maintained and reinforced by online communities and digital infrastructure.¹⁴⁷ As evidenced by the appearance of hashtags in the names of prominent social movements—e.g. #MeToo—the centralisation of internet usage

¹⁴⁴ Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty, ‘Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction’, in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, ed. by Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M. L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-9 (p. 7).

¹⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 100.

¹⁴⁶ Michael Hames-García, *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 11. See: Combahee River Collective, ‘A Black Feminist Statement’, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 2nd edn. (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), pp. 210-218 (p. 212).

¹⁴⁷ See, e.g.: Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (eds.), *Race after the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

around Web 2.0 platforms has transformed the internet into a space for the organising and expression of identity politics, from both marginalised and hegemonic identity positions. Moreover, users' broader and seemingly non-political usage has developed certain characteristics associated with particular social identities. For example, André Brock describes 'Black Twitter'—a disproportionate preference for Twitter among black Americans—as 'a community constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike'.¹⁴⁸ Rather than merely reflecting pre-existing social identities, the interfaces and conventions of digital media contribute to the ways subjects perform and develop the ongoing cultural constitutions of different identities. The generalised idea of a digital native is immediately complicated when placed in dialogue with these differences.

Occasionally, a generational identity such as the 'millennial' is mistakenly framed as 'an oppressed minority'.¹⁴⁹ While there has been an amassing of negative stereotypes about the millennial in contemporary discourse, to treat the 'millennial' as a stable, pre-given category with a significance akin to race, gender or class fails to apprehend the 'mutual constitution' of all social identities.¹⁵⁰ In privileging generational identity, techno-generational frameworks produce certain obfuscations and most often reinforce a limited bourgeois perspective. In Chapter Three I argue that *Sympathy* uses techno-generational frameworks in such a way that reproduces stereotypical formations of racial difference. Such differences—between black and white Americans, between black Americans and Japanese immigrants—are then deployed in the service of a broader point about the anxiety and rootlessness of a generation. The black protagonist's racial difference to other characters analogises a generalised technological rootlessness, with the novel displaying little interest in the constitution of this racial difference.

¹⁴⁸ André Brock, 'From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (2012), 529-549 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732147>> (p. 530).

¹⁴⁹ 'Young, gifted and held back', *The Economist*, 23rd January 2016 <<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/01/23/young-gifted-and-held-back>> [accessed 22 October 2019]

¹⁵⁰ Hames-García, *Identity Complex*, p 11.

Private Citizens performs a similar aestheticization of social identity, in this case disability, by using a character's disabled body to analogise the deficiencies of neoliberal ideology. In both cases, a techno-generational framework absorbs or obfuscates generational identity's mutual constitution with other social identities.

A final recurring thread throughout these novels' use of techno-generational frameworks concerns authorship and the role of the novel in a digital media environment. Print fiction did not feature prominently in generational discourse about 'millennials' until relatively recently. Scott's cultural history of 'millennials' makes reference to various significant works of popular music and television but not to a single work of prose fiction by and about 'millennials'.¹⁵¹ Novelist Tony Tulathimutte observes that the 'current front-runner' for a literary 'voice of a generation' is 'Lena Dunham, not even a novelist'.¹⁵² In a 2019 interview, Bret Easton Ellis asks 'where is the millennial novel?', before promptly answering himself: 'There isn't one'.¹⁵³ This provocation follows Ellis asking 'what is millennial culture? [...] It kind of disturbs me. There's no writing. They don't care about literature. None of them read books'.¹⁵⁴ Empirical studies suggest that the so-called 'millennial generation' in the United States has not abandoned print media.¹⁵⁵ Ellis's assertions about millennials' philistinism, made

¹⁵¹ Scott, *Millennials and the Moments that Made Us*.

¹⁵² Tony Tulathimutte, 'Why There's No "Millennial" Novel', *The New York Times*, 7 December 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/books/review/why-theres-no-millennial-novel.html>> [accessed 3 December 2019], n. pag.

¹⁵³ Bret Easton Ellis, 'Interview: American Psycho author Bret Easton Ellis on why he hates millennials' (interview by Decca Aitkenhead for *The Times*), 21 April 2019 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-interview-american-psycho-author-bret-easton-ellis-on-why-he-hates-millennials-0zngpx6pq>> [accessed 1 August 2019], n. pag.

¹⁵⁴ By this point, Ellis is already known to view the 'millennial' generation with contempt, calling it 'Generation Wuss' for years on Twitter. For example: 'Typical Generation Wuss comment: "You know, Twitter has really ruined you for me." It's TWITTER. Get a fucking life.' (@BretEastonEllis, 1 October 2012).

¹⁵⁵ A 2016 Pew Research Centre study concludes that U.S. adults aged between eighteen and twenty-nine were more likely to have read a book in the past year than their elders. This is not an 'age affect', younger people reading books for school, research or work, as the study suggests that all age brackets roughly read for pleasure as often as one another. (see: Andrew Perrin, 'Book Reading 2016', *Pew Research Center*, 1 September 2016 <<https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/09/01/book-reading-2016/>> [accessed 7 August 2019]). A later Pew study suggested that the demographic categories that correlate with book reading are education, household income and immigrant generation, rather than age (see: Andrew Perrin, 'Who doesn't read books in America?', *Pew*

here and elsewhere, are facetiously self-serving.¹⁵⁶ Not only do they draw attention to his own cultural cache as voice of ‘Generation X’, but they locate the novel and novelist at the heart of cultural inheritance. Any diminished prestige is isolated to a delimited group, whose disinterest in print media bars them from participation in this shared culture.

The literary industry’s current fascination with generational identity is usually more evident in interviews and authors’ essays than novels themselves. However, as Gérard Genette writes, such paratexts are significant frames that contribute to texts’ presentations to readers.¹⁵⁷ For example, Tulathimutte argues that ‘[t]he generational novel [...] is a comforting romantic myth’ and generational labels are ‘identity-bundles to substitute for self-definition’ that influence how individuals ‘click, shop and vote’.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he remains caught in this industry drive, the flyleaf to the UK edition of *Private Citizens* declaring it ‘Middlemarch for Millennials’.¹⁵⁹ Interviewed by Malcolm Harris, Tulathimutte states that ‘[i]f Malcolm’s economic portrait is the mainspring of the lived experience of this generation, then my book’s

Research Center < <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/23/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america/> > [accessed 7 August 2019]) ‘Millennials’ are not abandoning books, then; but are they abandoning novelistic fiction? A 2016 survey by the National Endowment for the Arts reported an overall decline in the number of U.S. adults reading “literature (poetry, plays, short stories, or novels)” (see: Office of Research & Analysis, ‘Arts Data Profile #10: Results from the Annual Arts Basic Survey (2013-2015) – Research Brief #1: visual and Performing Arts Attendance; Movie-Going; Literary Reading’ and Learning through Arts Classes or Lessons’’, *National Endowment for the Arts*, July 2016 <<https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/aabs-research-brief-1.pdf>> [accessed 7 August 2019]). In this case, those aged sixty-five to seventy-four are most likely to read literature, while the percentage of younger adults who report reading literature has neither risen nor fallen relative to their share of the population (see: Office of Research & Analysis, ‘Arts Data Profile #10: Results from the Annual Arts Basic Survey (2013-2015) – Research Brief #4: Gender, Race and Ethnicity, and Age of Arts Participants’’, *National Endowment for the Arts*, July 2016 <<https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/aabs-research-brief-4.pdf>> [accessed 7 August 2019]). So-called millennials are therefore a smaller section of the U.S. literary reading public, but they are not exhibiting a *decline* in interest in literature.

¹⁵⁶ In his essay collection *White* he regales readers with online war stories of ‘referring to millennials as Generation Wuss on my Twitter feed and podcast’ and notes that ‘a 24/7 news cycle runs itself dry and elevates certain voices’ treated him as ‘an “expert”’. Bret Easton Ellis, *White* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), pp. 130, 136. Ellis also brings up the question of the ‘Great Millennial Novel’ a year prior. See: Bret Easton Ellis, ‘Bret Easton Ellis and the future of fiction’, *TLS*, 16 May 2018 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/bret-easton-ellis-future-fiction-olah/>> [accessed 7 August 2019]

¹⁵⁷ Gérard Genette, ‘Introduction to the Paratext’, *New Literary History*, 22.2 (Spring 1991), 261-272 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/469037>>

¹⁵⁸ Tulathimutte, ‘Why There’s No “Millennial” Novel’, *The New York Times*, 7 December 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/books/review/why-theres-no-millennial-novel.html> > [accessed 6 August 2019]

¹⁵⁹ Tony Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens* (Edinburgh: OneWorld, 2016), flyleaf.

project is to show how it makes people think of themselves and each other'.¹⁶⁰ The novels in this thesis therefore do not necessarily reference the generational identity of the millennial or digital native explicitly. However, each novel invokes tropes about one or both of them that circulate in a broader discursive context.

The invocation of Eliot's *Middlemarch* to market *Private Citizens* indicates that the particular understanding of realism most often labelled 'generational' concerns the changing situation and composition of the middle classes as indicative of changes in society as a whole during a period of capitalist modernization. Where the novels I examine do attempt to represent the experiences of marginalised subjects—for example black and Asian women in *Sympathy*, or disabled women in *Private Citizens*—they view them from the normative assumptions of this bourgeois realist tradition. For the most part, the novels I examine are by middle-class authors producing for audiences of the same. With the exception of Franzen and Sudjic, who were both educated at elite institutions, they have all undertaken a Master of Fine Arts programme.¹⁶¹ While their representations of digital natives are marketed as extending a literary hand to younger audiences, the genre contract of the realist novel means they also promise to 'reveal' a generation to the typical audience of 'literary' realist novels: an older, middle-class, mostly white readership. That texts touted as 'the millennial novel' are conventionally realist in form reflects an increasingly risk-averse market. As Paul Crosthwaite writes, publishers apply 'strong pressure' on low-profile authors to avoid radically restructuring form from 'first

¹⁶⁰ Natasha Stagg, 'Constantly and On Your Own: Talking with Natasha Stagg', (interviewed by Mickie Meinhardt for *The Rumpus*), 27 December 2017 <<https://therumpus.net/2017/12/the-rumpus-interview-with-natasha-stagg/>> [accessed 18 September 2018]; Tony Tulathimutte and Malcolm Harris, 'Malcolm Harris in conversation with Tony Tulathimutte' (interviewed by Alex Woodend for *Bookforum*), 31 October 2017 <<https://www.bookforum.com/interview/18781>> [accessed 17 October 2018]

¹⁶¹ Jonathan Franzen graduated from Swarthmore College in 1981, while Olivia Sudjic graduated from Trinity Hall, Cambridge in 2007. Nathan Hill has an MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Tao Lin an MFA in poetry from Syracuse University; Natasha Stagg an MFA from the University of Arizona; and Tony Tulathimutte an MFA from the University of Iowa.

principles’ and instead ‘adapt from one or other pre-existing blueprint’.¹⁶² This reproduction of novelistic conventions further serves to rejuvenate the medium, signalling its continued cultural relevance value to a new market demographic.

Editors, publishers and critics often present debut authors as ‘next big things’ through techno-generational frameworks that highlight references to recent technologies. A *Guardian* review of Sudjic’s *Sympathy* approvingly declares it to be ‘packed with the “now”: [...] grubby dating apps [...] puns on Pinterest and Pinteresque’.¹⁶³ A review of Tommy Orange’s *There There* similarly remarks that ‘the novel is so contemporary that it even includes the 3D printing of guns, flying drones and VR headsets’.¹⁶⁴ Such examples invoke the ‘frantic commercial pace’ of technocapitalism, in which, as Mark Currie writes, the novel is ‘marked by its imminent and immanent obsolescence’.¹⁶⁵ Technological signifiers reassert the value of print fiction as up-to-date with the conflated rhythms of sociological generations and what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun describes as the logic of ‘the update [...] Things and people not updating are things and people lost or in distress, for users have become creatures of the update’.¹⁶⁶ This accelerating rhythm of the update produces a hierarchy of the new and the old, threatening the latter. Moreover, the timeframe of writing and publishing print fiction is slower than that of technocapitalist production. Therefore, paradoxically, tying the value of novels to their references to recent technologies also accelerates the rate of perceived obsolescence regarding each individual novel.

¹⁶² Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 23.

¹⁶³ Hermione Eyre, ‘Sympathy by Olivia Sudjic review – up-to-the-minute debut’, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/26/sympathy-olivia-sudjic-review>> [accessed 15 November 2018]

¹⁶⁴ T. A. Konsgaard, ‘Tommy Orange, *There There*’, *The High Arts Review*, 27 June 2018 <<https://thehigharts.com/tommy-orange-there-there/>> [accessed 23 May 2019]

¹⁶⁵ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007),

¹⁶⁶ Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, p. 2.

Representing ‘digital natives’ as the first generation to develop a habitual familiarity with digital media technologies from an early age means that the relevant technologies must be depicted not as new but as already banal through their habituation. In marketing these novels as representative of a generation, publishers must therefore sell familiarity itself as new. An approach taken by some of these novels to embody this familiarity is to, as in McLuhan’s writing on ‘hybrids’, stage a meeting between media, using the familiar conventions of literary realism to foreground the unfamiliarity of the digital.¹⁶⁷ The novels I examine attempt such hybridity to varying degrees. Some reproduce some of the conventions of blogging, while others construct multivocal narratives that embody the network effects of social media platforms.

Techno-generational frameworks remain relatively simple structures for representing shifts in social relations produced by and/or through the domestication of certain technologies. With regards neoliberal capitalism, generational identity serves as a way of conceiving of changes to the composition of Western middle classes. However, clashes between generational identity and other social identities such as race, gender and ability demonstrate that these organising logics obscure as much as they reveal. Overall, the novels I examine do not together provide a shared, essential notion of what it means to be a ‘digital native’ or a ‘millennial’. Rather, as realist narratives, their representations embody the failures and excesses that result in the applications of such labels onto heterogeneous social experiences.

Chapter One of this thesis (‘Old Man Yells at Cloud’) draws on Raymond Williams’ writing on structures of feeling to examine a particular use of the generation that conceptualises ‘the digital’ as an invading cultural force and the literary as a residual cultural tradition under attack. In this chapter I argue that two novels—*Purity* by Jonathan Franzen and *The Nix* by

¹⁶⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, ed. by W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko, 2003), p. 80.

Nathan Hill—both employ an anachronistic narrative perspective to challenge the narrative of technological progress. This perspective functions behind the focalizations of individual characters as well as the omniscient narrator, using ironic relationships between each to express a paternalistic, pseudo-sympathetic and fundamentally conservative concern about a digital native generation. Whereas novels such as *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) by Gary Shteyngart and *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers voice paternalistic concern through a speculative frame, *The Nix* and *Purity* amplify the sense of residuality by offering techno-generational framings of the recent past that depict a bourgeois culture already undermined. They represent a digital native generation using young, white, female characters. Framing these characters as vulnerable to the pernicious influence of older male characters, these novels' techno-generational frameworks express a paternalistic concern with the ways that digital media are 'degrading' feminine sexuality. Here, generational identity is placed in overlap with gender identity so that the former highlights a shift in the latter cause attributed to consumer technologies.

In contrast to figuring a digital native generation as unusually threatening, other novels examine how perceived generational characteristics are produced through longer term socioeconomic systems Chapter Two ('Work with Pleasure') considers how representations of the 'influencer' or 'content creator' on online platforms delineate emerging relations between labour and capital. I argue that *Private Citizens* by Tony Tulathimutte and *Surveys* by Natasha Stagg depict the desires of its young protagonists as captured by platforms' frameworks of extraction, with young people transforming their everyday social activity into forms of labour in reaction to a failing economy and a deflating neoliberal ideology with no clear alternative. These novels use techno-generational frameworks to foreground shifts brought about in class identity—specifically in middle-class graduates. In each, a young woman opts to become an 'influencer', a form of aspirational labour performed on online platforms. Amidst a broader

breakdown between public and domestic space and work and leisure time, they find this work alienating and objectifying. The two novels thereby use the overlap between generational and gender identity to represent how digital platforms produce new, gendered material relations between capital and labour. Colleen, the protagonist of *Surveys*, views becoming an online ‘influencer’ as a preferable alternative to her job in marketing research, however upon becoming an online celebrity she soon discovers it to involve much the same labour—albeit at a faster and more psychologically destructive pace. In *Private Citizens*, a paraplegic entrepreneur named Vanya creates a platform centring the experience of disabled peoples, only to find its mission inevitably subverted by the economic demands of platform capitalism. Moreover, Vanya and her boyfriend Will find themselves both perpetuating and falling victim to certain racial, gendered and ablest stereotypes circulated through their platform.

In Chapter Three (‘Interface’), I discuss how the types of deflated expectations regarding work depicted in *Surveys* and *Private Citizens* are broadened into a more generalised malaise among middle-class graduates in *Taipei*, by Tao Lin and *Sympathy*, by Olivia Sudjic. These novels play with stereotypes about technological addiction and represent habitual familiarity with the flattening grid-like visual logics of digital media interfaces as modes of coping with the uncertainty of an extended period of ‘emerging adulthood’. By way of Lauren Berlant’s writing on ‘flat affect’, I examine how this inhabiting of generational stereotypes registers blockages to the expected epistemological and affective payoffs of the realist novel. *Taipei* and *Sympathy* both produce flat affects in dialogue with their representations of encounters with the flatness of digital interfaces. However, by way of these flat aesthetics, these novels aestheticize the politics of racial difference under their techno-generational frameworks, subordinating them to a bourgeois concern about individual authenticity.

Finally, Chapter Four (‘Digitally Native’) explores potentials for alternative uses of digital technologies by examining how generational discourse might contribute to an

understanding of what Yuk Hui calls ‘cosmotechnics’, focusing on how members of indigenous societies adapt digital media as modes of maintaining cultural sovereignty under continuing colonial rule. This time I look at just one novel: *There There*, by Tommy Orange. This novel explores digital technologies as part of broader systems of the colonial oppression of Native Americans, yet also uses the generation as a form for considering how technologies might be appropriated as bases for alternative societies. It explores the ambivalence inherent within technologies such as the 3D printer, perhaps best known in popular culture for its capacity to produce unlicensed firearms but holding the potential to upend existing modes of production entirely. Franzen and Hill use techno-generational frameworks to express anxieties about how digital technology contributes to unrecognisable reproduction of a society, the failure of desired cultural transmission over time. Orange, on the other hand, deploys the generation to open a point of convergence from U.S. colonial ideology. In this novel, digital natives’ familiarity with new technologies generates modern indigenous logics that resist the ‘common sense’ of neoliberal capitalism.

Together, these chapters consider what analytical or political purpose techno-generational frameworks retain that make up for their limitations. While the generation appears to provide a flexible alternative to the period that better captures the present as an ongoing process, employing the social generation in the realist novel reinforces its conservative form. In marking a constitutive change to the make-up of a society, it introduces divergences in relationships individuals have to the social whole, opening a new area of experience to represent and cultivate. However, it also defines all these changes against an assumed and intractable norm inherited from its bourgeois origins. We might therefore say that, at best, these novels’ techno-generational frameworks create space for some preferable organising logic to better explain how digital technologies are impacting societies. At worst, however, they serve only to further defer the enunciation of such a logic.

CHAPTER ONE

Old Man Yells at Cloud: Technology, Realism and Ideology in *Purity* and *The Nix*

In a 2002 episode of the animated television series *The Simpsons*, titled ‘The Old Man and the Key’, Homer Simpson’s elderly father Abe visits the Department of Motor Vehicles to renew his driving licence. Instead of having his photograph taken, Abe offers a ‘recent photo’ of himself shaking his fist at the sky, cut from a newspaper article headlined ‘OLD MAN YELLS AT CLOUD’ (Figure 1). His application is promptly accepted. The gag draws on the show’s longstanding characterisation of Abe as cantankerous and isolated from modern society. However, in the late-2000s, this moment re-emerged in popular culture as bloggers and online fan communities began editing a cropped still of Abe’s newspaper cutting to mock conservative political pundits and videogame fans disgruntled at minor changes to their favourite franchises (Figures 2 & 3). Another early use of this meme ridiculed computer engineer Richard Stallman’s concern about ‘cloud computing’, the now-ubiquitous practice of storing user data on non-local computers via online applications such as Gmail.¹ Like the *Simpsons* episode that inspired them, Old Man Yells at Cloud memes wield an ageist cultural stereotype as a rhetorical weapon to dismiss their targets’ concerns as ignorant or irrelevant to a contemporary context.

Such stereotypes derive less from essential characteristics of biological aging than from cultural understandings of age at a given historical juncture. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette

¹ Reuven Cohen, ‘Stupid Redux: Old Man GNU Yells at Cloud’, *Elasticvapour.com*, 29 September 2008 <<http://www.elasticvapor.com/2008/09/stupid-redux-old-man-gnu-yells-at-cloud.html>> [accessed 14 February 2019]



Figure 1: 'The Old Man and the Key', *The Simpsons*, Fox, 10 March 2002



Figure 2: Credited to 'elfling' in Hunter, 'Old Man Yells at Cloud', *Daily Kos*, 2 October 2007
<<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2007/10/2/393228/-Old-Man-Yells-At-Cloud>> [accessed 14 June 2019]



Figure 3: Shawn Handyside, 'Old Man Yells at Cloud', *Halolz*, 11 November 2009
<<http://www.halolz.com/2009/11/11/old-man-yells-at-cloud/>> [accessed 14 June 2019]

puts it, we are ‘aged by culture’.² The category of old age is produced through cultural expectations concerning the affordances of material infrastructure stratified by intersecting factors of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. This is not to say that the aging body plays no part in cultural age categories, but rather that age categories cannot be entirely reduced to biological causation. Age categories, as Judith Butler writes of gender, can be *performative*, ‘a kind of imitation for which there is no original; [...] a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself’.³ In a way that is not only analogous to gender performativity but intertwined with it, subjects actively engage with certain behaviours associated with age. For instance, Linn Sandberg writes that old age is frequently ‘bound in a binary discourse as either decline or success’.⁴ An ageist discourse might intersect with a sexist one to frame an ageing body as declining in reproductive ability yet successful in maintaining its ‘figure’, for instance. Contrasting itself with young generations, who are embodiments of the future, the ‘Old Man’ identified in *The Simpsons* and the memes it inspired is a parodic figure produced through narratives of masculine decline.

However, the *Simpsons* scene not only provokes the viewer to laugh at Abe’s insatiable grouchiness. It also suggests he takes some pride in it. That Abe carries the clipping with him and is eager to produce it indicates that his yelling at clouds is not an attempt to control the elements but rather a performance of his age, to relish in the spectacle of his own cultural decline. Old Man Yells at Cloud memes reproduce this element, accusing their targets not only of simply being out of touch but of willingly being so, of deriving some pleasure from the signifiers of aging masculinity. Abe’s performance, along with the parodies it inspired, draw attention to the performativity of the Old Man and of age categories more broadly. The

² Margaret Morgaonroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)

³ Judith Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’, in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 307-20 (p. 313)

⁴ Linn Sandberg, ‘Affirmative Old Age – the Ageing Body and Feminist Theories on Difference’, *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 8.1 (2013), 11-40 (p. 13)

distinction drawn between ‘my day’ and the present is one often invoked to rally conservative audiences anxious about social change around ‘traditions, institutions and processes’ that Raymond Williams terms ‘residual’ against those seen as ‘dominant’ or ‘emergent’.⁵ This residual perspective embraces ‘certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, [but] are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue’ and ‘may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture’.⁶ Conservative cultural commentators invoke the ‘Old Man’ figure, pointedly framing themselves as in decline and out of step with the dominant and emerging ‘structures of feeling’ in contemporary culture, in order to challenge a teleology of progress.

In this chapter, I compare two novels whose narrative perspectives engage in such performances in order to represent the ‘digital native’ as a cultural ‘other’ whose use of new digital technologies is dangerous to the freedoms afforded by liberal democracy. The values these novels depict as residual are those commonly grouped under ‘liberal humanism’, defined by Catherine Belsey as: ‘a commitment to *man*, whose essence is freedom [...] the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history. Unified, knowing, and autonomous, the human being seeks a political system which guarantees freedom of choice’.⁷ The novels I examine fit into a wider contemporary liberal-humanist perspective that the autonomous subject is undermined by digital media specifically. That this perspective is hardly residual in practice is demonstrated by the success of Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, which asks ‘[i]f industrial capitalism dangerously disrupted nature,

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 121-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁷ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 8.

what havoc might surveillance capitalism wreak on human nature?’⁸ This framing has been criticised for presenting ‘surveillance capitalism’ as a unique aberrance rather than logical development from ‘prior’ epochs of capitalism.⁹ The narrative perspectives I examine in this chapter exhibit a similar disinterest in critiquing the longer contexts for the observed behaviour of digital natives, instead framing them as new, alien subjects of a threatening future.

Amidst the network of relationships across multiple decades in Nathan Hill’s debut novel *The Nix* exists a twenty-first century animosity between its protagonist, Samuel, a male university teacher and aspiring author, and Laura, a younger, female student who seeks to destroy his career rather than improve her grades through study. The overarching perspective of the ostensibly multivocal narrative frames Laura and her generation as products of a broader cultural malaise in which the complexity and nuance of everyday encounters between individuals are reduced to the soundbites and metrics of popular media, including social media platforms. The novel’s techno-generational framework therefore constructs digital natives as embodiments of a decline from an American culture invested in the humanities to one driven by finance capital and dreams of technological progress towards spectacle, simplicity and delusion. Drawing on contemporary generational discourses about digital natives and ‘generation snowflake’, the novel frames Laura as a problem for its stubbornly humanist protagonist Samuel to work out, an alien psychology to understand and empathize with as an individual.

Jonathan Franzen’s fifth novel, *Purity*, employs a similar techno-generational framing of an American culture in peril. The protagonist, Pip, is a recent graduate living in a squat and working at a parasitic ‘start-up’ company. Although she is impulsive and lacks direction, Pip is

⁸ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), p. 20.

⁹ See: Evgeny Morozov, ‘Capitalism’s New Clothes’, *The Baffler*, 4 February 2019 <<https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov>> [last accessed 26 July 2019]

characterised as an outlier in a generation enthralled by promises of technological progress, particularly claims of digital media's democratisation of politics and culture. The narrative draws on contemporary generational discourses surrounding student debt to depict Pip's material situation, while also reproducing conservative tropes about the attitudes of 'millennials' towards work and sexual relationships. Despite large sections of free-indirect narration, the coming-of-age novel employs an overarching perspective that places Pip on a path towards becoming what it views as an empathetic and rational individual. Like *The Nix*, then, *Purity* constructs a techno-generational framework to frame 'digital natives' as embodying a threatening future; however, Pip functions as a vision of avoiding this future, an alternative vision in which a younger generation disavow their simplistic worldviews engendered by new media technologies and instead embrace humanistic—indeed, novelistic—understandings of natural complexity. I will argue that there is a reactionary politics at the heart of this perspective.

I do not mean to reproduce ageist sentiments by attributing the narrative perspectives of *Purity* and *The Nix* to the biological ages of their respective authors. Franzen and Hill would be described as being of different generations under the Howe-Strass framework, yet they employ similarly anachronistic perspectives towards digital technologies and their impacts on society. Born in 1979, Hill's birthdate falls short of many demographic definitions of the 'millennial' by only one year. Yet he nonetheless expresses concern about this generation exhibiting a tendency towards 'snap-judgement' where fast access to information leads social media users to make hasty verdicts about events and people.¹⁰ Franzen, meanwhile, has rejected

¹⁰ Nathan Hill, 'Nathan Hill on *The Nix*, Satirizing the Media, and Capturing the Absurdity of America in Fiction', (interviewed by Hal Conick for *Slate*), 25 November 2016 <<https://slate.com/culture/2016/11/an-interview-with-nathan-hill-author-of-the-nix.html>> [accessed 15 February 2019]; see also: Nathan Hill, 'An interview with Nathan Hill', (interviewed for *Bookbrowse*) <https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/2854/nathan-hill> [accessed 15 February 2019]

‘technological consumerism’ since his 1996 essay ‘I’ll Be Doing More of the Same’.¹¹ His novels *The Corrections* and *Freedom* depict tech corporations manipulating ‘consumer appetite’ with ‘distracting noise’.¹² More recently he has argued that digital technologies are ‘fraught with uncertainties’, reducing our perception of others and the natural world, and that children should not be taught to continuously keep up with new technologies in place of the humanities.¹³ These broadly uncontroversial arguments align with common critiques of digital technologies, yet are limited in their unwillingness to situate them in broader socioeconomic contexts beyond their psychological impacts on individuals. Furthermore, they repeatedly frame the literature of previously marginalised cultural voices as symptomatic of literature’s fragmentation under technological consumerism.¹⁴ These comments have therefore produced waves of critical backlash, to which Franzen has responded with ‘a certain degree of glee’, inciting it further through references and dialogue in *Purity*.¹⁵

The narrative perspectives I identify in *The Nix* and *Purity* draw on the performed anachronism advocated by David Foster Wallace in his 1993 essay ‘E Unibus Pluram’, which delineates an oppositional aesthetics for a generation who ‘lived with instead of just looked at’ television, and whom television therefore has ‘by the throat’.¹⁶ To combat a focus on irony

¹¹ Jonathan Franzen, ‘I’ll Be Doing More of the Same’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16.1 (1996), 34-38 <<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/I%27ll+be+doing+more+of+the+same.-a018540918>> [accessed 28 May 2018]

¹² Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), p. 51; Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (New York: Picador, 2010), p. 232.

¹³ Jonathan Franzen, ‘Carbon Capture’, *The New Yorker*, 6 April 2015

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/carbon-capture>> [accessed 15 February 2019]; Jonathan

Franzen, ‘Liking Is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts’, *The New York Times*, 29 May 2011

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/opinion/29franzen.html>> [accessed 15 February 2019]; Jonathan

Franzen, ‘What’s Wrong with the Modern World?’, *The Guardian*, 13 September 2013,

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20130915070641/http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/13/jonathan-franzen-wrong-modern-world>> [accessed 28 May 2018]

¹⁴ For an analysis of Franzen’s problematic critiques of technological progressivism outside his fiction, see: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), p. 201-206.

¹⁵ Jonathan Franzen and Emma Brockes, ‘Jonathan Franzen interview: “There is no way to make myself not male”’, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/aug/21/jonathan-franzen-purity-interview>> [accessed 28 May 2018]

¹⁶ David Foster Wallace, ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (Summer 1993), 151-194 (pp. 167, 171)

among his generation derived from television, Wallace calls for an ‘almost atavistic’ return to ‘the hoary techniques of literary realism’ to represent this new, media-saturated state of being.¹⁷ This style’s residual character becomes its strength: it ‘would be outdated, of course, before [it] even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic’.¹⁸ Franzen echoes this sentiment in his own essays, writes for instance that ‘[t]he day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative’.¹⁹ Resting on a techno-generational framework, this oppositional aesthetic program attempts to transcend the limits of both postmodernism as an artistic label and the trappings of postmodernity as a social period. However, Wallace’s parting call for writers to ‘endorse single-entendre values’ and ‘human troubles and emotions’ prioritises the form of its opposition rather than its content: sincerity itself over sincere values.²⁰ As performed anachronism, it remains quintessentially postmodern.

Written in this anachronistic realist mode, *The Nix* and *Purity* replace television with digital technologies as their media antagonists. As Jae Sharpe writes, Franzen draws his ‘amalgamation [of] political and interpersonal concerns’ from the tradition of ‘Dickens and Tolstoy’, and his ‘definitional project of diagnosing and showcasing the political and relational conditions of the present’ from the legacy of ‘Sinclair and Steinbeck’.²¹ *Purity* both embodies and thematises this realist tradition, representing a present in which political concerns are shaped by digital media while also asserting the continued value of traditional print media such as the realist novel. In this way, its subject is not so much digital media but the place of the novel in a digital media environment. As Jon Doyle argue, *Purity* often ‘ignore[s] technology to describe a more “realistic” human experience’, and, despite its overt subject matter, ‘feels

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁹ Franzen, ‘I’ll Be Doing...’

²⁰ Ibid., p. 193.

²¹ Jae Sharpe, ‘Economies of Reputation: Jonathan Franzen’s *Purity* and Practices of Disclosure in the Information Age’, *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1).22 (2018), 1–23 < <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.240>> (p. 2).

oddly removed from the digital age, the technology a mere background novelty to the traditional narrative'.²² Doyle goes on to compare this to *The Nix*, which he argues employs an 'amalgamation of the styles and techniques employed by previous post-postmodernists, incorporating the rich, hysterical detail of Pynchon, a DeLillian blend of magic and dread, a Wallacean sense of empathy, and at least something close to Franzen-level character studies into a single text'.²³ Nonetheless, I argue that despite its stylistic variation, Hill's project with *The Nix* is to defend the residual values of a realist tradition in a digital media environment like Franzen and Wallace before him.

Although these two novels offer the perspectives of various characters across generations within discrete sections from both first- and third-person perspectives, overruling authorial perspectives emerge within the contrast between these different internal focalizations and the generations they aim to represent. The function of this perspective resembles that of what Wayne Booth terms the 'implied author': it is neither a character nor a narrator in a text, but rather 'a design principle, responsible for the narrative techniques and the plot of the text' as well as 'a source of the norms and values communicated by the text'.²⁴ Again, I am not claiming that Franzen and Hill are old men or that they themselves are reactionary. In many ways, their critiques of narratives of technological progress reflect those I will make in Chapters Two and Four of this thesis. What I will call the 'Old-Man' perspective, drawing on Abe Simpson's performance of cultural decline, is a particular focalization, or as Gérard Genette writes, a 'vision from behind'.²⁵ It can be distinguished from the perspectives of not only individual characters but also the narration, while remaining immanent to the text rather than

²² Jon Doyle, 'The changing face of post-postmodern fiction: Irony, sincerity, and populism', *Critique*, 59.3 (2018), 259-270 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1381069>> (p. 264).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Meaning, Intent, and the Implied Author', *Style*, 45.1 (Spring 2011), 29-47 (pp. 34-45)

²⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 190.

being a direct embodiment of authorial intent. In both *Purity* and *The Nix*, narration switches between first-person and free-indirect narration, in each case presenting the perspectives of characters. However, ‘behind’ these shuffling perspectives lies a broader narrative perspective, witnessed in moments of irony that reveal a character’s perspective to be limited. My analysis will distinguish this from a traditionally understood ‘omniscient narrator’, because while the Old-Man perspective draws attention to the limits of his character’s perspectives, it noticeably refuses to ‘fill in’ these gaps.

Clouding Realism

As Abe Simpson’s performance of cultural decline demonstrates, to yell at a cloud one must maintain a state of ignorance or vagueness concerning the processes that brought it into being. As Slavoj Žižek notes, in contrast to modern meteorology’s systems-based perspective, traditional meteorology depended on ‘some Beyond, which, by definition, remains beyond our grasp, [from which] clouds and winds arrive, and all one can do is formulate the rules of the emergence and disappearance in a series of “wisdoms”’.²⁶ This space of ignorance, a ‘beyond’, is integral to the performed wisdom of the Old Man.

It is appropriate, then, that some of the earliest uses of the Old Man Yells at Cloud meme targeted critics of ‘cloud’ computing. The notion of the cloud relevant here derives from early network diagrams (Figures 4 & 5). As Tsung-Hui Hu writes,

The cloud icon on a map allowed an administrator to situate a network he or she had direct knowledge of—the computers in his or her office, for example—within the same epistemic space as something that constantly fluctuates and is impossible to know: the amorphous admixture of the telephone network, cable network, and the Internet.²⁷

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, ‘What Can Psychoanalysis Tell Us About Cyberspace?’, *Psychoanalytic Review*, 91.6 (December 2004), 801-830 (p. 805)

²⁷ Tsung-Hui Hu, *The Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. x.

The use of the cloud metaphor as a means of deferring detail in engineering demonstrates a relationship between representation and an unrepresentable 'Beyond'. This relationship carries into how *The Nix* and *Purity* present the socioeconomic situation of digital natives.

The 'cloud' computing metaphor exemplifies the compartmentalising of complexity in everyday discourse. Hu writes that the 'virtualization' of networks in the figure of the cloud 'displaces the infrastructure of labour within networks', and that

When commentators describe the nebulous Occupy Wall Street movements [and] the working of global capitalism [...] as 'cloudlike,' or as 'a network of networks,' it is clear that the cloud, as an idea, has exceeded its technical platform and become a potent metaphor for the way contemporary society organises itself.²⁸

'Clouding' certain complex social phenomena encloses them into an epistemic space without interrogating them. Such a technique is integral to conservative thought. Criticising vagaries at the heart of 'New Left' Marxist doctrine, as well as in neoliberalism's notion of 'spontaneous order', Rugar Scruton asserts that 'no theory yet provided [...] does justice to the extreme complexity of political realities'.²⁹ He further argues that conservatives, who 'defend personal government, autonomous institutions and the rule of law' do not need to justify their own spaces of ignorance because they defend 'a reality which, for all its faults, has the undeniable merit of existence'.³⁰ Conservatism defends existing societal relations by maintaining a space of 'beyond', challenging any attempts to describe or systematise it by pointing out their inevitable reductions.

This aspect of conservatism functions in *Purity* and *The Nix* as a means of undergirding their ostensibly non-political impulses to pursue moderation and empathy wherever possible. The novels present themselves as social realist novels that explore individual experiences of broad social changes spanning multiple generations. Franco Moretti has argued that this genre

²⁸ Ibid., p. xii-xiii.

²⁹ Roger Scruton, 'What is Right?', in *The Roger Scruton Reader*, ed. by Mark Dooley (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 20-42 (p. 31)

³⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

emerges out of the conventions of nineteenth-century bourgeois writing, which asserted itself as throwing off ‘symbolic delusions’ and forcing ‘society to face the truth about itself’.³¹ In this way, bourgeois writing presented its class as ‘the first *realistic* class of human history’. However, this writing obscured the initially precarious material position of the bourgeoisie through various forms of ‘camouflage’ such as ‘moralizing adjectives and eagerly promoted earnestness’.³² As a result, classic works of the Victorian realist tradition that *Purity* and *The Nix* draw on, such as Mary Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854), mobilised conventions of obfuscation even as they presented themselves as writing with newfound clarity. Moretti concludes that ‘[v]agueness is what allows the spectres to survive the light of day; the fog that lays to rest the “unmistakable definiteness” of prose, and with it the great intellectual wager of bourgeois literature’.³³ In short, the scientific claim of bourgeois writing for seeing through delusion is in fact bolstered by vague, foggy or cloudy rhetorical techniques. Drawing on this bourgeois realist tradition, *Purity* and *The Nix* re-enact its camouflage. They make a point of ‘cutting through’ delusions of technological progressivism to reveal the complexities they obscure; however, these nuances are always deferred, located in some inaccessible ‘beyond’.

The narrative perspective of *The Nix* attributes cultural value to complexity for its own sake and presents digital media as a tool its characters use to avoid confronting it. It takes particular aim at the way that news is disseminated in a media environment dominated by the internet. The novel’s first chapter recounts the media frenzy surrounding Faye’s ‘attack’ on the right-wing Governor Packer. It describes the waves of spectacle, which initially dies down until it is saved from ‘its state of idleness’ when ‘a bystander caught the whole spectacular thing on video and has now posted it online’. The video will ‘be shown several thousand times on

³¹ Franco Moretti, ‘Fog’, *New Left Review*, 81 (May-June 2013) <<http://newleftreview.org/II/81/franco-moretti-fog>> [accessed 15 January 2019], n. pag.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

television over the next week, that will collect millions of hits and become the third-most-watched internet clip this month'.³⁴ Here, the *The Nix* satirises the effect of a digital media ecosystem, in which cable television and the internet mutually generate and sustain frivolous and reductive media events. Such events willingly overlook nuance, fuelling speculation that Faye is 'a former hippie and current liberal radical who hates the governor so much that she waited in a premediated way to viciously attack him'.³⁵ The omniscient narrator channels cuts through this media noise, however: 'there's a glaring hole in this theory, which is that the governor's jaunt through the park was an impromptu move that not even his security detail knew about [...] However this inconsistency is lost in the more sensational news items and never fully investigated'.³⁶ In other words, the new phenomenon of online content-driven sensationalist news obscures the complexity of the situation, something an older media form such as the bourgeois novel might have attended to—as evidenced by the narrative perspective itself.

Concluding with Samuel's declaration to write a long novel about his mother, *The Nix* frames itself as a full and sincere investigation into an individual, one more worthwhile than the dissemination of knowledge through other communication technologies. Samuel's model of literary fiction announces itself as seeking 'understanding, empathy, forgiveness'.³⁷ His account is presented as the virtuous alternative to the approach of his publisher, Periwinkle, whose commercial instincts and knowledge of the digital media ecology demand 'less empathy, more carnage'.³⁸ In the novel's final scenes, the narrative states that

If you see people as enemies or obstacles or traps, you will be at constant war with them and with yourself. Whereas if you choose to see people as puzzles, and if you see yourself as a puzzle, then you will be constantly delighted, because eventually, if you dig deep enough into anybody, if you really look under the hood of someone's life, you will find something familiar.

³⁴ Nathan Hill, *The Nix* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 614.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

This is more work, of course, than believing they are enemies. Understanding is always harder than pure hatred.³⁹

Here, the novel advocates gleaning wisdoms from the objects that come its way, but it only gleans ‘something familiar’. This demonstrates the inherent conservatism of its focus on ‘forgiveness’: there can be no difference and no movement, only identification and sameness.

In the novel’s epigraph is a parable attributed to the Buddha. It describes a king rounding up a group of blind men and presenting each with a different part of an elephant, telling them ‘this is an elephant’. When finished, he asks them all ‘what is an elephant like?’, and they each offer a different description based on the section they had been presented with. This argument breaks into a fight, and ‘the king was delighted’.⁴⁰ The parable frames the narrative of *The Nix* from behind its various characters’ perspectives and the narration itself, revealing the functional location of the Old-Man perspective. It draws attention to the limits of individual knowledge and experience, as well as suggesting how disagreements based on such limited perspectives might serve the interests of those who hold power. This attitude is played out in the narrative, which is populated by characters whose limited perspectives push them into miscommunication and conflict with one another. Towards the end, the narrator notes that ‘what’s usually ignored is the fact that each man’s description was *correct* [...] It wasn’t that they were blind—it’s that they stopped too quickly, and so never knew there was a larger truth to grasp’.⁴¹ Through this motif, which runs both in and out of the main text, *The Nix* holds open the notion of a ‘beyond’, yet does not itself stake a claim as to what this might be. Such a move, in the thematic logic it dictates, would contradict the ‘empathetic’ drive of its literary realism. It is enough for the novel’s narrative perspective to shake its fist at a complex present that produces antagonisms disagreeable to the liberal-humanist residual values of its genre.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 616.

⁴⁰ Ibid., n. pag.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 564.

Purity advances a similarly obfuscating criticism of limited perspectives. It uses fog to symbolise the wilful ignorance of its characters: ‘fog that [Anabel] was daily sorry to see go, because it revealed a bright light to which she preferred not to belong’.⁴² This sets off a clear train of associations. As Pip avoids reality through ‘the safety of casual sex’, she walks ‘in light fog’.⁴³ Towards the end of the novel it threatens what is presented as Pip’s healthy habit of practicing tennis with her prospective romantic partner, Jason: ‘If the fog had come back, she might have felt safe to stop’.⁴⁴ Fog brings a sense of comfortable insulation thus putting an end to Pip’s mature interpersonal engagement with Jason. Pip’s development centres around her willingness to eschew such comforts and encounter others in a state of vulnerability.

Clouds, meanwhile, signify the dangers of this comfort. *Purity* presents secrecy, hiding in figurative clouds and fog, as psychologically hazardous. Andreas’s fear about his secret life being exposed manifests as ‘a larger and more diffuse anxiety, a choking hydrochloric cloud’.⁴⁵ Cloud computing symbolises his paranoia about being exposed online, where ‘it would stay in the cloud forever’.⁴⁶ This cloud is toxic for Andreas, with him feeling that the ‘image of him’ and not a ‘flesh-and-blood person. The Internet meant *death*, and [...] he couldn’t take refuge in the hope of a cloud-filled afterlife’.⁴⁷ This association between technology, ignorance and death recalls Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984), which represents technological change with a ‘black billowing cloud’ of some mysterious gas, an ‘airborn toxic event’ primarily encountered through sensationalist broadcast media.⁴⁸ As Julian Henneberg writes, DeLillo’s cloud functions as a ‘technological sublime’, where an encounter with technological complexity ‘foster[s] a nagging epistemological uncertainty, the failure of linguistic registers, and the

⁴² Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: 4th Estate, 2015), p. 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 492.

⁴⁸ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 2002), pp. 127; 117.

collapse of traditional models of knowledge'.⁴⁹ The clouding at work in the realism of *Purity* and *The Nix* demonstrates how epistemological uncertainty itself can be wielded to reinforce residual liberal-humanist values by challenging the claims of any emergent or dominant structures of feeling.

In *Purity*, imagery of fog and cloud stand in opposition to Andreas's 'Sunlight Project', a Wikileaks-style organisation that advances an ideology of full transparency while shrouding itself in secrecy. Reproducing the bourgeois tendencies of realism by focusing on moderation and nuance as valuable in and of themselves, the narrative perspective sides with neither fogginess nor sunlight but rather some even cloudier middle ground between. As well as warning of its dangers, he describes fog as beautiful, 'a temporary sadness'.⁵⁰ This detailing of the Bay Area weather as a constant play of fog and sunlight recurs at several points in the novel. This reflects its thematization of identity, which it suggests emerges through both the concealing and revealing of secrets. As Andreas states, by concealing secrets, one maintains 'a distinction between inside and outside', yet 'identity in a vacuum is also meaningless. Sooner or later, the inside of you needs a witness. [...] To have an identity, you have to believe that other identities equally exist. You need closeness with other people. And how is closeness formed? By sharing secrets'.⁵¹ In discouraging the keeping of secrets, and in doing so disrupting this careful disclosure of individuality, the internet smothers human closeness. In *Purity*, fogginess itself is therefore positioned as one extreme in a continuum, the novel opting for a moderate position between fogginess and sunlight. This is the lesson Pip is depicted as learning through reading her estranged father Tom's memoir and practices as she mends fractured relationships at the novel's end.

⁴⁹ Julian Henneberg, "'Something Extraordinary Hovering Just Outside Our Touch": The Technological Sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*', *aspeers*, 4 (2011), 52-73. See also Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, pp. 118-9.

⁵⁰ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 517.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

Purity and *The Nix* both make distinctions between new and old media in their defence of moderation. *Purity* challenges the bellicose technological progressivism of Silicon Valley by comparing its claims and implementation to those of the ‘apparatchikism’ of the German Democratic Republic. Just as the ideological tunnel vision of GDR officials led them to ignore a crumbling economy and misery of its citizens, the veneration of ‘risk-taking’ and ‘disruptive new technologies’ among the elites of ‘the New Regime’ in Silicon Valley lead them to overlook a broader breakdown of social cohesion.⁵² At the start of the novel, Pip works for a start-up called Renewable Solutions which ‘didn’t make or build or even install things. Instead, depending on the regulatory weather [...] it “bundled,” it “brokered,” it “captured,” it “surveyed,” it “client-provided.” [...] she could never quite figure out what she was selling’.⁵³ Pip spends her days trading in nonsense on the behalf of investors for new technologies: ‘Bay Area consumers on average responded better to a rote and semi-nonsensical pitch than a well-meaning saleswoman trying to help them understand the offer’.⁵⁴ In this early detailing of its manipulative impulses, *Purity* targets technological progressivism as unable, even unwilling, to communicate reality sincerely.

In contrast, the novel frames print media as worthy of this task. A young Tom ‘run[s] for a top job at *The Daily Pennsylvanian* on a platform of paying more attention to the “real” world’.⁵⁵ The narrative satirises this enterprise by pointing out the further complexities that elude Tom’s journalists: ‘I thought my reporters were breaking the hermetic bubbles of seventies self-indulgence, but I suspect that, to the people they pestered for interviews, they seemed more like kids whose overpriced candy bars you had to buy so they could go to summer camp’.⁵⁶ Comparing himself to these ‘kids’ with ‘candy bars’, an older, narrating Tom’s

⁵² Ibid., p. 449.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 28-9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 341.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 342.

awareness of his own shortcomings, his impurity, allows him to maintain a ‘realistic’ course that culminates in the writing of his memoir. The narrative is structured to favour Tom’s interpretation of his fraught relationship with Pip’s mother Anabel—at the time a visual artist—insofar as it interpolates Tom’s first-person disclosure as its longest section while omitting her perspective. This sexist apportioning of focalization justifies itself with the implication that, since Anabel’s multimedia art project is never completed, her moral absolutism finally precludes her from being able to give an account at all. Characterising Tom as imperfect yet sincere, *Purity* presents instinctual moderation as a viable alternative to the grandiose, moralising claims of technological progressivism.

In their criticisms of technological progressivism and defence of humanist scepticism over moral absolutism, *Purity* and *The Nix* stake out a narrative perspective that, in opposition to their ‘digital native’ characters, resembles what Žižek terms the ‘non-duped’, or ‘a subject who is *not duped by the symbolic order*’.⁵⁷ This might be a ‘psychotic’ character, who battles against ‘the *doxa* of the big Other’ and finds their ostensibly psychotic views to be truer than the dominant symbolic order’.⁵⁸ It might alternatively be a ‘mastermind’ character who tricks society at large by putting that dominant symbolic order into place. In this case, ‘the deception of the big Other is located in an agency, in another subject (“they”) who is *not deceived*—this subject who holds and manipulates the threads of the deception proper to the symbolic order’.⁵⁹ Therefore, within the distrust of a dominant symbolic order is the assumption that there is an individual or group of individuals who are not-duped. In representing certain non-duped focalizations, *Purity* and *The Nix* excuse themselves from the dominant symbolic order of technological progressivism by speaking from outside.

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, ‘How the Non-Duped Err’, *Qui Parle*, 4.1 (Autumn 1990), 1-20
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685904>> (p. 9)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

In *The Nix* a non-duped Sebastian/Periwinkle manufactures outrage in the build-up to the 1968 protests outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago:

He had learned something important: What was printed *became the truth* [...] This is what he cared about: the message, the narrative. When he imagined it, he imagined an egg that he had to hold and protect and warm and coddle and nourish, one that grew to huge fairy-tale proportions if he did it right, glowing and floating above them all, a beacon.⁶⁰

Throughout the novel, Periwinkle mocks Samuel's sincerity while pulling the strings of society at large. Crucially, he does this using media infrastructure: television and newspapers in the 1960s, the digital media environment in 2011. He boasts that technological progressivism distracts the public from the ongoing effects of the financial crisis: 'they have homes full of interesting technology and they look at their smartphones and wonder "How could a world that produces something as amazing as this be such a shitty world?" [...] We've done studies on it'.⁶¹ This gesture to the empirical authority of public relations locates reality beyond the scope of any character's perspective without requiring the overarching narrative perspective to converse with any detail. Periwinkle further states that consumers, 'In the face of national calamity and utter annihilation of their personal prospects [...] either get righteously indignant and hyperaware, in which case they usually begin posting libertarian screeds on iFeel or something, or they'll sink into a somewhat comfortable ignorance'.⁶²

In *Purity*, Andreas plays a similarly non-duped role, manipulating other characters, particularly Pip, remotely, using the technological infrastructure of The Sunlight Project. We are told that he manages to 'find singular niches in totalitarian regimes', and allows the new Internet regime to 'hold him up as an inspiring example of its *openness*, and in return, when it couldn't be avoid, he protected the regime from bad press'.⁶³ Andreas is not duped by this ideology of openness, however: 'From the example of [Julian] Assange, he'd learned the folly

⁶⁰ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 458.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁶³ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 450.

of making messianic claims about his mission, and although he took ironic satisfaction in being famed for his purity, he was under no illusions about his actual capacity for it'.⁶⁴ Andreas himself is always haunted by his deepest guilts and passions, personified as 'the Killer', yet he is nonetheless depicted as the one pulling the strings behind the narrative of technological progress that the public at large are enthralled to. Just as in *The Nix*, an older male character provides a non-duped and non-ideological focalization that gestures to the limitations of younger characters' attachments to digital media.

The Old-Man perspectives deployed in *Purity* and *The Nix* shake their fists at digital native generations as envoys from a threatening future without investigating or representing in any detail where this future comes from. The origin stories of the technological progressivism they target are instead replaced with the origin stories of non-duped individuals who exist outside it. Moreover, since both novels attack technological progressivism by framing ideology itself as naïve, the non-ideological truth-telling of their non-duped characters serves to naturalise the realist novel's liberal-humanist values as common sense.

Nevertheless, the camouflage of these novels becomes somewhat visible in their narrativizations of 'enlightened' perspectives. Even as they challenge narratives of technological progress, these novels' gestures to complexity and appeals to nuance often rely on technological apparatuses of measuring that complexity. Towards the end of *The Nix*, Periwinkle states that,

the world has pretty much given up on the old Enlightenment idea of piecing together the truth based on observed data. Reality is too scary and complicated for that. Instead, it's easier to ignore all data that doesn't fit your preconceptions and believe all data that does. I believe what I believe, and you believe what you believe, and we'll all agree to disagree. It's liberal tolerance meets dark ages denialism. It's very hip right now.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 450.

⁶⁵ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 601.

In fact, Periwinkle's knowledge is always sourced from data, backing up his claims with 'reams of paper showing this'.⁶⁶ Therefore, while the narrative perspective encourages the reader to turn away from a digital media ecosystem to explore beyond the limits of their perspective, this 'beyond' is gestured to in terms of structured 'data'. This contradiction suggests that lessons learned from exploring beyond one's limited perception are less important than the idea of the Beyond itself, the very 'dark ages denialism' Periwinkle mocks.

We see a similar reliance on the language of technology in *Purity*. As a depressed Andreas looks out over some woodland in Bolivia, the narrative states:

Down in the meadow by the river rapids, by the tumble of wet boulders, a large woodpecker was drumming on a hollow tree. A buzzard eagle soared past the vertical face of a red pinnacle. Warm late-morning air currents were stirring in the woods along the road, creating a tapestry of light and shadow so fine-grained and chaotic in its shiftings that no computer on earth could have modeled it. Nature even on the most local of scales made a mockery of information technology [...] The woods were unfathomably complex, but they didn't know it.⁶⁷

The 'river rapids', the 'wet rocks', the 'woodpecker', the 'buzzard eagle' and the 'red pinnacle' stand in for a complex ecological system that the narrative draws clouds in through the terminology of vagueness: 'the unfathomably complex' woods, with its 'fine-grained', 'chaotic' 'shiftings'. These latter terms function like the clouds of systems diagrams, gesturing to further complexity that the narrative need not detail. *Purity* employs these figures to frame technological progressivism as reductive, accusing computational representations of attempting and failing to apprehend an irreducibly complex reality. However, in doing so, the narrative can only foreground its own inability to do so.

This tension continues as the narration draws on computational models of complexity to construct its criticism of computation, stating that 'Matter was information, information matter and only in the brain did matter organize itself sufficiently to be aware of itself; only in the brain could the information of which the world consisted manipulate itself. The human brain

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 283.

⁶⁷ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 504.

was a special case'.⁶⁸ We can observe the play between representation and a 'beyond' in this deducing of a real hierarchy—the brain being a 'special case' of material emergence—within a system of infinite relations, a complex yet flat informatic system. How this emergence might occur, and how it is measured and known by the narrative, is not explained, confined to a 'beyond'. This omission represses the role of a recording medium necessary to translate matter into information. Instead, the two are conflated to present computational reduction as an issue of quantity rather than quality: material reality simply consists of more data than a computer can handle. This omission reveals the narrative's dependence on what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank term the 'cybernetic fold': a post-war cultural imaginary enabled by the new possibilities computers offered for managing complexity, in which anything from animal behaviour to the human mind is conceived of in the language of systems theory.⁶⁹ In other words, at this crucial thematic juncture, *Purity* relies on computation itself to delimit the complexity of the world that computation cannot hope to match.

Purity and *The Nix* use cloudiness and assertions of a Beyond to conserve the cultural capital of universal, 'practical knowledge' embodied in residual traditions and derived from experience.⁷⁰ It is this knowledge that they see as being disrupted in its transmission by digital media, whose reductive logic seeks to replace this knowledge with a sea of context-less information. To challenge the excesses of a digital media ecosystem and its attendant narratives of technological progress they both suggest that it reduces complexity into simplified, easily consumable stories. By conflating digital technologies with the discourses used to market them, the narratives exhibit a tension between a disinterest in digital technologies and a realist requirement to represent them. They place them in contrast to the novel and print media as

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 504.

⁶⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', *Critical Inquiry*, 21.2 (Winter 1995), 496-522 (p. 508).

⁷⁰ Roger Scruton, 'Knowledge and Feeling', in *The Roger Scruton Reader*, pp. 152-162 (p. 155).

embodiments of a sincerity and empathy apparently missing among a younger generation. However, as I argue towards the end of this chapter, the small-c conservatism of their Old-Man perspectives in today's socioeconomic context reinforces the basic tenets of neoliberalism against emergent political consciousnesses in the twenty-first century. First, however, I turn to consider how these novels frame an emergent culture, embodied in a younger generation, as posing an existential danger because its unhealthy fascination with digital technologies has replaced a respect for nuance and complexity.

Time Bombshells

In their performances of decline, the Old-Man perspectives of *The Nix* and *Purity* stand in opposition to the cultural archetype outlined by French collective Tiquun in their *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Tiquun argue that the 'Young Girl' is the 'model citizen as redefined by consumer society' who 'no longer has any intimacy with herself *except as value*'.⁷¹ The 'Young Girl' appears a misogynistic term; however, Tiquun stress that it designates a model that, under consumer capitalism, individuals of various genders and ages aspire to be. She is 'young', because adolescence is a time in which an individual only relates to society through consumption, and she is a 'girl', because 'it is the sphere of *reproduction*, over which [women] still reign, that must be colonised [by consumer capitalism]'.⁷² The Old Man offers another model of a citizen, one it defines against the Young Girl as someone fighting a losing battle against their commodification by consumer culture. This opposition is expressed through misogynistic framings of 'digital native' characters, a techno-generational framing that

⁷¹ Tiquun, *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl* (Los Angeles: Semiotex(e), 2012), p. 18.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

functions to defend patriarchal liberal-humanist values against a threatening, consumerist future coded as feminine.

An exaggerated characterisation of Laura as both the product and the agent of consumer culture in *The Nix* reflects many of the characteristics Tiqqun ascribe to the Young Girl. The narration pauses to detail her ‘logoed tank tops and sweatshorts’ and describes her being influenced by ‘*Cosmo* and Victoria’s Secret catalogues’.⁷³ Laura displays no interest in feminist deconstructions of gender, instead wielding her sexuality through consumer technologies to manipulate her male peers into doing academic favours. In many ways, Laura is the real-world effect of the aggressive marketing of her double, Molly Miller, a pop superstar whose brand of ‘new authenticity’—an ‘up front’ embrace of celebrity and ‘greed’—is referenced throughout the novel.⁷⁴ Tiqqun describe the Young Girl as an alienated male fantasy that has come back to dominate men and society as a whole.⁷⁵ The Old-Man perspective of *The Nix* warns of this domination, Laura embodying the excesses of a consumer culture that, with her deciding to pursue politics at the novel’s conclusion, threatens to capture all aspects of social life.

Laura is introduced to the reader via the third-person indirect perspective of Samuel as ‘blond, lightly freckled, dressed sloppily’.⁷⁶ The narration offers repeated descriptions of Laura’s body and clothing, noting her ‘tiny frayed flannel shorts’ and twice mentioning the ‘sucking’ and ‘wet pop’ of her ‘lower buttocks’ against the ‘leather chair’.⁷⁷ The recurring descriptions of Laura’s clothes and body reflect Samuel’s sexual frustration throughout the novel and marginalise her within his narrative. Laura’s sexuality constitutes a form of power over her male peers, who move seats throughout the semester to ‘get closer to her orbit, creeping

⁷³ Hill, *The Nix*, pp. 17; 186.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁷⁵ Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials...*, p. 24.

⁷⁶ Hill, *The Nix*, p 17

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-4.

mollusc-like' towards her desk.⁷⁸ She knowingly uses her sexuality to gain favours, 'quasi-repay[ing]' male peers for helping her avoid studying with 'hugs that were maybe a little too tight and too close, as well as bi-semester visits [...] wearing only her favorite tiny towel'.⁷⁹ Through an omniscient narrator's focus on Laura's body and the way in which she uses it for material gain, the narrative equates her age and sexuality, presenting them as a threatening power held by the dangerous, amoral generation she represents.

Laura's body is itself presented as a technology of convenience, another way in which she can avoid confronting her anxieties and dependencies. The conventions and clichés of pornographic representations of sexual acts shape Laura's understanding of sexuality. The narrator describes how she and her lover, Larry, 'had both ingested so many hours of internet pornography that they were simply acting out scenes that had become normalized, even banal'.⁸⁰ Not only does Laura, as a digital native, construct her performance of her sexuality from pornographic images encountered online, but she utilises her own body through, and in some respects as, technology: 'She stripped off her clothes and, holding a camera at arm's length, posed in several of the smoky ways she'd absorbed from two decades of looking at [...] internet pornography. She took about a dozen pictures of herself from slightly different angles and with slightly different pouts'.⁸¹ Elsewhere in the novel, we are told that 'for kids hitting adolescence in the eighties, in those days before the internet, before the web made pornography easily accessible and therefore banal, for this last generation of boys for whom porn was primarily a *physical object*, possessing pornography was like having a superpower'.⁸² Relocating this superpower onto her body, Laura wields it to elicit favours from her male peers

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 366.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 186.

⁸² Ibid., p. 113.

who, like her, form their views of romantic relationships through their consumption of online pornography.

To a limited extent, *The Nix* attempts to sympathise with or at least explain Laura's attitudes towards sexuality by suggesting she lacks a more meaningful agency. She accepts men's impulses to reproduce the conventions of online pornography with some reluctance, as it 'made her feel like the sexual equivalent of a bingo card'.⁸³ Nevertheless, *The Nix* expresses anxiety over the perceived emerging practices of a younger generation failing to reproduce liberal-humanist values surrounding courtship and sex due to the influence of digital media. Laura's sexuality is part of her generational threat: 'the way she so effortlessly and fluidly moved her legs is a sign of youthful flexibility or serious yoga training or both'.⁸⁴ As well as being disgusted by Laura's abject youthful sexuality, at the idea her having sex with her immature male classmates, Samuel is also unable to stop thinking about it. The initial eroticised description of Laura is immediately preceded by the phrase 'Children like Laura Pottsdam', the paedophilic overtones signalling Samuel's sense that Laura's self-presentation is not only immodest on a personal level but immoral on a societal one. As a Young Girl, Laura is presented as fascinating and threatening in her overt and technologized sexuality, but also, because of her youth, dangerously 'off limits' to older men.

The characterisation of Purity 'Pip' Tyler in *Purity* also concerns adolescence and reproduction. The novel consists of seven sections, each from the perspective of a single character. However, its overarching structure is that of a *bildungsroman* that follows Pip's moral development. At the beginning, she is characterised as impulsive, promiscuous, immature and vulnerable. Sex is what Pip 'does', described via her own perspective early on as 'the only thing in her life that she was reasonably effective at'.⁸⁵ The scattered family at the

⁸³ Ibid., p. 366.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁸⁵ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 15.

centre of *Purity* is described in terms of warheads, an arms expert noting in one scene that ‘later-generation bombs “poison” their own cores if you tamper with them’.⁸⁶ This reflects one description of Pip as ‘a mobile destabilizing menace, a kind of rogue warhead’ who Leila imagines entering ‘the nucleus of her and [her partner] Tom’ and producing ‘a mushroom cloud’.⁸⁷ Pip is presented as a generational timebomb who has been tampered with and is inadvertently poisoning its own core. However, being a protagonist and a more ‘rounded’ character than Laura, she matures as the narrative progresses. In *Purity*, the Young Girl that the Old Man opposes is revealed by Pip’s gradual divergence from it.

Like *The Nix*, *Purity* draws attention to Pip’s physical appearance. However, contrasting with the exaggerated sexualisation of Samuel’s gaze, Pip’s body is presented in fragments through references to its apparent imperfection. A text Jason sends to a male friend states that she has a ‘nice face fantastic body’ and rates her looks numerically as ‘8+’.⁸⁸ Tom’s long-term partner Leila observes Pip’s ‘long and lustrous hair’ and ‘strikingly deep tan’, yet concludes she is ‘by no means the most attractive intern to work at DI’.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, Leila’s jealousy leads to Pip being described as ‘a full-chested, creamy-skinned, regularly menstruating twenty-four-year-old’, with Leila resenting her for ‘going braless under her sweatshirt after showering, digging her bare feet between sofa cushions while she lay and worked with the tablet device DI had issued her’.⁹⁰ Here, as with Laura in *The Nix*, Pip’s body is entangled in the novel’s thematic antagonism towards digital technology.

In a later scene that ostensibly inhabits her perspective, the narration of two sexual encounters Pip has with Andreas focus primarily on her body rather than his, supplementing her perspective with the male gaze of the older man. We are told Andreas finds her ‘pleasant

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 218.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 215, 217.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 176-7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 224.

enough' but is attracted to her as, in his view, being 'Tom's'.⁹¹ Yet, when 'she let him undress her, he wasn't thinking about her father; he was simply grateful for the sweet good girl she was'.⁹² The sexualised paternalism of this phrasing functions to draw attention to Andreas' perversions. However, although the narrative perspective is broadly critical of his misogyny in the abstract, the physical, non-digital presence of Pip in this scene is nonetheless presented as a positive, breaking through his obsessive guilt and single-minded desire for revenge against Tom. As I will argue further below, *Purity* naturalises misogyny as repellent yet biologically sincere, whereas it depicts feminism as a rigid, semi-computational ideology.

The narrative perspective hedges against this line of criticism. In one scene, Tad Milliken, a libertarian and transparently self-interested venture capitalist, bemoans 'one-size-fits-all' statutory rape laws, telling Andreas that 'not every fifteen-year-old is alike, believe me.'⁹³ The women at Pip's workplace conflate her youth and sexuality, viewing her as 'the complainer, the underperformer, the entitled Young Person, the fresh-skinned magnet for Igor's Gaze, the morally hazardous exploiter of Igor's indulgence'.⁹⁴ However, despite these asides on the mischaracterisation, objectification and even abuse of young women, *Purity* repeatedly depicts Pip as 'off-limits' and therefore as dangerous to older men. With regards to Andreas, we are told

[Pip] beheld an emotional vista in which she was angry at her missing father, at all older men, and punished and provoked this father-aged man, drove him wild, induced him to offer himself as the person missing from her life; and her body responded to the offer; but it was icky to respond to him that way.⁹⁵

Andreas views the unattainability of Pip's young body as punishing him for his history of abusing positions of power over younger women. Nonetheless, her physical presence is

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 498.

⁹² Ibid., p. 502.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 485-6.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 287.

presented as good for Andreas because, instead of seeing her as an object viewed from the comfort of a screen—like a pornographic image—he becomes vulnerable before her.

With Pip's body under constant surveillance by other characters, *Purity* depicts technological mediation as a primary mode by which women are repressed in its represented society. As in *The Nix*, pornography exerts a pernicious influence on characters' sexual behaviour, suggesting a significant shift in the move from print and video to online. Tom recounts adolescent experiences of looking for 'realer' women in magazines, imaging having intellectual conversations with them, and nonetheless still feeling morally compromised by his objectification of them.⁹⁶ This romanticised framing of print pornography provoking moral contemplation in its audience contrasts with the narrative's condemnation of online pornography. Andreas becomes addicted to it, caught in a cycle of self-hatred and 'glimpsing death in online porn'.⁹⁷ This is because, unlike its analogue forebears, online pornography emerges within 'the unfathomable vastness' of the internet and its 'annihilation of the distinction between public and private', which satisfies 'every compulsion', reducing the brain and personhood to 'a closed loop of stimulus and response'.⁹⁸ Pornography appears to promise ultimate control and security, yet ultimately leads to depression and alienation for Andreas. As one of the narrative perspective's more sustained treatments of a technology in *Purity*, this scene flattens out sexual politics into a broader model for how the digital absorbs individuals' 'humanity' into its processes.

In these novels, the techno-generational framing of the Young Girl serves as a foil against which to define the residual values of liberal humanism. The patriarchal, heteronormative masculinity of their narrative perspective asserts itself when detailing the physical attractiveness of their younger female characters and presenting it as dangerous. Here

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 346.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 465.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 465.

the two novels draw on longstanding traditions of gendering a threatening future as feminine. As Andreas Huyssen writes of the female android in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1926), 'the fears and perceptual anxieties emanating from ever more powerful machines are recast and reconstructed in terms of the male fear of female sexuality, reflecting, in the Freudian account, the male's castration anxiety'.⁹⁹ However, in *Purity* and *The Nix*, the technology itself is not coded as feminine. Rather, digital native women are represented as the unwitting dupes of men who wield technological control. The narratives warn against not only the degradation of the humanities but the patriarchal underpinnings of this tradition, which it implies remains preferable to the subjugation of women in the digital present.

The Nix and *Purity* deploy this figure of the dangerous, sexualised Young Girl to resolve a more contemporary opposition between generational discourses in 2010s America. One of these paints young people as anxious, fragile, and overly coddled by their well-meaning parents. By 2016, this characterisation had coalesced into the term 'generation snowflake', largely wielded by right-leaning commentators to contest the use of 'no-platforming' tactics by student groups on college campuses against right-wing invited speakers.¹⁰⁰ Associated with this discourse are the notions of 'trigger warnings', brief mentions that lecture content may distress audience members with post-traumatic stress disorder, and 'safe spaces', initially conceived of as rooms where audience members could recuperate during or after debates about rape culture. Critics observed a 'concept creep and the expansion of "safety" to include emotional comfort'.¹⁰¹ They further argued that its codification at an institutional level threatened the very

⁹⁹ Andreas Huyssen, 'The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*', *New German Critique*, 24/25 (Autumn, 1981 - Winter, 1982), 221-237 (p. 226)

¹⁰⁰ Helen Rumbelow, 'Generation Snowflake: Why Millennials Are Mocked for Being too Delicate', *The Australian*, 9 November 2016 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/generation-snowflake-why-millennials-are-mocked-for-being-too-delicate/news-story/2f885d016af1a881bff92b69282fd88e>> [accessed 9 October 2019]. See also: Bryony Gordon, 'I feel sorry for the poor ickle millennials', *The Telegraph*, 8 April 2016 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2016/04/08/bryony-gordon-why-i-feel-sorry-for-the-snowflake-generation/>> [accessed 9 October 2019]

¹⁰¹ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin, 2018), p. 27.

societal purpose of universities to ‘broaden [one’s] field of vision’ and confront ‘unfamiliar ideas [...] seeing the world as other people see it’.¹⁰² Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt connect an ‘intensification of the culture of safetyism’ to a generation’s ‘electronic device use’, which, along with overbearing parenting, leaves them depressed and with fewer life experiences.¹⁰³ This contributes to prevalent stereotypes about millennials—particularly millennial women—as both coddled and dangerous.

The Nix aims to represent this ‘coddled’ perspective through chapters that focalize and thereby ‘explain’ Laura’s perspective. Reflecting the earliest definitions of the ‘millennial’ generation as produced by permissive parenting, Laura’s mother tells her ‘Don’t let anyone EVER bully you or make you feel bad for yourself’.¹⁰⁴ *The Nix* accentuates the novelty of this change through its contrast to the experiences of other generations in the novel. Faye is from a conservative working-class family who disowns her when she goes to university. The young Samuel, meanwhile, has been abandoned by his mother, Faye. The permissive parenting of Laura’s mother is implied to be the root cause of her embodiment of the most negative tropes associated with the ‘millennial’ generation: she is spoilt, narcissistic, entitled, lazy and superficial.¹⁰⁵ However, at one point Laura herself identifies the limitations of her upbringing, noting that her mother always believes her excuses and ‘seemed to be wilfully hallucinating about her’.¹⁰⁶ She worries that trying and failing in her studies would be ‘crippling’ for her mother, ‘a nullification of her whole life’s project’.¹⁰⁷ Like that of Pip in *Purity*, Laura’s floating mother-figure functions to imply the need for a traditional father figure to restore order: in Pip’s

¹⁰² Judith Schulevitz, ‘In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas’, *The New York Times*, 21 March 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html>> [accessed 9 October 2019]

¹⁰³ Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, pp. 161, 154.

¹⁰⁴ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁵ Joel Stein, ‘Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation’, *TIME*, 20 May 2013 <<http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>> [accessed 19 February 2019]

¹⁰⁶ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 362.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

case this is the journalist Tom, while for Laura it is left to Samuel to confront her narcissism. In both cases, the Old-Man perspective sits behind these young female characters' focalizations, drawing attention to their limitations.

The Nix goes on to suggest that Laura is unable to transcend the side-effects of this parenting because it is reinforced by digital media. We are told she spends much of her time posting to her 'friends' on iFeel, an 'excellent new app that was the social media du jour among the college set. Laura's friends were all on it, and used it obsessively, and would abandon it as soon as it was discovered by the late-adopters, meaning old people'.¹⁰⁸ Social media platforms here serve as a primary vector by which the younger generation purposely alienate themselves from 'old people'. Laura is adept in the thought and behaviour encouraged by social media, executing 'an intuitive sort of regression analysis based on several metrics' that ensures that she 'feel[s] like she was on the leading edge of everything'.¹⁰⁹ She is deeply addicted, maintaining a 'huge cavalry' of contacts who 'messed her several times daily through the many social media sites she kept a presence on, which made her phone ding all day, repeatedly [...] those pure high singing notes that made her feel bolts of Pavlovian happiness'.¹¹⁰ Here, the exploitative creators of iFeel are training a generation in certain habits.

The psychological foundations that *The Nix* suggests the iFeel creators exploit are those ingrained by twentieth-century parenting techniques. The two negative influences reinforce one another. Laura's anxiety about failing to meet her mother's expectations leads her to crave affirmation, the feeling that '[e]veryone wanted to give her exactly what she desired', which she finds fulfilled in iFeel.¹¹¹ The novel thereby draws a connection between Laura's addiction to the positive feedback she receives via iFeel and her mother's overbearing parenting style, a

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 183.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 183.

combination that marks Laura and her generation as an entirely new development. In *The Nix*, the narrative perspective does not wholly disown any connection to digital technology, but rather establishes an Old/Young binary within digital natives. Samuel and his online friend ‘Pwnage’ prove somewhat reliant on videogames, yet they also strive and eventually succeed in overcoming their dependence. It is the type of digital media, rather than digitality itself, that splits generations: for all their flaws, videogames maintain a thematic link to literature and the humanities through Samuel’s association of them with Choose Your Own Adventure stories. Social media platforms, meanwhile, are presented as entirely anathema to a bourgeois humanism that the novel’s broader Old-Man perspective performatively presents as being in decline.

Laura’s ability to provoke positive feedback on iFeel translates into a capacity to manipulate the university institution to her advantage. Believing that Samuel is ‘tak[ing] away her future’ by failing her for plagiarism, Laura takes it upon herself to speed up the process of his firing. After she tells the dean that Samuel’s class is not a ‘safe space’, Samuel begins receiving emails titled ‘*Urgent Student Matter*’ from ‘the dean, and the director of Student Affairs, the director of University Relations, also the Office of Adaptive Services’, etc.¹¹² She convinces another student to remote-access Samuel’s office computer and ends the novel having succeeded in having Samuel fired by setting up ‘Students Against Faculty Extravagance’, which accuses him of ‘abus[ing] his office privileges’ by playing videogames on his university computer. With no moral compass, Laura’s resourcefulness and intuition for how to manipulate institutions is depicted as indicative of a broader threat. Presidential candidate Governor Packer praises Laura for challenging ‘unproductive liberal professors in outdated fields’ and encourages her to ‘run for president someday’. Inspired, Laura switches

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 185; 203.

majors to ‘political science and acting’.¹¹³ *The Nix* thereby represents Laura and her generation as a threat to the university as an institution for upholding liberal-humanist values.

Unlike Laura, Pip is characterised as an outlier within her digital native generation. We are told that, ‘As a teenager, when she was living in Felton and going to school in Santa Cruz, all her friends had owned Apple computers, but the laptop her mother had bought her was a cheap, generic PC from OfficeMax’.¹¹⁴ Later, while working, Pip finds herself performing domestic and emotional labour for her housemates as well as her mother, Anabel, who, ‘though not technically disabled, was emotionally handicapped and had no support network’.¹¹⁵ Pip’s situation is presented as a result of Anabel’s particular parenting as much as it is about wider social forces. She sends Pip to private school ‘telling her not to worry about the money’, failing to inform her ‘that it might not be the best idea, if she wanted to set about doing anything good in the world to graduate with \$130,000 in student debt’, and—unbeknownst to Pip—refusing a billion-dollar inheritance on obstinate moral grounds.¹¹⁶ *Purity* thereby presents Pip’s impulsive behaviour as an unstable and contradictory product of various interpersonal relationships as well as broader social forces.

For the most part, however, *Purity* is more interested in the second strain of generational discourse relevant to this discussion: that which surrounds what is sometimes referred to as ‘generation debt’. Saddled with significant student loan repayments, ‘millennials’ are conceived of as a generation of what Paul Mason calls ‘graduates with no future’.¹¹⁷ Beyond their effects on individuals, insurmountable student loan repayments loom over American society as a ‘debt bomb’, since a growing portion of the population are unable to spend and

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 615.

¹¹⁴ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 60.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 209

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹⁷ Paul Mason, *Why It's STILL Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 69.

contribute to economic growth.¹¹⁸ However, student loans are only one of many debts that face this generation:

Their disposable income will fall, because the financialization of public services demands a clutch of new debt repayments that eat into salaries: student loan repayments will be higher, private health insurance costs will rise, pension top-up payments will be demanded. They will face higher interest rates on home loans for decades, due to the financial crash. They will be burdened with the social costs of looking after the ageing baby boomers, plus the economic costs of energy depletion and climate change.¹¹⁹

This generation, Mason argues, see themselves as ‘an international sub-class’ of a neoliberal capitalist system which is set up to, as Malcolm Harris puts it, ‘mine more value from the future and spend it in the present’.¹²⁰

Purity expresses concern about this generational development. The novel opens with Pip living in an Oakland squat burdened with student debt and working a low-wage ‘bullshit job’ she does not understand.¹²¹ Pip’s debt provides the initial motive for the plot and sets up a core theme: she searches for the identity of her absent father, which Anabel has stubbornly concealed from her, to ask him for financial support. The narrative connects Pip’s economic situation to a dysfunctional, partisan-political backdrop that it frames in orientalisising terms as an aberration from a safe, bourgeois norm: ‘the middle class was disappearing faster than the icecaps, xenophobes were winning elections or stocking up on assault rifles, warring tribes were butchering each other religiously’.¹²² Later, the character Cynthia lists ‘the concentration of capital in the hands of a few, the calculated demolition of faith in the government, the worldwide abdication of responsibility for climate change, the disappointments of Obama’.¹²³

¹¹⁸ National Association of Consumer Bankruptcy Attorneys, ‘The Student Loan “Debt Bomb”: America’s Next Mortgage-Style Economic Crisis?’, 7 February 2012 <<https://www.nacba.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/020712-NACBA-student-loan-debt-report.pdf>> [accessed 19 February 2019]; See also: Malcolm Harris, *Kids these Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), Kindle ebook, loc. 619-955.

¹¹⁹ Mason, p. 67

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69; Harris, *Kids These Days*, loc. 956.

¹²¹ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2018)

¹²² Franzen, *Purity*, p. 449.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 539.

A product of this, Pip is not only a timebomb in the context of the lives her parents have developed while separated. She and her generation are timebombs who threaten American society and its traditions, fused by the unchecked errors of an older generation. While the novel's narrative perspective performatively sympathises with this generation's anger, it also seeks to defuse it through the depiction of Pip's maturation.

Alongside and contributing to a dysfunctional socioeconomic system in *Purity* is the internet, whose 'platforms were united in their ambition to define every term of your existence'.¹²⁴ In this situation, 'You could cooperate with the system or you could oppose it, but the thing you could never do [...] was not be in relation to it'.¹²⁵ Furthermore, she 'wasn't much of a Facebook user, in part because she felt bludgeoned by happier people's photographs and in part because social media use was frowned upon at work'.¹²⁶ This does not mean she begins the novel being technophobic, however. When an activist staying at the squat offers her a job at The Sunlight Project, fronted by the 'very good looking', 'authentic risk-taking hero' Andreas, Pip falls for its slick marketing and travels to Bolivia to join and use the Project to find out her father's identity.¹²⁷ However, this error is the starting point for her maturation rather than indicative of an essential generational naïveté. Presenting Pip as unstable and contradictory, *Purity* maintains some personal distance between Pip and narratives of technological progress because this is where its narrative locates potential for personal development.

Unlike Pip, it is not debt that fuels Laura's antagonism to residual liberal-humanist values in *The Nix*, but rather the constant and unconditional affirmation she receives from both her mother and from iFeel. Whereas Pip navigates the responsibilities of paying her student

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 447-8.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 448.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 60-1.

debt and caring for her mother and housemates, Laura refuses to put any work into Samuel's class while also demanding the credits necessary to attain her degree. In one chapter structured according to various logical fallacies, Laura arrives at Samuel's office 'literally wearing pyjamas' and tries to explain away her plagiarising an entire paper.¹²⁸ Under the subtitle 'Argumentum Verbosum', she launches into a monologue that includes assertions of financial precarity: 'my parents' college fund won't cover four full years'; and sexual insecurity: 'my boyfriend [...] wants me to send him dirty pictures of me'.¹²⁹ The chapter ends with Laura failing to convince Samuel and storming out, threatening to have him fired, revealing that her father donates 'more than you make in a year' to the university.¹³⁰ *The Nix* pays little attention to the accumulating debt that so concerns the narrative perspective of *Purity*. Instead, it uses the privileged Laura as the sole representative of the youngest generation in its techno-generational framework, asserting an emerging generational consciousness has no interest in intellectual inquiry and no guiding moral principles.

The third person, indirect perspective of Samuel describes his students as looking 'like they blamed *him* for their apathy' and arguing that reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an 'old play', offers nothing useful for 'real life'.¹³¹ Although Samuel is barely older than his students, his alignment with literary, liberal-humanist values marks him as culturally old in the novel's techno-generational framework. The student's dislike of classic literature, meanwhile, is reflective of technological progressivism. Samuel works at a 'small university' located in suburban Chicago, attended by students from wealthy families and surrounded by 'giant department stores and corporate office parks'.¹³² The university buys into narratives of technological progress, advertising itself as a '*Wired campus! Preparing students for the*

¹²⁸ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 32.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹³¹ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 17.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

twenty-first century!'.¹³³ Samuel is instructed by a provost 'obsessed with teaching hard sciences and mathematics in *every class*' to 'show on his annual reports how he promotes mathematics in his literature class'.¹³⁴ *The Nix* presents these attempts by the university institution to keep up with technological progress as both reflecting and contributing to the degradation of the humanities in twenty-first century culture. Laura is as much a product of the feedback mechanisms of iFeel as she is of this pressure on students to approach education as a place to acquire 'human capital' for improving one's job prospects.

The Old-Man perspectives of *The Nix* and *Purity* defend residual bourgeois traditions from an increasingly dominant digital culture they represent with the technologized habits and attitudes of their young, female digital native characters. In *The Nix*, Laura embodies the excesses of this culture, producing sexualised images of her body through digital media technologies. She is addicted to the feedback mechanisms of social media, which reinforce her disinterest in humanist inquiry and her expectation that others adhere to her will. In these ways, *The Nix* depicts Laura as a digital native who is both the product and agent of an undesirable future. While the characterisation of Pip in *Purity* initially reproduces anxieties concerning young women as envoys from a threatening future, she is also depicted as an outlier within her generation. Her peers are enthralled by the promise of technological progress, yet she holds onto a residual scepticism that the narrative places value in. While older male characters perceive her youthful body as a threat, its physical appearance is referred to throughout the narrative and is depicted as cutting through the dangerous feedback loops of computational representations. Therefore, while *The Nix* characterises Laura as the epitome of a Young Girl who views her body through and as a technology, in *Purity* Pip's reality diverges from this limited worldview. The more she interacts with older male characters, particularly Tom, the

¹³³ Ibid., p. 18.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

more her perspective aligns with residual liberal-humanist values that the novel presents as worth defending against narratives of technological progress.

Let's Be Realistic

The Nix and *Purity* performatively defend liberal humanism as a value system under threat in order to assert their preferability to a technological-progressivist ideology they perceive as dominant. They represent this dominant structure of feeling through young characters—specifically Young Girls—duped by the dominant symbolic order of the digital. In order to distance themselves from and challenge this dominance, the narrative perspectives of the two novels embrace the unfashionable scepticism towards utopian promises embodied in the stereotype of an Old Man. However, these novels go further to depict any ideology as an ‘unrealistic’ simplification of a complex reality. To make this claim, they naturalise a particular bourgeois ideology as ‘realistic’ common sense through calls for moderation and an awareness of complexity. These, they suggest, are residual cultural values that the technologically structured naïveté of a younger generation has led society to lose sight of. In doing so, they approach the traditional order of social relations as a ‘given’ that must be protected from a dangerous future.

In this way, the cloudy language used in the two novels reflects that of ‘neoliberalism’, the hegemonic ideology of early-twenty-first century American society. ‘Neoliberalism’ is itself a cloudy term, evoking socioeconomic complexity without detailing a diffuse and often inconsistent set of policies that addresses specific local contexts. Rather than producing an all-encompassing definition of neoliberalism, I instead centre analysis on one specific understanding of the term. As Wendy Brown writes, neoliberalism can be understood as a ‘normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated

governing rationality'.¹³⁵ This 'order of reason' frames individuals as 'an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavours and venues'.¹³⁶ This rationality views various areas of life through a distorted economic lens: 'one might approach one's dating life in the mode of an entrepreneur or investor'.¹³⁷ *Purity* and *The Nix* reproduce aspects of this neoliberal 'common sense' that conceives of areas of public and private life through an economic lens, even as they criticise certain policies of the neoliberal U.S. government, particularly in regards to education and environmentalism. The age performativity of their narrative perspectives allows each novel to accept this ideology as 'realistic' while avoiding the appearance of ideological commitment.

The clouding of complexity, particularly regarding the market, has always been integral to neoliberalism. *Purity's* reliance on cybernetic language to gesture to the complexity of the human mind and the natural world resembles similar rhetoric employed by the neoliberal economist Friedrich Hayek's to paint the market as 'beyond' human cognitive capacities, and therefore beyond the scope of government policy. As Quinn Slobodan details, 'even as [Hayek] disparaged the fallacy of computer-aided models, he drew inspiration from the same source of system theory' in order to paint 'a vision of the world economy itself as an enormous information processor beyond the capacity of the human mind'.¹³⁸ Such appeals to cybernetic complexity informed neoliberal policy. As Tiziana Terranova writes, 90s neoliberals framed 'the internet' as 'an ecosystem, inhabited by knowledge, and substantially self-organizing' to challenge then-dominant ideas of the 'information superhighway' that presented the internet as

¹³⁵ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 9.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹³⁸ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 225.

material infrastructure presumably to be designed and maintained by government.¹³⁹ Today, the ‘Cloud’ provides a useful metaphor for maintaining this sense of the internet as ‘beyond’ regulation. Already a longstanding conservative rhetorical technique, the terminology of complexity remains useful for those aiming to dismiss radical politics and defend a particular economic understanding of various areas of public and private life as ‘realistic’.

Purity and *The Nix* both draw on this appeal to complexity in order to characterise a younger generation’s desires for political transformation as unrealistic. This becomes apparent in the novels’ depictions of feminist politics. *The Nix* compares the radicalism of ‘second-wave’ feminism with Laura’s generation, who are made to embody what has been criticised as ‘postfeminism’: a commodified celebration of ‘girl power’ and embracing of gender signifiers that repudiates the political drive of feminism proper. Second-wave feminism is treated nostalgically as farcical and somewhat reductive: at University in the 1960s, Faye’s all-female dorm-mates describe Plato, Ovid and Dante as ‘dead men assholes with nothing to say about today’s youth’.¹⁴⁰ Embodying this perspective is the ‘long-haired, mean looking Alice’, introduced via Faye’s perspective as ‘the craziest of them all’, the narrative noting her Buddhism, military-style attire and proclivity for ‘free-love’.¹⁴¹ Faye and Alice are roommates and befriend one another despite their differences. In one scene, the two attend a consciousness raising session in which the teacher tells them that all men are ‘armchair rapists’.¹⁴² The narrative perspective performatively describes second-wave feminism with a wry nostalgia, framing it as a quirk of a past historical period that has since died out.

Alice’s 60s student radicalism is juxtaposed with the attitudes of Laura’s postfeminist apathy. Laura describes an event named ‘the Slutty Cavegirls party’ as ‘just so totally offensive!

¹³⁹ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 120.

¹⁴⁰ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 392.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 398.

Because it's a party at a frat. *Obviously* she would dress slutty. They didn't have to tell her that'.¹⁴³ Laura's readiness to 'dress slutty', contrasts with both Faye's initial conservatism and Alice's feminism in the sections from the 60s. Undermining the claims of another political movement, *The Nix* presents both second-wave feminism and postfeminism as equally inauthentic, and, more damningly, useful to capital. In the novel's present, another of Periwinkle's clients, Molly Miller, is a twenty-five-year-old singer working on a memoir titled '*Mistakes I've Made So Far*'.¹⁴⁴ Periwinkle plans to manufacture confessions for this book, including 'an innocently small episode of lesbianism. An experimental time in junior high [...] Not enough to turn off the parents but hopefully enough to get us some rainbow-flag awards'.¹⁴⁵ Here, sexual liberation and LGBTQ+ rights are depicted as easily folded into the interests of capital. In these moments, *The Nix* appears to criticise the apolitical dimensions of this postfeminism by characterising Laura, Molly, and the generation they function to represent in the narrative, as apathetic and oversexualised consumer profiles. However, if the narrative perspective suggests that Laura fails to align with some preferable feminist sensibility, it does not enunciate what this is in any clear terms.

Despite its criticism of postfeminism for failing individuals like Laura, *The Nix* nonetheless reproduces neoliberal ideology's expectation that women will discipline themselves as its 'ideal subjects'.¹⁴⁶ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff note that postfeminism resonates with basic tenets of neoliberal ideology, particularly 'a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political'.¹⁴⁷ The narrative perspective makes an example of Laura for her irresponsibility, yet does not offer a political perspective on

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 364.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁴⁶ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 'Introduction' in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-17 (p. 7).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

where she might turn for an alternative lifestyle. Instead, it is presumably up to her to overcome society's sexism as an individual, rather than as part of any political movement aiming to alter the system that produces patriarchal structures. Through its focus on the individual, the narrative diminishes Alice's radical political allegiances. It depicts her engaging in sexual role play with a police officer, Alice performing a sixties street punk and the officer a violent member of the repressive state apparatus. Alice admits that her activist friends 'would not understand' the 'electric part of me', yet she 'prefer[s] to go with it and not judge'.¹⁴⁸ This apolitical relationship works to highlight the limited scope of Alice's political affiliations, opening a seemingly productive space for empathy between individuals of different ideologies. In suggesting that Alice's friends would look down on her exploration of this space, the novel expresses a concern that collective political identities constrain the complexities of interpersonal relationships.

Purity similarly offers a narrativization of recent feminist history, beginning with second-wave feminism, which the narrative perspective suggests had become a dominant ideology among the white middle- and upper-class activists, artists and journalists that make up the social milieu it represents. Tom's memoir recounts feminist criticism at university in the 1980s: 'I learned that I was even more inescapably implicated in the patriarchy than I'd realized. The upshot was that, in any intimate relationship with a woman, my motives were a priori suspect'.¹⁴⁹ Becoming aware of 'structural unfairness' makes Tom feel guilt, 'as if simply being male [...] placed me ineluctably in the wrong'.¹⁵⁰ Regarding his relationship with Anabel, he writes 'I was making amends for a structural unfairness. It *hurt* her that I had practical skills,

¹⁴⁸ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 433.

¹⁴⁹ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 347.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

and because it hurt her it hurt me, too’, implying that he is unfairly punished as an individual by a puritanical ideology seeking retribution for structural disparities.¹⁵¹

Purity’s male characters internalise second-wave feminism as a set of social obligations that politicise the mysterious and otherwise non-political vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships. The novel’s impulse towards moderation as a sign of nuance is most overt in its depiction of Tom’s relationship with the young Anabel, a second-wave feminist and conceptual artist unable to finish her grand project. Alluding to Isaiah Berlin’s famous 1953 essay, Tom describes Anabel as ‘the hedgehog’ and himself as ‘the fox’.¹⁵² Tom is both personally and politically cautious, aiming in his journalism to ‘serve the truth in its full complexity’ in reaction to ‘the politically polarized house I grew up in, my father’s blind progressivism, my mother’s faith in corporations, and how effectively the two of them could poke holes in each other’s politics’.¹⁵³ This moderation extends into everyday interaction, with Tom accusing Anabel of offering false binaries: ‘A middle was being excluded, and the middle was reality’.¹⁵⁴ These scenes dichotomise the realism of Tom’s journalism and the programmatic idealism of Anabel’s multimedia conceptual art projects. They also demonstrate a performative aligning of cultural interpretations of old age with particular ‘old media’. Tom is by no means biologically ‘old’ in the present day of the novel—only in relation to Pip. However, the novel aligns this character’s residual humanist values and old media forms with its ‘common sense’ narrative perspective, a common sense it believes is ignored by the rigid scripts of digital media and feminist politics.

Tom’s journalistic perspective is presented as residual in the present day of the novel. Meanwhile, Anabel’s brand of feminism has resurged and become dominant through its

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 403.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 403; See: Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History’, in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, 2nd edn, ed. by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Vintage, 2013), pp. 436-498.

¹⁵³ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 365.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 433.

association with the affordances of networked media such as blogs and social media platforms.¹⁵⁵ This new generation of feminists in *Purity* do not embody post-feminism, nor do they reflect the intersectional approaches of the ‘third wave’, whose contributions are omitted entirely from *Purity*’s whitewashed narrativization of feminist history. Rather, their seemingly naïve veneration of digital media resembles recent discussion about a possible ‘fourth wave’. As Nicola Rivers writes, this wave is constituted less by its different ideas to previous waves but as a reaction to ‘the surge of misogyny and its attempts to disrupt or disturb this, as well as challenging a Western cultural reliance on the apparently “reassuring” trope of postfeminism, rather than a symptom of postfeminism(s) decline’.¹⁵⁶ In this environment, digital media becomes a vector by which misogyny surges as well as a terrain on which feminists disrupt it. This use of digital media platforms for both combatting misogyny is exemplified by the recent #MeToo movement, through which women foreground and challenge the entrenchment of sexist power dynamics within social institutions.

Purity associates a satirical strawman fourth-wave feminist utopia of a world without men to the technological progressivism it criticises elsewhere. The character Annegret tells Pip that ‘women’s need for friendship is genuinely satisfied by the Internet’ and mocks her boyfriend for being jealous about her online friendships.¹⁵⁷ Pip displays some scepticism regarding this narrative. When Annegret suggests that the internet enslaves men to ‘images of women’, Pip states ‘I think you’re forgetting about gay sex and pet videos’.¹⁵⁸ Leila embarks on a ‘rant’ about ‘male-dominated Silicon Valley and the way it exploited not only female freelancers but women more generally, seducing them with new technologies for chitchat [...] while maintaining control of the means of production—phony liberation, phony feminism,

¹⁵⁵ See: Nicola Rivers, ‘New Media, New Feminism?’, Chapter in *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 107-130.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁵⁷ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 20.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

phony Andreas Wolf'.¹⁵⁹ Although dismissive of Marxist ideas earlier, the Old-Man perspective of *Purity* reinforces Leila's sentiment by indeed representing Andreas as a fraud who uses feminism as a cover.

In *Purity* fourth-wave feminism is depicted as part of the ruse of technological progressivism that the non-duped characters Andreas and Tom do not bother themselves with in private. As in *The Nix*, the narrative perspective stakes out a seemingly moderate critique of feminism by appealing to questions of individual responsibility and apolitical desire, figuring the complexities of interpersonal relationships as a 'beyond' to the systemic thought of feminism. Early in the novel, Pip tells Andreas in the middle of a flirtatious email exchange that '[w]e girls are supposed to at least have these amazing sexual powers, but in my recent experience this is just a lie told by men to make them feel better about having ALL the power'.¹⁶⁰ Andreas responds with apparent earnestness, 'It's true I'm male and have some power, but I never asked to be born male' and continues to question whether a predator should 'betray its nature and starve to death' or search for 'the right' way to deal with privilege.¹⁶¹ This is a turn-off for Pip: 'Already the agreeable flirtation was slipping into German abstraction'.¹⁶² Through this exchange, *Purity* suggests that Pip understands feminist ideas but is not attached to them as a more abstract ideology, in the way that Andreas presents himself as being.

In one scene, the free-indirect narration alludes to Laura Mulvey's feminist film criticism to describe the 'gaze' of Pip's boss Igor, and Pip threatens him with a sexual harassment lawsuit: 'I have a law-school friend who says it's enough that you create an atmosphere'.¹⁶³ However, ultimately Igor's harassing behaviour is presented as comic and

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 36, 9.

inconsequential, with Pip seeing herself as ‘the morally hazardous exploiter of Igor’s indulgence [...] probably none of [her older female colleagues] could have been as rude to Igor as she was and not been fired’.¹⁶⁴ Later, after a housemate rejects her inappropriate sexual advances, Pip tells Igor ‘I was just kidding about the lawsuit’ and attempts to flirt with him. Igor asks if Pip is unwell, then says ‘it was just teasing around’ and that ‘this is an office, there are rules’.¹⁶⁵ Pip realises ‘all she’d done by confronting him was ruin the long-running game with him, the game that had made her work here half-bearable’.¹⁶⁶ Against the novel’s criticism of second-wave feminism, these scenes imply that Pip operates beyond feminist ideology, aware of the uncertainties of interpersonal relationships. The novel frames instances of sexual harassment as a mutual ‘game’ rather than as exploitation based in power imbalances.

The misogynistic anxiety about Pip’s sexual behaviour is resolved when she enters a relationship with Jason, the young man who had spurned her at the novel’s beginning. This bourgeois ‘marriage-plot’ conventionality, which resolves Pip’s experience of misogyny in a heteronormative relationship, is opposed to the novel’s framing of supposedly feminist digital media. Whereas the couple’s early encounter was disrupted by Tom’s phone and Pip’s defensiveness, their new romantic arrangement is maintained by Pip’s willingness to be vulnerable. She ‘felt herself wanting to bury herself in Jason, pour her trust into him, even though she had evidence that self-burial and crazy trust levels could result in toxicity’.¹⁶⁷ Although we still ‘couldn’t help’ being ‘heedless in sex only’, this sexuality is lent a new literary quality: it is ‘bigger, almost metaphysical; a John Donne poem she’d studied in college and failed to appreciate’.¹⁶⁸ Pip takes up tennis with Jason, something neither are good at but decide to work on nonetheless. As Carren Irr writes of this ending, ‘recovered from shame to

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 62-3.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 547.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 547.

the extent that she can experience sensations of satisfaction, sufficiency, and sweetness, Pip is described as having been released into unthinking yet skilful action in tandem with another'.¹⁶⁹ As opposed to the avoidance encouraged by the internet's capturing of sexuality, the metaphor of the game is presented as fostering more productive interpersonal relationships. *Purity* uses this critique of technology offering control and security to defend against a perceived threat to masculinity in Western societies, foregrounding the ultimate untenability of a world without men, or specifically without the residual values of the Old Man.

These depictions of generations of feminism are relevant to this discussion of the digital native because they are drawn into the techno-generational frameworks of *The Nix* and *Purity* through implied thematic allegiances. In both novels, feminist politics finds itself appropriated by consumer capitalism, which simplifies consumer's worldviews through technologies' reductive representations of society and sociality. In being aligned with digital technologies in this way, feminism in both novels—and any political ideology more broadly—are depicted as themselves reductive computations, taking complex reality and transforming it into simplified and fundamentally limited narratives. Amidst these computational ideologies, which a digital native generation imbues, the Old-Man perspective in *Purity* approves of Pip's flexible, postfeminist individualism. It frames this outlook as 'realistic', a worldview aligned with Tom's journalism and memoir writing. This set of allegiances represent the residual values the narrative perspective frames as under threat by the fashionable drive of technological progressivism.

Other political movements and ideologies are drawn into the opposing allegiances that structure the themes of *The Nix* and *Purity*. Both novels makes appeals to complexity to satirise the 2011 Occupy movement as naïve and unrealistic in both its broad goals to reform the

¹⁶⁹ Caren Irr, 'Ecostoicism, or Notes on Franzen', *Post45*, 30 May 2018
<<http://post45.research.yale.edu/2018/05/ecosticism-or-notes-on-franzen/>> [accessed 31 May 2018]

economy following the 2008 financial crash and its strategies to achieve this. Occupy was an anti-capitalist political movement influenced by the apparent successes of the Arab Spring, mainly made up of young activists using digital communication networks to organise protests in urban spaces.¹⁷⁰ The strategies of Occupy were primarily ‘horizontalist’, eschewing any ‘appeal to or takeover of the vertical power of the state’ and instead arguing for ‘freely associating individuals to come together, create their own autonomous communities and govern their own lives’.¹⁷¹ Occupy is difficult to define because of this horizontalist tendency: just within the United States, Occupy Wall Street differed in its tactics and demands to Occupy Oakland.¹⁷² However, common to both these protests was an effort at ‘prefigurative politics’, the rejection of any apparatus of political implementation that does not resemble the world it strives to create. As a result, leftist critics have derided Occupy for focusing on the ‘sense of the camp as end in and of itself’.¹⁷³ Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams even accuse Occupy of its own vague language: ‘moments will purportedly “resonate” with one another [...] riots and blockades will “spread and multiply”; experiences will “contaminate” participants and expand’.¹⁷⁴ The Old-Man perspectives of *Purity* and *The Nix* align the horizontalism and prefigurative politics of Occupy with technological progressivism in order to dismiss both as naïve, reductive simplifications of complex reality.

In *The Nix*, the Occupy Wall Street protests are represented with some sympathy, yet are ultimately depicted as unknowingly useful to capitalism. The novel satirises horizontalism and prefigurative politics towards its conclusion by having a

¹⁷⁰ Ruth Milkman, ‘Millennial Movements: Occupy Wall Street and the Dreamers’, *Dissent*, 61.3 (Summer 2014), 55-59 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2014.0053>>

¹⁷¹ Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 26.

¹⁷² Research and Destroy, ‘The Wreck of the Plaza’, *Research and Destroy*, 14 June 2014 <<https://researchanddestroy.wordpress.com/2014/06/14/the-wreck-of-the-plaza/>> [accessed 28 February 2019]

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, p. 35.

‘dispassionate’ Samuel witness a ‘young man’ earnestly use the occupation’s ‘human microphone’ system to propose a motion:

The speaker [...] understands that people express themselves politically in different ways and that [...] some people prefer their message to take on a more let’s say *abstract quality* than the policy proposals and talking-points papers and multi-step manifestos this group has heroically written through a painstakingly slow consensus-approach apparatus and under incredible duress that includes constant police surveillance and media scrutiny and also talking above the sounds of the drum circle, he might add.¹⁷⁵

The passage satirises the limited self-referential focus of Occupy: the motion the speaker attempts so earnestly to pass concerns asking the drummers to stop playing after 9 p.m. as others in the camp are struggling to sleep.

Yet the passage also captures the paternalistic sympathy of the Old-Man perspective for the Occupy protests, even as it portrays the movement as absurd through repeated references to jugglers and drummers. Looking at a collection of artefacts in the Morgan Library, previously the home of banker J. P. Morgan, Samuel finds that the building ‘feels designed to intimidate and diminish. It makes Samuel think that the folks protesting the superrich at Zuccotti Park are about a hundred years too late’.¹⁷⁶ Periwinkle, speaking to Samuel over the phone from a Wall Street Building overlooking Zuccotti Park, tells him that the protestors are protesting ‘the world that brought my company into being. Multinational. Globalization. Capitalism’.¹⁷⁷ He mocks this, likening it to ancient meteorology: ‘It’s a revolt against things they don’t understand. Imagine our hominid ancestors protesting a drought? This is like that’.¹⁷⁸ Describing the occupation’s jugglers and drum circles as a ‘non sequitur’, he argues that ‘what they don’t understand is that there is nothing capitalism loves so much as a non sequitur. This is what they need to learn. Capitalism gobbles up non sequiturs happily’.¹⁷⁹ The protestors are duped by the

¹⁷⁵ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 603.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 606.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

forces they hope to overthrow. The narrative perspective views Occupy Wall Street as ultimately impotent, yet sympathetic in its very impotence.

The sympathy that *The Nix* perspective extends to the Occupy activists operates on a personal level rather than a political one. Periwinkle describes the protests as an ‘impression of a protest [they] saw on TV once, many years ago’, alluding to the 1968 Chicago protest which is itself depicted as an event manufactured via the news media by himself to help discredit the ‘radical left’.¹⁸⁰ Here, collective political projects are not expressions of material conflict but rather spectacles produced through media interference by non-duped individuals such as Periwinkle. Politics is framed as merely a reflection of deeper existential anxieties channelled through the images of popular media. Here, the narrative aligns less with Periwinkle’s exaggerated cynicism than Samuel’s glimpse of sincerity, the notion that jugglers of Occupy may have ‘sold out’ to a set of images but ‘not to greed’.¹⁸¹ Ultimately, however, the narrative suggests that the protests are a symptom of some deeper existential malaise that technological progressivism takes advantage of for profit. Watching the human microphone, Samuel ‘feels so separate from what’s happening here [...] These people seem to have a sense of purpose that he has completely lost’.¹⁸²

Occupy are placed in thematic alignment with digital media through the way this ‘sense of purpose’ resonates with an earlier scene in the novel, in which the videogame-addicted Pwnage tells Samuel that he finds ‘*Elfscap*e way more meaningful than the real world’ because he can see the effects of his actions, whereas in the real world he has been fired from his job while the CEO ‘got a salary that was literally eight hundred times bigger than mine’.¹⁸³ *Elfscap*e provides a means of ‘fulfilling our basic human psychological need to feel

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 201, 560.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 603.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 192.

meaningful and significant'.¹⁸⁴ It is this basic need that the *The Nix* suggests the convoluted horizontalist politics of the Occupy protests fulfil. Samuel's sense of distance from the protestors is provoked by how the rituals of communal feedback, 'hands are thrust into the air, fingers atwirl', produce an image of a communality. We are told 'he wants to be seen, wants his hurt acknowledged'.¹⁸⁵ This reading of prefigurative politics recalls another earlier scene, when Laura expresses anxiety to her followers on iFeel and receives supportive messages back from 'friends and admirers, boyfriends and lovers, colleagues and acquaintances'.¹⁸⁶ Through these thematic connections with videogames and social media, *The Nix* represents Occupy, its avatar for contemporary political protest by today's young generation, as a technology for avoiding some nebulous existential dread rather than a political project addressing specific material conditions.

In *Purity*, the only occupation we see the Occupy movement perform is their overstaying their welcome in the dilapidated squat Pip lives in at the novel's opening. Like the jugglers and drummers of *The Nix*, yet also invoking the more aggressive tactics of the Oakland movement, the Occupy protestors are described as 'a zoo of transients and troublemakers'.¹⁸⁷ *Purity* satirises the prefigurative politics of the Occupy movement by representing them as unable to maintain a clean squat. That Pip finds herself performing communal tasks assigned to others is, the narrator informs us, 'the problem of communal living'.¹⁸⁸ Here, *Purity* reproduces horizontalism's own logic even as it attempts to satirise it: just as a collectivist utopia is theorised to emerge from the communitarianism of the Occupy camps, the novel constructs a cloudy association between domestic arrangements and the supposedly inherent flaws of a communitarian politics.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 603.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 368.

¹⁸⁷ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 38.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

This framing is reiterated in the same scene, as Stephen and his friends ‘imagine a labour utopia’ in which ‘technology-driven changes in productivity and the resulting loss of manufacturing jobs would inevitably result in better wealth distribution’.¹⁸⁹ Pip questions this vision and Stephen struggles to answer. We are told that ‘[s]he’d listened to a lot of these utopian discussions, and it was somehow comforting that Stephen and his friends could never quite work all the kinks out of their plan; that the world was as obstinately unfixable as her life was’.¹⁹⁰ Again, the narrative makes gestures to the vague ‘kinks’ of an ‘obstinately unfixable’ social reality that cannot be integrated into Stephen’s Marxist utopianism. This deferral is comforting for Pip, relieving her of anxiety about her material precarity by blending it with vague existential concerns. *Purity* does not imply any preferable alternatives, only the implication that what exists is inevitably preferable to a future that might exist. Like clouds, material relations in the novel emerge from an unknowable beyond whose mysterious processes a younger generation, with the use of digital technologies, are misguidedly attempting to systematise and change.

The performative age that constructs the implied authorial perspectives of *Purity* and *The Nix* repeatedly challenges the reductive claims of narratives of technological progress by making aesthetic gestures to some cloudy beyond that they can never account for. In doing this, they position themselves as old and out-of-date, defenders of residual values against a younger generation duped by the symbolic order of technological progressivism. The implied values of *The Nix* frame political movements with sympathy but ultimately view them as misguided in their politics, admiring them only for their sense of existential purpose. At the end of the novel, Samuel begins to appreciate Occupy protestors, ‘especially now that the drummers have agreed to drum only during reasonable daylight hours’.¹⁹¹ We are told he is ‘fond of their rhythms,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁹¹ Hill, *The Nix*, p. 613.

their ceaseless forwards momentum, the way they can go for hours without a single pause. He tried to match their discipline, for he has a new project, a new book'.¹⁹² Draining collective politics of its content and replacing it with form, *The Nix* advocates a withdrawal from politics into personal discipline and growth. The only active political actors left in the novel are the reactionary Governor Packer and, forebodingly, Laura Pottsdam, whose amorality is matched only by that of the novel's own Old-Man perspective.

The novel's placing the Occupy movement alongside an aestheticized hippie movement and an escapist videogame subsumes politics into a framework of generational repetition. It appears that the only thing that 'moves' through these cycles is technology: whereas the older characters gain some degree of empathy and self-awareness, overcoming their addictions to 'easy answers', Laura only deepens her self-centredness due to her inability to shake her addiction to social media as a digital native. Despite finding optimism in Samuel's embrace of sincere novel-writing, his product, the narrative of *The Nix*, presents a politically corrupt society in which little changes over the generations except isolated instances of individual virtue and developments in technology, the latter of which contribute only to deepen a cycle of moral destitution.

Purity, meanwhile, ends with its protagonist, Pip, refusing politics. Trying to rouse Pip's anger towards the end of the novel, Cynthia, Tom's sister and Pip's aunt, launches into something of a generationalist call to arms: 'you don't owe these people anything. They owe *you*, big-time. It's your turn to call the shots now. If they give any resistance, you're within your rights to nuke them'.¹⁹³ In reaction, Pip dismisses not only this reductive generational politics but politics altogether.

Pip both did and didn't share her anger. Certainly it seemed unfair that she'd been stuck with a shitty world of her parents' making. [...] they belonged to the generation that had done nothing about nuclear weapons and nothing about global warming; it wasn't her fault. And yet it was

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 613.

¹⁹³ Franzen, *Purity*, p. 539.

oddly comforting to know that even if she could identify the ethically correct thing to do with a billion dollars, and proceeded to do it, she could never alter the world's shitty course.¹⁹⁴

Just as she responds to the Occupy activist, Pip turns away from political anger and towards what the Old Man presents as residual liberal-humanist values that stress mutual understanding between individuals rather than collectivist political movements. Pip therefore ends the novel playing tennis and working on her own wellbeing. Broader questions of her political agency opened at the beginning of the novel are abandoned in favour of individual moral development, since the 'world's shitty course' can never be altered through the reallocation of resources.

The implied narrative perspectives of *Purity* and *The Nix* performatively invoke the stereotypical Old Man's scorn for novelty as an anachronistic bulwark against the utopian claims of technological progressivism. They both depict a generation of digital natives as lacking the capacity for nuanced thought, in part because of the influence of rigid computational logics that reduce complexity into simplified, easily consumable stories. In *The Nix*, Laura embodies a dangerous generation of consumers addicted to social media. Her tendency towards simplifying abstractions has been reinforced by social media platform iFeel, driving her towards distrust in others. Political ideologies are presented as analogous to computation, both being at odds with these novels' championing of interpersonal understanding and empathy. In *Purity*, Pip develops by overcoming her circumstances and rejecting technological progressivism in favour of self-discipline. The narrative deploys uncertainty in relation to inter-individual relationships to dissolve politics into the murkier territory of interpersonal relationships between individuals. With regards to feminism, it encourages empathy for individual female characters while dismissing feminist political projects as misguided expressions of their individual psyches.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 539.

In launching techno-generational critiques of any attempt to systematise and change reality, the Old-Man perspectives of these novels performatively ‘yell’ at digital natives as the products of a socioeconomic system while refusing to engage with the systems itself. In doing so, they reinforce a dominant neoliberal ideology that fuels the very technological progressivism they set out to challenge. An alternative approach to challenging technological progressivism might be to engage in the difficult task of detailing the activities and perspectives of digital natives involved in the new modes of production centred around digital technology. However, considering the complexity of digital systems, is such a task possible? I will now turn to examine two novels that differ to *The Nix* and *Purity* insofar as they do not depict digital natives as threatening aberrations of American culture. Instead, they use techno-generational frameworks to draw continuities between a hegemonic neoliberal common sense and the ideology fuelling the growth of internet platforms as the mediators for society and culture in twenty-first century America. As we will see, however, these attempts to represent the lived experience of those working in this new digital economy do not prove entirely successful.

CHAPTER TWO

Work with Pleasure:

The Influencer and Platform Capitalism in *Surveys* and *Private Citizens*

In 2019, a Harris Poll/LEGO survey indicated that three times as many children in the U.S. and U.K. aspired to be ‘YouTubers’ or ‘vloggers’ than those that aspired to be astronauts.¹ The relevant question was leading, limiting responses to one of five choices: ‘astronaut’, ‘musician’, ‘professional athlete’, ‘teacher’, or ‘Youtuber/vlogger’. It was therefore structured for a purpose: to attract attention to the LEGO Group’s collaborative education program with NASA by tapping into anxieties about Western decline. News reporting obliged, focusing on the contrast between British and American children and those polled from China, the majority of whom chose astronaut. An article in the *Independent* referred to these apparently disappointing Western children as ‘Generation Influencer’.² A broader term than ‘vlogger’, the influencer is, as Crystal Adibin writes, ‘a vocation and practice focused on social media-based, multimedia, fame on the internet’.³ As of 2018, approximately two-thirds of all adults in the United States use at least one social media platform, with younger adults reporting the greatest usage.⁴ A minority of these users have leveraged their network centrality on Web 2.0 platforms into

¹ The LEGO Group, ‘LEGO Group Kicks Off Global Program To Inspire The Next Generation Of Space Explorers As NASA Celebrates 50 Years Of Moon Landing’, *The Harris Poll*, 16 July 2019 <<https://theharrispoll.com/lego-group-kicks-off-global-program-to-inspire-the-next-generation-of-space-explorers-as-nasa-celebrates-50-years-of-moon-landing/>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

² Sarah Young, ‘UK Children Would Rather Grow Up to be YouTubers than Go to Space, Poll Finds’, *The Independent*, 18 July 2019 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/youtube-vlogger-career-job-children-astronaut-space-china-poll-a9010086.html>> [accessed 18 July 2019]

³ Crystal Adibin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), pp. 72;

⁴ Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, ‘Social Media Use in 2018’, *Pew Research Center*, 1 March 2018 <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>> [accessed 17 October 2018]

lucrative corporate sponsorships, in which they are paid to ‘influence’ the behaviour of their subscribers and ‘followers’. Adibin writes that

the economic, legal, cultural and social impact of the Influencer industry has stimulated innovative forms of digital labor on the internet, encouraged an increasing uptake of young people in entrepreneurship, generated new models of work life, fostered cross-cultural literacies, raised the value of digital estates, demonstrated the potential of networked social movements, and saw the spread of vernacular practices on a global scale.⁵

As a cultural figure, the influencer binds the uncanny behaviour associated with a generation of ‘digital natives’ to emergent modes of capitalist production structured around online platforms.

The notion of ‘generation influencer’ attempts to grasp shifting social relations provoked by the rise of tech corporations by pointing to the aspirations of digital natives. A shift from the basement-dwelling ‘hacker’ to the selfie-taking ‘influencer’ as models for a generation’s professionalisation of digital media usage indexes Web 2.0 platforms’ consolidation of the internet. Although hacker culture was already ingrained in post-industrial capitalism by the 1970s, the cultural archetype of the ‘hacker’, epitomised in cyberpunk fiction, is a countercultural ‘trickster’, often male, and holds esoteric technical expertise.⁶ The archetypal influencer, on the other hand, follows the whims of mass consumer culture, is stereotypically feminine, and relates to digital technologies in passive ways similar to regular consumption. The generational threats commonly projected onto the figure of the influencer, as reflected in responses to the LEGO poll, are therefore not rebellion and activism but rather narcissism and cultural decline.

The cultural fascination with influencers reached its peak in early 2019, when the Twitter account of Pope Francis sought the attention of young Catholics by describing Mary as

⁵ Adibin, *Internet Celebrity*, p. 87.

⁶ Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 34-46; 280. See also: Alan Liu, *Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 138-140.

‘the first “influencer”: the “influencer” of God’.⁷ That the account associates chooses to affix this buzzword to Mary—rather than Jesus, John, or any of the apostles—plays into a debate concerning the gendering of the term influencer. Emma Grey Ellis observes that men ‘prefer terms like “digital content creator” or “content producer”’, whereas women—including academic researchers on the phenomenon—use the term ‘influencer’.⁸ Taylor Lorenz contests this gender split, tracing the origins of the ‘creator’ label to YouTube’s ‘Next New Creators’ program and arguing that it remains specific to that platform. ‘Influencer’, she found, is a ‘platform-agnostic term’ used to describe ‘anyone who leverages social media to grow a following and exerts influence over that following in order to make money’.⁹ The two novels I examine in this chapter do not use the term ‘influencer’, both being published in 2016 before the words’ rise to prominence.¹⁰ However, they do anticipate its current cultural archetype by depicting young women who aspire to accumulate a social media following and transform it into monetary value.

Natasha Stagg’s *Surveys* begins with its protagonist narrator Colleen working a minimum-wage job at a marketing agency in a nondescript shopping mall and describing her evening liaisons with younger men and drug dealers. In these opening chapters, Colleen briefly mentions posting messages online and responding to comments by male admirers, one of whom turns out to be a minor internet celebrity, named Jim. When their public online interactions

⁷ ‘With her “yes”, Mary became the most influential woman in history. Without social networks, she became the first “influencer”: the “influencer” of God. #Panama2019’ (@Pontifex, 27 January 2019) [accessed 6 December 2019]

⁸ Emma Grey Ellis, ‘When Women are Called ‘Influencers’ and Men ‘Creators’, *Wired*, 29 May 2019 <<https://www.wired.com/story/influencers-creators-gender-divide/>> [accessed 6 December 2019]

⁹ Taylor Lorenz, ‘The Real Difference Between Creators and Influencers’, *The Atlantic*, 31 May 2019 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/05/how-creators-became-influencers/590725/>> [accessed 6 December 2019]

¹⁰ Natasha Stagg has since written that ‘*Surveys* is a coming-of-age story, but its central themes are jealousy, fame, and statistics, and its release coincided with an explosion of new terms that better define and obfuscate those themes as felt today. The word “influencer” has a different meaning than it did while I was writing a character that many reviews have named an “influencer,” for example’. Natasha Stagg, *Sleeveless: Fashion, Image, Media, New York 2011-2019* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2019), p. 7.

render them both more famous, she and Jim begin monetizing their relationship through ticketed events and sponsorship deals. Soon Colleen finds herself caught in cycles of quantified feedback delivered by obscure algorithms and having to manage the attention of aspiring influencers. *Surveys* draws continuities between Colleen's life as an influencer and her low-wage work at the novel's opening, depicting forms of emotional labour and sex work obfuscated in the quantified metrics that drive both. It applies a techno-generational frame in which formative experiences with technologies entrench certain aspirations and standards into the minds of a generation that drive a wider, yet obscured economy.

Tony Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens* depicts individual aspirations becoming entangled with economic imperatives to record and commodify data about particular bodies through the narrative arc of the couple Will and Vanya. This story is told indirectly through the conflicted perspective of Will, a lethargic freelance web designer. His hyper-consciousness about racist microaggressions aimed at him as an Asian-American man develops, through an addiction to online pornography, into a misogynistic inferiority complex involving a desire to control his girlfriend Vanya. An aspiring Silicon Valley entrepreneur with paraplegia, Vanya launches a video blog and online community platform called 'Sable', ostensibly to challenge negative representations of people with disabilities in mainstream American culture. However, her entrepreneurial zeal and willingness to conform to the demands of an exploitative socioeconomic system ultimately alienate her from the novel's other characters. While Vanya relishes the public spotlight Sable brings, her users' incessant gaze intensifies Will's paranoia, provoking him to attack a stranger on a bus during a video livestream. As their relationship deteriorates, *Private Citizens* links Will's desire to control Vanya to the couple's laborious self-objectification online, depicting their influencer work embedding forms of normativity with regards to gender, disability and race within the emerging platform economy.

Generationalist discourse pervades these two novels' paratexts. The blurb to *Surveys* describes Colleen and Jim as 'the Scott and Zelda of their generation', while the flyleaf to the UK edition of *Private Citizens* declares it to be '*Middlemarch* for Millennials'.¹¹ In interviews, both authors exhibit ambivalent attitudes towards what Tulathimutte terms 'a prefab Millennial identity'.¹² Yet they nonetheless reproduce generationalist ideas in describing the historical situation of their peers: Stagg states with regards to the internet that 'We were on the cusp—the millennial cuspers, or whatever you want to call us. We saw that huge shift'.¹³ Stagg furthermore produces online content alongside her fiction, writing self-described 'fluff pieces' for what she terms 'Content World'.¹⁴ Tulathimutte, interviewed with Malcolm Harris, author of *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (2017) has stated that 'If Malcolm's economic portrait is the mainspring of the lived experience of this generation, then my book's project is to show how it makes people think of themselves and each other'.¹⁵ Stagg's *Surveys* and Tulathimutte's *Private Citizens* respond to mainstream generational discourses and their overlap with an emerging creative economy, one centred around new forms of creative work and in which the authors find themselves increasingly enmeshed.

In what follows, I analyse how *Surveys* and *Private Citizens* construct techno-generationalist framings of their character's aspirations and attachments to particular forms of

¹¹ Natasha Stagg, *Surveys* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext[e], 2016), back cover; Tony Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens* (Edinburgh: OneWorld, 2016), flyleaf.

¹² Tony Tulathimutte, 'Coddled, Sexting Millennials: Jennifer duBois Interviews Tony Tulathimutte' (interview by Jennifer duBois for *American Short Fiction*), 9 February 2016 <<http://americanshortfiction.org/2016/02/09/jennifer-dubois-interviews-tony-tulathimutte/>> [accessed 4 July 2018]; Natasha Stagg, 'Natasha Stagg is Almost Not-Famous' (interviewed by Bianca Heuser for *Ssense*), 19 August 2016 <<https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/natasha-stagg-is-almost-not-famous-the-author-and-magazine>> [accessed 19 August 2018]

¹³ Natasha Stagg, 'Constantly and On Your Own: Talking with Natasha Stagg', (interviewed by Mickie Meinhardt for *The Rumpus*), 27 December 2017 <<https://therumpus.net/2017/12/the-rumpus-interview-with-natasha-stagg/>> [accessed 18 September 2018]

¹⁴ Natasha Stagg, 'ROMANCE & POWER: Natasha Stagg' (interviewed by Bianca Heuser for 032c), 2 September 2016 <<https://032c.com/romance-power-natasha-stagg>> [accessed 18 September 2018]

¹⁵ Tony Tulathimutte and Malcolm Harris, 'Malcolm Harris in conversation with Tony Tulathimutte' (interviewed by Alex Woodend for *Bookforum*), 31 October 2017 <<https://www.bookforum.com/interview/18781>> [accessed 17 October 2018]

labour in order to represent the shifting economy of twenty-first century America. Here, the digital native serves as an uneasy placeholder for emerging class formations, a generation's formative experiences with technology training them in certain skills and behaviours useful to capital. Posting on online platforms is not immediately legible as labour, the continuous stream of text, images and videos seemingly lacking the final, tangible product of factory work or even writing or painting. However, both *Surveys* and *Private Citizens* pierce the gloss of online content to depict the invisible labour behind it, while also attending to the gendered, racialised and ableist constraints placed on influencers. I begin this chapter by comparing each novel's techno-generational framing of aspiration to contemporary theories about the neoliberal subject. I then analyse their representations of the influencer's material relationship to a wider platform economy, before finally examining the ways these novels depict their characters adapting their bodies to meet the demands of this economy. In these novels, the archetype of the influencer reveals itself as a chimera, a semi-ironic aspiration that barely conceals a growing perception of exploitation and economic precarity among middle-class individuals under neoliberal capitalism.

Serial Entrepreneurise

Surveys and *Private Citizens* depict downward mobility among middle-class graduates to represent a socioeconomic context in which the incomes of younger people have declined while those of older age groups have increased.¹⁶ Within this context, the influencer is a digital embodiment of what Erin Duffy terms 'aspirational labour'. Individuals seek to become

¹⁶ Caelainn Baar and Shiv Malik, 'Revealed: the 30-year economic betrayal dragging down Generation Y's income', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/07/revealed-30-year-economic-betrayal-dragging-down-generation-y-income>> [accessed 10 August 2018]

influencers through ‘creative activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven’.¹⁷ Recent years have seen aspiring influencers providing free, unsolicited advertising for brands in order to entice potential sponsorship deals.¹⁸ Duffy observes the gendered dimensions of this aspirational labour, arguing that the influencer emerges in part out of ‘the narrative conflation of branding and post-feminist empowerment [...] a way to emancipate women from patriarchal employment structures’.¹⁹ *Private Citizens* and *Surveys* craft narratives out of the trajectory of this aspiration. However, rather than framing it as emerging alongside the digital, these novels depict the aspirational labour of the influencer economy emerging from deflated expectations about the individual’s ability to succeed in a post-industrial economic system.

Post-industrial management discourse absorbed the 1960s ‘artistic critique’ of capitalism by dissolving top-down bureaucracies and framing the workplace as a site for realising one’s desires rather than earning a living.²⁰ Individuals entering post-industrial job markets in the Global North are therefore increasingly presented with an apparent abundance of opportunities for ‘creativity, reactivity and flexibility’, or what Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello describe as ‘an apologia for change, risk and mobility’.²¹ Rather than demonstrating a certain set of skills, job-seekers must now prove themselves able and willing to move between different short-term projects.²² As Malcolm Harris writes, this neoliberal market ideology transforms cultural attitudes towards youth, framing it as a time in which individuals

¹⁷ Brooke Erin Duffy, ‘The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19.4 (2016), 441-457 (p. 443).

¹⁸ Taylor Lorenz, ‘Rising Instagram Stars Are Posting Fake Sponsored Content’, *The Atlantic*, 18 December 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/influencers-are-faking-brand-deals/578401/>> [accessed 6 December 2019]

¹⁹ Duffy, ‘The Romance of Work’, p. 445.

²⁰ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2017), p. 97; see also: Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), pp. 74-105.

²¹ Boltanski and Chiapello, p. 89.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

accumulate ‘human capital’ to prepare for the job market: ‘By looking at children as investments, we can see where the product of children’s labor is stored: in the machine-self, in their human capital’. The ‘millennial’ generation therefore grow up ‘highly attuned to the needs of capital markets’, which in turn capitalises on this willingness to adapt to market demands by encouraging individuals to take precarious or unpaid work to gain ‘experience’.²³ In *Private Citizens*, the ex-student radical Cory attends a seminar for small business owners whose stated aim is to ‘catalyze mass change through personal transformation’ by advocating vague, inoffensive values—‘HONESTY. PASSION. VISION’—while encouraging its attendees to ‘DISRUPT YOUR LIFE’ and announcing that ‘You Are a Platform’.²⁴ This conflation of work and leisure is prevalent in the rhetoric of platform employers such as Uber.²⁵ Both *Private Citizens* and *Surveys* let this rhetoric ring hollow. In the former, ‘the obscene entitlement of a Stanford degree’ does not excuse Linda from ‘trudg[ing] through the entry level’ of various low-wage jobs.²⁶ In *Surveys*, Colleen is rejected for numerous service jobs after graduating, finally finding work at the survey centre where ‘[i]t would be nice, actually, to know less about psychology’.²⁷ This context, in which the promises of neoliberalism fall short for a generation, informs the representations of the platform economy in *Private Citizens* and *Surveys*.

Set in San Francisco between 2007 and 2008, *Private Citizens* depicts a socioeconomic landscape in which Google is solidifying its megacorporate status while Facebook is securing its own, the industry’s take-over of the Bay Area drawing on seemingly bottomless capital and cultural prestige. These are, however, the years of the financial crisis. *Private Citizens* does not represent the crash itself but rather the neoliberal stupor of the months prior, its San Francisco

²³ Malcolm Harris, *Kids these Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), ebook locs. 594; 1090.

²⁴ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp.141; 139; 144.

²⁵ Boltanski and Chiapello, p. xiv.

²⁶ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 75; 73.

²⁷ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 47.

already inundated with tech bros, yuppies and hipsters. Those displaced by this influx are also marginalised in the narrative, their presence providing spectral reminders of local histories, communities and politics that have since shattered into commercialised simulacra. The plot follows four neurotic Stanford University graduates—Will, Cory, Linda and Henrik—as they each fail to capitalise on their elite education. Through free-indirect third-person narration, the novel synthesises a sardonic representation of a twenty-first-century metropolis under the influence of its burgeoning tech sector with a sympathetic rendering of the material contradictions and psychological conflicts that drive the often-obnoxious behaviour of its protagonists. Their stories interlace to ask how we live authentically in a socioeconomic environment that appropriates the very notion of authenticity to clearly inauthentic ends.

Whereas *Private Citizens* is set at the locus of the new platform economy, Colleen's narration in *Surveys* drifts through the semi-deserted malls, motel rooms and bars of Arizona and Florida. Taking place in 2011, Colleen has graduated university with a seemingly useless psychology degree and entered a job at a market research 'survey centre' that pays a 'just-above minimum-wage hourly rate'.²⁸ The early chapters of the novel are populated by casual drug dealers, dejected mall workers and the 'one part of America' that the center pays to transport in and take surveys for under minimum wage, who Colleen describes in both sympathetic and callous terms.²⁹ Colleen recounts learning at university that 'everything, everything, everything was fucked in the world and that America especially was doomed because our country had grown up like a carefree nouveau-riche socialite', and 'that supply and demand created an economy, and a big part of finding out demand was market research'.³⁰ In *Surveys*, market research has become a basis for not only an economic system but for Colleen's understanding

²⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 48; 13.

of herself. Online and offline she seeks out the feedback of others, particularly as a quantifiable monetary value. It is this desire that spurs her decision to pursue online fame.

Surveys and *Private Citizens* both construct techno-generational frameworks to give recognisable form to their representations of a shifting economy, although they rarely reproduce the digital native as a stable category. In *Surveys*, Colleen locates herself within a broad generation of early adopters of the internet, employing the first-person plural to consider how this alienated her from her parents, stating that they ‘won’t know what we’re getting into’ online.³¹ She describes the genesis of the World Wide Web as an ‘unfolding’ that she, and a generational ‘we’, experience as it happens.³² Her generation are defined by this unfolding, a formation that overrides others: ‘it was hard, no matter who you were, to adapt and predict’. With reference to various media technologies that have since become outdated, from dial-up modems to Polaroid photos and CD-Roms, Colleen’s recollection of her generation’s formative engagement with the internet gathers speed, with her describing emergent modes of communication—‘smiling faces made of punctuation’—in the middle of a snowballing run-on sentence that contradicts the control she asserts in the claim that ‘we thought, For now, this will be fun [...] but eventually we’ll go back to TV’. The passage ends on the foreclosure of this return to previous habits, with Colleen left wondering how her generation might adapt to their unique historical situation and its ongoing unfolding: ‘What if we had to live in a way that TV had never described?’³³ This question marks the creation of a new generation of digital natives who must adapt to a different environment, one in which the habits and customs represented on television are no longer available.

³¹ Ibid., p. 100.

³² Ibid., p. 100.

³³ Ibid., pp. 99-100.

However, Colleen sees herself as an older sub-generation of digital native, ‘young, according to old people, and old, according to young people’.³⁴ This resembles the split introduced in *The Nix* between Laura, who’s digital native generation grew up with social media, and Samuel, whose generation grew up with videogames. Describing one of she and Jim’s followers, Colleen states: ‘Growing up online for a bigger percentage of his life than me, he’d posted stuff I was never young enough to get into’.³⁵ She is unnerved by this younger generation, as indicated when she references her ‘painfully clued-in step relatives’, one of whom ‘looked up from the screen with piercing ambivalence’ and sincerely asserts that he will never drink alcohol.³⁶ As will be explored below, these minor differences in age manifest in different desires. In contrast to the paternalistic Old-Man perspective of *The Nix*, however, Colleen’s first-person attempts to speak from a liminal location between generational experiences with the internet. This allows her to comment on the changes digital technologies have brought about without disavowing her own implication within them.

Colleen suggests that her generation’s early experiences with the internet are formative, that is, giving them certain shared experiences and habits. She recounts, ‘we hid a blog from even our friends, especially them, because it was for strangers to find. Maybe strangers would tell us they understood that part of us our friends couldn’t’.³⁷ The internet as a network affords intimate social connections outside local communities which are neither public nor private. By the time of the main action of the novel, however, these connections have expanded into complex networks. She finds ‘old classmates or people I’d known peripherally scared me by becoming too active in my online life’.³⁸ After a message appears on her phone from a man named ‘Matt’, one of many men she has been in communication with online, Colleen thinks,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 161, 169.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

‘If only it were the real thing. But it was. This was not even close to fake, actually’.³⁹ The insulated dyads that initially form Colleen’s online communications become a complex network in which these emergent forms of social interaction overlap with traditional modes of kinship, troubling both and in doing so producing new desires and a flexibility that meets the demands of the post-industrial economy.

Set in a recent past in which social media corporations are only beginning to consolidate their mediation of everyday social interactions, *Private Citizens* constructs a subtler techno-generational framing. A generational gap between experiences with digital media is identified by the narrative recounting how Will digitized old photos for his parents. Later, Cory’s lack of knowledge when it comes to information technology, her ‘techlessness’, marks her as unusual among her peers: ‘incredibly—*unthinkably*—she didn’t know how to email’.⁴⁰ Adults older than forty are a distant presence in the novel, and when they do come to the forefront it is often to complain about the behaviour and attitudes of younger generations. Nonetheless, the narrator self-consciously complicates any universalising identity categories that might apply to its characters through the introduction of individual contingencies. Early in the novel the narrative states, through the perspective of habitual activist Cory, that

Her generation’s failure was not one of comprehension but of compassion, of splitting the indifference; its juvenile taste for making a mess; its indignant reluctance to clean it up; its limitless capacity for giving itself a break; its tendency to understand its privilege as vindication. And it wasn’t even happy.⁴¹

Avoiding digital media constitutes one of Cory’s methods by which she distinguishes herself from her generation and attempts to make up for her privileged upbringing.

In her ‘techlessness’ and awareness of her class privilege, Cory contrasts with Vanya.

Reviews of *Private Citizens*, if they mention her at all, read Vanya as a secondary element

³⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁰ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 137, 39.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 8.

within the tragic structure of Will's plotline, describing her as 'borderline psychotic', 'a monster in a Silicon Valley society' and a 'cunning creation' who 'may be said to embody the characteristics Tulathimutte is most interested in mocking' yet remains 'an object of readerly sympathy'.⁴² In many ways, Vanya is characterised as an antagonist. She dismisses as defeatism any suggestion that there are some structural obstacles she has not had to encounter. She attributes her success to her individual spirit while comparing her internships to 'modern slavery ("Though slaves didn't have to make up rent")', and she calls Will 'lucky' because he is 'exempt from both white guilt and racial profiling', yet expresses disbelief at being searched by the TSA herself: 'They think *I'm* a terrorist? *Kind* of ridiculous'.⁴³ Vanya states early on that mainstream culture trains individuals to 'react to [disability] with misplaced empathy'.⁴⁴ This statement frames her characterisation as the blinkered and unrepentant avatar for a dogged entrepreneurialism entangled in the promises of Silicon Valley.

Prior to launching her entrepreneurial platform, Sable, Vanya quits her job 'after two months in frustration at her lack of executive power' and throws herself into 'gathering favours, hustling, suffering debasements'.⁴⁵ She brands herself a 'Maker. Serial Entrepreneuse. Idea Bot', and a 'Type A Left-Brain ESTP Post-Wave Feminist True-Cost Social Capitalist Progressive Independent Compatibilist Challenger Mahayana Buddhist Straight Mono Switch Femme'.⁴⁶ This all reflects a broader Silicon Valley culture, Vanya being instructed by 'a dot-com-bubble survivor' that 'if you made incremental backstretches and accepted no payday until

⁴² Sarah Gilmartin, 'Private Citizens review: 'Middlemarch' for millennials', *The Irish Times*, 24 September 2016 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/private-citizens-review-middlemarch-for-millennials-1.2798609>> [accessed 16 October 2019]; Luke Brown, 'Private Citizens by Tony Tulathimutte review — Silicon validation', *Financial Times*, 28 October 2016 <<https://www.ft.com/content/2233cf8a-9b63-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae>> [accessed 30 April 2019]; Christian Lorentzen, 'Tony Tulathimutte's Private Citizens: Finally, Millennial Heroes and Heroines in a Great American Novel', *Vulture*, 25 February 2016. <<https://www.vulture.com/2016/02/first-great-millennial-novel.html>> [accessed 30 April 2019]

⁴³ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 277; 61; 134; 131

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 251; 241.

your big break, you'd build a disruptive organization with your personality in its DNA: a Virgin, an Apple, an Amazon'.⁴⁷ Vanya strives to prove herself as a productive disabled individual, against the perception of disabled bodies as 'disruptive to the "normal" speed, flow or circulation of people, commodities and capital'.⁴⁸ Silicon Valley appeals to her because of its reinterpretation of 'disruption', the internet promising individuals with impairments ways to 'transcend the limitations of the offline world', ameliorate 'social isolation' and join the work force or launch their own enterprises.⁴⁹ In other words, Sable is presented as Vanya's project to prove her disabled body's capacity for creating new areas of value.

In places, Vanya's conception of disability is somewhat radical. She tells Will: 'Your glasses are prosthetics. So's my wheelchair. Storing info in your phone, that's artificial cognition. [...] There's nothing but the body'.⁵⁰ Framing *all* bodies as requiring technological prosthetics resembles what Lennard Davis has described as a 'new ethics of the body [that] begin[s] with disability rather than ending with it'.⁵¹ However, Vanya embodies this ethics by both embracing a corporatized understanding of technology through Sable, and by presenting herself as beautiful, self-made and productive. Regarding her extensive cosmetic surgery, Vanya argued 'I don't do it to please men. I do it because [...] I feel more like myself this way. Everything that I am is deliberate'.⁵² Her perspective recalls Davis's observation that 'care of

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁸ Nancy Hansen and Chris Philo, 'The Normality of Doing Things Differently: Bodies, Spaces and Disability Geography', in *Rethinking Normalcy: A Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Rod Michalko and Tanya Titchkosky (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2019,) pp. 251–269 (p. 258)

⁴⁹ Kerry Dobransky and Eszter Hargittai, 'Unrealized potential: Exploring the digital disability divide', *Poetics*, 58 (2016), 18–28 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.08.003>> (p. 20). As Dobransky and Hargittai and many others in disability studies note, however, structural barriers persist in the post-industrial digital economy, with the often-mandatory digital devices and software for work designed with a normative user in mind, leaving many with certain impairments on the wrong side of a 'digital divide' See also: Haiqing Yu, Gerard Goggin, Karen Fisher and Bingqin Li, 'Introduction: Disability Participation in the Digital Economy', *Information, Communication & Society*, 22.4 (2019), 467–473 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1550525>>; and Stephen J. Macdonald and John Clayton, 'Back to the Future, Disability and the Digital Divide', *Disability & Society*, 28.5 (2013), 702–718 <<http://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.732538>>

⁵⁰ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 268.

⁵¹ Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 23.

⁵² Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 328.

the body is now a requirement for existence in a consumer society [...] the contemporary body can only be completed by means of consumption'.⁵³ Catherine Malabou describes this in the context of work rather than consumption, writing that neoliberal market rhetoric substitutes the natural 'plasticity' of the body 'for its mistaken cognate, *flexibility*', which she defines as 'the possibility of instantly adapting productive apparatus and labour to the evolution of demand'.⁵⁴ Vanya enlists this concept of plasticity-as-flexibility to defend her addiction to prescription drugs—'[i]f *not* taking Adderall *diminishes* your productivity, isn't taking it a no-brainer?'—and to encourage a vision-impaired Will to return to work by 'overcoming disability' using assistive technologies.⁵⁵ Mastering the contingency of her body through 'projected *self*-image' denies the social construction of identity, an attitude that coheres with the neoliberal market ideal of meritocratic success.⁵⁶

Whereas Vanya is a true believer in neoliberal ideology, Colleen in *Surveys* exhibits no entrepreneurial spirit. Her approach to her work at the survey centre reflects what Huehls and Greenwald Smith name the '*fourth, ontological* phase of neoliberalism', in which '[t]he market does not require specific economic pursuits, political commitments, or ideological beliefs; it only requires our presence, our being in and of it'.⁵⁷ An anachronism in the era of platform corporations' harvesting of user activity for advertising, the survey center pays volunteers to answer surveys on behalf of corporate clients looking to target particular consumers.⁵⁸ Colleen and her peers, who frequently get drunk on the job, display little interest in their work, whereas their manager, Jewelia, extols meritocracy and 'assumed we were working hard, with her

⁵³ Lennard J. Davis, 'The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category', in *The Disabilities Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), (p. 274).

⁵⁴ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, trans. by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 12, 46.

⁵⁵ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 269; 346.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁵⁷ Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction', in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp. 1-18 (p. 9).

⁵⁸ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 9.

interests in mind, since they should be ours as well [...] because it meant more work in the future'. Colleen attributes Jewelia's 'faith in something as crooked and unappreciative as this business' to 'the broken neighbourhood in which she'd grown up in Houston', and dismisses this narrative of social climbing as a 'stereotype'.⁵⁹ Colleen and her co-workers exhibit their apathy to neoliberal ideology in deciding not to work whenever Jewelia is away.

However, capital finds a use for Colleen regardless. The survey center's corporate structure exerts mechanisms of 'control' in the sense used by Gilles Deleuze: instead of top-down hierarchies training workers to perform certain actions with uniform efficiency, a loose network of quantified measurements manages and modulates adaptable low-skill labour.⁶⁰ Colleen recounts how she is vaguely instructed to be efficient, yet 'Corporate only cared about the numbers'.⁶¹ She and her co-workers provoke particular responses or fabricate them entirely to produce the desired figures:

Corporate guaranteed the results clients asked for. This meant that if they wanted to know that people want to see a Britney Spears fragrance in a high end department store, Corporate would tell them it was true. [...] All of this was left un-discussed in our office, not because we were sworn to secrecy, but because the words to describe these processes were not readily available.⁶²

Colleen and her co-workers are alienated from their labour, lacking the ability to even describe it. Corporate control simply requires them to produce certain quantified results by any means necessary and 'pretended to be none the wiser'.⁶³ Colleen and her peers are adaptable, replaceable, low-skill components at the bottom of an economic system that does not care whether they believe in it or not.

This control is ingrained in Colleen through her experiences with digital media. She compares surveys to writing that 'can never be completely finished. You can always ask more

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁰ Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3-7 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>>[accessed 18 August 2018]; see also: Boltanski and Chiapello, p. 82.

⁶¹ Stagg, *Surveys* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016), p. 10.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 30-1.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 32.

people to respond. In college, I'd turn in an essay for a lit class that was actually a collage of posts I'd written before and quotes I'd randomly plucked from the book'.⁶⁴ Here, Colleen's familiarity with the spatial dimensions of word processing, its affordance for quick cutting and pasting, provokes a different approach to creativity. Colleen views herself as the curator of innumerable existing fragments rather than the source of material. Her relationship with the feedback from the university institution anticipates her work at the survey centre and as an influencer. She tells us that 'the more disparate the paragraphs in the paper were, the more interested the teacher seemed, so instead of streamlining my process, I made it even more haphazard, paraphrasing other people's blogs'.⁶⁵ Rather than producing knowledge, Colleen and her professor both move existing symbols around an informational system. That Colleen knows this to be the case yet continues to perform according to this logic suggests an inability and an unwillingness to step outside neoliberalism's ontological grip, or at least a willingness to take the easiest route to moderate success in this system.

Beyond Colleen's flexibility in manufacturing efficiency at work, she expresses a desire for self-fashioning through her everyday use of social media. Early in the novel, she asserts that the internet 'is where *trans* happens. It's where a person finds out that they're someone else inside, or many someones, and, hopefully, the person they are becoming inside. It's where secrets see light and take shape, so that when they come out to the important people—the ones you've really met—they aren't so scary'.⁶⁶ Colleen frames the internet as what Oliver L. Haimson, et al. name a 'trans technology' that allows 'trans users the changeability, network separation, and identity realness, along with the queer aspects of multiplicity, fluidity, and

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 31-2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

ambiguity, needed for gender transition'.⁶⁷ The concept of 'network separation' here is key to Colleen's view of the internet as 'trans', and to the novel's techno-generational framework more broadly. As Haimson, et al. note, the 'openness and ability to share personal content' that characterises trans technologies is enabled by the fact that those users know offline are absent.⁶⁸ Colleen asserts that the internet provides a space for younger users to 'grow up' away from the gaze of their parents, who 'won't know what we're getting into,' leading them to discover that they 'are someone else inside'.⁶⁹

Colleen's appropriation of the terms 'trans' and 'come out' are striking, evoking trans communities' uses of 'digital counterpublics' that do not replicate the striated gendering of bodies in public life.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the narrative's broad application of this vocabulary is cavalier, drawing the particularities of the cis-normative structuring of much of the internet on an institutional level into a generalised techno-generational framework centred around a cisnormative, middle-class narrative.⁷¹ Moreover, in implying that it is the internet that inclines digital natives towards 'dysmorphia', *Surveys* upends the source experience of the metaphor. Trans people seek out trans technologies in order to enact network separation, rather than being worked on by trans technologies.⁷² By suggesting that the internet is 'where a person finds out that they're someone else inside', *Surveys* reduces dysmorphia to a characteristic of the internet. Such a framing also comes close to reproducing recent claims that 'rapid-onset dysmorphia' is spreading among young people due 'social and peer contagion' driven by the availability of

⁶⁷ Oliver L. Haimson, et al., 'Tumblr was a Trans Technology: the Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies', *Feminist Media Studies* (2019), 1-17 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505>> (p. 2)

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁶⁹ Stagg, *Surveys*, pp. 100; 85.

⁷⁰ Olu Jenzen, 'Trans Youth and Social Media: Moving Between Counterpublics and the Wider Web', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24.11 (2017), 1626-1641 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1396204>> (p. 1629)

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 1629-1632. See also: Laura DeNardis and Andrea M. Hackl, 'Internet Control Points as LGBT Rights Mediation', *Information, Communication & Society* 19.6 (2016), 753-770.

⁷² This extends into Stagg's non-fiction work. In recent essays, she has written on 'bodily dysmorphia' in relation to image 'filters' and a 'generation's dismorphic aspirations' in relation to contemporary feminine beauty standards set by influencers. See: Stagg, *Sleevless*, pp. 40; 145.

transgender topics on social media.⁷³ However, the internet is simply one tool available for trans individuals to work through questions of gender and embodiment that are larger than it. By suggesting that the internet creates a trans generation of digital natives, *Surveys* asserts a technological determinism that represses the social constitution of the technologies it depicts.

Surveys and *Private Citizens* depict middle-class graduates struggling to gain the returns on human capital promised by a neoliberal market ideology. Their techno-generational frameworks represent this shifting economy through characters' approaches to labour. In *Surveys*, early experiences with the internet alienate Colleen from her local community, training her to seek value in the feedback of strangers. When transported offline, this capacity to adapt manifests in a mundane ability to meet quotas passed down by a complex control mechanism which she and her co-workers lack the language to describe. *Private Citizens* satirises the pervasion of digital media into a generation's approaches to work through the atypical 'techlessness' of Cory and the exaggerated enthusiasm for Silicon Valley of Vanya. An embodiment of the entrepreneurial self, Vanya is determined for her disabled body to meet the demands of the market and is dismissive of any notion of class privilege. She embraces the notion of plasticity in both her approach to work and her body itself, refashioning her image to assert her self-mastery. However, the perception—held by both Vanya and Colleen—that the internet provides a space for exploring, constructing and controlling one's identity is proved false as the novels turn to represent their lives as influencers.

⁷³ See: Arjee Javellana Restar, 'Methodological Critique of Littman's (2018) Parental-Respondents Accounts of "Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* (2019) <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-019-1453-2>> (p. 2).

Platform Capitalism

In their depiction of influencers, *Surveys* and *Private Citizens* exemplify what Martin Paul Eve and Joe Street loosely term ‘platform-capitalism fiction’, a genre that ‘[charts] the ways in which the virtualised commodities that dominate societal postmodernism persist’.⁷⁴ ‘Platform capitalism’ names a mode of production in which platform-owning corporations accumulate and analyse behavioural data extracted from individuals’ activity both on and off their platforms. They then package these analyses into predictive advertising models to lease to clients seeking to target particular consumer segments. Nick Srnicek writes that an ‘advertising platform’ such as Facebook or YouTube ‘has data extraction built into its DNA, as a model that enables other services and goods and technologies to be built on top of it, as a model that demands more users in order to gain network effects, and as a digitally based medium that makes platforms a central model for extracting data’.⁷⁵ The two novels I analyse here present two junctures in the rapid growth of platform capitalism. With Vanya and Will attempting to compete with their own platform in 2008, *Private Citizens* explores the final throws of ‘distributed’ platform capitalism. In the 2011 setting of *Surveys*, Colleen and Jim work within an established ‘netarchical’ platform capitalism, one in which the infrastructure for data extraction has already been claimed by a handful of corporations.⁷⁶

The two novels therefore differ in their representations of how influencers fit within the broad economic system of platform capitalism. In *Private Citizens*, Vanya views Sable as

⁷⁴ Martin Paul Eve and Joe Street, ‘The Silicon Valley Novel’, *Literature and History*, 27.1 (2018), 81-97 (p. 83).

⁷⁵ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 89. Shoshana Zuboff describes this process as ‘surveillance capitalism’ in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019)

⁷⁶ Vasilis Kostakis and Michel Bauwins, qtd. in Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, ‘Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalisation of Digital Economic Circulation’, *Finance and Society*, 3.1 (2017), 11-31 (p. 15).

enabling her to disseminate her earnestly positive story about disability, the platform initially being a spin-off from the ‘positivity-themed blog network’ she had previously worked for.⁷⁷ She describes the website to potential investors as filling a gap in the market for a ‘mainstream’ online community for disabled users that does not ‘devolve into group therapy’ and ‘make[s] disability exciting to watch’.⁷⁸ Its content is packaged in the language of the mid-00s blogosphere, with titles including ‘The 14 Worst Accessibility Design Fails’, ‘Watch This Deaf MC DOMINATE a Rap Battle (Wait for It!)’ and ‘@CCESS @BILITY: *Shattering the Able Ceiling with Web 2.0*’.⁷⁹ These titles reflect Vanya’s sincere and sanguine view of new media, Sable and herself as offering people with disabilities a route into a mainstream culture that has traditionally excluded them. This is the public face of Sable: a space for those frequently marginalised in American society to express themselves and participate.

However, alongside this public face, Vanya also translates her attitudes towards disability to potential investors. Here, she markets the disabled body as an untapped source of value, stating that ‘disability transcends markets’, that Sable will ‘redefine’ Old Media stereotypes and succeed ‘*because of its disability focus, not in spite of it*’. Will silently observes contradictions in this pitch: ‘how would she “transcend” the disability focus when it was the site’s distinguishing feature? Why “redefine” stereotypes instead of eliminate them?’⁸⁰ Here, the narrative frames Sable early as fundamentally contradictory and somewhat cynical in its presentation as advocacy. While the site lacks the surplus of users’ behavioural data necessary to wholly embody surveillance capitalism, relying on investment instead, it orients itself towards this model when Will builds ‘a brand database for social intelligence monitoring’.⁸¹ The business model of advertising platforms emerges as Google and other large corporations

⁷⁷ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 45; 43.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 271; 250.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

monetize already existing surpluses of behavioural data to replace investment⁸² Vanya's storyline therefore concerns not the excesses of platform capitalism but rather its emergence. It depicts a website ostensibly created for advocacy inevitably succumbing to a broader socioeconomic logic.

Platform capitalism relies on surveillance at a mass, automated scale: cookies, cameras and microphones recording the activity of individuals without their meaningful consent. As Shoshana Zuboff writes, we voluntarily accept this surveillance when platforms have ingrained themselves in our 'felt needs for effective life'.⁸³ Detaching oneself from a widely used platform like Facebook's Messenger app could affect our ability to contact certain people, for example. Moreover, as platforms' 'shadow profiles' of non-users demonstrate, even when someone actively chooses to avoid surveillance capitalism it can incorporate them regardless.⁸⁴ Since user activity is integral to the platform capitalist production, scholars have debated whether any activity performed on platforms can be understood as 'labour'. Tiziana Terranova, an 'autonomist' Marxist theorist, conceives of online activity as free labour: users' 'excessive activity' and affective investments in platforms make them attractive to new users, making this activity a source of value for platform capitalists.⁸⁵ Srnicek, however, writes that 'any idea of socially necessary labour time – the implicit standard against which production processes are set – is lacking. This means there are no competitive pressures for getting users to *do* more, even if there are pressures to get them to do more online'.⁸⁶ For Srnicek, platforms simply extract from existing social interactions rather than encouraging users to produce anything new.

⁸² Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, pp. 63-97.

⁸³ Shoshana Zuboff, 'Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization', *Journal of Information Technology*, 30 (2015), 75-89 (p. 85)

⁸⁴ David Garcia, 'Leaking privacy and shadow profiles in online social networks', *Science Advances*, 3.8 (2015), [1-6] <<https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/8/e1701172>> [accessed 23 October 2019]

⁸⁵ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 73-4.

⁸⁶ Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 55.

The depiction of Sable in *Private Citizens* contests Srnicek's understanding of platform labour. To attract users to the platform, Vanya performs modes of surveillance both on herself and her audience. She stresses that the site's content be 'ever-flowing' to produce the elusive quality that makes it 'sticky', i.e. enticing viewers to visit the site regularly.⁸⁷ Vanya and Will achieve stickiness through 'Lifecasting', described by Vanya as 'Real life from the seated perspective. Getting paid to do interesting things. Like a reality show, but *real*'.⁸⁸ Other than short 'blackouts' for performing basic biological functions, the couple record the entirety of their days to produce regular streaming content for Sable. This self-surveillance is extreme, yet plausible due to the horizon of expectations produced through the self-surveillant culture of influencers. As David Lyon writes, 'surveillance is enabled not only by technical and political means but also by the enthusiasm, ignorance, and sometimes reluctant cooperation and even initiative taking of the surveilled'.⁸⁹ Vanya rationalises Lifecasting as a unique means of using new media to regain control over her image, showing '*real*' experience of a person with mobility impairment.

However, this self-surveillance does not passively record Vanya's day to day activity. As Zuboff details, the logic of advertising platforms is 'instrumentarian' rather than 'totalitarian'. It is '[t]rained on measurable action, it is profoundly and infinitely indifferent to our meanings and motives, [and] it only cares that whatever we do is *accessible* to its ever-evolving operations of rendition, calculation, modification, monetization, and control'.⁹⁰ In *Private Citizens*, Cory identifies this logic when she describes the internet as a 'global corporate holding pen masquerading as public commons [...] Molding and standardizing human relationships to function as components in the assembly line'.⁹¹ Moral or ideological

⁸⁷ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 272.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸⁹ David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 29.

⁹⁰ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, p. 360.

⁹¹ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 123.

dimensions of user activity are secondary to the nudging of behaviour towards habits that better fit the ‘symbolic dimension’ of the platform’s extractive framework.⁹² Platforms care less about the content of what we use them for, than about ensuring that these actions and utterances are formed in ways more easily measured and narrativized into data profiles to sell to clients.

Vanya’s self-surveillance intensifies when she decides to apply an image-recognition algorithm that measures ‘movement, faces, contrast’ and quantifies the ineffable ‘interestingness’ that attracts regular viewers.⁹³ In order to produce better interestingness scores, the couple adapt their bodies to the quantifiable ideal of the algorithmic gaze. As their Lifecasting continues, Vanya comes to internalise ‘the swoons and crests of her web analytics, which function as line graphs of her mood’, the algorithmic measuring devices of the site shaping her content for Sable, and by extension her behaviour.⁹⁴ Will and Vanya thereby take on ‘the biorhythms of the New Media elite’: from Will’s perspective we see how, to increase their time spent streaming, he innovates ways to transform his little leisure time into ‘speed-orgies of vice and chore, doing squats with a toothbrush in his mouth and rinsing with bourbon’.⁹⁵ Here, *Private Citizens* demystifies the particular model of disability Vanya seeks to exemplify with Sable by depicting the ways that algorithmic governmentality can exert power over its subjects’ bodies and shape their behaviour.

In the early chapters of *Surveys*, Colleen describes her social media activity taking up the majority of her evenings. She refers to it as if it were a duty or commitment rather than something she enjoys, ‘reporting to followers’ about her days with ‘vague posts’ and spending ‘entire nights online, not sleeping at all’.⁹⁶ Here, with Colleen using platforms for the majority of her social interactions, we see platforms extracting value from increasing portions of a

⁹² Zuboff, ‘Big other’, p. 77.

⁹³ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 272.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 272.

⁹⁶ Stagg, *Surveys*, pp. 38, 62.

decreasing leisure time. Later, however, Colleen identifies a change in the degree of this unavoidability that is generational: ‘Growing up online for a bigger percentage of his life than me, [Sam had] posted stuff I was never young enough to get into, like word-blocks and branded messages he probably didn’t think would stay with him forever’.⁹⁷ A younger digital native than Colleen, Sam grows up within an environment in which his modes of social interaction are informed by corporate activity on the platform. However, for both Colleen and Sam, social media platforms have ingrained themselves into everyday social relationships.

Surveys depicts platform capitalism as not simply pushing the existing activity of users onto platforms, but rather producing new subjectivities—digital natives—as a resource to exploit. Kylie Jarrett has explored the value created by users of social media through the term ‘digital housewife’: ‘the actor that emerges from structures and practices of the ostensibly voluntary work of consumers as they express themselves, their opinions and generate social solidarity with others in commercial digital media while, at the same time, adding economic value to those sites’.⁹⁸ Just as the housewife in industrial capitalism performed unpaid domestic labour that enabled male workers to perform factory labour day after day, platforms rely on the energies that users invest into their social interaction in order to sustain themselves. Sam’s use of branded messages suggests that this voluntary activity is shaped by platform capitalism to meet its needs, rather than being simply extracted. Viewing herself as more mature, Colleen believes she can explain what drives online activity from a greater degree of distance. However, she also plays the digital housewife not only to platforms but in a more literal sense to Jim: her online interactions with him contribute to his online self-narrativization, while she depends upon his pre-existing fame to build her newfound influence.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹⁸ Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), p. 4.

It is when she quits her job and begins touring the country with Jim as an influencer that Colleen's social media activity becomes more legible as labour. Colleen and Jim produce value as influencers by maintaining an aspirational lifestyle:

We lived out endless clichés: juice bar freaks, Vegas day-gamblers, Burning Man tradesmen, business partners in meetings, art stars interviewed on every relevant site, junkies strung out at every relevant party. I couldn't get enough of these sponsored "events." Sometimes they were just dance parties, but we never danced, just stood behind the DJ booth with other celebrities. Other times they were at museums or restaurants and we'd mingle and get our picture taken.⁹⁹

She writes that this sponsored, 'promotional stuff' is 'very veiled. Our names were connected to a few social networks. We were paid to do that. Our promotion came from New York, where we never were'.¹⁰⁰ Colleen's narration de-emphasises her online content itself, instead foregrounding the form and the lifestyles that surround being an influencer. Here, being a full-time influencer departs from the 'self-expression' or 'social solidarity' Jarrett identifies in the digital housewife, becoming more traditional routine labour.

As Colleen's social media activity becomes concerted 'content creation', the demand to do more online, to produce more and more content, becomes more obvious. She and Jim perform certain activity on the behalf of sponsors and, far from this being spontaneous leisure activity, they plan it carefully: 'We started having these regular sort of meetings, in bed on our laptops, art-directing what we would post about what we were doing'.¹⁰¹ Reviewers of the novel were quick to compare Colleen to real-life examples of online celebrities, in particular Essena O'Neill, an Australian user of the photo-sharing website Instagram who in 2015 announced her desire to quit social media and described the brand deals that dictated her content as well as the psychological pressure she experienced from meeting the standards of appearance.¹⁰² In depicting activity beyond the content itself, *Surveys* traces the often invisible labour that goes

⁹⁹ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰² Jessica Roy, 'What Happens When a Famous Instagram Teen Stops Being Polite and Starts Getting Real', *The Cut*, 2 November 2015 <<https://www.thecut.com/2015/11/instagram-teen-gets-real-about-social-media-fame.html>> [accessed 19 September 2018]

into producing the particular commodities associated with platform capitalism, weaving together complex associations of labour, technology and desire as its young characters strive to succeed in this emergent economy.

At one point, Colleen becomes obsessed with a rival blogger named Lucinda, who she discovers has had an ‘affair’ with Jim. This is significant because Colleen remains reliant on Jim for her success throughout her career as an influencer. Therefore, that Lucinda threatens Colleen as a competitor for Jim’s affection means that she also threatens her image and livelihood. Colleen begins to intuit an asymmetrical rivalry, feeling as if she must compete with Lucinda both for the affection of Jim and for online popularity, all while Lucinda appears to have no sense of this competition. Colleen can only approach Lucinda by way of her public image, encountering her as ‘a collection of cat videos, a blog that she updates with an outfit or the book she’s reading, a list of likes and dislikes that I can’t really argue with, and a lot of interactions with guys she knew from high school who were always in love with her’.¹⁰³ Colleen often returns to describe how Lucinda’s online content is structured and its effect on her as a consumer: ‘I always forgot that even the act of putting up a video is an act of attention seeking, since sometimes her posts felt so unplanned’.¹⁰⁴ The blurring of Colleen’s personal relationship with Jim and her professional rivalry with Lucinda reflects the extent to which the distinction between work and leisure has collapsed in this form of labour.

Private Citizens and *Surveys* are both narratives of platform labour that centre on the experiences of isolated individuals. Online platforms maintain a mediated distance between influencers, in part through metrics that place them in competition with one another. Meanwhile, those who manage online platforms are largely invisible. They therefore offer few opportunities for solidarity between workers, since their workplaces are barely recognisable as

¹⁰³ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

such. As Juliet Webster and Keith Randle writes, ‘The antagonistic class relations of capitalism have become more masked and it is possible that they have never been more hidden than they are in virtual work’.¹⁰⁵ This is particularly the case in *Private Citizens* since the narrative concerning Sable centres on Vanya and Will’s relationship, while the platform itself is designed and maintained by a group of ‘developers’ who are rarely referred to and funded by venture capitalists who are also distant from the action of the text. The confusion regarding influencers’ roles in platform capitalism is exacerbated in both texts by the fact that these characters are both exploited by a wider system all the while exploiting other users.

Paralleling Corporate’s relationship with the survey centre’s employees and participants, Colleen and Jim engage with their followers from afar, rarely showing up to their own parties.¹⁰⁶ Colleen describes the attendees ‘wear[ing] themselves out just thinking about how to make this night the one that delivered them instant notoriety’.¹⁰⁷ Here, she intuits the ‘contest’ driving a new mode of capitalism. As Jodi Dean writes, ‘[t]he logic of the contest structures ever more tasks and projects as competitions, which means that those doing the work are not paid unless they win. They work but only for a chance at pay’.¹⁰⁸ The contest burdens all the entrants with risk, for those who fail to win are not paid for their labour. With their parties, Colleen and Jim exploit the aspirational labour of others in such a way that burdens them with risk. She describes all the messages online ‘sitting on a mountain of meaning [...] coded into context, online’. In this context, she and Jim ‘were asking about art and representation, and about the modern notion of a man and a woman devoted to each other. We were dropping in

¹⁰⁵ Juliet Webster and Keith Randle, ‘Positioning Virtual Workers Within Space, Time, and Social Dynamics’, in *Virtual Workers and the Global Labour Market*, ed. by Juliet Webster and Keith Randle (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 3-34 (p. 15)

¹⁰⁶ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

¹⁰⁸ Jodi Dean, ‘Introduction: The Manifesto of the Communist Party for Us’ in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 1-46, (p. 17).

U-turn signs on everyone else's roads, smiling at each other, driving forward.¹⁰⁹ Here, the couple manipulate the meanings that users imbue in digital activity to outpace their competitors without their worrying about it themselves.

In *Private Citizens*, Vanya's entrepreneurial zeal makes her blind to this logic of the contest. When commenters on Sable begin questioning her class privileges, she dismisses the criticism as overlooking her gender and disability. However, rather than simply expressing herself online, Sable's 'Lifecasting' videos are a mobilization of significant capital:

a six-megapixel wearable webcam with an integrated mic. The primary webcam was a black prism the size of a cigarette lighter, with a blue LED and a label clip; a second HD webcam jutted upward from a flexible stand on the wheelchair's armrest to capture Vanya's face. Through a zip-tied fascicle of cords, both cameras were hooked to auxiliary batteries and three 128 GB SSDs in a single enclosure, and drew high-speed wireless from a redundant EV-DO connections on two cell networks. Raw footage was automatically encoded, image-stabilized. HDR-filtered, and fed out live to the site.¹¹⁰

The detail of this passage also recalls the 'superspecificity' of cyberpunk aesthetics, in which incomprehensible technical jargon, devoid of meaningful content for the reader, embodies the extension of capital into signification itself.¹¹¹ Here, the detailed listing of the technological infrastructure of Vanya's Lifestream contrasts with highlighting the role owning capital plays behind the breezy, improvised and 'real' tone of her performance itself. With such moments, *Private Citizens* satirises the notion that the aspirations of influencers in the new platform economy allows individuals to transcend old class hierarchies.

Vanya's focus on self-branding and 'ever-flowing' content centres less around herself or Sable's activism, but rather providing third parties access to a particular 'vertical': a narrow market of consumers with specific needs. She tells investors '[t]here's a tremendous built-in vertical: my market opportunity research shows that seventy-seven percent of *all* people with

¹⁰⁹ Stagg, *Surveys*, pp. 127-8.

¹¹⁰ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 135-6.

¹¹¹ Therence Whalen, 'The Future of a Commodity: Notes toward a Critique of Cyberpunk and the Information Age', *Science Fiction Studies*, 19.1 (1992), 75-88 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240123>> (pp. 76, 86)

disabilities are frustrated with the lack of online community, and these are *tech-savvy* users'.¹¹² To corner this untapped disabled userbase, she eschews reductive conceptualisations of disability in Sable's presentation, telling investors that '[t]he tent is as big as it gets: The hearing and vision impaired. Little people. MD, MS, CP, CF. The whole autism spectrum. Wounded veterans, paraplegics, diabetics'.¹¹³ Rather than simply designating bodies disabled, then, Sable works through a potentially infinite multiplication of categories through which to classify bodies. Its content is designed to attract a pointedly 'disabled' variant of the ideal online consumer, described by Henry Jenkins as 'active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked'.¹¹⁴ It is therefore in Vanya's interests to ensure that her audience remains on topic and provides data about disabilities, thereby constituting a viable 'audience commodity': a coherent and dependable convergence of emotionally engaged, socially networked, and—Sable's competitive edge—identifiably disabled users.¹¹⁵ Maintaining this coherence requires repressive practices of surveillance: Vanya promises investors that 'Sable will fight negativity with automated content filtering, crowd moderation, and aggressive brand management [...] It's about driving expectations for community engagement'.¹¹⁶ While ostensibly inclusive, therefore, Sable's values derived from its generating detailed categories for identifying disability rather than deconstructing existing ones.

Holding this contradiction between openness and control through surveillance proves more difficult in practice. As Will moderates the community's message boards, the free-indirect narrative observes that 'if [Vanya] was trying to impress [Will] with the Sable community's

¹¹² Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 45-6

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), p. 20.

¹¹⁵ Christian Fuchs, 'Dallas Smythe Today - The Audience Commodity, the Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory. Prolegomena to a Digital Labour Theory of Value', *TripleC*, 10.2 (2012), 692-740 <<https://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/443>> [accessed 26 April 2019]

¹¹⁶ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 45.

cohesion, the moderating queue achieved exactly the opposite'.¹¹⁷ His job is to surveille the users, deleting off-topic discussion—including, but not limited to, spam and bigotry—to maintain the 'cohesion' of the audience commodity. Yet Vanya finds that Sable's ostensibly inclusive definition of disability threatens the coherence of the audience commodity she promises to investors: 'Some members aren't even really disabled they're just *old*' or have 'these *temporary* disabilities. I mean, obesity? Give me freaking break [...] I want young, cool, engaged, *legitimately* disabled influencers who'll bring in other active registered goddam users!'¹¹⁸ Vanya's frustration here indicates her internalisation of platform capitalism's instrumentarian logic. Although attempting to challenge stereotypes in the content of Sable, she nonetheless appeals to established hierarchies of ability to maintain disabled bodies into a scarce resource, an idealised audience commodity.

Unlike Will and Vanya, Colleen and Jim in *Surveys* lack any technical expertise in digital media, and, rather than owning their own platform like Sable, rely on the established infrastructure of popular platforms such as YouTube and Tumblr. Therefore, Vanya and Will have some control over what and how their platform measures this audience commodity, Colleen and Jim do not. For the most part, Colleen's narrative is ambiguous about the platforms and types of content she and Jim create and about the platforms they use, describing interactions with digital interfaces are described in spare language: 'I curled around my computer, searching for all the things I'd seen a million times. The views were not growing as steadily, but they were growing, and would always grow, never diminish'.¹¹⁹ Metrics such as 'views' are integral to measuring the audience commodity. However, some metrics are considered more valuable than others, as indicated by Vanya's frustration at the passivity of her users in *Private Citizens*.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 275.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 277.

¹¹⁹ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 127.

Colleen is made to confront the exploitation behind her content creation when she sits with her mother and Keaton, her mother's boyfriend,

talking about my life and work, but not so much that I could explain what any of it meant. I would start by generalizing, saying "It's different now, though, it's all just numbers, it's not about the people," and then backtracking and defending my fame with hard evidence that I was bigger than some of her very own idols, technically, and that those rankings had to mean something, because they came from the public now. And yet I had artistic merit. The stars of today that actually deliver get told directly so by their fans, so there was no way to fake an audience, these days.¹²⁰

Keaton retorts, 'I heard all those YouTube views aren't accurate', causing Colleen to backtrack further. Colleen measures the value of her 'life and work', which have become inseparable, according to the quantified statistic provided by YouTube. This sudden awareness of her understanding, and the possibility that the 'rankings' might be providing inaccurate numbers provokes her to confront her degree of alienation under platform capitalism. Her concern is heightened by her realisation that she is more affectively attached to her 'authenticity' than she had thought, suggesting a lack of control regarding the structuring of her own desire.

The platforms Colleen references, such as YouTube, guard the workings of their algorithms from users, often changing the criteria by which they promote or de-emphasise particular content without informing content creators.¹²¹ That the details of the interfaces and screens of digital media are absent from or remediated back into the sparse and toneless prose of *Surveys* exemplifies what Zara Dinnen describes as the digital banal in contemporary fiction: 'a mechanism of obfuscation by which the computational networks that define us as subjects are often made invisible to us'.¹²² Colleen and Jim's work is constantly mediated through the interfaces of these platforms that have withdrawn from the narrative's surface, particularly the quantification of user interaction from which they produce their audience commodity to gain

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

¹²¹ Sophie Bishop, 'Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm', *Convergence*, 24.1 (2018), 69-84 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086>> (pp. 71-3)

¹²² Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 18.

advertising deals and sponsorships. Even Lucinda's critiques of online culture come through the mediating apparatus of obscured digital systems and infrastructures. I will examine these asymmetrical interactions with infrastructures in the following chapter. For now, I only mean to highlight that Colleen and Jim's lack of technical expertise regarding online platforms leaves them alienated from the product of their labour, their audience commodity, to a greater degree than Will and Vanya who exercise some control over the means by which it is produced.

Surveys and *Private Citizens* both depict digital native characters turning from established modes of post-industrial labour towards an emergent platform economy that appears to offer more fulfilling work. Online platforms sell access to data recorded about social interaction, reinforcing particular behaviours that lend themselves to this process. The role of influencers in this process is to keep active users on platforms in order to produce greater amounts of data. However, this is complicated by the fact that influencers are themselves users with little access to the algorithms structuring this system, leaving them alienated from their labour. Digital natives, both influencers and amateur users alike, therefore find themselves exploited under platform capitalism.

As Colleen becomes as disillusioned with life as an influencer as she had been with her work at the survey center, *Surveys* explores the possibility of exiting the platform economy. However, Colleen comes to realise that due to the increasingly netarchical structure of platform capitalism, its overlapping of her once separate private, online life with her public, offline life, 'I can't just... *go away*. No one can just go away anymore'.¹²³ Elsewhere, she comments that 'At the end of some great movies, someone flies off, and you know they will never see each other again. That can't happen with Jim and I. It can't happen with anyone and I'.¹²⁴ Colleen's attempt to distance herself from the internet fails in the final scene of the novel as she decides

¹²³ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 134.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

to launch back into virtual labour. However, her inseparability from platform capitalism is affirmed when she and Jim reconnect via text message. Again, it is Jim who provides her access to economic success as an influencer. However, earlier in the novel Colleen discovers that Lucinda has wiped her online presence: ‘It looked as if her Twitter account, her Instagram, the YouTube channel, the Tumblr that aggregated everything—all of it had been deleted. How stupid is she? I thought. You can’t really delete any of it’.¹²⁵ Colleen discovers that Lucinda is working on a book, and this troubles her: ‘that she was working on it, not constantly publishing it [...] People work on one thing, every day, without an audience’.¹²⁶ Here Colleen becomes aware that her desire has become caught in the networks of platform capitalism. Of course, the first-person account serves as testament to Colleen’s decision to follow Lucinda to turn to longer form creation of novelistic writing.

Private Citizens appears to depict the only escape from platform capitalism as a total exit. Will exits by leaving Vanya following his botched eye surgery. Vanya, however cannot conceptualise such an exit, suggesting he re-join Sable and ‘inspire people with your story—a recently vision-impaired man relearns the ropes’.¹²⁷ Will responds: ‘I hate work’ a refusal of work that recalls Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’, whose eponymous hero’s repeated mantra of ‘I would prefer not to’ has become a rallying call for recent Marxist theorists who see non-participation, or ‘exodus’, as the best means of resisting global capitalism.¹²⁸ Significantly, all four protagonists leave the workforce by the novel’s end, which closes with words written on a ‘whiteboard, face up’ in Cory’s empty, abandoned office:

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

¹²⁷ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 346.

¹²⁸ Ibid. See: Herman Melville, ‘Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street’, in *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), pp. 31-108; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 203-4.

*FREE
HELP
YOURSELVES*¹²⁹

With the office emptied of furniture, this sign loses its original context and its message become ambiguous. It might now refer to Cory's rejection of her work for a charity, a renunciation of her guilt and responsibility concerning those less privileged than her: she is free and will no longer help them. Alternatively, it could be generalised to apply to all subjects of neoliberal capitalism: their supposed freedom from state interference means that they must rely on themselves. Finally, the implied collectivism of its second-person plural 'yourselves' might reach towards a positive affirmation of shared precarity, one that challenges culturally dominant neoliberal values of individual sovereignty and strives for an alternative community.

This gesture towards exodus hardly appears a satisfactory resolution to the new social implications of platform capitalism, however. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe Bartleby's exodus from work as 'completely solitary [...] In political terms, too, refusal in itself (of work, authority, and voluntary servitude) leads only to a kind of social suicide'.¹³⁰ Sarah Sharma has observed that, in comparison to the masculine desire to exit from traditional forms of labour, feminist-Marxist explorations of the idea of 'exodus' frame it as an exit from the exploitation of feminised forms of care work and the creation of new, alternative modes of care.¹³¹ In a sense, Will is able to exit the workforce because of the money he had already accumulated through his privileged, solitary profession of freelance web-design. The two women, Cory and Linda, however, appear more poised than Will and Henrik to re-enter the economy: Cory through the unwaged domestic labour of caring for her ill father, and Linda through marketing herself as a surrogate mother. The visions of escape from platform

¹²⁹ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 372.

¹³⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 204.

¹³¹ Sarah Sharma, 'Do Not Enter, This Is Not an Exit: Sexodus and the Gig Economy. Digital Bauhaus Summit 2016', *Vimeo*, 20 June 2016. <<https://vimeo.com/171370869>> [accessed 20 September 2018]

capitalism offered by *Surveys* and *Private Citizens* ultimately prove incomplete, Will's exodus reflecting his gender and class privilege while Lucinda and Colleen's escape into the solitary artistic labour of novel writing proves starkly solitary.

In *Private Citizens*, Vanya and Will create a platform with progressive intentions, however the instrumentarian logic of surveillance capitalism leads them to reproduce the normative hierarchies they sought to challenge. In *Surveys*, Colleen and Jim monetize their activity on established platforms through third-party sponsors. Moving from a user to an 'influencer' initially gives Colleen a sense of control, as she exploits those who fail to achieve her status. Yet her supposed disinterestedness regarding this work is challenged as soon as she discovers that she is being exploited by a vaster, obscured socioeconomic system. Ultimately, both novels prove unable to enunciate a possible class solidarity among influencers that transcends their personal rivalries and entrepreneurial aspirations, instead gesturing only to an exodus by way of novel writing. This demonstrates the limitations of techno-generational frameworks as providing a basis for the identification of useful class categories among fast-changing socioeconomic systems such as surveillance capitalism.

The Commercialization of the Body

The techno-generational frameworks that *Private Citizens* and *Surveys* use to represent individuals purposefully or unknowingly performing labour under platform capitalism necessarily overlap and clash with pre-existing social hierarchies of gender, ability and race. Both novels raise these issues through depictions of what Aristeia Fotopoulou terms 'biodigital vulnerability': the ways that digital media contribute to 'new forms of control, not only of bodies and their movements, but also the circulation of discourse and their production of

knowledge.’¹³² Vanya finds herself objectified by her audience. As a moderator of Sable’s user forums, Will encounters numerous racist and sexist comments. Less attached to the composition of her audience commodity than Vanya, Colleen chooses not to moderate or block any user activity. She states that ‘I can cut off anyone on these lists, simple, but they’ll always be there, sending out energy that I’ll always in some way be receiving. I may as well know exactly what it is’.¹³³ The influencers of *Surveys* self-market in an environment always already constituted by gendered expectations, both ‘alone in her bedroom, taking selfie after selfie, and relating to the world as if it is a soft, sexist thing’.¹³⁴ Just as Vanya and Will modulate their behaviour in order to interest their ideal audience of disabled users and thereby solidify it as a particular, defined audience commodity, Colleen adapts to any feedback received, pursuing an audience commodity defined only by metrics of the platforms she uses.

In a podcast interview in *Surveys*, Colleen’s competitor Lucinda discusses ‘monetization, and how it’s so widely discussed in every part of the human experience’, and suggests that a mother encouraging their child to monetize on their online followings is ‘an awful thought’.¹³⁵ The interviewer asks if Lucinda monetizes her blog, to which she replies that in fact she does, and recounts an old job ‘selling AT&T contracts. I’d have to walk up to people and ask them if they had a few minutes. It was humiliating’.¹³⁶ Referring to this work, as well as other workers she saw in the mall where she worked, including survey takers, Lucinda interprets all forms of work most readily available to a young woman as ‘the commercialization of the body’.¹³⁷ It is left ambiguous as to whether she understands blogging to be an extension of this dynamic, or an escape from it. Previously in the novel, Colleen refers to ‘a seven page

¹³² Aristeia Fotopoulou, *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 20.

¹³³ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 142.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

essay on the future of fame' that Lucinda posts online, quoting from it: 'In the future, no one will want to be famous, in the way that no one now wants to be exploited. We will all aspire to be less and less known as we grow up. As things currently stand, no one can resist a little fame here and there'.¹³⁸ With this critique the novel introduces the idea that female influencers are placed in vulnerable positions.

Both novels depict biodigital vulnerability as integral to the work of being an influencer. Colleens asserts that her sexual activity is 'public knowledge', acknowledging that her experience of platform capitalism has given her a different perspective on privacy than she had asserted in relation to her early experiences online.¹³⁹ As Matthew Fuller argues, social media platforms have produced a dynamic in which 'privacy is to maintain identity as a resource; to parcel it out, to operate with it as it has already entered the economy of identification but held in reserve as an asset within possessive individualism'.¹⁴⁰ *Private Citizens* presents this dynamic when Vanya 'denied that privacy was a right or even an asset in the attention economy'.¹⁴¹ While she denies privacy to Sable's users, she views it as an asset for herself, implementing a 'dump button' to cut moments from the Lifestream that damage her image.¹⁴² This careful apportioning of identity further interferes with Vanya's stated goal of giving disabled people greater control over their cultural representation: 'being out in plain view is always worth it, because it makes us a part of society instead of invisible minorities'.¹⁴³ While Vanya encourages users to share for her profit, she puts value in information she withholds from viewers in order to protect her public image. However, Vanya is also particularly careful

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁴⁰ Matthew Fuller, 'Anonymity', in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 41-44.

¹⁴¹ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 272.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 277-8.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 271.

about the gendered dimensions of privacy, blocking Will's attempts to take photographs during sex and foregoing sexual activity altogether once a public figure.

Surveys suggests that this relation to privacy is generational, produced through digital native's formative experiences with the internet. Colleen's description of her early online interactions associates computers with both work and play, describing her first sexual encounters as taking place online. Evoking these early experiences, she claims that

The biggest motivation of Internet communication is trying to find out what people think of you. Everyone in the world has always wanted to know how they are perceived, and I have always wondered about how I appear to neighbours, since they are around me more than my friends, but they are oblivious to my social life.¹⁴⁴

Throughout the novel, Colleen meditates on being looked at, both as something she desires and as something she is self-consciously ashamed of: 'I want something I don't want, which is people, asserting an idea I have about myself, stroking my ego, and touching me with the sole intention of pleasuring me. What a stupid thing to want, since people who do that are gross'.¹⁴⁵ Colleen's early use of the internet produces a libidinal desire to become the sexualised object of a gaze that has been separated from any prior social connections such as family.

This desire for concrete feedback leads Colleen towards informal sex work prior to becoming an influencer. Towards the novel's start as Javier, a drug dealer buys her a drink, Colleen recollects that at University she 'learned that money is ascribed meaning, but that it is the one meaningful thing, since everything else has been either disproven or devalued in more drastic ways. Seeing money being spent on me was similar to getting it for myself'.¹⁴⁶ Javier suggests that his buying her drinks is 'like a payment' and offers her two hundred dollars in exchange for sex. Colleen states:

After Javier mentioned money, I had a way out. I could continue this date and any other, happily. I didn't have to wake up feeling stupid and used, creeping into my clothes just to avoid a breakfast conversation. If the cash was on the table, everything was settled. He liked me exactly

¹⁴⁴ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

this much. I went home with Javier and had good sex with him. I relaxed and let him do whatever he wanted [...] The whole thing was wrong, so the smaller details were, too. And I allowed every part of it to feel good, because that was my job.¹⁴⁷

Receiving money for her sexual activity lends it material reality. This, Colleen suggests, is because money serves as a metric that, like the views and shares of social media platforms, makes social reality ‘easier to digest: You work, and you get paid. You wake up, and someone puts a price on you. You grow old, and your price diminishes. If you’re not getting paid, you’re losing money’.¹⁴⁸

Colleen’s attitude reflects how digital natives’ bodies are commercialized on online platforms. Colleen, who is only able to succeed as an influencer due to her status as Jim’s lover, grows aware of how the reinterpretation of youth as human capital is starkly gendered. Her perceived value as exploitable labour for a corporation is made legible not only through her skills or degree, but through her feminine body, where it diminishes as she ages. Colleen sees in sex work a practice that stabilises the uncertainty that arises from this dynamic, one that delimits certain quantifiable rules and rates of comparison. Before Javier, Colleen had already performed sex work for strangers on the internet, making eight hundred dollars on a website that ‘offered an arrangement between “daddy” and “baby”, where one would “spoil” the other for any favors asked of her. I met with a couple in Marana, who told me to dress in lingerie while they masturbated in front of me and fed me cocktails made with Malibu rum’.¹⁴⁹ This entanglement of sexual desire and quantifiable metrics, wherein the human capital of the feminine body diminishes with age, pushes Colleen towards becoming an influencer.

That this is a generational phenomenon in *Surveys* is confirmed when Colleen finds that being an influencer not only makes her the object of her users’ gaze, but also somebody supplying a gaze for other aspiring influencers. Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead argue that

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

one function of sex work in recent decades has been to fulfil a ‘performative need, to reassure others that they can have technically competent sexual encounters, even some simulated affection’.¹⁵⁰ One function of Colleen and Jim’s parties, in a twenty-first-century context, fulfil a performative need of their peers to reassure themselves that they can become influencers: ‘[alcohol] might be the only thing that could save them from looking like they cared as much as they did. The people who’d paid to get in to our party and found their way back to the hotel looked around themselves and each other as if to say, This is it’.¹⁵¹ In one of the novel’s closing chapters, Colleen is discovered by a fan in an obscure nightclub who tells her ‘I’m really glad I’m meeting you’ because ‘you definitely don’t give a fuck. More girls need to be like that, I think, personally’.¹⁵² This pushes Colleen back into online celebrity. Just like in online spaces, this fan provides Colleen with feedback that in turn informs her own desires.

However, the content of this feedback is abstracted into a quantifiable scale. After having conversations with her friends online she forgets the content and ‘remembered only the screen, the numbers, the results, our exchanges’.¹⁵³ Again, this is not restricted to online spaces for Colleen as a digital native. She fetishizes all metrics, admitting that that her desire to be paid for sex has little to do with material need:

I only vaguely worried that my life was levelling out in the romance department, since I’d found and given up the big one, and all the rest would be lived out in its shadow. And in the back of my mind, I knew that wasn’t going to be a huge problem. Not really in the back of my mind, but in the front of my devices. Men and boys message me daily about wanting to do terrible and wonderful things to me, all I had to do was ask. It’s public knowledge, if the public wants to know. Would it make me an awful person if I asked someone to pay me for sex, even though I didn’t need the money?’¹⁵⁴

The breakdown of her relationship with Jim leads her to seek further validation through feedback, provoking her to again desire the solidity of the monetary quantification of her value.

¹⁵⁰ Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead, *Sex, Work and Sex Work: Eroticizing Organization* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁵¹ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 104.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

It also demonstrates her reliance on a male influencer and the commercialization of her feminine body to remain a successful influencer.

Private Citizens explores the way that disability inflects this commercialization of the body. When Will first meets Vanya, he is ‘so drunk’ that he does not notice her wheelchair until after he has kissed her and taken her by the hand, at which point she ‘didn’t get up, but instead hung on and . . . rolled’. His reaction is simply to think ‘*Perfect*’.¹⁵⁵ This account upends the familiar trope of the ‘first encounter’ between a non-disabled individual and a disabled individual in which ‘disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute’.¹⁵⁶ For Will, it is Vanya’s beauty that cancels her other qualities; her disability, meanwhile refracts this emphasis to render her attractive-yet-attainable to him as a self-perceived ‘beta male’. Will registers her disabled body as a data point to interpret through a hierarchy of normative feminine beauty standards, readjusting her ‘value’ to him accordingly. Will’s anxious male gaze exerts practices of surveillance that apportion Vanya’s disabled body a value relating to her status as an abstracted ‘woman-commodity’.¹⁵⁷ In elaborating Will’s misogyny, the narrative depicts overlaps between the male gaze and ableist stereotypes.

Nonetheless, Vanya’s beauty is integral to her role as an influencer and the ‘face’ of Sable. Vanya shapes her body to be the hyperfeminine object of a male gaze. To do this, she avoids the ableist conceptions of the normal by appealing to the concept of the ‘ideal’: a ‘mytho-poetic body that is linked to that of the gods [...] [and is] not attainable by a human’.¹⁵⁸ Through Will’s perspective, the narrator describes her as embodying classical aesthetic ideals: ‘soft and sylph-like and porcelain’, ‘noble, like a statue of some heroic dog, reflecting decades of trained

¹⁵⁵ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁶ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press 1997), p. 12.

¹⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 173.

¹⁵⁸ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 24-5.

poise’, ‘like Roman architecture, all grand arches and cunningly supported domes’.¹⁵⁹ Her carefully styled hair, clothes and body make Will feel ‘second-rate’.¹⁶⁰ She carefully controls her image, ‘groom[ing] until she came to resemble her smiling photo on the About page, an attractiveness unto abstraction’.¹⁶¹ Will can find no photographs of her before her extensive cosmetic surgery—‘Nose, lips, boobs, bob fix, browbone, Lasik’.¹⁶² In this sense, Vanya’s efforts to embody a positive ideal disabled subject are also conservative, relying on regressive conceptualisations of femininity to challenge ableism. Both Vanya and Will reconstruct her disabled body as the ideal object of what Mulvey describes as ‘an active/passive heterosexual division of labour’ implied in the male gaze.¹⁶³

In particular, *Private Citizens* engages with an idea put most succinctly by visual artist Ann Hirsch that ‘whenever you put your body online, in some way you are in conversation with porn’.¹⁶⁴ Through its depiction of Will, *Private Citizens* proves particularly concerned with the ways that the circulation of online pornography affects a generation. He owns a vast collection of downloaded pornography, the narrative describing ‘the man-hours it’d taken to download it; to create file tags and XML-formatted scene markers; to regularize the filenames and formats; to fill gaps in photo sets and find hi-res scans of DVD cases, front and back...’.¹⁶⁵ This description goes on for some length, amplifying the amount of time spent working on creating and ordering this archive. In many respects Will approaches pornography less as a matter of pleasure than as an act of labour. This coheres with Stephen Maddison’s assertion that online pornography consumption involves a degree of ‘entrepreneurial skill, choosing appropriate

¹⁵⁹ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 243; 43; 53

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 328.

¹⁶³ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6-18
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>> (p. 12).

¹⁶⁴ Jennifer Chan, Rozsa Farkas, Ann Hirsch and Cadence Kinsey, ‘Becoming Camwhore, Becoming Pizza’, *Mute*, 8 November 2012 <<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/becoming-camwhore-becoming-pizza>> [accessed 26 September 2018]

¹⁶⁵ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 109-10.

contractual subscriptions, following links and recommendations to new sites of free content, keeping up with chat rooms, torrent lists, blogs and feeds to ensure we aren't missing out on opportunities to realise our desires, and demonstrate our self-management'.¹⁶⁶ That the narrator describes Will archiving data about women in terms of 'man-hours' reinforces this complex association between consumption and work, an entanglement perfected in platform capitalism.

Despite assigning Vanya an attainable value, Will remains paranoid about her leaving him and attempts to control her. He receives 'push notifications on [Vanya's] social networking activity, search alerts in her name, an RSS feed on her blog. It was as preoccupying as porn, but with no finish'.¹⁶⁷ This surveillance of Vanya is thereby likened to his addiction to pornography. We learn that he is especially drawn to '[t]he moment at the beginning of a gonzo scene where the actress switched her focus from the camera to the other actors, and audience became voyeur'.¹⁶⁸ His online voyeurism is reflected in his attitudes and behaviour towards women more generally. He has 'been trained to assume ['hot girls'] looked down on him', so finds it 'hard to hold eye contact with [them]'. This provokes a 'loserly imperative to get as near as possible to hot girls and stare at them and be useful to them and get their approval'.¹⁶⁹ Will's experiences with pornography lead him to use technology in his relationship with Vanya to maintain the active/passive division of labour imposed by the male gaze. Such practices of digital surveillance restores his position as the masculine viewing subject and Vanya as the feminine object of his gaze.

Moreover, pornography supplies Will with a way to simulate the control and punishment of women. He acknowledges that 'porn *wasn't easy*, everyone knew it was a clearinghouse of coercion and addiction, which cut down on smugness. Will preferred not the

¹⁶⁶ Stephen Maddison, 'Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur? Sex, Porn and Cultural Politics', *New Formations* 80/81 (2013), 102-118 (p. 110)

¹⁶⁷ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 130.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.112.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

smirking glamoristas [...] [but] the ones who couldn't watch without thinking. *My god, this girl is going to die someday*.¹⁷⁰ Here, Will's attachment to online pornography derives from the exploitation imbedded within its production. Paradoxically, the visual representation of this exploitation becomes central to the commodity, an integral dimension to the spectacle that obscures the production process. Susanna Paasonen writes that it is often easier to ask of the pornographic actor 'how can they do that' than to 'inquire after the conditions of labor and production that have led to the acts being performed and recorded in the first place'.¹⁷¹ Will's fetishization of the harsh nature of sex work in the pornography industry runs in parallel to the 'authentic' aesthetics of Vanya's Lifestreaming, which seeks to render invisible any traces of labour even as Vanya frames it as more real than 'a trashy reality show'.¹⁷²

Will's entrepreneurial approach to pornography culminates in his creating 'porn that didn't require people', creating 'virtual surrogates' in 'game engines'. This promises a disruption of pornography, 'the foundations for the homebrew online collaborative erotic composite performance found-footage remix'. In some respects, this idea subverts pornography's heteronormative conventions: 'One man could be ten men, ten men one woman [...] Dozens of cameramen, lighting and motion techs, audio engineers could collaborate over team chat in the authentically realized fantasy [...] Love would be free at last'.¹⁷³ However, the free-indirect narration remains informed by Will's misogynistic attitude towards the female actors. Although the script could 'random-generate genders', the syntax of 'One man could be ten men, ten men one woman' genders the active users as masculine and the passive digital objects as feminine. Moreover, the Silicon Valley vocabulary—'frontiers', 'real time', 'collaborate', 'authentically', 'free'—ties Will's desire, produced through his consumption of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁷¹ Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resource: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 208.

¹⁷² Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 323.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 115.

pornography, to neoliberal market ideology. Earlier, the free-indirect narration asks ‘whether *masturbating to porn* was an art form’.¹⁷⁴ The above passage indicates that in *Private Citizens* masturbation functions not as art but rather as work for a generation whose desires and private lives have been subsumed by the logics of platform capitalism. These sections literalise the channelling of a digital native generation’s aspirational and other libidinal desires into a numbing engagement with the entrepreneurial spirit of post-industrial capitalism. They also suggest the ways in which this channelling intersects with entrenched gender hierarchies, disciplining individuals into performing gendered roles.

Will’s gendered labour of manipulating social networks through digital media extends from pornography into his social life, particularly his relationships with women: he creates a spreadsheet of friends, most of whom are ‘women who’d rejected him, implicitly or otherwise’, with information on ‘the date of his encounter, approximate date of rejection, and her height, age, race, ethnicity, and estimates of income, weight, IQ’.¹⁷⁵ Through his spreadsheets and pornography archive, Will desires to encounter women not simply as objects but as what Yuk Hui distinguishes as ‘digital objects’: bundles of metadata that are not only oriented towards the past in recording prior cultural memories but are future-oriented, materialising sets of relations that can be manipulated in the future.¹⁷⁶ Will even converts Vanya’s content as an influencer into a digital object, making ‘homemade Vanya porn. From this template, it was easy to generate more’.¹⁷⁷ As a result of Will’s manipulation of her biodigital vulnerability, the image of Vanya becomes a digital object that is infinitely mutable. However, this passive digital model of Vanya serves as a metaphor for her willingness to perform as an influencer in platform capitalism.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 55-6.

¹⁷⁶ Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 242-3.

¹⁷⁷ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 325.

This logic resembles David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s idea of literature’s ‘narrative prosthesis’, which ‘detail[s] “crippled” differences faithfully while simultaneously metamorphosing those differences into social satires’.¹⁷⁸ Literary narratives have depended on disability because it has been frequently interpreted as either ‘lack’ or ‘excess’, and ‘all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excess’.¹⁷⁹ Stories detail disabled bodies to materialize certain symbolic meanings disconnected from the everyday experience of living with impairment. Take, for example, Sophocles’ use of lameness and blindness in *Oedipus the King* to tangibly ground the eponymous hero’s hubris in his physical body.¹⁸⁰ *Private Citizens* alludes to and relies on this exact narrative prosthesis to provide Will a reckoning. Will’s impairment after the botched cosmetic surgery is framed as a result of the blinkered entrepreneurial zeal of Vanya, who even states earlier in the novel—while comparing one-off views and returning users on Sable—that ‘eyeballs are cheap!’¹⁸¹ However, becoming vision-impaired purges Will’s misogynistic and neurotic gaze by literally dismembering it (his eyes are literally amputated to prevent infection). This is presented as a salvation from Vanya, as Will suggests at the novel’s denouement: ‘how did I never get bored of looking at [Vanya]? As long as she was hot I could tell myself anything’.¹⁸²

This discussion appears to have little relevance to *Surveys*, until one turns attention to the infrequent mentions of Colleen’s ‘paralyzed right eye’. Colleen is self-conscious about this *ophthalmoplegia*, noting that men either ‘obsess over me or [don’t] even look at me’ because of it and that ‘I always let my hair cover that eye, though. I can’t see out of it anyway’.¹⁸³ Reviewing the novel, Catherine Foulkrod observes that ‘It’s hard to think about the eye without

¹⁷⁸ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 5.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4; 53.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁸¹ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 277.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* 353

¹⁸³ Stagg, *Surveys*, pp. 35; 34; 103.

thinking about the gaze'.¹⁸⁴ This is because Colleen's narration often remarks upon eye contact, especially with men: Sam looks at her paralyzed eye when he asks 'Have you ever had a job?'; When she first stays with Jim, he 'looked into my one unparalyzed eye, which must have been streaky from the pool, crusty from sleep, and bloodshot from staying up. "I love you," he said'¹⁸⁵. Early in the novel, Colleen notes that 'I could see the eye contact a person made with an ad before picking out jeans'.¹⁸⁶ This focus on eye contact contextualises her ophthalmoplegia to suggest that it symbolises the asymmetry of the gaze: men are free to look upon and evaluate her as a commodified body, whereas her gaze is compromised, turned in on herself in the form of self-consciousness. Colleen's paralyzed eye, interpreted as a lack, therefore serves as narrative prosthesis, locating the novel's themes about the commercialisation of women's bodies on the body.

Nonetheless, *Surveys* employs a subtler example of narrative prosthesis than *Private Citizens*. Will's punishing visual impairment grounds his exodus from his technocultural milieu in bodily reality, presenting it as a severing from Vanya's overbearing ambition and from Silicon Valley more broadly. Disability-as-lack serves as a symbolic solution to the central excess in Will's plotline: his inferiority complex and voyeurism. Although it replicates longstanding tropes regarding vision-impairment and paralysis, *Private Citizens* does often display an alertness to the fact that Vanya's mobility impairment is defined by the reification of assumed bodily norms in the social construction of space that exclude difference.¹⁸⁷ To some extent, narrativizations about disability must necessarily confront social stigmatisation. Ato Quayson argues that narratives display an 'aesthetic nervousness' when confronting disability,

¹⁸⁴ Catherine Foulkrod, 'Immaterial Girl', *Bookforum*, 28 march 2016 <<https://www.bookforum.com/culture/-15859>> [accessed 6 December 2019]

¹⁸⁵ Stagg, *Surveys*, p. 90.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 90; 13.

¹⁸⁷ Natasha Saltes, 'Navigating disabling spaces: challenging ontological norms and the spatialization of difference through "Embodied Practices of Mobility"', *Mobilities*, 13.1 (2018), 81-95 <<http://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2017.1333279>> (p. 82-3)

a ‘suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of [their] hitherto dominant protocols of representation’.¹⁸⁸ This occurs because literary representations of disability tend to oscillate between deploying it as a symbol and referencing the ‘social hierarchization and closure’ that interpretations of disability produce in the real world.¹⁸⁹ Disabilities may initially enter narratives as symbols, however the abstract significations of these symbols soon hit up against the more concrete requirements of detailing how that disability exists within that represented world. *Surveys* avoids some of this tension by only rarely mentioning Colleen’s paralyzed eye and not detailing its effects beyond its cultural interpretation by herself and others.

Private Citizens, in contrast, draws attention to how Vanya’s mobility impairment is less a property of her body than the social environment. Bruce Robbins argues that literary references to infrastructure gesture to the ‘public’.¹⁹⁰ However, the mobility infrastructure of *Private Citizens*’ San Francisco must always be supplemented by Vanya’s wealth or personal relationships, therefore gesturing to the private. At the Sable launch, ‘[a] fleet of full-accessibility party buses greeted them at the harbor and shuttled them to the live-band karaoke at the Marriott’.¹⁹¹ Elsewhere, Vanya is made dependent on Will’s body to supplement a lack in mobility infrastructure: ‘he wiped the street grime off Vanya’s wheels and piggybacked her up stairwells’.¹⁹² Here, the novel’s social satire is targeted at a material deficiency in the capitalist city, rather than a perceived deficiency in Vanya’s body. Elsewhere, however, the narrative lingers on Vanya’s personal mobility infrastructure in such a way that associates her personal wealth with her disability: ‘the automatic door to Vanya’s apartment opened with a motor hum’; ‘no impediments except the squat coffee table with its stack of tortoiseshell

¹⁸⁸ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 26.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁹⁰ Bruce Robbins, ‘The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes toward an Archive’, *Boundry* 2, 34.1 (Spring 2007), 25-33. <<https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2006-025>> (p. 26).

¹⁹¹ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 267.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 249

coasters. Everything was reachable via lazy Susans and swivelling bookshelves on motorized wall runners, the curtains remote-controlled. The handrails in the bathroom were the apartment's only conspicuous accessibility features'.¹⁹³ If, as Robbins writes, '[i]nfrastructure is a heritage of which we are usually unconscious until it malfunctions', the narrative's detailed lingering on Vanya's chic mobility infrastructure *makes it conspicuous*, both as a comment on her wealth and as a positioning of her as outside, or as always already a malfunctioning.¹⁹⁴ The narrative therefore objectifies Vanya's body in detailing her mobility impairment, drawing broader satirical signification out of its difference to the assumed normativity of other characters' bodies.

Vanya's entrepreneurial zeal becomes the target of narrative prosthesis towards the novel's conclusion. Will—now blind—discovers that Vanya has entered his home unannounced and realises that she must have entered via 'the back stairwell, which had no stairlift. She must have dragged herself up'.¹⁹⁵ While such stubbornness suggests care for Will, she can only express this by promising that he can 'still work for the company' and 'inspire people with your story—a recently vision-impaired man relearns the ropes'.¹⁹⁶ When Will rejects her, we read that Vanya 'lowered herself to the floor, and he heard her crawling away one hand after another, her body swishing behind her. The stairwell door clumsily opened'.¹⁹⁷ This lingering on Vanya's bodily movement again distinguishes her from the other characters, marking her body as 'abnormal' in its 'clumsiness'. The absence of her wheelchair further constructs a metaphor that uses an assumed understanding of disability as 'lack' as a source to target a lack in Vanya's individualist ideology. Her singular focus on Sable's success has driven away Will, who once carried her up the stairs she must now move 'clumsily' down. With

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁹⁴ Robbins, 'The Smell of Infrastructure', p. 32.

¹⁹⁵ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 346.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 348

Vanya, the cultural construction of the disabled body as a ‘lack’ is therefore drawn on to materialise a lack in her entrepreneurial ideology.

At several moments, *Private Citizens* demonstrates an alertness to the discrimination against and marginalisation of people with disabilities. Nonetheless, in terms of its narrative development it uneasily relies on narrative interpretations of disabled bodies as deviations from a normal distribution in order to elaborate a satire of Silicon Valley that likens a lack in an individualist ideology to a lack in the body. Positing the co-dependence of its four protagonists as its positive alternative, it pointedly excludes Vanya from this relationship by framing her body as lacking Will’s help in order to criticise her self-perceived independence. However, the depiction of Sable challenges some of this narrative prosthesis from within. Vanya’s efforts to launch Sable suggest that certain economic systems incentivise practices of surveillance that do not register on a conscious level. Vanya inadvertently internalises the instrumentarian logic of platform capitalism and begins commodifying herself and her audiences according to certain representations of disability at odds with their own experience.

As disability scholars have observed, people with disabilities have long been excluded from cultural ideas around sexuality, however ‘there are strong links between the assumed passivity of disabled people and the assumed passivity of women’, representations of disabled women exaggerate patriarchal conceptualisations of feminine sexuality as submissive.¹⁹⁸ Paralysis among women is ‘pictured easily as sexual passivity or receptiveness – an invitation to sexual predators’.¹⁹⁹ Will conceives of this passivity when considering whether Vanya engages in sexual activity as ‘tedious appeasement’. Her insistence that she ‘get[s] off on watching’ is dismissed by Will’s perspective, which continues to suspect sexual activity to be

¹⁹⁸ Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990), p. 72. See also: Anne Finger ‘Forbidden Fruit’, *New Internationalist*, 233 (July 1992) <<https://newint.org/features/1992/07/05/fruit>> [accessed 23 July 2019], n. pag.

¹⁹⁹ Tobin Siebers, ‘A Sexual Culture for Disabled People’, in *Sex and Disability*, ed. by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 37-53 (p. 45).

devoid of any pleasure for her, framing her as a submissive object of his gaze for him to take advantage of.²⁰⁰ The novel connects this ableist interpretation of Vanya's impairment to platform capitalism when Will asks himself '[w]hat could be more mature, more *considerate*, than objectifying yourself to meet the vile hard-charging demands of mainstream penetration?'²⁰¹ Here he alludes to Vanya's pitch to Sable investors, in which she asserts that the 'group therapy' of existing disabled online communities alienates able-bodied people, making it 'the biggest threat to mainstream penetration'.²⁰² The narrative associates Vanya's supposed self-objectification for Will with a self-objectification she performs for Sable viewers, thereby itself reproducing the patriarchal reading of the paralysed woman as submissive and endangered in order to comment on a generation's apparent trust in platform capitalism.

However, as Will also appears on Vanya's Lifestream, he, like Vanya, finds himself becoming the object of the gaze. He receives feedback from Sable users directed at his body and personality rather than the 'interestingness' of the content. Vanya tells him he needs 'media orientation—camera etiquette, style reboot, that kinda thing. Reworking the optics'.²⁰³ As the ironic mention of his 'optics' signals, she means downplaying his Thai heritage to make him 'conspicuous and memorable' to her mostly white viewers.²⁰⁴ However, Will does become conspicuous and memorable after his altercation on a bus, in which his adversary 'yanked and freed Will's belt, jeans, and boxer shorts down to his ankles'.²⁰⁵ We are told that 'the highlight algorithm, smelling a hit, had automatically posted the incident, becoming the site's most watched video in less than three days [...] The videos circulated among the commentariat—speedily reposted, memed and macroed, and recut to an autotuned parody montage'.²⁰⁶ Here,

²⁰⁰ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 49.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.45.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

Will not only finds himself the vulnerable object of a racialized gaze, but also finds his own image manipulated like Vanya's, by anonymous others and circulated across platforms.

Surveys and *Private Citizens* thereby depict modes of 'biodigital vulnerability' involved in the work of the influencer, linking it to gendered and—in the case of Vanya—ableist conceptualizations of the body's value. In *Surveys*, having formed her sexuality through online communication with strangers, Colleen exhibits little concern that her sexual activity is 'public knowledge'. Through these formative experiences, she finds her sexual desire entangled in the quantifiable metrics of currency and platform metrics. The novel depicts being an influencer as being part of a system in which one seeks fulfilment in the quantified feedback from users while also directing one's gaze at them to fulfil their desire, a system the novel likens to sex work. In *Private Citizens*, Vanya views content creation as a means of materialising her entrepreneurial spirit, while for Will, it represents a means of asserting masculine power. Vanya carefully controls what she reveals to her audience, curating a hyperfeminine image for a male gaze that makes her content 'stickier'. Will's entrepreneurial approach to online pornography manipulates the biodigital vulnerability of women online, including Vanya, to reassert his position as the masculine viewing subject. However, as an online personality he becomes the vulnerable object of a racialized gaze.

Despite the shortcomings of influencer labour depicted in these novels, the digital native characters of *Surveys* and *Private Citizens* view it as providing some solidity and relief from a sense of dislocation and uncertainty produced by a post-industrial labour market and a neoliberal ideology that prizes unrealistic meritocratic, entrepreneurial success. However, entering the platform economy as either an influencer or user only serves to exacerbate the sense of alienation among this generation. I will now develop on these observations by examining how they might inform minor aesthetic elements, looking at two realist novels that similarly explore what happens when digital natives attempt to orient themselves within a

complex, overdetermined present through the simplified interfaces of digital media technologies.

CHAPTER THREE

Interface:

Flat Affect and the Mediated Other in *Taipei* and *Sympathy*

Millennials [...] inspire an animosity, suspicion, and wary prejudice usually reserved for misunderstood, aberrant minorities [...] The first generation of digital natives and Facebook fiends, [Millennials] possess the biological attributes of other Earth dwellers but appear to represent an evolutionary hop into a future that seems stuck in traffic. Ready to take on a world that isn't making room for them, they're thwarted, slowly, awkwardly, fitfully integrating into adult society and doing a remarkable job of getting on everybody's nerves. They walk among us, though most of them don't appear to mind where they're going, their eyes and forefinger scrolling down ghostly screens as they maintain constant textual linkage with fellow mutants and finesse their flat affect.¹

This portrait of the so-called 'millennial generation' by journalist James Wolcott's links their use of digital media technologies to a perceived inability to reproduce common signifiers of adulthood. In psychiatry, 'flat affect' refers to a limited range of emotional expression symptomatic of schizophrenia, 'a kind of emotional opacity in which affective display [...] has little range, intensity and mobility.'² Assuming his reader's agreement, Wolcott invokes flat affect to suggest that millennials prove frustratingly, even threateningly, illegible to their elders' gaze. They fail to reproduce expected codes of expression, instead reflecting the flat inhumanity of their digital devices' 'ghostly screens'. Such generational archetypes themselves evoke the 'flatness' described by E. M. Forster: they are 'comforting', 'easily recognised' and 'easily remembered' caricatures constructed round a single idea or quality'.³ Whereas 'round'

¹ James Wolcott, 'Do Millennials Really Deserve Their Bratty Reputation?', *Vanity Fair*, October 2015 <<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/09/james-wolcott-millennials>> [accessed 6 December 2018]

² Robbie Duschinsky and Emma Wilson, 'Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2015), 179-190 (p. 185)

³ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), pp. 103-6.

characters are remembered ‘in connection with the great scenes through which [they] passed and as modified by those scenes’, flat characters do not develop, serving a fixed and evident purpose, whether that be a comic effect, a plot device, or the embodiment of a single theme.⁴ However, what happens if the protagonist of a novel fails to round out? What would it mean for a character to stubbornly refuse change or to enter into ‘great scenes’?⁵

The stereotypical millennial, derived from various marketing profiles, is one such recognisable and flat character prevalent in contemporary discourse. Marta Figlerowicz argues that such flat protagonists ‘draw attention to themselves by being somehow simpler, less influential, and more restricted in their self-expression than they themselves, or the novel’s implied readers, would have assumed or expected’.⁶ These flat protagonists ‘are haunted by the sense of a receding outer world that is ever more disconnected from the stories they tell’.⁷ Flatness here stages a blockage in the realist novel’s generic obligation to explain individuals’ relationships to a social whole. Whereas novels such as *The Nix* and *Purity* fetishize an appreciation of nuance in individuals, flat protagonists and narrators do not develop according to any discernible causation, highlighting instead the limits of empathetic understanding. Just as Wolcott’s millennial irritates its elders, flat protagonists irritate the reader by refusing to exhibit ‘humanity’, contesting the assumption that novels give us ‘access’ to the lives of others.⁸ In the words of Sianne Ngai, the circuit of ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ that a reader expects to feel for literary characters are replaced with ‘the very fact of its unfeignedness’, a lack of expected

⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

⁵ Kurt Vonnegut attempted to visualise such a dynamic through his reading of *Hamlet* as flat in shape, or lacking a narrative arc, because with any event in the play ‘we don’t know whether it’s good news or bad news’. See: Kurt Vonnegut, ‘Here is a Lesson in Creative Writing’, in *A Man without a Country* (New York: Seven Stories, 2005), pp. 23-37 (p. 37).

⁶ Marta Figlerowicz, *Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 10.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

affective investment that itself produces an unsettling, ‘ugly’ feeling.⁹ Flatness refuses to fulfil the traditional affective contract associated with the novel by withholding expected emotional intensity and thereby producing instead a minor affect, such as irritation.

In this chapter, I examine how two novels employ this flatness to short-circuit the promise of techno-generational frameworks. In representing their characters’ relationships with digital media technologies as intimate yet asymmetrical, uncertain and flat, they pointedly refuse to explain the ‘digital native’ and thereby fail to fulfil the affective contract of the generational novel. This refusal is evident in Tao Lin’s third novel *Taipei* (2013). In short sections of flat, third-person prose, the novel follows Paul, a young author who has arrived back in New York after visiting his parents in Taipei. He commences a period before a two-month publicity tour for his latest book, an ‘interim period’ that he aims to use to work before becoming ‘extremely social’ on the tour.¹⁰ However, this period instead sees the rise and fall of various social relationships, continuous drug taking and only sporadic efforts at writing. When he and his partner Erin marry in Las Vegas, they travel to Taipei to stay with Paul’s parents. Rather than spend time with them, however, Paul and Erin upload short, intimate and often incoherent films made on Paul’s MacBook to the internet. As their relationship fractures, they return to the U.S. and separate only to reunite at the novel’s ending, a climax whose affective payoff is undercut by the narration’s deadpan register and Paul’s constant intoxication.

I will compare the flattening of affect in *Taipei* to *Sympathy* (2017), by Olivia Sudjic. The novel is a first-person account of British graduate Alice Hair’s stay with her grandmother, Silvia, in Manhattan. Initially seeking information about her long-lost adoptive father, Alice spends much of her time aimlessly wandering the city, uploading photos to Instagram and

⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 81-4. This withholding is also explored in Pieter Vermeulen, ‘The Critique of Trauma and the Afterlife of the Novel in Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 58.3 (Autumn 2012), 549-568, p. 558.

¹⁰ Tao Lin, *Taipei* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2013), p. 22.

dating the unlikeable Dwight, an aspiring tech entrepreneur. When Silvia falls ill, Alice becomes a live-in babysitter for wealthy family friends. Later, they ask her to order their genetic history online, and Alice discovers that the father is genetically linked to a semi-famous short-story writer named Mizuko Himura. Alice promptly develops an obsession with Mizuko and uses her social media footprint to locate and engineer an encounter. Developing a friendship, Alice continues to use Mizuko's internet activity to produce her desired future outcome of a sexual relationship. When Mizuko falls ill and seemingly disappears, Alice writes a letter revealing the true identity of Mizuko's biological father, which provokes Mizuko's mother to commit suicide. Alice frames the novel itself as an attempt to work through her guilt for having caused this tragedy, however her careful aestheticization of events and projections of causation onto digital media flatten the account of its affective payoff.

Lin and Sudjic's publishers marketed these texts as 'voice of a generation' novels. Emblazoned on the front cover of the UK edition of *Taipei* is a quote from Bret Easton Ellis declaring Lin 'the most interesting prose stylist of his generation', conveniently omitting the other half of the original tweet: 'which doesn't mean that "Taipei" isn't a boring novel...' (@BretEastonEllis, 4 March 2013).¹¹ Lin's characteristic flat style is also evident in his earlier writing, such as his 2010 novel *Richard Yates*, the blurb of which includes a similar quote describing Lin as 'Kafka for the iPhone generation'.¹² On the flyleaf for the UK edition of *Sympathy*, meanwhile, is a quote from Sudjic in which she describes herself as 'on the cusp of a generation that appears increasingly disconnected from reality, locked into our fantasy lives, filter bubbles and secret algorithms, living in an era that is "post-truth", while deluding ourselves that we are connecting, controlling, choosing'.¹³ More recently, and as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Sudjic wrote an essay on 'the millennial novel' in which she claimed

¹¹ Lin, *Taipei*, front cover.

¹² Clancy Martin, qtd. in Tao Lin, *Richard Yates* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010), back cover.

¹³ Olivia Sudjic, *Sympathy* (New York: ONE, 2017), flyleaf.

that the genre ‘depict[s] a rootless, anxious life’ .¹⁴ These paratextual elements surrounding the publications of *Taipei* and *Sympathy* frame the texts with promises that they offer readers privileged access to the otherwise opaque inner-lives of a generation.

It should be noted that recent attempts such as Sudjic’s to define ‘millennial fiction’ often omit mentions of the ‘alt-lit’ movement, a network of young writers in the early 2010s who, through online journals, blogs and social media accounts, reproduced the aesthetics and vernacular of online culture in poetry and prose fiction.¹⁵ One reason to omit these authors might be because their style, content and methods of publishing often diverge from the institutions of literary culture through which such generational definitions are set. However, a further reason is that several of the movement’s prominent male figureheads, including Tao Lin, were accused of sexual assault of in 2014.¹⁶ Including the work of these alleged abusers in a perceived generational movement undermines the assumed teleology that often undergirds this discourse, the belief that—as Sudjic writes—‘[i]f there’s something millennials are championing, it’s speaking out’.¹⁷ As I do not buy into this teleology, I include Lin’s work in this study of the construction of digital natives. However, with *Taipei* including numerous depictions of sexual encounters under intoxication, it is worth keeping in mind the accusations against Lin as part of the shifting contexts for the novel’s depiction of agency and digital media.

Taipei and *Sympathy* both respond to the framing of a generation of ‘digital natives’ as resisting cultural legibility, appearing alien or even inhuman. Novels marketed as expressing the voice of this generation promise an often-older readership a means of breaching their

¹⁴ Olivia Sudjic, ‘Darkly funny, desperate and full of rage: what makes a millennial novel?’, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/what-makes-a-millennial-novel-olivia-sudjic>> [accessed 11 October 2019], n. pag.

¹⁵ *Alt Lit Gossip* <<http://altlitgossip.tumblr.com/>> [accessed 24 August 2018]; Kenneth Goldsmith, ‘If Walt Whitman Vlogged’, *The New Yorker*, 7 May 2014 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/if-walt-whitman-vlogged>> [accessed 23 August 2018]

¹⁶ Miles Klee, ‘Stephen Tully Dierks, Tao Lin, and the alt lit scene’s rape problem’, *The Daily Dot*, 2 October 2014 <<https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/does-alt-lit-scene-have-rape-problem/>> [accessed 24 August 2018], n. pag.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, n. pag.

flattened surfaces to understand them. However, Lin and Sudjic's characters' familiarity with digital media technologies leads them to further recede from tangibility. With its frustrating style and protagonist, *Taipei* stubbornly embraces flatness to short-circuit the reader's quest for understanding. *Sympathy*, meanwhile, performatively illuminates the experience of digital natives through an uncomfortably knowing first-person narrative, producing a flattened affect that highlights the ambivalent and problematic nature of such a promise. I begin this chapter by examining the ways in which the two novels tie flat affect to techno-generational frameworks. I then consider how the novels map the flattening interfaces of digital media onto their character's habits of perception. Finally, I will analyse how each novel challenges the mastery promised by touch screens by attempting to formulate an ethical consideration around non-responsiveness. Although both novels ultimately seek an ethics that respects difference, they clumsily subsume experience of gender, race and sexuality under techno-generational frameworks that prioritise a sense of unease among middle-class graduates navigating the anxieties of an 'extended adolescence'. This makes them as symptomatic of a bourgeois realist desire to access and manipulate the other as they are efforts to resist this desire.

Flat Affect

As Raymond Williams argues, melodramatic norms across cultural texts highlight what is important to a society, constructing shared 'structures of feeling' that point towards future class positions.¹⁸ For example, characters' anger or despair at their conditions under an oppressive system might rally readers against it. Through such emotive expressions, recognisable expressions or performances provide a sense of shared experience. Building out of Williams's

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128-135

argument, Lauren Berlant considers performances that disturb ‘the promise of confirmation that structures sentimental esthetics’ due to their opacity.¹⁹ She describes these ‘structures of unfeeling’ in relation to flat affect: whereas, ‘[i]n the sentimental scene where we presume emotional universality and an ethics of emotional intelligibility’, what Berlant calls ‘underperformativity’ pointedly withholds intelligible, mutual expressions.²⁰ Instead, ‘like passive aggression and other problematically evidential modes of relating, [it] sneaks around the codes of sincerity and intelligibility that make possible normative social trust and trust in the social’.²¹ This produces a sense of ‘flatness’ which, as Jackie Stacey stresses, ‘refers to the expectations designed by previous histories of generic conventions’.²² In the apparent flatness of underperformativity we register the withholding of an expected affect that would shape a sense of mutual belonging.

In a 2009 interview, Lin responded to a question about his characteristic underperformativity by stating that, ‘[i]f I do affectless prose [...] I want to do in the extreme’.²³

The ‘extreme’ flatness of his style is evident in the following passage from *Taipei*:

In mid-June, one dark and rainy afternoon, Paul woke and rolled onto his side and opened his MacBook sideways. At some point, maybe twenty minutes after he’d begun refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail in a continuous cycle—with an ongoing, affectless, humourless realization that his day “was over”—he noticed with confusion, having thought it was a.m., that it was 4:46 p.m. He slept until 8:30 p. m. and “worked on things” in the library until midnight and was two blocks from his room, carrying a mango and two cucumbers and a banana in a plastic bag, when Daniel texted “come hang out, Mitch brought a lot of coke”.

Daniel and Mitch were outside a bar, discussing where to use the cocaine. Paul said Daniel looked “really tired” and asked if he needed some eggplant, in reference to a joke they had that Daniel was heavily dependent on eggplant and almost always suffering its withdrawal symptoms, which could be horrific.²⁴

¹⁹ Lauren Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2015), 191-213 (p. 193)

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-4.

²² Jackie Stacey, ‘Crossing over with Tilda Swinton—the Mistress of “Flat Affect”’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2015), 243-271 (p. 254).

²³ Tao Lin, ‘The Hipster Thief’ (interviewed by Nick Antosca for *Daily Beast*), 19 September 2009 <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-hipster-thief>> [accessed 7 December 2018]

²⁴ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 76.

The deadpan register, like most of the novel, reads like an anecdote with no impending climax or punchline. Lin bluntly lists things, from social media platforms to fruit to his own emotions (described as negatives or lacks), without describing them. The effect resembles what Frederic Jameson terms ‘itemisation’, in which ‘the quest for new languages’ to describe the ‘distressingly unoriginal reactions and psychic events’ of postmodernity are ‘abandoned’ in favour of simply listing ‘the items that come by’.²⁵ Lin itemises affects themselves, placing phrases in quotation marks to detach them from the sentence in such a way that inoculates the prose from their expected resonances, instead shrouding them in ironic distance. The declaration that Paul’s day ““was over”” lacks any emotive quality, appearing instead as an intertextual reference to nothing in particular. The explanation of Daniel’s ‘horrific’ eggplant withdrawal—like any time you are ‘let-in’ on a private in-joke whose conception you were absent for—only further emphasises the distance between reader and character. Above all, the accentuated flatness of the free-indirect narration withholds an answer as to whether Paul and the other characters in the novel experience the world in a manner as bereft of emotion as the prose is itself.

Critiques of Lin’s flat, underperformative prose have tended to associate its flat affect with the perceived symptoms of autism, terming it ‘Asperger’s style’ or ‘Asperger’s realism’.²⁶ As I have stated, psychiatrists understand flat affect as a symptom of schizophrenia. Ihab Hassan identifies schizophrenic fragmentation as a postmodern cultural characteristic, one that

²⁵ Frederic Jameson, ‘Itemised’, *London Review of Books*, 40.21 (8 November 2018), pp. 3-8 (p. 5)

²⁶ Stephen Marche, ‘The New Bad Kids of Fiction’, *Esquire*, 10 June 2013

<<https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a23000/marie-calloway-tao-lin/>> [accessed 28 November 2018];

Christian Lorentzen, qtd. in Michelle Orange, ‘Men Respond to Marie’, *Slate*, 7 June 2013

<http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2013/06/marie_calloway_what_purpose_did_i_serve_in_your_life_is_a_titillating_frustrating.html?via=gdpr-consent> [accessed 28 November 2018]; Meanwhile, alt-lit blogs have speculated over whether Lin himself is autistic, with Lin stating that claims that he is ‘retarded’ have ‘become a meme’.

See: ‘IT’S OFFICIAL... (TAO LIN AUTISM REPORT)’, *altlitgossip*, 7 January 2012

<<http://altlitgossip.tumblr.com/post/15483316835/its-official-tao-lin-autism-report>> [accessed 28 November 2018]; Tao Lin, ‘~2.5-Hour/IRL Interview with Tao Lin on MDMA: The 11,810-Word Transcript’ (interviewed by Chandler Levack for *Thought Catalogue*), 2 November 2010 <<https://thoughtcatalog.com/chandler-levack/2010/11/an-interview-with-tao-lin-on-mdma-the-unedited-transcript/2/>> [accessed 28 November 2018]

contrasts with the relative coherence of modernism's paranoia.²⁷ The raising of 'autism' rather than schizophrenia to describe Lin's underperformative itemisation indicates a shift in focus from the postmodern condition to a particular focus on technocapitalism. Jordynn Jack observes that the gendered stereotype of the successful autistic 'geek' attempts to explain the diminished 'economic productivity' of the 'traditional male'.²⁸ Prominent male literary figures have parodied Lin's style and his engagement with social media to suggest its debasement of the 'literary' in the digitized attention economy.²⁹ They draw on the trope that frequent digital media inhibits young peoples' 'emotional intelligence', the 'ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behaviour and relationships'.³⁰ Such assertions reflect a wider trend in which people with autism, or those wrongly perceived as autistic, are described as deficient in 'humanistic' areas and proficient in 'computational' ones.³¹ *Taipei* alludes to this when Paul reads a review of one of his readings which describes him 'as "monosyllabic," "awkward," "silted and unfriendly" within a disapproval of his oeuvre, itself vaguely within a disapproval of contemporary culture and, by the way of someone else's essay, the internet'.³² Here, Paul is aware that his behaviour and creative output are being read and explained by others through a techno-generational framework—something, it follows, that Lin is also aware of regarding his own public persona and writing.

²⁷ Ihab Hassan, 'The Culture of Postmodernism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2.3 (1985), 119-131 (p. 124).

²⁸ Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), p. 110.

²⁹ Christian Lorentzen, 'Tao Lin Will Have the Scallops', *Observer*, 17 August 2010 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20100820015907/http://www.observer.com/2010/culture/tao-lin-will-have-scallops>> [accessed 28 November 2018]; Joshua Cohen, 'Camera Obscura', *Bookforum*, Sept/Oct/Nov 2010 <https://www.bookforum.com/inprint/017_03/6361> [accessed 28 November 2018]

³⁰ Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* (San Diego, CA: TalentSmart, 2009), p. 17.

³¹ Majia Holmer Nadesan, *Constructing Autism: Unravelling the 'Truth' and Understanding the Social* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 131.

³² Lin, *Taipei*, p. 129.

Comparing the two novels, Adam Guy concludes that, unlike *Taipei*, ‘the formal stakes of *Sympathy* are not particularly high – it never seems that Sudjic is grasping towards a new or personal style’.³³ I broadly agree insofar as *Sympathy* is written in a conventional realist mode, albeit with a nonlinear chronology. Nonetheless, a sense of flatness pervades *Sympathy* in both characterisation and style. In her essay *Exposure*, Sudjic suggests that Alice ‘lacks an identity except that which she siphons from the woman she stalks online [...] Her own outline is fluid, more like a sparse marketing demographic than the characterisation we might recognise from a nineteenth-century novel’.³⁴ In other words, Alice is parasitic, and this is reflected in her first-person narration:

From watching Silvia, I’d learned that one of the worst things about being ill is that most other people find your suffering opaque. With this sadness it was different. I felt that I needed to nurture and protect it from people’s understanding. I wanted Susy’s sympathy because I wanted comfort and to feel less alone, and yet I also didn’t want it—I didn’t want my personal grief to be part of something universal right then.³⁵

Here, Alice narrates her depicted behaviour from a retrospective moral distance, through moments of ‘confession’. However, Alice’s metacommentary on the thematic resonances of her confession flatten her actions into content to be curated.

Alice’s aestheticization of her account, its heightened melodrama, provokes a suspicious reading rather than a shared structure of feeling. The flatness of Alice’s narration is therefore less an effect of underperformativity than—to misappropriate a term from Shakespeare scholar Flloyd Kennedy—its ‘para-performativity’: “para” in the sense of providing cover or protection (as in parachute), and also “para” because it is—in [J. L.] Austin’s usage—“parasitic upon [language’s] normal use”.³⁶ The most striking characteristic of the

³³ Adam Guy, ‘Following’, *The Oxonian Review*, 35.3, 23 October 2017 <<http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/following/>> [accessed 14 November 2018]

³⁴ Olivia Sudjic, *Exposure* (London: Peninsula Press, 2018), p. 64.

³⁵ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 383.

³⁶ Flloyd Kennedy, ‘Meta-Performativity: Being in Shakespeare’s Moment’, *Being There: After—Proceedings of the 2006 Conference of the Australian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies* (University of Sydney, 4-7 July 2006), <<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/2510>> [accessed 15 October 2019], p. 3. I

novel is its emphasis on motifs: demons, parasites, drones, butterflies, water, quantum physics, symmetry and the colour pink, among other imagery, recur across the breadth of the narrative, forging innumerable connections between disparate events. The cumulative effect is, as Alice herself writes of Mizuko's autofiction at the beginning of the novel, 'suspiciously literary'.³⁷ In its winding structure and reoccurring motifs, *Sympathy* reads as if an aestheticizing layer has been superimposed over its contents. The carefully cued melodrama of this paraperformativity misfires, producing a flatness that alienates the reader from Alice's perspective. This flat affect is not sought deliberately by Alice as the text's narrator, but is rather a result of the unreliability and limitations of her narration.

This is reflected in prominent internet aesthetics. In *Exposure*, Sudjic celebrates Instagram-based visual artist Audrey Wollen's 'Sad Girl Theory', which argues for performing the gendered emotion of sadness to resist efforts to marginalise the history and present material reality of women.³⁸ Wollen writes that feminine sadness operates 'through internalisation rather than externalisation, through violence against [women's own] bodies instead of public space, through weeping instead of shouting'.³⁹ Her Instagram account, 'Sad Girl', publicly externalises this internalised suffering, directing outwards. However, two years after coining the term, Wollen argued that Sad Girl Theory had become 'eclipsed by my identity as an "Instagram girl"' (@audreywollen, 10 May 2016). Quoting this, Sudjic comments that the 'self-surveillance' and 'unboundaried, porous sense of self' advocated in Sad Girl Theory has inadvertently transformed 'from something that celebrates transparency and resists systems of

specify 'misappropriated' because Kennedy's paper concerns the 'rehearsed' or 'remembered' character of lines spoken during a live performance.

³⁷ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 5.

³⁸ Lucy Watson, 'How girls are finding empowerment through being sad online', *Dazed*, 23 November 2015 <<http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28463/1/girls-are-finding-empowerment-through-internet-sadness>> [accessed 7 December 2018]

³⁹ Audrey Wollen, qtd. in Alice Hines, 'a taxonomy of the sad girl', *i-D* <https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/pabzay/a-taxonomy-of-the-sad-girl> [accessed 7 December 2018]; Sad Girl Theory can be seen resonating outside Instagram in the Twitter feed of poet Melissa Broder (@SoSad-Today) and musician Likki Li's 2018 album *so sad so sexy*.

control to something that serves the opaque, often highly patriarchal interests of majority-male tech firms and their advertisers.⁴⁰ The inversion of internalised to externalised affect performed by Sad Girl theory has been flattened through its commodification under platform capitalism. Lauren Fournier has criticised Wollen's work for burying the non-white, non-binary traditions it draws from, and for conflating an 'awareness' of its own privileges and 'savvy' use of surveillance capitalism infrastructure with feminist politics.⁴¹ As I argue in following sections, *Sympathy* displays a similarly problematic 'self-awareness' as the paraperformative aestheticization of Alice's past vulnerability and sadness appropriates and flattens racial difference, subordinating it to bourgeois anxieties about digital technology.

Paraperformativity functions to produce a similarly flat affect to underperformativity. However, where Lin's underperformative style itemises emotions to drain them of their affective resonance, Sudjic's paraperformative narrator overinvests scenes in their own emotional reading, provoking a fatigue and suspicion that blocks their expected affect resonances. It is also worth noting the gendered implications of these techniques. Lin's underperformative prose is associated with cultural readings of autism, a condition frequently associated with masculinity. Sudjic's paraperformativity, meanwhile, is associated with emotional convention, drawing connections to the historical linking of the novel to feminine 'hysteria'. As Ankhi Mukherjee writes, 'the hysteric has no body, and too much body. The hysterogenic body is a stand-in, a duplicitous simulacrum of the erotogenic body', one reproduced in melodramatic conventions whose 'imaginary limits' become a 'symbolic

⁴⁰ Sudjic, *Exposure*, p. 76.

⁴¹ Lauren Fournier, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 33.3 (2018), 643-662 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2018.1499495>> (p. 655); Heather Mooney has similarly critiqued Sad Girl imagery's appropriation of pre-existing Latina/x cultural tropes and obscuring of racial dispossession, while Camilla Ackley accuses it of trivializing clinical depression. See: Heather Mooney, 'Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls: Affect, Race, (Dis)Possession, and Protest', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 46.3/4 (Autumn/Winter 2018), 175-194 (p. 184); Camilla Ackley, 'The Problem with Sad Girl Culture', *Into the Fold*, 15 July 2015 <<https://www.intothefoldmag.com/2015/07/the-problem-with-sad-girl-culture/>> [accessed 7 December 2018]

impotence' that make them 'improbable and inauthentic'.⁴² In other words, the flat affect produced by paraperformativity has long been registered in literary culture as a particularly feminine inauthenticity.

The apparent flatness of so-called digital natives is often framed in terms of the inauthentic social connection afforded by digital mediation. Quoting a teenage test subject who states that she and those who 'grew up with iPhones [...] don't know how to communicate like normal people and look people in the eye and talk to them', psychologist Jean Twenge concludes that '[i]n the next decade we may see more young people who know just the right emoji for a situation—but not the right facial expression'.⁴³ Both novels play with this idea of reliance, even addiction, to digital media technologies. *Taipei* places Paul's copious drug taking in parallel with use of digital media, with him and Erin even snorting cocaine from an iPhone and MacBook.⁴⁴ In *Sympathy*, Alice more explicitly describes herself as being 'enslaved' to digital media, yet she consciously plays on the addiction trope to cut Mizuko off from others, suggesting that they lock their phones away so they might 'retreat to some tasteful Scandinavian-inspired cabin in the woods where a person could build up her soul and psychic defences again'.⁴⁵ The knowingness with which these two novels invoke the metaphor of addiction allows them to explore the pervasion of digital media into various facets of their characters' lives without reducing the cause of their behaviour to these narratives of dependence.

As social scientist Sherry Turkle contends, the metaphorical mapping of addiction as a recognisable framework onto our emergent habitual engagements with technologies obscures

⁴² Ankhi Mukherjee, *Aesthetic Hysteria: The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 32.

⁴³ Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2017), p. 91..

⁴⁴ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 155.

⁴⁵ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, pp. 335, 359.

the ways in which social relations are always already mediated by these technologies.⁴⁶ *Taipei* and *Sympathy* hold open this social dimension, their under- and paraperformativity withholding any emotional ‘overcoming’ or ‘reckoning’ with their protagonists’ addictions. Despite their critiques of digital media, their characters prove unable and unwilling to inoculate themselves from a digitized society. To quote Berlant, their flat affect ‘destabilizes the conventional relation between high intensity and importance’ and instead performs ‘a desire to capture the present’s multiple, magnetizing scenes in their noisy proximity, tiltedness, and oscillation’.⁴⁷ For Berlant, an amalgam of ‘converging forces, events, and registers of experience’ over recent decades has effected a sense that ‘history is not adding up to something, but resonates in a hovering, overdetermined environment where unresolved effects suture the scene in which plot plays out’.⁴⁸ Withholding melodramatic conventions foregrounds this overdetermination—the fact that the present cannot be understood as a linear effect of a single cause. It ‘induces and refers to a general atmosphere of non-transparency, heterogeneous causality, and withheld or uneven accessibility’.⁴⁹

In particular, *Taipei* and *Sympathy* withhold or disrupt melodramatic norms to foreground the suspension of the expected life-stages of middle-class subjects in capitalist countries of the Global North. Both protagonists exist in the state of what Jeffrey Jensen Arnett names ‘emerging adulthood’. Rather than entering full-time employment, achieving financial independence and having families, today’s young adults experience ‘a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than

⁴⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pp. 293-4. For an overview and critique of discourses about internet addiction, see: Geert Lovink, ‘Distraction and its Discontents’, in *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), pp. 33-45.

⁴⁷ Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, pp. 193, 195.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

it will be at any other period of the life course'.⁵⁰ *Taipei* and *Sympathy* both take place in such 'interim periods' in both protagonists' lives: for Paul, this begins some months preceding his book, although it extends into successive interim periods with no clear bookends. For Alice in *Sympathy*, her year in New York is a temporary trip between education and work that she overstays and never achieves closure on, with Alice's actions recurring and mutating her obsessive, non-linear recounting of them. While they are presented as anxiety-inducing and uncertain, both these interim periods are made possible by the class privilege of these characters. To the extent that *Taipei* and *Sympathy* do attempt to represent the experience of a generation, they both do so by exploring the ways in which a suspended, overdetermined present becomes anxiety-inducing for a middle-class individual struggling to reproduce the expectations of a bourgeois life course.

Taipei locates Paul in a social network of drifting young graduates: 'without education's season-backed, elaborately subdivided, continuous structure, traceable numerically backward almost to birth, connecting a life in that direction, [Paul] was becoming isolated and unexplainable as one of those mysterious phenomena, contained within informational boxes, in picture-heavy books on natural history'.⁵¹ Emergent adulthood precludes any clear sense of the future, instead rendering it as flat and opaque. As Gilles Lipovetsky writes, contemporary subjects are besieged by risk assessments of forecasting models, producing a non-teleological 'pure future, one that needs to be constructed without any guarantees, without any pre-ordained path, or any implacable law of change'.⁵² Paul's 'addictions' are inseparable from his intuition of this threatening, unclear future. Audrea Lim writes that whereas the 'hippie movement' saw drugs as a way of changing the world, Paul's generation views drugs as a technology for

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, 'Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties', *American Psychologist*, 55.5 (2000), 469-460 (p. 469)

⁵¹ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 19.

⁵² Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 42.

‘adjusting’ to the world.⁵³ Digital media also function to this end, with Paul conceiving of his drug taking and use of his MacBook in terms of aiding his ‘productivity’.⁵⁴ Paul’s flattened affect therefore gestures to the opacity of the interim period he finds himself in, which offers no clear structures to respond to emotively.

In *Sympathy*, Alice recounts being obsessed with her performance at university—‘I was waiting, with growing dread, for the results of my exams’—and fearing a future described by her grandmother in which ‘life became just a series of days and weeks and years with no markers and very few rules, and nobody told you what to do anymore’.⁵⁵ Whereas Silvia frames this as freeing, Alice finds its lack of structure as threatening. In *Exposure*, Sudjic gestures to the overdetermination of the present when she describes anxiety becoming a ‘social’ illness in Western culture, as ‘headlines’ depict ‘a number of perceived threats [that] appear to be colliding on our collective horizon’, including ‘social support networks that are crumbling. Economic instability. Individualism and free market capitalism. The uncertain future of climate change or the luxury of too much choice’.⁵⁶ That Sudjic approaches these forces second-hand, as ‘headlines’ rather than immediate material realities, highlights their complexity while also belying her relative class position. These nebulous forces are primarily visible to middle-class youth as flattened media images rather than immediately threatening material realities. *Taipei* and *Sympathy* explore this personal encounter with the flattened complexity of the present rather than offering more detailed representations of the nebulous forces that impinge on their middle-class protagonists.

⁵³ Audrea Lim, ‘The Drugs Don’t Work: Tao Lin’s “Taipei” and the Literature of Pharmacology’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 19 June 2013 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-drugs-dont-work-tao-lins-taipei-and-the-literature-of-pharmacology/#!>> [accessed 28 November 2018]

⁵⁴ Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 22, 182.

⁵⁵ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, pp. 36-7.

⁵⁶ Sudjic, *Exposure*, p. 31

Whereas melodramatic conventions construct shared ‘structures of feeling’ for readers to identify with or against, *Taipei* and *Sympathy* offer flat affects in their depictions of the anxiety-enduing uncertainty of a digital native generation’s extended adolescence. Lin’s underperformative style itemises emotions, implying that they are organised by a logic which it does not attempt to explain. Meanwhile, the melodramatic conventions of *Sympathy* fall flat due to the self-conscious narration, overflowing into a paraperformative inauthenticity that likewise implies an obscured organising logic. Both novels invoke the notion of addiction to explore how digital media enter the lives of their protagonists, however they leave open a broader determination rather than explaining their behaviour through their habitual use of digital technologies. They therefore offer provisional techno-generational frameworks, in which a generation is differentiated by the habits they cultivate with digital technologies, nested within a broader yet obscured social-deterministic framework. *Taipei* and *Sympathy* approach the complex, overdetermined present by way of its flattening in the interfaces of consumer digital media technologies. I now turn to examine these interfaces in greater detail.

Flat Screen

In 2013, Apple launched their new iOS 7 operating system with an overhauled design. Previous iterations of their iOS had used shadowing and texturing to give icons the appearance of having three dimensions (Figure 6). These are examples of *skeuomorphs*, ‘carryovers from an older technology or way of doing things that had value, and are retained as a semblance, and expectation’.⁵⁷ With users having become habituated to the iPhone interface, Jony Ive, lead designer of Apple’s iOS 7, opted for a flatter, ‘anti-skeuomorphic’ design (Figure 7). He

⁵⁷ Matt Hayler, *Challenging the Phenomenology of Technology: Embodiment, Expertise and Evolved Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 141.



Figure 6: Home screen, Apple iPhone iOS 6 (2012)



Figure 7: Home screen, Apple iPhone iOS 7 (2013)

stated that ‘we understood that people had already become comfortable with touching glass, they didn’t need physical buttons, they understood the benefits [...] So there was an incredible liberty in not having to reference the physical world so literally. We were trying to create an environment that was less specific’.⁵⁸ For Ive, users’ visual and haptic familiarity with touchscreen interfaces brought ‘an opportunity but with a set of problems to create objects whose forms don’t hint at what they do’.⁵⁹ That a corporation like Apple licenced such a visual departure demonstrates the degree to which twenty-first century consumers had become habituated to the particularities of graphical user interfaces (GUIs). They no longer require the conventions of the analog to guide them through the digital. Instead, the digital exists within the primary elements structuring their experience of the new.

The flat styles of *Sympathy* and *Taipei* seek to represent this habitual familiarity with digital media technologies. In an argument resembling Figlerowicz’s writing on flat protagonists, Berlant argues that flat affect ‘foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading, without negating the affective encounter with immediacy’.⁶⁰ Flat affect therefore implies ‘less an esthetics of expression than of apprehension’, in which ‘incidents are sensed, and it remains to find a form for the disturbance’.⁶¹ It marks a kind of delayed response to the overdetermined present, a buffering between apprehension and expression: ‘a causal trajectory forces on the present a sense of itself as unfinished business without constituting the present as congealed or already playing out a fate. It is always the case that *the event remains to be sensed*. Recession induces a sense of interregnum’.⁶² *Sympathy* and *Taipei* bear the mark of such immediate encounters with the two-dimensional GUIs and hard screens through which we encounter the

⁵⁸ Jony Ive, qtd. in Brett Molina and Veronica Bravo, ‘Jony Ive: The Man Behind Apple’s Magic Curtain’, *USA Today* 19 September 2013 <<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2013/09/19/apple-jony-ive-craig-federighi/2834575/>> [accessed 13 November 2018]

⁵⁹ Ive, qtd. In Molina and Bravo, ‘Jony Ive’.

⁶⁰ Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, p. 193.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶² *Ibid.*

overdetermined operations of ‘the digital’, reflecting how, in our everyday encounters with new media technologies, complex, nonhuman processes are always represented back to us in flattened, legible forms.

Metaphor provides one site for observing an assumed habitual familiarity with digital technologies. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, ‘the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’.⁶³ Rooted in common experiences, metaphors are often ‘so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena’.⁶⁴ *Sympathy* and *Taipei* exploit this dynamic to produce a sense of generational familiarity with digital media. Alice’s mother, Susy, needs to ‘imagine whenever she is using her web browser that she is walking down an ordinary street. She can be seen by anyone. Susy needs real-world metaphors like this to understand’.⁶⁵ Whereas Susy needs the source material of familiar, ‘physical’ experiences to conceptualise digital processes, Alice uses her knowledge of digital processes to solidify her experience. For example, when Silvia instructs her to look through her father’s belongings, Alice states ‘It was like I’d aborted one search and started a new quest but the World Wide Web had not forgotten the first’.⁶⁶ Here, Sudjic assumes the reader’s familiarity with personalised search algorithms without assuming the reader’s knowledge regarding their technical workings.

The narration of *Taipei* uses metaphors similarly, describing for example how ‘[m]ost mornings [...] [Paul] wouldn’t exactly know anything until three to twenty seconds of passive remembering, as if by unzipping a file—newroom.zip—into a PDF’.⁶⁷ Twice, the narrative draws on animated images in the Graphical Interchange Format (GIF) as a source for metaphor. As Paul and Erin travel by bus through Taipei, the narration describes the city’s lights as

⁶³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 5.

⁶⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 78.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶⁷ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 35.

‘animated and repeating like GIF files’.⁶⁸ In another scene, Paul conceives of his own memory and cognitive processes through his visual familiarity with GIFs. We are told that when Paul considers why he might have overreacted to Erin sounding angry during a phone call to a third party, that ‘in college, he would later have analysed this, in bed, with eyes closed, studying the chronology of images—memories, he’d realized at some point, were images, which one could crudely arrange into slideshows or, with effort, sort of GIFs, maybe’.⁶⁹ Here, Paul draws on his habitual use of GIFs to ‘arrange’ memories in his mind in such a way that renders them in legible, chronological order and thereby orient himself within the overdetermined present. The narrative does not explain what GIFs are but uses the reader’s assumed familiarity with GIFs to describe something about memory. These metaphors therefore operate in the opposite direction to the skeuomorphic design of Apple’s older iOS interfaces.

In their representations of digital natives, the flat styles of *Taipei* and *Sympathy* embody the sense in which digital technologies are, as David M. Berry writes, ‘embedded within the environment, in the body and in society’.⁷⁰ Such technologies are introduced as novelty but embedded through habit. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes, habits are repeated practices that become ‘seemingly forgotten as they move from the voluntary to the involuntary, the conscious to the automatic. As they do so, they penetrate and define a person, a body, and a grouping of bodies’.⁷¹ Habits therefore contribute to the impression of generational difference, with younger peoples’ habitual use of smartphones to create and maintain relationships coming to define them. However, the habituation of GUIs of digital media is not ideologically neutral. Alexander R. Galloway writes that ‘an interface is not a thing, an interface is always an effect. It is always

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁰ David M. Berry, ‘The Postdigital Constellation’, in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, ed. by David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 44-57 (p. 50).

⁷¹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Update to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 5-6.

a process or a translation’, one produced in the distinction between two significant materials.⁷² This effect is often one of mastery: as Chun writes, ‘interfaces—as mediators between the visible and the invisible, as a means of navigation—have been key to creating “informed” individuals who can overcome the chaos of global capitalism by mapping their relation to the totality of the global capitalist system’.⁷³ The organising logics of GUIs trains users in repetitive actions useful to a socioeconomic system.

The underperformativity of *Taipei* embodies this ideological dimension of the GUI. Many of the short sections that structure the narrative of *Taipei* begin by establishing chronology. These temporal markers—‘the next night’, ‘around midnight’, ‘thirty minutes later’, ‘the next afternoon’—signify varying lengths of time yet standardize the action according to clock time.⁷⁴ However, this continuous marking is often bereft of any sense of narrative causation. Ian Sansom’s review of *Taipei* describes Lin’s ‘[a]ffectless style’ as ‘bloggy’, while Alice Bennett writes that the novel’s ‘empty, eventless rhythms are soothing and compulsive in almost the same way as scrolling through webpages’.⁷⁵ The fragments of narrative hang together like timestamped social media posts, even logging many of the characters’ ages: ‘After the reading Lucie, 23, introduced herself and Amy, 23, and Daniel, 25, to Paul and Mitch’.⁷⁶ Each character is thereby located on a single scale that makes implications about their relationships to one another. This is most obvious when we are told ‘Paul couldn’t find Kyle, 19, or Kyle’s girlfriend, Gabby, 28’.⁷⁷ These figures foreground the age gap between them, making them out as belonging to different generations. In *Taipei*, relationships between

⁷² Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 33.

⁷³ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 8.

⁷⁴ Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 26-31

⁷⁵ Ian Sansom, ‘Taipei by Tao Lin – review’, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2013

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/04/taipei-tao-lin-review>> [accessed 7 December 2018]; Alice Bennett, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 9.

⁷⁶ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

characters are flattened to the visual logic of social media interfaces which foreground certain information about individuals.

Taipei therefore integrates some of the organising logic of online platforms—particularly those of the loosely connected ‘blogosphere’—to structure its narration of a relatively loose plot. However, there is a further element to this structure. Although largely underperformative, Lin’s narration occasionally produces moments of heightened language. For example, in one scene Paul feels his heart

beating like he’d sprinted twenty yards. As the beating gradually normalized he’d think of how his heart, unlike him, was safely contained within blankets of skin, scaffolded by bone, held by muscles and arteries in its place, carefully off-center, as if to artfully assert itself as source and creator, having grown the chest around itself to hide inside and to muffle and absorb – and, later, after innovating the brain and face and limbs, to convert into productive behavior – its uncontrollable, indefensible, unexplainable, embarrassing squeezing of itself.⁷⁸

In his review of *Taipei*, Declan Tan suggests that the above sequence ‘produces almost digital, or computer-generated images, in the reader’s mind, elaborate animations that seem to actually “move”, provides a new way of looking’.⁷⁹ However, rather than breaking from it, these instances contribute to the flattened affect of the novel.

Lin’s flights from flat prose into vivid imagery resemble scrolling through a page in which GIFs have been imbedded. As Liza Johnson notes, GIFs are ‘a go-to form for arrested narrative development and suspended animation’.⁸⁰ Sally McKay writes that, when considered by themselves, ‘animated GIFs function without a “whole” — there is no ongoing narrative for them to be juxtaposed against [...] the affect is strong and virtually uninflected by signification it can induce a light trance, taking over the perceptual system by temporarily shutting down

⁷⁸ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 40.

⁷⁹ Declan Tan, ‘Uncorrected Proof: *Taipei* By Tao Lin’, *The Quietus*, 17 march 2013 <<http://thequietus.com/articles/11662-taipei-tao-lin-review>> [accessed 24 October 2019]

⁸⁰ Liza Johnson, ‘Observable Behavior’, *Representations*, 135 (Summer 2016), 22-30 <<http://rep.ucpress.edu/content/135/1/22>> [accessed 4 December 2018] (p. 27)

emotion and cognition'.⁸¹ Here, the lack of narrative context for the regular repetition of a single GIF induces flat affect. They approach what Matthew Causey describes as 'a unique aesthetic object, a para-performative, tele-theatrical phenomenon wherein the immediacy of performance and the digital alterability of time, space and subjectivity overlap and are combined'.⁸² In their looped performance of recognisable emotions, GIFs become paraperformative, flattening their initial affects into the networked 'culture of exchange' through which they are made and sent among users interacting through GUIs.

However, invocations of this paraperformativity are secondary to the overarching underperformativity at work in *Taipei*. Paul engages in the online culture of exchange at various points in the novel. For instance, we are told that 'Paul and Maggie created a GIF of a baseball cap moving around on their heads'.⁸³ While the narration of these performances are largely underperformative, the actions themselves resemble what Sianne Ngai calls the 'zany': comedic, hyperactive performances, usually of failures at work, that subtly combines an extreme playfulness with a 'stressed-out, even desperate quality'.⁸⁴ This combination plays out in the underperformative description of Paul and Erin's hyperactive filmmaking in Taipei:

Paul took the MacBook and stared in earnest fascination—feeling almost appalled but without aversion—as Erin ran and leaped stomach-first onto the front of a parked car, then speed-walked away with arms right against her sides, crossing Paul's vision, supernatural and comical as a mysterious creature on YouTube, before calmly taking the MacBook.⁸⁵

For Ngai, such zaniness embodies the overlap of work and play in post-industrial economies.⁸⁶

Paul and Erin's zany performances are instances of play, yet they contribute to the online

⁸¹ Sally McKay, 'The Affect of Animated GIFs (Tom Moody, Petra Cortright, Lorna Mills)', *Artfcity*, 16 July 2018 <<http://artfcity.com/2018/07/16/the-affect-of-animated-gifs-tom-moody-petra-cortright-lorna-mills/>> [accessed 4 December 2018]

⁸² Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 51.

⁸³ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 228.

⁸⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Interesting, Cute* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 185.

⁸⁵ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 192.

⁸⁶ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 182.

personas around which they construct their careers as writers. In the narration's invocation of the GUIs within which these performances are circulated as commodities, they become work. Like the isolated, paraperformative, GIF-like descriptions of Paul's imagination, these zany moments are flattened within the flattened GUI-style organisation of actions and emotions in *Taipei*.

Whereas *Taipei* invokes the GUIs of blogs and YouTube, *Sympathy* invokes an aesthetic sensibility associated with the affordances and user conventions of image-sharing site Instagram. The platform provides one of the primary windows through which Alice approaches the world. Early in the novel, she 'contemplated the blank canvas of my Instagram account [...] I wanted the world to know I was here, not me as I had been but as self constructed from bits of New York.'⁸⁷ In these scenes, *Sympathy* reflects the ways in which urban environments are 'always already mediated'.⁸⁸ In particular, the mediating of the Instagram interface reflects the whitewashed, gentrified, middle-class New York that Alice traverses. She navigates the city while looking out for what would 'make a good tile for my Instagram', taking 'three thousand pictures and post[ing] about five a day'.⁸⁹ Instagram serves as her means of indirectly communicating with past and future acquaintances, and she begins to conform to its conventions. Being with Dwight 'provided a lot of material and a lot of likes for Instagram [...] I even made little collages of what we had been up to and posted them as I had seen strangers do'.⁹⁰ Significantly, Alice first encounters Mizuko through her Instagram profile and 'spent the whole holiday in this frozen position, my head bent low over her life in miniature'.⁹¹ That Alice

⁸⁷ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 48.

⁸⁸ Zara Dinnen, *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) p. 142.

⁸⁹ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, pp. 92; 130.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

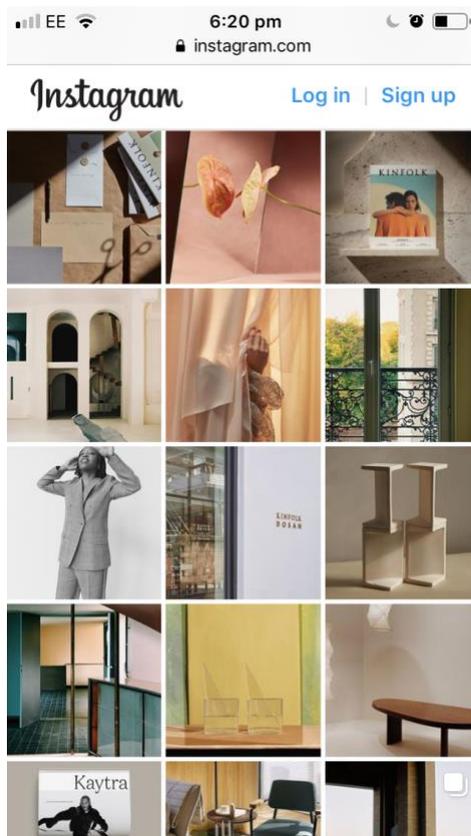


Figure 8: Kinfolk's Instagram feed (@kinfolk) [accessed 5 December 2019]

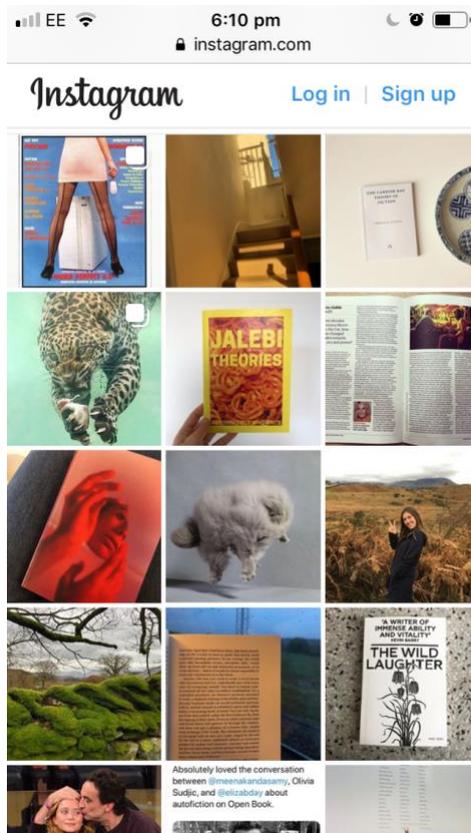


Figure 9: Olivia Sudjic's public Instagram feed (@olivia.sudjic) [accessed 5 December 2019]

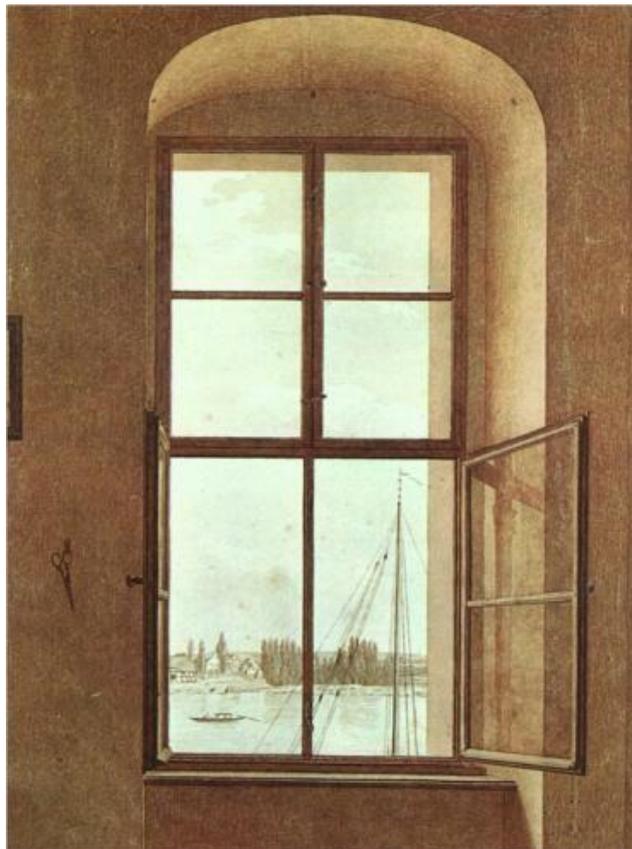


Figure 10: Caspar David Friedrich, *View from the Painter's Studio*, c. 1818.

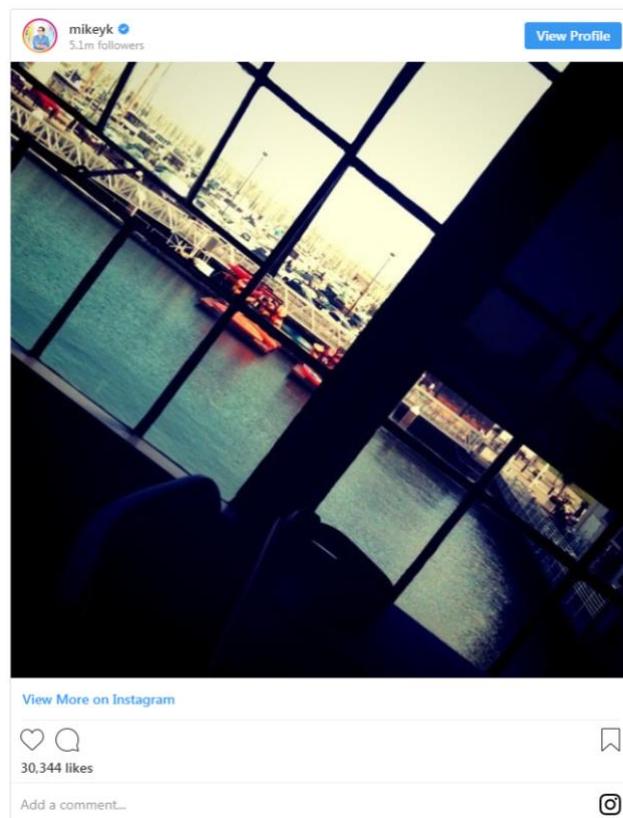


Figure 11: Instagram co-founder Mike Krieger's first upload to the platform (@mikeyk, 16 July 2010) [accessed 5 December 2019]

has the feeling of viewing Mizuko's life organising GUI of Instagram contributes to the sense of mastery she attempts to exert.

Although reviewers' claims that *Sympathy* is 'largely about Instagram' are hyperbolic, the novel does invoke certain aesthetic sensibilities that emerge on the platform.⁹² Lev Manovich describes 'Instagramism' as a 2010s aesthetic sensibility that adapts minimalist traditions 'to fit what works best on the small screen'.⁹³ It 'blends' modern photography and modern 2D design practices through compositional techniques, such as flat, negative space, and recurring subjects, including 'careful arrangements of a number of objects, photographed from above'.⁹⁴ As exemplified by 'slow lifestyle' magazine *Kinfolk*, this sensibility often stresses the non-digital, rarely mentioning or representing the technology it is hosted on (Figure 8). It offers what Florian Cramer describes as a post-digital opposition between 'high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness' that challenges the 'hidden teleology' of 'new Media' by repurposing older media technologies 'in relation to digital media technologies'.⁹⁵ In spreads framed with white space, Instagramism pairs rustic and modern design, placing 'vintage' objects before flat, monochromatic backgrounds. This aesthetic sensibility has migrated offline, with Bean, Khorramian and O'Donnell noting that the 'accessibility, replicability, and consistency of the visual forms associated with the *Kinfolk* taste regime has resulted in a flood of similar images [...] in copycat magazines, Instagram feeds, chain cafes and restaurants, and home improvement stores'.⁹⁶

⁹² Josephine Livingstone, 'The First Great Instagram Novel', *The New Republic*, 17 March 2017

<<https://newrepublic.com/article/141399/first-great-instagram-novel>> [accessed 25 October 2019], n. pag.

⁹³ Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (Self-published, 2006) <http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/151-instagram-and-contemporary-image/instagram_book_manovich_2017.pdf> [accessed 25 October 2019] (pp. 71; 105).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁹⁵ Florian Cramer, 'What is "Post-digital"?', *APRJA*, 21 Jan 2014 <<http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>> [accessed 8 May 2019], n. pag

⁹⁶ Jonathan Bean, Avid Khorramian and Kelsey O'Donnell, 'Kinfolk magazine: anchoring a taste regime', *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 21.1 (2017), 82-92 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2017.1334282>> (p. 90). See also the Tumblr blog *The Kinspiracy*, which mocks this trend, compiling photos upload to Instagram that resemble the *Kinfolk* 'taste regime': <<https://thekinspiracy.tumblr.com/>> [accessed 25 October 2019]

Alice ridicules this aesthetic sensibility when she mocks Ingrid, the mother of the children she babysits, for ‘the contradiction between [her] obsession with organic things and natural childhood and how much time she spent on her device. She was a very active Pinterest and Instagram user and had a huge following on both’.⁹⁷ However, Alice’s narration in *Sympathy* is itself full of Instagramisms, brief descriptive details or itemisations of nature and consumer products: ‘blossoms descending towards the gutter or alighting on the arms of benches’; ‘ornamental cockatoos within dusty windows’; ‘crayon-smelling pots called banana pudding’.⁹⁸ However, *Sympathy* is also interested in the platform’s visual logic, in particular the ‘grid’. The novel’s first page describes the ‘neat grid of [Mizuko’s] pictures’, referring to the feed of square thumbnails a user encounters after accessing another’s profile on Instagram (Figure 9).⁹⁹ Within this grid, Instagram photos are curated as small images to be viewed on smartphone screens; therefore, as Manovich writes, ‘in order to be visually effective, reducing effects of perspective is particularly important’.¹⁰⁰ The individual photographs must be flattened in order to communicate with one another within the visual logic of the grid. Or, as Alice later explains to Silvia, the ‘grid format of the app means you play with juxtapositions’.¹⁰¹

Writing before the creation of Instagram, Rosalind Krauss traces the grid as an artistic organising principle through modernist art to nineteenth-century symbolists such as Caspar David Friedrich, who had anticipated its visual logic with images of windows from within dark rooms in which ‘the window is experienced as simultaneously transparent and opaque’, or ‘as a mirror as well—something that freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being’ (Figure 10).¹⁰² This visual logic is reproduced, whether intentionally or not, in the first

⁹⁷ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 188.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 50; 51; 98.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, p. 110.

¹⁰¹ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 100.

¹⁰² Krauss, pp. 58-9.

image posted to Instagram by co-founder Mike Krieger: a photograph of a tilted, silhouetted window imposing a grid over a marina (Figure 11). The composition of such a technique reduces the depth of a landscape to the two-dimensional overlay of the darkened window.

Krauss writes that, as a form for organising information and visual content, the grid is

[f]lattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. [...] In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface [...] insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves.¹⁰³

These flattening properties, which carry over into the grids of Instagram's GUI, structure Alice's imagination as a character and narration as narrator.

Alice maps the Instagram grid onto the city planning of Manhattan: 'a city made up of little squares. I began popping them like vitamins'.¹⁰⁴ The reduction of the overdetermined complexity and alterity of the city to the regular spatial dimensions of the grid makes Alice feel a part of the environment, or rather that the environment is a part of her. Elsewhere, Alice contends that each of her Instagram photos 'implied a kind of fantasy life beyond it, like a window, and every time I posted one, I felt that it added a new room around the window and each room housed another self. It made the whole city more manageable, was a way to take apart the pieces of the machine'.¹⁰⁵ Again, Alice imagines the grid as a technology for flattening heterogeneity into an overarching formal logic. She writes that 'The city is tricky [...] It helps that streets are snapped to a grid. There are also psychic boutiques and sidewalk prophets, but until you contrive your own love story set in that city, even one as warped as mine, you remain outside it, looking for signals in the white smoke that rises from under, in the sudden hot laundry smells and LED typos of street vendors'.¹⁰⁶ Alice conceptualises the city as a transcendental

¹⁰³ Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October*, 9 (Summer 1979), 50-64 (p. 50)

¹⁰⁴ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

grid that flattens and orders its chaotic elements into a meaningful narrative, ‘your own love story’.

This association between the city grid and GUIs is also suggested in *Taipei*. While travelling to a party by taxi, Paul imagines ‘another him walking toward the library’ and visualises these alternate selves as ‘two red dots through a silhouetted, aerial view of Manhattan’. He then

visualized the vibrating, squiggling, looping, acting line representing the three-dimensional movement, plotted in a cubic grid, of the dot of himself, accounting for the different speed and direction of each vessel of which he was a passenger—taxi, Earth, solar system, Milky Way, etc. Adding a fourth dimension, representing time, he visualized the patterned scribbling shooting off in one direction, with a slight wobble, miles from where it was seconds ago. [...] he briefly imagined being able to click on his trajectory to access his private experience, enlarging the dot of a coordinate until it could be explored like a planet.¹⁰⁷

The passage makes explicit the integration of Paul’s habitual use of interfaces into his imaginary. Movement through three-dimensional space is represented on a two-dimensional grid. Traditional verbs for cognitive processes—‘imagined’, ‘visualized’—operate alongside GUI actions—‘adding’, ‘enlarging’. This set of imaginary actions allows Paul to conceptualise himself as a digital object: as ‘imaginary, as mysterious and transitory and unfindable’ but nonetheless leaving a ‘concrete history’ of recorded data, ready for viewing and manipulation via a GUI.¹⁰⁸

Taipei and *Sympathy* construct their respectively flat styles through their representations of their digital native protagonists’ regular encounters with digital GUIs. These characters draw on their habitual usage of digital technologies to conceptualise new experiences, rather than approaching the digital itself as something new. *Taipei* draws on the temporal organising principles of the blogosphere as a structure for its underperformative narration. This overarching temporal structure provides a flat overlay that contains isolated instances of vivid

¹⁰⁷ Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 24-5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

description, flattening them into brief paraperformative figures of Paul's imagination. In *Sympathy*, meanwhile, Alice's paraperformative use of visual motifs reproduces the visual logic of the Instagram grid even as she attempts to thematise and criticise it. That both digital native protagonists search for broader organising principals in the specific layouts of GUIs points to their anxieties concerning their overdetermined presents and futures, which refuse to cohere to any understandable logic. The grid, for instance, becomes a form for flattening and therefore controlling a seemingly irrational spread of disparate elements. I now turn to analyse how the flattened aesthetics of each novel approach the ethical implications of their digital native protagonists' desires for mastery and control.

Flattened Difference

In some passages, *Taipei* and *Sympathy* resemble concerns expressed in *Purity* and *The Nix* about a corporatized digital media producing a generation trained in bad habits. At one point, Paul views technology as an abstraction whose function is to 'indiscriminately convert matter, animate or inanimate, into computerized matter for the sole purpose, it seemed, of increased functioning, until the universe was one computer'.¹⁰⁹ Paul describes technology as 'an abstraction, undetectable in concrete reality' which is 'accomplishing its concrete task' of 'converting a sufficient amount of matter into computerized matter for computers to be able to build themselves'.¹¹⁰ In *Sympathy*, Alice similarly suggests she was being followed by an 'evil spirit', or an alien, parasitic force.¹¹¹ She often describes Dwight in these terms, referencing 'the way he talked about manipulating *the user*, giving someone using one of his apps the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 166

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 167.

¹¹¹ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 165.

illusory sense of mastery and of choice’ and suggesting that ‘he knew how to exploit the psychological vulnerabilities of humans but that he was not quite human himself’.¹¹² Alice remarks that ‘back then I had no reason to mistrust the medium; it seemed reassuring, impersonal, objective, with no particular bias or axe to grind. Google was the arbiter of truth’.¹¹³ Both texts imply that computers impose a particular form on the world that best suits its operations and assert this to be truth.

They therefore reflect a prominent argument in new media theory that resembles Martin Heidegger’s critique of technological ‘enframing’ compared to more authentic modes of revealing Being, such as *poesis*.¹¹⁴ Modern technology reveals Being as ‘standing-reserve’, a collection of objects of our own creation for calculation and use. Thereby, it actually estranges us from Being, even as it reveals it.¹¹⁵ Extended to today, we might say that the mediation of the world and of social relations through the GUIs of digital devices reduces the world to a series of instrumentalised objects.

This reduction is evident in the descriptions of Paul’s relationships with women in *Taipei*, a traditional locus of affective intensity in Western literature. In one scene, Paul sits in a bar with Laura, ‘in a booth, side by side, facing a giant screen showing *Half Baked* on mute with subtitles’. A little later in the scene, the narration describes Laura speaking ‘in a sincere-seeming manner, staring at *Half Baked*, which Paul saw on her right eye as four to six pixels that sometimes changed colors’.¹¹⁶ This description of Laura ‘staring at’—rather than watching—the screen, is void of any sense of temporal movement or particularity and detaches *Half Baked* as the visual content of the screen from the spatially situated object of the television.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 166.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), pp. 3-35 (p. 12).

¹¹⁵ Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

The narration further draws on the visual logic of screens by collapsing the spatial relations between Paul, Laura and the ‘giant screen’ into a two dimensional rendering of Paul’s vision, isolating his ‘subjective’ visual impression of the screen in his perception of Laura’s eye from its ‘objective’ existence in the room by way of the digital, pixilated aesthetics.

This flattening is more explicitly associated with GUIs when Paul meets a journalist called Alethia and

read all he could find by Alethia on the internet, becoming more “obsessed,” [...] but he didn’t like her impersonal tone in their emails discussing their interview—which she’d spent eight hours transcribing—and, less than a week after they met, all he felt toward her, to his weak amusement, was an unexamined combination of indifference and vague resentment [...] it seemed, by the bureaucratic language and curtness of Alethia’s emails, like she also “hated” him, that they “hated” each other.¹¹⁷

Frank Guan has suggested that Lin’s choice of Alethia likely derives from Heidegger’s definition of *alethia* (ancient Greek for ‘truth’, or more accurately an ‘uncovering’ or ‘unconcealment’) as a ‘poetic antithesis or dismantling of [...] the experience of reality, or being, through industry, technology, and science, to an unholy, savage, and disorienting agglomeration of power’.¹¹⁸ For Guan, this passage indicates that, rather than delivering an uncovering of Being, Lin’s mediated communication with “Alethia” seems more a personified encounter with technology, a conceptual state of absolute transparency of self, than another human’.¹¹⁹ However, I contest that Paul’s encounter with Alethia’s emails signal less the failure of modern technology to reveal her being than the problematic nature of Paul’s drive to uncover it.

The apparent paucity of ‘face-to-face’ interactions among young people has provoked concerns about what Vincent Miller terms a ‘crisis of presence’, in which the enframing of the other through the ‘subject-centred, instrumental way of being’ promoted by digital media

¹¹⁷ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 128.

¹¹⁸ Frank Guan, ‘Nobody’s Protest Novel’, *n+1*, 20 (Autumn 2014) <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-20/reviews/nobodys-protest-novel/>> [accessed 5 December 2012]

¹¹⁹ Guan, ‘Nobody’s Protest Novel’.

reduces ‘our sense of moral and ethical responsibility’.¹²⁰ Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Miller argues that the lack of the ‘embodied presence’ of users of social media means it ‘can be denied a moral compulsion and can be encountered in purely instrumental terms’.¹²¹ However, Miller’s drawing together Heidegger’s notion of ‘enframing’ and Levinas’s notion of the ‘face-to-face’ encounter overlooks the fundamental disagreement between the two philosophies. For Levinas, ethical responsibility always precedes ontology: the problem lies not in technological mediation of the other’s ‘face’ but in how any face, whether mediated or not, is approached.¹²² Precisely through their reductions, the way their enframing disrupts existing modes of relating to the world and each other, new technologies point to the necessity for acknowledging our ethical responsibility to the other that transcends our relative proximity to them.

Berlant’s writing on underperformativity points to a similar reconsideration. For Berlant, flat affect is not a ‘failure’ of expression but rather

an enigma that induces data collection, event interpretation, and a kind of auratic assessment [...] It allows for an ethical scene of acknowledgement, curiosity, or attention from what can only be an intimate distance, even when a political scene of violence and anxiety in the space of difference [...] What happens there—a kind of inattention, neglect, refusal, liking, curiosity, desire, and projection—is TBA.¹²³

Precisely because it does not point to easily legible melodramatic reactions, flat affect provokes an acknowledgement of the alterity of the other that can lead to ethical action. It can be deployed as a mode of ‘refusal from below’, insofar as ‘biopolitical systems of supremacy often call on the problem populations—such as women, people of color, queers, and youth, but this too will

¹²⁰ Vincent Miller, ‘A Crisis of Presence: On-line Culture and Being in the World’, *Space and Polity*, 16.3 (2012), 265-285 (p. 281)

¹²¹ Vincent Miller, ‘A Crisis of Presence: On-line Culture and Being in the World’, *Space and Polity*, 16.3 (2012), 265-285 (p. 279).

¹²² See: Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Heidegger, Gagarin and Us’, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. by Seán Hand (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 231-4 (pp. 231-3). For a more sustained consideration of this argument, see: Richard A. Cohen, ‘Ethics and cybernetics: Levinasian reflections’, *Ethics and Information technology*, 2.1 (2000), 27-35

¹²³ Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, p. 196.

vary—to have emotions for the privileged, to be vulnerable, expressive, and satisfying in disturbance'.¹²⁴ In other words, a flattening produces the conditions for ethical responsibility.

If the protagonists of *Taipei* and *Sympathy* exhibit any 'development', it is in their ability to view the alterity of the other through the false mastery promised of digital interfaces, both visual and haptic. Sudjic has suggested that she draws her thoughts on sympathy, the eponymous theme of her novel, from empiricist philosopher David Hume.¹²⁵ As Paul Sagar summarises, Hume defines sympathy as 'the process of turning the "idea" of another's affective state into an "impression": we literally come to share each other's sentiments, transforming the imagined passions of another "into the very passion itself'.¹²⁶ In many ways, this more closely resembles *empathy*, a word often understood to denote a kind of simulated or projected experience of another's emotion, and one often associated with literature.¹²⁷ Criticising this idea, Jennifer Cooke notes that 'the imaginative violations [empathy] can entice us to [are] a dangerous way of obliterating the differences to which we need to urgently attend for that imagining to take place'.¹²⁸ By refashioning herself to the tastes expressed in Mizuko's social media posts, Alice attempts to flatten the differences between them—in age and in race—and engineer this sense of feeling-with. However, Mizuko appears to stubbornly refuse to feel with Alice: 'Mizuko rarely cried [...] sadness usually made her hard. As in impenetrable. God, when I write about her, every word does that. Turns to innuendo'.¹²⁹ Here, the flat affect exhibited by Mizuko, her impenetrability, becomes sexually charged for Alice as a desire to penetrate through the hard boundary of her alterity.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 197-8.

¹²⁵ Olivia Sudjic, 'Q&A with Olivia Sudjic' (interviewed by Deborah Kalb for *Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb*), 4 April 2017 <<http://deborahkalbbooks.blogspot.com/2017/04/q-with-olivia-sudjic.html>> [accessed 5 December 2012]

¹²⁶ Paul Sagar, 'Beyond sympathy: Smith's Rejection of Hume's Moral Theory', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25.4 (2017), 681-705 (p. 683).

¹²⁷ Julinna C. Oxley, *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy: Limits and Applications in Ethical Theory and Practice*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2011), p. 35.

¹²⁸ Jennifer Cooke, 'The Violations of Empathy', *New Formations*, 89/90 (Winter 2016), 153-168 (p. 168).

¹²⁹ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 134.

Alice's attempts to flatten differences extends to her experience of New York. She describes how, when she first arrives in New York, she 'couldn't get online for large portions of the day, which helped fuel the other addiction—the trancelike walking—and that when I arrived at somewhere, rarely by design, I saw only what was immediately apparent, not what Wikipedia said about it'.¹³⁰ Much later, when Alice has lost contact with Mizuko, she begins aimlessly walking around a New York under a 'pink sky'.¹³¹ Here, she recounts experiencing New York as a network, determining herself to be 'native now, a fluent speaker [...] I had learnt the city's language' and describing 'coded messages flying around [...] I saw who sent them and where they went and who read them', as if the content of these messages is irrelevant compared to the relationships they create between nodes in a stable system. She describes her knowledge of the city as, 'connect[ing] the sour smells of rubbish overflowing with the chlorine disinfectant from outside the table-dancing club with the place under the bridge which always smelt of urine, and it was a pattern'.¹³² Here Alice draws on a cybernetic imaginary to conceptualise herself as immersed within the world, as having penetrated through its surface to see its essential processes.

Alice's desire to penetrate and feel-with both Mizuko and New York more broadly becomes a way of managing her anxiety about her extended adolescence. She describes wanting to grasp or hold on to things to steady herself against a feeling 'after graduating, of being on the outside of some mystery, peeking in'.¹³³ When her pursuit of Mizuko's affection goes awry, she describes how 'each day I moved deeper and deeper into the white glow of Mizuko's world, gripped it harder and tighter in my hand. Each link in the chain led me to greater certainty'.¹³⁴ This desire to 'grip' Mizuko informs how Alice approaches her through the mediating interfaces

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 322.

¹³² Ibid., p. 343.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 232.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 232.

of touchscreen technologies. As Esther Leslie writes, touch screens extend ‘the sense of the interface as natural, as automatic as a shrug of the shoulder, a blink of an eye’.¹³⁵ It draws on a longer, ‘haptocentric’ assumption concerning the primacy of touch as an ‘immediate’ sense able to verify the presence of objects in reality.¹³⁶ We observe things visually via our desire to touch, and thereby ‘know’, them.¹³⁷ Before Alice introduces herself to Mizuko, she hesitates: ‘Up until now, it had all belonged to me. The information was contained. I held it—literally—in the palm of my hand’.¹³⁸ Alice conceptualises touch as a kind of certainty that can help ward off her anxiety about the overdetermined present. This sensation of holding or gripping Mizuko by way of technology structures Alice’s desire.

However, Alice’s devices for achieving this ‘grip’ all rely on the less fulfilling experience of tapping on a flat, smooth touchscreen. Byung-Chul Han suggests that a dominant ‘smooth’ consumer aesthetic caters for haptocentric desire, conveying ‘an agreeable feeling, which cannot be connected with any meaning or profound sense’.¹³⁹ For Han, the ‘smooth touchscreen’ is ‘a place of de-mystification and total consumption. It produces what one *likes*’.¹⁴⁰ The smooth is ‘liberated’ from meaning, offering a flat, ‘agreeable feeling’. Leslie similarly writes that touch screens flit ‘tokens of love, work, misery, horror, banality, kitsch [...] through the same system, contained within the dimensions of the small screen’.¹⁴¹ This means that ‘[w]hat appears on the screen, commanded by the fingers, loses in particularity, in order to become incoherent, equitable things, a generality, each substitutable by the other’.¹⁴²

¹³⁵ Esther Leslie, ‘Touch Screen’, in *Writing, Medium, Machine: Modern Technologies*, ed. by Sean Pryor and David Trotter (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016), 191-207, p. 192.

¹³⁶ Dave Boothroyd, ‘Touch, Time and Technics: Levinas and the Ethics of Haptic Communications’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 26.2-3 (2009), 330-345

¹³⁷ See: Claire Colebrook, ‘Hypo-Hyper-Hapto-Neuro-Mysticism’, *Parrhesia* 18 (2013), pp. 1-10 (p. 3)

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

¹³⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), e-book, p. 18.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁴¹ Leslie, ‘Touch Screen’, p. 193.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

In other words, the flatness of the touch screen drains things of their symbolic meaning and their affective charge, provoking instead a flat affect.

In *Sympathy*, the promise of mastery imbues the touchscreen with sexual intensity in Alice's narrative, as indicated in the lingering descriptions of them:

[Mizuko] too laid her device in her lap. It had a splintered screen despite a protective case designed like a slice of watermelon [...] she had long nails, filed to demonic points, with just the tips painted pink. She had to use her fingers lightly, flexed so that only the pads of them touched the screen. Still there was a slight click.¹⁴³

Such descriptions imbue the haptic sensation of the touch screen's flatness with a kind of sexual charge. The mention of Mizuko's fingernails, repeating the motif of pink imagery, a colour Alice remarks represents the 'merging of red and white, the two colours which in Shinto represent female and male. In the West, pink is pretty much for little girls and lesbians. To me, it is Mizuko and the colour of New York'.¹⁴⁴ Alice's narrative employs pink imagery when she speaks about merging, immersion or penetration. However, paradoxically, this 'merging' is achieved through the 'slight click' of a fingernail on the flat surface of a touch screen.

This paradox comes further into focus in one passage when, after Alice fails to contact Mizuko, the sense of mastery embodied by the smartphone falters:

I stared intently at my phone. It lay next to my head on the carpet. The longer I stared at it, the less I recognised what it was. It had turned into a stranger. A deaf-mute. Dark and resolute. Nothing about it suggested that it might be an object one could communicate with. Stroking it with my fingers or holding it to my head and trying to talk felt useless as talking into a stone.¹⁴⁵

Here the phone is encountered as an obstinate material object rather than a site of virtual potential, a piece of hardware without software. The hard flatness of the touch screen presents a tension between mastery and a feeling of powerlessness. As Leslie writes, the touch screen is both 'permeable' and 'proves to resist permeability, remaining always ever the same glass, the same hard barrier'. Touch's association with intimacy 'collapses into distance, be that the

¹⁴³ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, pp. 63-4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

inaccessibility of what is beneath the glass, the obscurity of its workings, or its dependence on remote and fragile systems.¹⁴⁶ The touch screen and touch interface appear to promise haptic mastery while exposing its limits. As Leslie continues, '[t]here is nothing more off than the touch-screen device without power. Its impenetrable darkness is a sign of that. Without it being on, touch and being touched threaten to wane'.¹⁴⁷

While touch screens bring the promise of mastery, they fail to produce pleasure and instead induce boredom or, when the screen fails, irritation. As Dave Boothroyd writes, the 'contact' of touch is '*at the same time* the separation of the toucher and the touched'.¹⁴⁸ One's skin is therefore an "'in-between" of the I/Other conjuncture [...] an "inter(sur)face"'.¹⁴⁹ The 'skinly boundary of the body' is therefore an 'ethical interface' and 'no more refers to the "biological" or "natural" skin than it does to any other possible affective materiality or "haptic medium" which might become a primary site of exposedness and vulnerability'.¹⁵⁰ Here, the physical device of the phone might become such an ethical inter(sur)face for experiencing the limits of one's subjectivity. Depicting protagonists as being of a digital native generation whose very perception and being-in-the-world is suffused with the logics of digital technology, *Taipei* and *Sympathy* wager that an ethics is required that can occur with and through digital interfaces rather than existing outside them.

The underperformativity of *Taipei* frequently draws attention to the failures of digital media by foregrounding the materiality of Paul's devices and the way he contorts his body to use them: 'lying on his back across two seats with knees bent, twice dropping his iPhone onto his face'; '[Paul] opened his MacBook—sideways, like a hardcover book—and looked at the

¹⁴⁶ Leslie, 'Touch Screen', p. 194.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Boothroyd, 'Touch, Time and Technics', p. 342.

¹⁴⁹ Dave Boothroyd, 'Touch, Time and Technics: Levinas and the Ethics of Haptic Communications', *Theory, Culture and Society* 26.2-3 (2009): 330-345 (p. 343)

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 343-4.

internet, lying on his side, with his right ear pressed into his pillow'.¹⁵¹ Elsewhere, machines breakdown or lose their appeal 'Paul's MacBook, which he'd spilled iced coffee on, was in Kansas being affordably repaired'; Paul 'searched his name in Alethia's email account—signed in on Rodrigo's tiny, malformed-looking, non-MacBook laptop'.¹⁵² This contrasts with Franzen's *Purity*, which links digital devices to the sexualised generational threat of Pip's body, 'braless under her sweatshirt after showering, digging her bare feet between sofa cushions while she lay and worked with the tablet device'.¹⁵³ In, *Taipei* bathetic descriptions of the physical reality of these technology break through the mastery promised by the interface, relocating technology into mundane scenes. This awkward undermining of mastery carries into Paul's sexual experiences. *Taipei* does not reference touch screens as directly as *Sympathy*, however the sense of the smooth is evoked nonetheless: 'Paul saw after being in the bathroom a few minutes, [Erin] was asleep with her mouth slightly open and her MacBook open on her stomach. [...] Paul lay beside Erin and meekly pawed her forearm three times, then briefly held some of her hands, which were surprisingly warm'.¹⁵⁴ Here, as he had with Laura, Paul paws at Erin's impenetrable surface in a scene suffused with technology. However, he cannot 'grip' her just as Alice can never 'grip' Mizuko: instead he can only grasp at 'some of her hands' and be surprised at their warmth, the way her alterity will always exceed his knowledge and expectation.

Throughout *Taipei*, Paul's sexual encounters become enmeshed with prescription drugs and digital technology: 'Paul scooted towards Erin, and they hugged five to ten seconds and began kissing and removing their clothes. Erin's eyes, whenever Paul looked, seemed to be tightly closed, which seemed like "not a good sign," as he'd read on her blog—or somewhere—

¹⁵¹ Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 128, 19.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁵³ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: 4th Estate, 2015), p. 224.

¹⁵⁴ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 130.

that she liked sex with “a lot of eye contact”¹⁵⁵ Here, Paul’s perception of Erin as an individual is exteriorized, structured by information on the blogosphere. In another scene, we are told that ‘they recorded Erin licking cocaine off Paul’s testicles and serving cocaine off an iPhone to [...] Erin snorting cocaine off her MacBook screen’.¹⁵⁶ In an earlier scene, after Paul and his romantic interest Laura combine Ambien and alcohol and watch ‘a foreign movie off her computer’, he dips in and out of consciousness, finding himself ‘kissing lazily, with eyes closed and long pauses, maybe sometimes asleep’. As they undress ‘weakly’, Laura saying “we just met” from what seemed like a nearby, inaccessible distance’, Paul ‘felt like he was trying to remove the surface of a glass bottle by pawing at it with oven mitts [...] hands that felt glossy and fingerless’.¹⁵⁷ Here, Paul’s ‘pawing’ at Laura, described as like ‘the surface of a glass bottle’, reflects the haptic sensation of a touch screen. However, rather than connoting mastery, it connotes confusion and incapacity. Introducing technological mediation into this scene foregrounds the way Laura’s alterity exceeds Paul’s control, yet in doing so it also transfers agency from Paul onto a technological device, excusing him of his role in the confused consent of the scene.

Alice and Paul’s encounters with interfaces therefore often confront them with the limitations of their knowledge and agency. As Michael Dieter writes, an interface ‘can be considered as a multi-scalar meeting point or threshold that both separates and holds together affective intensities and various more-than-human agencies’.¹⁵⁸ While interfaces are intended to make complex systems ‘useful’ to the user, they also put humans into ‘contact’ with nonhuman processes of the machine. Mark B. N. Hansen writes that, rather than extending

¹⁵⁵ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 133.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44-5.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Dieter, ‘Dark Patterns: Interface Design, Augmentation and Crisis’, in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, ed. by David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 163-178 (p. 165)

human perception, digital media produce ‘a temporal disjunction of perception from operability’, in which users encounter ‘a different level of temporalization than any ensuing and retrospectively constructed perceptual interface’.¹⁵⁹ The representations we interact with on GUIs mark the trace of operations that have already happened and that we lack any direct sensory access to. In *Sympathy*, Alice, notes that the buttons on Facebook’s GUI ‘didn’t exist except in the instant I’d brought them into being by touching the now-dark glass. They were, I recited [...] skeuomorphisms. Part of a gratifying simulacrum which overlaid an invisible field whose laws I couldn’t hope to understand, much less reverse’.¹⁶⁰ Her acknowledgement of her ignorance regarding digital operations does not resemble the victorious apprehension of the sublime so much as the lingering, flat fatigue and boredom of what Sianne Ngai terms the ‘stuplime’.¹⁶¹ These stuplime encounters with the flat opacity of GUIs expresses an awareness that technology enframes reality, promising mastery, all the while exceeding the limitations of human cognition,.

Sympathy opens with Alice ‘locked out’ of Mizuko’s Instagram profile: ‘[a] white wall had descended, blank except for a padlock symbol’.¹⁶² She tries to ‘follow’ Mizuko again, waiting to regain access:

When I wasn’t watching the white wall, I watched the grey bar. At least there time moved on. It didn’t tell the *actual* time, but how long had passed since she went off-grid [...] Once, I felt sure I’d seen her status morph from *last seen* to *online* and from *online* to the pendulous *typing*: a sign of life, like steam on a mirror. Then I had blinked hard, and again the grey bar, the headstone above the message thread, confirmed that she was not.¹⁶³

Rather than being integrated into her habits, the GUI embodies a blockage in Alice’s access, her description relying on skeuomorphs: the blank, white ‘wall’; the ‘steam on a mirror’; and the ‘headstone’ all draw on experiences of certain non-digital objects to describe the relations

¹⁵⁹ Mark B. N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), p. 43.

¹⁶⁰ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 337.

¹⁶¹ Sianne Ngai, ‘Stuplimity’, in *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 248-297.

¹⁶² Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 1.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

between digital objects, such as ‘padlock symbol’ and the ‘time’ on the ‘grey bar’. The GUI comes to flatten the complexity of Alice and Mizuko’s relationship into a handful of symbols. Alice does not apprehend the processes of mediation that stand between her and Mizuko, only the visual cues of the interface.

Alice confronts the limits of her perception in another scene, as she expresses incredulity at her lying next to Mizuko in bed, who before that day she had only followed online.

It felt strange that I couldn’t stretch out my hand through her body, push it out the other side, or turn her over in my palm. Until then, having spent hours on end, day after day, sliding my finger through her pictures, I had thought of her more like a liquid or a gas, but in fact she was a solid.¹⁶⁴

Alice goes on to write that she ‘found it hard to accept that the Mizuko I’d known in multiple miniatures was one person’.¹⁶⁵ In her presence, Alice is confronted with Mizuko’s solidity, the radical otherness or alterity of her being, whereas online she encounters her as a digital object. The narrating Alice describes her past desire to control Mizuko, with her everyday experiences of new media technologies structuring this desire: she apprehends Mizuko through the haptic phenomena of the smartphone, turning her in her palm and sliding her finger through her as a ‘liquid or gas’ that she controlled and modulated the flow of.

Nonetheless, and despite Alice’s paraperformative framing of the scene, mediation is not determinative here. After this event, Alice continues to manipulate Mizuko in her presence. In fact, it is only in her absence—as Alice looks back as a narrator—that she appears able to accept Mizuko’s fundamental alterity. She asserts the ‘one moral’ of her account to be that ‘the body is our natural barrier. There were lines I should not have crossed, and I did so without permission. I was always looking for correspondences, but meaning is found through difference’.¹⁶⁶ With this claim, Alice’s paraperformativity attempts to explain her fantasies of

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 399.

penetration, particularly her paying someone to translate Hiromi's suicide note. She states that 'I don't let myself sympathise—I think it would be wrong', chastising her younger self for doing so: 'it's like I have broken into a reality that is not mine'.¹⁶⁷ However, this is in bad faith. Alice reproduces the letter in full for her reader, stating that 'Its intended recipient should at least receive it' and that 'the law of opposites says don't send a message to your intended recipient if you don't want her to read it'.¹⁶⁸ That the note to Mizuko is published in English, rather than its original Japanese, signals Alice's paraperformativity, flattening the ethical didacticism of her claims. Alice's thematization of Hiromi's 'reality'—rendered legible in the letter—reflects the novel's broader paraperformative flattening of difference into a first-person literary narrative.

Despite demonstrating some self-awareness about Alice's attitudes towards Mizuko, there remain orientalist overtones to *Sympathy's* paraperformative flattening. Alice's narrative associates Japan with opacity, initially through her inability to remember living there as an infant: 'Nothing about moving to Tokyo is very clear, because Silvia did not come with us'.¹⁶⁹ Her fetishization of Japan stems from her desire to know more about her father, Mark, who once lived there. Its negative presence in Alice's memory makes Japan appear both inaccessible and attractive to her:

It was sifting through those things as a teenager—the beautiful ornaments, scrolls, and prints the dusty boxes contained, as well as all the packets of real photographs of me, nearly three, in front of temples and neon crossings—that started my fixation with Japan. I wanted to restore, maybe more like *invent*, the future suggested by their contents.¹⁷⁰

Here, Alice's orientalism becomes a means of alleviating anxiety about the future. On top of this, her narration's paraperformative use of cultural difference in this scene structures her past self's experience and sense of individuality, demonstrating how racial difference itself can be

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 399.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 392, 405.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

deployed as a technology. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes, '[Race] is a mode of revealing that renders everyone into a set of traits that are stored and transmitted; and also race is then seen as what allows man to endure through time as a set of unchanging characteristics'.¹⁷¹ Particularly in the case of *Sympathy*, a novel by a white author with non-white protagonists, racial oppression is aestheticized both by the characters within the action of the text and by the text itself in order to express a bourgeois anxiety about personal identity.

A younger Alice fetishizes Japanese culture, claiming its 'attention to detail 'is at the root of all the other impressive national stereotypes [...] being polite and respectful to strangers and their personal space, obeying rules, keeping a shared environment pristine, co-operating'.¹⁷² She applies this reduction to a system of rules for her own behaviour, 'sleeping on a mattress on the floor, lining up a series of strange rocks and wigs which stood for the whole universe outside my door'.¹⁷³ Her descriptions of Japan as an orderly system resonate with her descriptions of interfaces as imposing orderly grids onto chaos: 'As I waited for my case, black wheelie bags were going round like identical sushi, all neatly wrapped and shiny in plastic'.¹⁷⁴ She loves 'all the soothing acts of ceremony and little rituals, which made me feel like no moment was too small for me to hold and keep'.¹⁷⁵ The haptic imagery and mention of squares here again reflect her descriptions of touchscreens and interfaces, drawing on 'high-tech Orientalist' tropes that, as Wendy Chun writes, 'orient the reader to a technology-overloaded present/future [...] through the promise of readable difference'.¹⁷⁶ The observable difference of

¹⁷¹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'Race and/as Technology or How to Do Things to Race', in *Race after the Internet*, ed. by Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 38-60 (p. 40)

¹⁷² Sadjic, *Sympathy*, p. 53.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'Othering Space', *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 243-254 (p. 250)

Japanese culture renders it a flattened screen for Alice to project her individual desires and anxieties onto.

Sympathy enacts this orientalism in its paraperformative narration. Some of the novel's most prevalent visual motifs are the colours pink, white and black, whose associations with characters symbolise the overlapping love triangles of Alice (black), Mizuko (pink) and Rupert/Dwight/Robin (white). In one scene, Alice mentions 'these big black starfish with an eye in the middle of their gut' from the Japanese sci-fi film *Warning from Space* before describing an Instagram photo of Mizuko's 'cute' costume from this film: 'She has little pastel stars on her shoulders, a white jacket like a spacesuit, a white helmet, and a little antenna with a pink heart on top'.¹⁷⁷ Here, the Orientalism of Mizuko's characterisation anesthetizes and flattens race to contribute to the patterns and motifs that decorate the narrative. As in *Sad Girl Theory*, even as the paraperformative self-awareness of *Sympathy* gestures to the way that, in today's digitized society, various cultural signifiers are approached as disembodied and appropriated by a white hegemony, it enacts this very appropriation to decorate the fundamentally bourgeois thematization about personal agency and identity.¹⁷⁸ It is exemplary of the way in which, as Phillip Brian Harper writes, 'aspects of racially inflected cultures [...] will be deployed as seems appropriate to convey a sense of the general disorientation that is taken to characterize the postmodern condition'.¹⁷⁹ This is particularly apparent in Alice's status as black woman, which similarly plays into the novel's visual motifs. She describes how, when using a dating app, she is 'inundated with messages from white men saying that their girlfriends had always wanted to have sex with a black woman' before hoping to mimic Mizuko's sleeping position and asserting 'I had black magic. I closed my eyes, darkness, as if that might let me

¹⁷⁷ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 244.

¹⁷⁸ See: Alexander Galloway, 'Does the Whatever Speak?', *Race after the Internet*, ed. by Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 111-127 (p. 133)

¹⁷⁹ Phillip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 194.

see what she saw. A neon-pink 3 flickered and instantly disappeared again in the dark'.¹⁸⁰ Racial difference is flattened into a series of colour motifs, which, as in Instagram grids, empties them of social significance and foregrounds their decorative recurrence and juxtaposition.

Alice guesses from her own experience that her father wished to work in Japan '[t]o surround himself with people who didn't know him, couldn't disappoint him, strangers who didn't speak his language but whose ceremonial politeness reached across'.¹⁸¹ She then asserts that 'Tokyo was a place you could quite happily exist alone and be self-contained. It seemed to promise that it was *better* to be by yourself'.¹⁸² A similar notion is expressed in *Taipei* regarding the titular city. Paul imagines that 'moving alone to Taipei at an age like 51' would relieve him from social relationships, since 'his Mandarin wasn't fluent enough for conversations with strangers [...] he'd be pre-emptively estranged, secretly unfrienable'. Not only does he reproduce the language of social media to describe social relationships, but he further imagines that '[t]he unindividualized, shifting mass of everyone else would be a screen, distributed throughout the city, onto which he'd project the movie of his uninterrupted imagination'. Figuring himself as isolated before a 'screen' of others, he sees himself as being able to choose whether or not to view himself as 'part of the mass'. Idealising his relationship with others as like his relationship with a screen, he imagines himself feeling 'some kind of needless intimacy, not unlike being in the same room as a significant other and feeling affection without touching or speaking'. This distance will allow Paul

An earnest assembling of the backup life he'd sketched and constructed the blueprints and substructures for [...] the independent organization of a second, itinerant consciousness [...] The antlered, splashing, water-treading land animal of his first consciousness would sink to some lower region, in the lake of himself, where he would sometimes descend into sleep and experience its disintegrating particles'.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Subic, *Sympathy*, p. 336.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁸³ Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 15-16.

This paraperformative flight of fancy combines Paul's intuition of flatness with the promise of control, of being able to control his own becoming by introducing 'blueprints and substructures'. The new consciousness he desires to create through this dynamic is clean, calm and discrete from others, as suggested by the serene and muted image of 'being in the same room as a significant other' and its contrast with a more chaotic sense of his self, the 'antlered, splashing, water-treading land animal of his first consciousness'. Habitual encounters with the mediating logic of a screen or interface therefore allow both digital native protagonists to conceptualise their exit from a liminal, uncertain position between collective identities and instead retreat into an individuality of their own making.

In both novels, a generation's habitual uses of interfaces and touch screens, technologies that appear to promise users' mastery of complex systems, reflect fantasies of control and penetration, methods of navigating the overdetermined present that disregard ethical consideration of the other. Alice's high-tech Orientalism satirises what Chun describes as the 'promise of intimate knowledge, of sexual concourse with the "other," which renders it comprehensible and enjoyable, and, in many cases, this intimate knowledge is compensation for *lack* of mastery'.¹⁸⁴ When Alice ascribes 'fantasies of penetration' to *Shunga* prints, she acknowledges her 'Orientalist projections' onto Japanese culture.¹⁸⁵ She writes that Mizuko 'would tell me playfully that I had a Japan fetish, in a voice that sounded pink and soft, and sometimes she would say it like I was truly, *truly* sick'.¹⁸⁶ With the motif of pink also occurring during Alice's fantasy of merging with an environmental system, a link is drawn between Alice's habitual use of digital media and her desire to penetrate into Japanese culture via Mizuko. To Alice, Mizuko is the alluring cultural 'other' that nonetheless promises to explain

¹⁸⁴ Chun, 'Othering Space', p. 250.

¹⁸⁵ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 133.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

her own self. The narrating Alice's paraperformative orientalism projects onto racialized bodies a Western anxiety concerning modern technology's enframing of being.

Taipei's underperformativity does not enact this thematization, but rather uses the flatness of interfaces as a site for raising the ethical. Paul encounters the women in his life as flattened screens. Early in the novel, while attending a party with his girlfriend Michelle,

Paul, walking self-consciously toward her, remembered a night, early in their relationship, when he somehow hadn't expected her to enlarge in his vision as he approached where she'd stood (looking down at a flyer, one leg bent) in Think Coffee. The comical, bewildering fear—equally calming and surprising, amusing and foreboding—he'd felt as she rapidly and sort of ominously increased in size had characterized their first two months together.¹⁸⁷

Lin's underperformative prose itemises adjectives, draining Paul's memory of affective resonance. It also flattens spatial dimensions: approaching his girlfriend Michelle, whose static image is isolated in parentheses, Paul feels threatened by the visual effect of this image enlarging into a bodily presence, the illusory effect of three dimensions in a two-dimensional space. For the digital native perspective presented in *Taipei*, GUIs and face-to-face encounters are not opposites but overlap, troubling prior melodramatic conventions and searching for new ones.

In the novel's final passage, Paul sits on the toilet after turning on a bathroom tap and being startled by 'the rupture and crackling of water, its instantaneous column of binary variations'. He realizes that 'he had no concept of what water felt like until he touched it—cold, gasping, meticulous, aware'. However, this sense of immersive, authentic being-in-the-world that might otherwise be evoked by Paul's experience with water is pervaded by digital aesthetics as he notices 'the surface of things was shinier and more dimensional from greater pixilation'. Returning to his bedroom he is again startled, this time by 'Erin already moving, as if independent of his perception. He briefly discerned her movement as incremental—not continuous, but in frames per second [...] He wanted to move backward and close the door and

¹⁸⁷ Lin, *Taipei*, p. 8.

be alone again, in the bathroom, but Erin had already noticed him and, after a pause, distracted by her attention, he reciprocated her approach'.¹⁸⁸ Even Paul's realisation of Erin's alterity here is framed by the mediating language of film, which is itself a form of digital media for Paul and Erin, who produce films using a MacBook. This passage therefore finds ethical sensibility towards others by way of, rather than through avoiding, the apparently reductive flat surfaces of digital interfaces.

In a literary context that prizes representations of the 'new', *Taipei* and *Sympathy* eschew melodramatic conventions in order to embody the apparent flat affect of a generation of 'digital natives', representing their habitual familiarity with new media technologies as a coping mechanism against a backdrop of the overdetermined uncertainty of 'emergent adulthood'. They focus on individuals' encounters with the flat interfaces and touch screens they use to navigate urban landscapes, foregrounding the limits of these technologies for alleviating anxiety. They further criticise the use of technology to try and manipulate and control others, whether those be sexual partners or those designated culturally other. In contrast to *The Nix* and *Purity*, whose conclusions advocated for a withdrawal from the technological towards the ethical locale of the face-to-face encounter, *Taipei* and *Sympathy* appear hyperaware of the impossibility of such a withdrawal and instead seek emergent conceptualisations of the ethical that precedes mediation. However, while their flat aesthetics draw our attention towards the overdetermination of the present and the alterity of the other, *Taipei* and *Sympathy* make little effort to interrogate the structural underpinnings of the contemporary malaise they reproduce, instead gesturing to its complex overdetermination. Where these two novels deployed techno-generational frameworks to search for a fresh understanding of ethical responsibility between individuals that might survive its mediation

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 247-8.

through reductive digital interfaces, I now turn to consider a recent novel that embraces a digital native identity as a basis for enunciating a radical post-colonial politics

CHAPTER FOUR

Digitally Native: Technology and Survivance in *There There*

Upon suffering beyond suffering; the Red Nation shall rise again and it shall be a blessing for a sick world. A world filled with broken promises, selfishness and separations. A world longing for light again. I see a time of seven generations, when all the colors of mankind will gather under the sacred Tree of Life and the whole Earth will become one circle again.¹

Early in Tommy Orange's debut novel *There There*, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield reads this prophesy by Lakota leader Crazy Horse as her mother takes her to participate in the 1968 occupation of Alcatraz Island. In the years prior to the novel's 2018 publication, Indigenous people from numerous tribes and nations used invoked prophesy as a rallying call to protest the extension of the Dakota Access Pipeline under Lake Oahe. They symbolically identified the pipelines as the destructive 'black snake' of Lakota cosmology and themselves as the Seventh Generation destined to defeat it and restore the Earth, advancing Crazy Horse's prophesy alongside the Seventh Generation Principle that 'Indigenous communities must look seven generations ahead when considering the environmental impact of human actions'.² One way they spread this generational framing was through images, videos, poems and stories posted to social media under tags such as #NoDAPL and #sevengenerations.

¹ Tommy Orange, *There There* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018), p. 48.

² See: Lynn Schofield Clark and Angel Hinzo, 'Digital Survivance: Mediatization and the Sacred in the Tribal Digital Activism of the #NoDAPL Movement', *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 8.1 (2019), 76-104 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-00801005>> (p. 90); see also: Sail Elbein, 'The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock', *New York Times*, 21 January 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/magazine/the-youth-group-that-launched-a-movement-at-standing-rock.html>> [accessed 10 October 2019]; Joe Whittle, "'We opened eyes": at Standing Rock, my fellow Native Americans make history', *The Guardian*, 30 November 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/standing-rock-indigenous-people-history-north-dakota-access-pipeline-protest>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

Reporting described these tactics by mapping the Seventh Generation onto the categories of the American market mainstream, a *New Yorker* profile explaining that it ‘tracks roughly with millennials of all races, but they share their own unique history. [...] [They are] the first to have grown up free to be Indian. They are familiar with their ancestors’ scars but also fluent in mainstream American culture’.³ Marion Grau suggests that, in their online modes of organising, the Standing Rock protestors showed themselves to be ‘the “digital natives” nobody was thinking of when they coined that term’.⁴ As Lynn Schofield Clark and Angel Hinzo argue, this tactical use of social media constituted a form of ‘survivance’, which Gerald Vizenor defines as ‘an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent’.⁵ Survivance does not entail protecting or returning to a lost past, but rather ‘the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*, “to remain alive or in existence,” to outlive, persevere’.⁶ In response to the material threat of capitalist extraction, a self-identified generation used digital media technology to ensure the continued transmission of indigenous epistemologies, rather than their disruption.

In *There There*, Opal turns over the card from which she reads Crazy Horse’s prophesy to find ‘that picture you see everywhere, of the sad Indian-on-a-horse silhouette’.⁷ In its attempt to transcend this nostalgic yearning for a lost past available only as simulacra, Orange’s polyphonic, multigenerational novel *There There* parallels the tactics of the Seventh Generation by looking to digital technologies for indigenous survivance. Its chapters tell the interrelated

³ Elbein, ‘The Youth Group that Launched...’.

⁴ Marion Grau, “‘The Camp is a Ceremony’: Report from Standing Rock’, *Religion Dispatches*, 25 November 2016 <<http://religiondispatches.org/decolonizing-thanksgiving-at-standing-rock-a-black-friday-report/>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

⁵ Gerald Vizenor, ‘Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice’, in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. by Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. 1-23 (p. 1).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷ Orange, *There There*, p. 48.

stories of fourteen Native Americans in present-day Oakland, California, representing the gentrification of the Bay Area from the opposite side to *Private Citizens* and *Purity*. Between these chapters are a Prologue and Interlude, which thematically frame the chapters by connecting at a rapid pace the historical and contemporary violence committed against Native American peoples by white colonisers. These sections ground the novel's depictions of digital technology in longer histories of technological violence, from the use of firearms to 'blood quantum' measurements of indigeneity enforced by U.S. governments. The characters of *There There* are working-class 'natives' to Oakland who witness the influx of relatively affluent white tech workers. The youngest characters are natives in multiple senses: native to Oakland, native to America, and, having grown up using digital technologies, they are also 'digital natives'. The novel stages the overlap between these different senses, with the youngest characters approaching their Native American identity through their use of digital technologies. For instance, they access information about indigenous cultures online, using the internet to reconnect themselves to cultural heritages whose transmission across generations has been disrupted by colonial violence.

The novels examined in the previous chapters begin with the assumption that technologies pose a threat to what June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner describe as the precarious 'transmission of a common cultural heritage' over successive generations.⁸ Kathryn Bon Stockton observes that concern about 'millennials' and 'the touch-screen generation' express 'a countervailing worry that these children do *not* reproduce us' and that new technologies are to blame.⁹ *The Nix* and *Purity* both give technology a central role in the disruption of the transmission of a cultural heritage as a kind of infection that threatens the cultural institutions

⁸ June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generational Consciousness, Narrative and Politics* (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002), p. 4.

⁹ Kathryn Bon Stockton, 'If Queer Children Were a Video Game', *Queer Game Studies*, ed. by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017), pp. 225-238 (p. 228)

of American society. As I argued in Chapter One, this techno-generational framework obscures the origins of technological capitalism within that residual culture. There is no such obfuscation regarding the cultural heritage under threat in *There There*. Orange positions digital technologies within the broader history of colonial violence, in which technologies of war and governance targeted the bodies and cultural practices of Native Americans to eliminate their cultural traditions. It therefore cuts through the hype and catastrophism surrounding generational discourse about digital natives by re-contextualising the term in the struggle against the continuing violence of imperialism.

Despite being born in 1982, Orange is rarely (if ever) labelled a ‘millennial’, unlike the other young authors I have examined thus far. This reflects the fact that, as Reniqua Allen observes, a mainstream cultural focus on the diminishing returns on certain privileges among ‘millennials’ has aligned the generational identity with a white, middle-class hegemony.¹⁰ Rebecca Liu similarly observes in Western popular culture ‘an archetypal Young Millennial Woman – pretty, white, cisgender, and tortured enough to be interesting but not enough to be repulsive’.¹¹ She suggests that this archetype assumes a universal ‘relatability’, a generational ‘we’ that ‘functions not so much as a unifying call to arms but a convenient erasure of difference’.¹² Such analyses challenge the coherence of generational identity. Allen describes ‘[the black millennial’s] journey of tentative steps forwards and horrific setbacks [...] complicating the whole notion of generational change that we are used to ascribing to non-black people, in which a particular cohort is perceived as being fundamentally different from its

¹⁰ See: Reniqua Allen, *It Was All a Dream: A Generation Confronts the Broken Promise to Black America* (New York: Nation Books, 2019), p. 6.

¹¹ Rebecca Liu, ‘The Making of a Millennial Woman’, *Another Gaze*, 12 June 2019 <<http://www.anothergaze.com/making-millennial-woman-feminist-capitalist-fleabag-girls-sally-rooney-lena-dunham-unlikeable-female-character-relatable/>> [accessed 1 August 2019], n. pag.

¹² *Ibid.*, n. pag.

predecessors'.¹³ Nevertheless, while both these writers point out numerous deficiencies, they ultimately view some value in shared generational identity by opting to reclaim and correct the 'millennial' archetype rather than dismiss it. In *There There*, Orange draws on some of the tropes surrounding the 'millennial' generation, however the narrative ultimately subordinates them to a different generational logic.

As a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma, profiles and reviews of *There There* frequently identify Orange as part of a 'new generation' of Native American writers, alongside Chee Brossy, Grace Randolph, b: william bearhart, Julian Whitehead, Terese Marie Mailhot and others.¹⁴ The previous literary generation is considered to have emerged alongside a political reformulation of indigenous identity coalescing around the formation of the American Indian Movement, known for reclaiming and occupying Wounded Knee in 1973 and Alcatraz Island in 1968-71.¹⁵ Profiles of Orange's 'new' generation often define it in relation to an 'indigenous-centred' Master of Fine Arts program at the Institute of American Indian Arts, establishment in 2012, which contrasts itself with what Mailhot calls 'the white MFA' by centring indigenous voices.¹⁶ The historical situation of this generation include cuts to federal funding for Native programs, as well as a renewed shift towards 'termination' and

¹³ Reniqua Allen, 'The Missing Black Millennial', *The New Republic*, 20 February 2019

<<https://newrepublic.com/article/153122/missing-black-millennial>> [accessed 6 August 2019], n. pag.;

¹⁴ Julian Brave NoiseCat (Secwepemc/St'at'imc), 'Tommy Orange and the New Native Renaissance', *The Paris Review*, 29 June 2018 <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/29/tommy-orange-and-the-new-native-renaissance/>> [accessed 20 March 2019]. This generational conceptualisation of Native American literary culture derives from Kenneth Lincoln's 1983 book *Native American Renaissance*, which describes a generation of post-war Native authors at once 'outside the great traditions of Western literature' yet 'shaped by what they recognized and relearned from contemporary literature'. Whereas Native American texts had long been omitted from literary studies through 'tribal dislocation and mistranslation', 'misconceptions about literature' and 'cultural indifference', the 'new nativism' of twentieth-century modernism opened doors into publication for a generation of Native writers including Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor and Louise Erdrich. See: Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1983), pp 7; 3.

¹⁵ Alan R Velie and A. Robert Lee, 'Introduction', in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement*, ed. by Alan R Velie and A. Robert Lee (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), pp. 3-15 (p. 4)

¹⁶ Anne Helen Petersen, 'These Writers Are Launching A New Wave Of Native American Literature', *BuzzFeed*, 22 February 2018, <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/dont-f-with-tommy-and-terese#.padDzlpK2>> [accessed 20 March 2019]

‘non-dependence’ as advocated for by the Native American Coalition.¹⁷ It also includes the ecological impact of accelerated industrial production on indigenous populations, which gained mainstream coverage due to the protests at Standing Rock.¹⁸

As Rebecca Tillett writes, this notion of successive Native literary generations tends to ‘obscure the often specifically political histories of Indian oratory and writings upon which many Native writers are drawing’.¹⁹ Whereas external commentators often mistake the extension of mainstream publishing opportunities to Native authors for a spontaneous generational flowering of creativity, writers such as Orange reorient the generation into a vehicle for survivance. *There There* pointedly eschews reservation-based stories to represent Native communities in metropolises, a focus Orange himself suggests is ‘definitely generational, but I think even within our generation there are different camps’.²⁰ Here, the generation provides a loose form for conceptualising changing attitudes to indigeneity among Native Americans. One vector for this change is individuals’ ‘relationship[s] with technology’, which Orange sees as challenging against the perception of Native people as ‘past tense’ while also cautiously predicting that this relationship will ‘get more intense as we move towards this scary future’.²¹ Such a statement would suggest that *There There* espouses a technological pessimism, however it nonetheless identifies some potential for an understanding of indigeneity developed with and through—but not *by*—digital technology, using the generation as a form to introduce futurist impulses into its narrative.

¹⁷ Kenneth W. Townsend, *First Americans: A History of Native Peoples*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 611-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 606-7.

¹⁹ Rebecca Tillett, ‘On The Cutting Edge: Leslie Marmon Silko’, in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement*, ed. by Alan R Velie and A. Robert Lee (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), pp. 74-87 (p. 86)

²⁰ Tommy Orange, ‘Powell’s Interview: Tommy Orange, Author of “There There”’, [interviewed by Kate Laubernds for *PowellsBooks.Blog*] <<https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/powells-interview-tommy-orange-author-of-there-there>> [accessed 20 March 2019]

²¹ Tommy Orange, ‘Meet Tommy Orange’, [interviewed by Linda Lenhoff for *Diablo Magazine*] <<http://www.diablog.com/July-2018/Meet-Tommy-Orange/>> [accessed 17 May 2019]

In this final chapter, I analyse the ways in which *There There* constructs an alternative techno-generational framework around the ambivalent potentialities of the digital native. My argument will focus on *There There* while also returning to reconsider the themes from previous chapters in the light of Orange's postcolonial thematization of the 'digital native'. I begin by examining how *There There* presents the internet as an environment or mode of being that proves relevant to generational claims to indigeneity. I then analyse the novel's representations of encounters between characters of different generations and new digital technologies such as the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, or 'drone', which echo both modes of neo-colonial violence and techniques of resistance. Finally, I will suggest that *There There* identifies certain potentials within the burgeoning technology of digital fabrication, or '3D printing', even as this technology provides the material basis for the violent climax of the novel. I argue that, in contrast to the technologically-induced cultural schisms that define generations in the other novels I have analysed so far, *There There* employs the generation as a form to conceptualise how new technologies might contribute to historical continuities and differences in the ongoing project of Native American survivance.

Digital Indigeneity

In *There There*, references to the cultural traditions of indigenous tribes and nations of North America intertwine with the literary and popular culture of the United States. The older characters look upon this younger generation and their use of digital media with attitudes ranging from disappointment to bemusement to hope as the narrative style shifts between its many characters' perspectives with each chapter. Preceding and between these chapters, the Prelude and Interlude detail the physical and cultural violence that Euro-American colonists continue to perpetrate against Native Americans. These essayistic passages foreground the

interlinking of each character's stories through family relation, friendship or chance encounter, and how they fatally converge at the fictional Big Oakland Powwow at the novel's climax. In the short closing chapters, many of the named characters are killed or injured by stray bullets after an attempt by some of the younger male characters to steal the Oakland powwow prize money with 3D-printed firearms goes awry. Therefore, while *There There* aims to construct a relatively positive techno-generational framework, it also depicts digital technologies' residual capacities for extending colonial violence.

This ambivalence towards technologies is encapsulated in the idea one character, Lucas Oxendale, has for a sci-fi film:

It'll be in the near future. I'm gonna have an alien technology colonize America. We'll think we made it up. Like it's ours. Over time we'll merge with the technology, we'll become like androids, and we'll lose the ability to recognize each other. The way we used to look. Our old ways. We won't even really consider ourselves half-breeds, half aliens, because we'll think it's our technology. Then I'm gonna have a half-breed hero rise up, inspire what's left of the humans to move back to nature. Get away from technology, get our old way of life back. Become human again like we used to be. [...] The alien colonizers win of course. We'll only think we won by getting back to nature, back to the Stone Age.²²

This brief outline allegorises the European colonisation of the Americas and their subjugation of Lucas's indigenous ancestors. Initially, with the near-future Americans merging with the alien technology and forgetting their old ways, it suggests that native peoples' use of colonisers' technologies played a significant role in destroying indigenous cultures. Moreover, this change proves irreversible: the half-breed hero and his/her people 'only think' they return to nature and humanity by abandoning the technology. The end reveals that the implicitly non-technological indigenous past the hero seeks to return to is a 'Stone Age', a simulacrum that is itself shaped by the colonial present. With its disavowal of any nostalgia for an inaccessible pre-colonial nature, Lucas's film idea reflects *There There*'s broader exploration into appropriating the often-oppressive tools of twenty-first-century technoculture for post-colonial resistance. The

²² Orange, *There There*, p. 31.

novel considers a series of digital technologies—from the internet to the drone to the 3D-printer—as producing modes of being that continue to displace Native American cultures. However, it also suggests that such technologies might contain novel potentials for defending and extending the transmission of a Native cultural heritage.

Lucas's idea reformulates the prophesy of Sweet Medicine in the Cheyenne oral tradition.²³ Having instructed the Cheyenne people in their sacred laws, Sweet Medicine delivers a warning at the end of his life that strangers, bringing new tools and ways of life, will gradually destroy their culture. These 'Earth Men', 'light in skin' with 'clipped hair',²⁴ can 'take thunder [...] and light their houses', 'fly up into the air',²⁵ travel from "'blue ridge to blue ridge" in less than one day's time',²⁶ and carry 'sticks spitting fire', a 'strange and powerful weapon [...] [which] shall be noisy and from it will be sent something like a pebble, which will be deadly'.²⁷ With these they will kill animals and the land, 'more and more babies being born, more and more people coming'.²⁸ They will also bring an unfamiliar animal, the horse, which will allow the Cheyenne to get to 'that blue vision way off in the hills [...] in a short time'.²⁹ In one interpretation of the prophesy, the Cheyenne 'must learn to use' the horse, as it will 'help you in many ways [...] so fear him not'.³⁰ In others, the horse will cause the Cheyenne to be

²³ Here I condense various retellings of the Sweet Medicine prophesy from recorded sources spanning 40 years. It would be misguided to try and derive any fundamental or 'essential' structure to this story from these particular retellings, however, as the reinterpretation of the story by Native American storytellers over time is central to its significance. I therefore only present aspects of these retellings pertinent to understanding Lucas's allegory in *There There*, rather than asserting the proper 'meaning' of the story, which it is not my place to judge.

²⁴ John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty, *A Cheyenne Voice: The Complete John Stands In Timber Interviews* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), pp. 97-98

²⁵ Fred Last Bull, qtd. in John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, 2nd edn (Yale University Press, 1998), p. vi.

²⁶ Patrick M. Mendoza, Ann Strange Owl-Raben and Nico Strange Owl, *Four Great Rivers to Cross: Cheyenne History, Culture, and Traditions* (Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 1998), p. 16.

²⁷ Kurt Kaltreider, *American Indian Prophecies: Conversations with Chasing Deer* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 1998), pp. 30-32.

²⁸ Members of the Strange Owl family, 'The Life and Death of Sweet Medicine', recorded by Richard Edoes, in *American Indian Myths and Legends*, ed. by Richard Edoes and Alfonzo Ortiz (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 199-205 (p. 204); Fred Last Bull, qtd. in Stands In Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, p. vi.

²⁹ Stands In Timber and Liberty, *A Cheyenne Voice*, pp. 97-98.

³⁰ Patrick M. Mendoza, Ann Strange Owl-Raben and Nico Strange Owl, *Four Great Rivers to Cross*, p. 16.

‘gradually changed’ and abandon their religion: ‘With the coming of this animal, your decline shall begin’.³¹ In this storytelling tradition, the horse constitutes an alien technology that permanently changes Cheyenne culture over generations. Depending on the interpretation, it embodies either a promise or a curse. In alluding to this story by way of Lucas’s film about a colonizing technology, *There There* offers its own interpretation and complication to this ambivalent prophesy. In particular, the novel suggests that adaption to new technologies might be a significant part of what it means to be Native.

Indigeneity remains a complex and contested concept among scholars and Native American peoples because, in practice, efforts to provide a clear definition are most often used to limit the number of those who claim certain indigenous rights, status and entitlements under U.S. law.³² As Paul Lyons writes, measures of ‘authenticity’ are never ‘disinterested’ because they are deployable both in the ‘court of public opinion’ and in the legal courts during hearings concerning welfare benefits or tribal sovereignty.³³ *There There* challenges limiting definitions by offering a radically open and heterogeneous representation of indigeneity, one that reconceives of how Native peoples relate to environments. Arnold Krupat writes that an ‘indigenist’ critical perspective links tribal identities or worldviews to ‘a particular relation to the earth’.³⁴ Louise Erdrich echoes this view when she writes that ‘[i]n a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened

³¹ Stands In Timber and Liberty, *A Cheyenne Voice*, pp. 97-98; Kaltreider, *American Indian Prophecies*, pp. 30-32.

³² Rebecca Tsosie, ‘The New Challenge to Native Identity: An Essay on “Indigeneity” and “Whiteness”’, *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy*, 18 (January 2005), 55-98
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol18/iss1/5/> [accessed 4 December 2019] (p. 59)

³³ Paul Lyons, ‘Questions about the Question of “Authenticity”’: Notes on Mo’olelo Hawai’i and the Struggle for Pono’, in *Native Authenticity: Transnational Perspectives on Native American Literary Studies*, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 19-38 (p. 24).

³⁴ Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2002), p. 10.

by a sense of group and family history'.³⁵ In this understanding, one's indigenous identity derives from an unbroken ancestral connection to a land. The generation often serves as a measure for this connection to place. However, its use differs between and even within cultures, as Krupat observes:

In Hawai'i, for example, some claim indigenesness after seven generations of resident, while others would require 150. In the south-west, the Hop claim to indigenesness rests on a presence dating back some hundred generations. But Navajo people in place for perhaps thirty generations can hardly imagine themselves as anything but indigenous to the landscape they know so well, and to which they are "spiritually attached".³⁶

The generation lends definition to the depth of one's connection to a place. However, 'indigenesness as defined by literal relation to landscape [is] more difficult to achieve for those Native writers who grew up in the cities, or far from the home-places of their people'.³⁷ A presence in a particular place spanning tens or even hundreds of generations proves an impossibly high-bar for those whose ancestors' displacement has been enforced over centuries by settler-colonial governments.

There There details the effects of this contestation over authentic indigenity. The Interlude describes 'Indians from eight different tribes with quarter-blood quantum requirement and so not federally recognized Indian kinds of Indians'.³⁸ Edwin, who studied Native American literature while disconnected from his tribal affiliation, struggles with 'how to be' when '[e]very possible way I think it might look for me to say I'm Native seems wrong'.³⁹ After encountering a white woman who sees him wearing regalia and asks whether he is 'A Native American', Tony observes that 'People don't want any more than [...] [to] talk about how they saw a real Native American boy on a train, that they still exist'.⁴⁰ The Prologue depicts

³⁵ Louise Erdrich, 'Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place', *New York Times*, 28 July 1985 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/28/books/where-i-ought-to-be-a-writer-s-sense-of-place.html>> [accessed 23 May 2019]

³⁶ Krupat, *Red Matters*, p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Orange, *There There*, p. 136,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

this nostalgia for the ‘lost’ Native America as being disseminated through America’s broadcast media, epitomized in a test pattern broadcast between 1939 and 1970s depicting the head of an ‘Indian, surrounded by circles that looked like sights through riflescopes’.⁴¹ These reductive, violent-nostalgic images of the ‘pure’ Native American produce the ‘authenticity’ that indigenous people must appeal to as ‘the representative Native subject of claims to sovereignty’.⁴² This paradoxical relationship with the image of the past is experienced by Orvil in *There There*, who dresses ‘like an Indian [...] because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian’.⁴³

There There locates indigeneity in urbanity to contrast itself with reservation-based conceptualisations prevalent in Native American Renaissance literature. As Dene states, following Lucas, ‘all we got right now are reservation stories, and shitty versions from outdated history textbooks’.⁴⁴ The Prologue notes that many Native Americans actively moved to cities ‘to escape the reservation’ where ‘silence just makes the sound of your brain on fire that much more pronounced’.⁴⁵ It ends by stating that ‘reservations aren’t traditional, but nothing is original [...] everything is new and doomed [...] Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere and nowhere’.⁴⁶ It thereby argues that a particular piece of reservation land parcelled out by the U.S. government—usually because it was low in exploitable resources—provides a severely limited basis for a conceptualisation of indigeneity. As an alternative it explores the environments and experiences of Native Americans living today as grounds for a renewed conceptualisation of indigeneity.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴² Deborah L. Madsen, ‘Introduction: Contemporary Discourses on “Indianness”’, in *Native Authenticity: Transnational Perspectives on Native American Literary Studies*, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 1-18 (p. 12)

⁴³ Orange, *There There*, p. 122.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 149.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

The narrative works through this paradox by offering numerous alternatives to the stereotypes of Native peoples prevalent in American popular culture, challenging the grounds on which reparations and justice are discussed and materialised in U.S. society. To challenge these stereotypes, it expresses the heterogeneity of Native American identity. As reviewers observed, Orange is one of many ‘urban rather than reservation-based writers, who explicitly claim a mixed-blood status and a heritage constituted by the complex history of Native American colonization and conquest’.⁴⁷ *There There* begins with a brief, uncompromising history of centuries of violence directed at Native Americans by European colonisers, before describing the migration of many Native Americans from reservation land to urban centres over the course of the Twentieth Century, whether through active choice or coercion under U.S. government policies of assimilation and termination. It defends these ‘Urban Indians’ from accusations of defeat or inauthenticity, criticising measures of authenticity from blood quantum to reservation living. Instead, it affirms a wide variety of experiences and identities as authentically indigenous, and in doing so renews demands on existing power to take responsibility and address the continued subjugation of indigenous peoples—by funding basic social programs to support Native communities both on and off reservation land, for example.

Throughout *There There*, what it means to be Native American remains heterogeneous, contradictory and subject to constant revision. The Interlude describes individuals converging on the Big Oakland Powwow ‘alone and in pairs [...] We are young people and old, every kind of Indian in between’.⁴⁸ The first-person plural draws disparate experiences together into a communality without a defining identity, foregrounding and celebrating a simultaneous heterogeneity and communality among twenty-first century indigenous people under continued colonial rule. Here, being Native is somewhat performative, produced through the convergence

⁴⁷ Madsen, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Orange, *There There*, p. 135.

of disparate individuals itself rather than existing beforehand through a single, essential connection to blood or land. The form of the novel itself produces a type of network effect regarding its numerous characters, their different lives overlapping and binding to one another as they converge on the powwow. Often these overlaps are aided by the network effects of the internet: Edwin eventually finds his job at a Native Center on online job listings and his estranged father on Facebook. Whereas the coincidences in *Purity* and *Sympathy* are sinister, occurring through individual characters' manipulation of one another using digital media, in *There There* they are the result of characters' active efforts to maintain a pan-Native community in America.

Generational frameworks help Orange conceptualise this heterogeneity of Native American identity. The Prologue states that '[w]e were not Urban Indians' upon first moving to cities, thereby placing a meaningful distinction between those who move to the city and those who are born there.⁴⁹ Labels such as 'sidewalk Indians [...] citified, superficial, inauthentic, cultureless refugees' are contested by broadening the concept of nature to include 'Urbanity': 'An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth. Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and non-living thing from the earth'.⁵⁰ In contrast to a European separation of 'nature' or 'the earth' from 'mankind' and 'artifice', Orange presents the city as natural. His characters are indigenous not in spite of but as a result of their familiarity with the city. They 'know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers' and 'ride buses, trains, and cars across, over and under concrete plains'.⁵¹ This is not an 'assimilation, absorption, erasure' because 'the city made us new and we made it ours' as they 'found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork'.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 8-9.

The city provides a site for building and renewing indigenous cultural practices rather than erasing them.

Through this understanding of the urban as natural, the Prologue extends its techno-generational structuring of indigeneity to encompass ‘digital natives’: ‘Plenty of us are urban now. If not because we live in cities, then because we live on the internet. In the high-rise of multiple browser windows’.⁵³ With this comment, *There There* makes a move unusual in twenty-first-century literature. As with the urban environment, it frames the internet as a natural site, rather than as an inauthentic or alien space that disrupts one’s connection to nature. The youngest characters of the novel are uncertain how to relate to their ancestors and ethnic community when centuries of violence and forced displacement has distanced them from their ancestral homelands and cultural traditions. With indigeneity often defined by a relation to place, such a generational dislocation damages the perceived authenticity of their Native identity. In stating that many young Native peoples ‘live on the internet’, the Prologue complicates the link between cultural authenticity and geography by suggesting that the internet might be understood as a meaningful part of the place that his young characters are indigenous to. Following this framing, the narrative of *There There* largely represents the internet as a lived reality that proves meaningful to its characters in a positive way.

Framing the internet as a place with cultural meaning in this way contrasts with the vacuity of digital media as represented by *Purity*, *The Nix* and *Private Citizens*, as well as the flatness that has defined digital media in *Taipei*, *Sympathy* and *Surveys*. In some respects, this framing of the digital as place recalls 1980s and 90s cultural constructions of ‘cyberspace’, a term often criticised for implying what Nathan Jurgenson has called ‘digital dualism’: the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

notion that the ‘virtual’ is a separate and distinct realm to the ‘real’.⁵⁴ Employing space as a metaphor to conceive of the digital implies that it lacks any prior spatial reality, obscuring the large-scale material infrastructure from consumer hardware to data banks that sustains our experiences with digital media. Yet this relative disinterest in the material infrastructure of digital media is hardly unique to *There There*. Furthermore, as will be explored below, the novel explores some of the spatial existence of the digital in the gentrification of Oakland spurred on by the tech industry. Nevertheless, the early spatial conceptualisation of the digital in order to elaborate its open understanding of indigeneity obscures some of the material existence of the digital in physical, political systems.

In its embrace of ‘the digital’, *There There* satirises the kind of Old-Man perspective employed in *The Nix* and *Purity*. Bill Davis, a Vietnam war veteran who enjoys reading novels, bemoans the attitude he perceives in the Oakland youth:

He can’t stand what the youth are allowed to become these days. Coddled babies, all of them, with no trace of skin, no toughness left. There’s something wrong about all of it. Something about the ever-present phone glow on their faces, or the too-fast way they tap their phones, their gender-fluid fashion choices, their hyper-PC gentle way of being while lacking all social graces and old-world manners and politeness. Edwin’s this way too. Tech-savvy, sure, but when it comes to the real cold hard gritty world outside, beyond the screen, without the screen, he’s a baby.⁵⁵

This derision of a ‘coddled’ generation’s uncanny ‘savviness’ with technology betrays an anxiety about the reduced status of a residual culture. Bill’s concern over ‘old-world manners’ is ironic, lent significance by the violent nostalgia detailed in the Prologue. In believing these ‘old-world manners’ should be instilled in his partner’s son, Edwin, Bill echoes settler-colonial attempts to impose ‘old world’ ideas over the indigenous communities of the implied ‘new world’. His mockery for a younger generation’s techn-savviness is undermined pages later

⁵⁴ Nathan Jurgenson, ‘Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality’, *Cyborgology*, 13 September 2011 <<https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/09/13/digital-dualism-and-the-fallacy-of-web-objectivity/>> [accessed 11 June 2019]

⁵⁵ Orange, *There There*, p. 82.

when he is startled by a drone, his ‘real cold hard gritty world’ revealed to bear little relation to twenty-first century Oakland.

In *Purity*, the absence of Pip’s father stands in for the decline of a humanist culture that the novel’s Old-Man perspective views as under threat by a cultural fascination with new technologies. In *There There*, Bill expresses similar concerns, viewing himself as a surrogate father-figure for Edwin. He states that ‘the young people have taken over the place’ who do not care about ‘the integrity of the game’.⁵⁶ However, what Edwin views as the ‘forced nature’ of Bill’s attempts to toughen him up do not adequately account for this perceived lack, as suggested in an episode in which Edwin gets into an argument with a war veteran on a bus.⁵⁷ Unlike *Purity*, Edwin’s story suggests that the intergenerational transmission of a culture requires more than a transaction within the family unit. When he does get in touch with his biological father, Harvey, via Facebook, he finds him to be friendly and interested but somewhat detached. Harvey is not characterised as a role-model either, introduced to the reader as the man who sexually assaulted Jacquie Red Feather when they were teenagers. In the end, Edwin achieves a sense of belonging to Native culture through his active role organising a powwow on a community level, rather than receiving it through paternalistic instruction.

Instead of escaping the digital, then, Orange’s multigenerational narrative explores how indigenous cultures might be practiced with, and therefore formed by, digital technologies. Marc Prensky’s initial definition of the ‘digital native’ drew on terms from language-acquisition to liken them to a second-generation immigrant who had learned to ‘integrate’ rather than reproduce customs of the ‘old country’.⁵⁸ This assertion implies that assimilation into a hegemonic culture more ‘up-to-date’ with technological progression is ‘smart’ and a self-

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 82-3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵⁸ Marc Prensky, ‘Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1’, *On the Horizon*, 5.9 (Septembr/October 2001), pp. 1, 3-6, (p. 4).

evidential good. Siân Bayne and Jen Ross note that this ‘culturally specific, and racist, understanding of the character of immigrants’ frames them as always of the past.⁵⁹ The technological framework of *There There* takes this formulation and upends it, considering what the digital native means in the context of a culture that has not emigrated but has rather been invaded and subjugated. Orange’s young characters of *There There* are indigenous to America, and their familiarity with consumer digital media technologies does not merely signal their assimilation into a hegemonic culture. Instead they use these technologies as new tools for maintaining community and declaring their indigeneity.

This notion of digital indigeneity further contrasts with the sense of rootlessness expressed in the other novels I have examined in this thesis. In *Taipei*, Paul is a ‘second-generation’ immigrant, his parents both moving to the U.S. from Taiwan and since returning there, with Paul remaining in New York. We are told that when ‘Paul visited his parents twelve months ago’ it ‘had been his first time in Taiwan in almost five years’.⁶⁰ The city of Taipei feels alien to him: ‘he had no concept of Taipei’s size or shape or layout, only an unreliable memory of how many minutes by car separated certain relatives’ apartments and department stores’.⁶¹ Rather than describe the fashion district to his girlfriend Erin from memory, he shows her ‘its Wikipedia page [...] and typed “ximending” in Google Images’.⁶² Paul’s memory of Taipei is exteriorized into the Internet. He expresses little sense of belonging to or interest in his Taiwanese ancestry, and when he visits his fascination with digital media devices alienates him from his parents. The internet therefore becomes a way by which Paul maintains a distance

⁵⁹ Siân Bayne and Jen Ross, ““Digital Native” and “Digital Immigrant” Discourses: A Critique’, in *Digital Difference: Perspectives on Online Learning*, ed. by Ray Land and Siân Bayne (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), p. 159-179, p. 166.

⁶⁰ Tao Lin, *Taipei* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013), p. 163.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163-4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

from his spatial environment and a means by which he permanently blocks cultural transmission from his parents to himself.

In *Sympathy*, Alice moves to the U.K. from New York as a child then returns as an adult, only to discover she feels no belonging to either country. Soon after arriving, she flips through a marketing booklet for an ‘incubator space for digital nomads. I hadn’t ever heard of a digital nomad. I hadn’t yet been called a Digital Native’.⁶³ While Alice ostensibly dismisses the term ‘digital native’, the idea of being a ‘nomad’ troubles her. The novel imbues this term ‘nomad’ with added significance when Mizuko states ‘she was going to write a story about my dad [...] called “The Nomad”’ and when they meet with Mizuko’s estranged father—unbeknownst to Mizuko—at a hotel restaurant called the ‘NoMad’.⁶⁴ Alice attempts to overcome her rootlessness at the novel’s denouement by settling in the UK, literally planting roots by starting ‘New Leaf Gardening’. This proves unstable, however. Her obsession with Mizuko returns, and, as she wanders through images of New York on Google Street View, she feels ‘my own Walden Pond, seeping out of me as if I’d sprung a leak. *Self* soaked into everything around me’.⁶⁵ Even at the novel’s conclusion, the digital remains a site that uproots Alice from her attachment to a particular environment.

Surveys similarly depicts nomadism as a dimension of being a digital native, taking place in ‘non-places’, sensorially interchangeable post-industrial spaces characterised by similar mass-produced designs unrelated to their local environment.⁶⁶ However Colleen finds comfort in these non-places: ‘just turning into the mall block felt solid, like I was clocking in’.⁶⁷ When she becomes an online celebrity and finds herself ‘in another hotel room, on a tour that

⁶³ Olivia Sudjic, *Sympathy* (London: ONE, 2017), p. 117.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.285; 310.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

⁶⁶ Marc Augé, *Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995)

⁶⁷ Natasha Stagg, *Surveys* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016), p. 27.

started up the coast then crossed over', she states that 'it is always calm. I don't fear the invisible layers of vomit and cum on the mattress. I just want something to lie down on, and four walls that don't move'.⁶⁸ Despite, or even because of their interchangeability, these non-places provide a sense of solidity missing in the data-driven activity of her online life. Moreover, Colleen's attempts to abandon her nomadic lifestyle provide no stability. When she returns to Orlando toward the end of the novel, she finds that it is not 'the one I grew up in', and contrasts its slowness with the speed of being online, where 'we can go on forever [...] stretched, in every direction at once'.⁶⁹ Ultimately, then, in *Surveys* the nomadic lifestyle of the internet celebrity proves no more devoid of a sense of belonging than her family home.

Compared to *There There*, these novels depict digital technologies as uprooting or distancing individuals from connecting with a particular place. Those characters who are framed as being digital natives have never had a sense of a deep connection to anywhere except the metaphorical space of the internet. In the case of *Taipei* and *Sympathy*, this sense of dislocation is intensified by the characters' international movement. The urban environment is represented through a digital imaginary, drawing on the organising principles of interfaces designed by corporations. These novels therefore read their characters' lack of connection with place through their general flattened aesthetics, suggesting that it has become primarily mediated through digital media that diminishes local cultural significance. In *Surveys*, however, Colleen feels disconnected from both online platforms, whose modes of measuring her popularity elude her, and the offline urban environments she lived in prior to her online fame.

In contrast, the digital natives' use of digital media in *There There* does not contribute to a sense of dislocation or rootlessness but rather becomes a vector for the maintaining and planting of roots, for building a sense of indigeneity rather than drift. Moreover, far from simply

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 82; 84.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 174.

being a symptom of ‘the digital’, it is the relative privilege of Paul, Alice and Colleen that produces their digital nomadism. They are able to move from place to place due to inherited wealth or wealth gained through online fame, able to move into gentrifying urban environments with a sense of assumed safety, and neither have they any dependents that might prevent them from this constant uprooting. The Native residents of Oakland in *There There* cannot simply up and leave like Colleen and Alice without placing themselves or others in positions of vulnerability. The techno-generational frameworks of *Taipei*, *Surveys* and *Sympathy* obfuscate these questions of privilege in order to prioritise digital media usage as a distinct site of social disruption.

A Hard, Fast Future

Reviews of *There There* often note its references to contemporary technoculture approvingly, one stating that ‘[i]nstead of the silent Indian narrator of the film *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* we have characters obsessed by the technological singularity and the fact that 3D printers can be programmed to make 3D printers. There’s no hey, ho Tonto here’.⁷⁰ Another notes that ‘one might expect a historical piece of fiction. But [...] the novel is so contemporary that it even includes the 3D printing of guns, flying drones and VR headsets’.⁷¹ Reading references to digital media in this way, as solely signifying the ‘up-to-date’-ness of its characters, obscures how they fit into the novel’s broader thematisation of colonisation. As is suggested by the ambivalence expressed in Lucas’s film idea, digital technologies are neither benign nor neutral in *There There*. Even as the novel constructs a positive indigenist techno-generational

⁷⁰ Stuart Kelly, ‘Book review: *There There*, by Tommy Orange’, *The Scotsman*, 19 July 2018 <<https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/books/book-review-there-there-by-tommy-orange-1-4770944>> [accessed 23 May 2019]

⁷¹ T. A. Kongsgaard, ‘Tommy Orange, *There There*’, *The High Arts Review*, 27 June 2018 <<https://thehigharts.com/tommy-orange-there-there/>> [accessed 23 May 2019]

framework, it acknowledges that technological ‘progress’ has involved further subjugation of indigenous people. As Vine Deloria Jr. writes, ‘[f]or much of the first four hundred years of contact, technology dealt Indians the hardest blows’, overpowering Native tribes militarily and distorting their spiritual interpretations of nature.⁷²

The Prologue and Interlude of *There There* accordingly locate imperialist technologies within the longer history of settler colonialism in the Americas. The blinkered speed of technological capitalism reduced the lands and people of the Americas to resources to be exploited, uncompromising in its view of progress. The Prologue describes Euro-American settler colonists’ violence against indigenous peoples in terms of technological speed: ‘When they first came for us with their bullets, we didn’t stop moving even though the bullets moved twice as fast as the sound of our screams [...] The bullets were premonitions, ghosts from dreams of a hard, fast future’.⁷³ In one sense, this speed is dreamt up by the colonists who seek ever greater wealth borne by waves of new industrial technologies. In another, it is a premonition of Natives, as in Sweet Medicine’s prophesy regarding the ‘Earth Men’ and their ‘firesticks’. The Prologue states that European colonisers ‘took everything and ground it down to dust as fine as gunpowder, they fired their guns into the air in victory and the strays flew into the nothingness’.⁷⁴ These stray bullets are literalised at the climax of the novel, fired by young Native characters, digital natives, who use a 3D printer to create firearms and steal prize money from the Big Oakland Powwow.

Elsewhere, *There There* depicts technologies colonising indigenous cultures in ways other than explicit violence. Edwin Black describes ‘the open window my mind has become ever since the internet got inside it, made me a part of it’.⁷⁵ A colonising internet imposes certain

⁷² Vine Deloria Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997) p. 4.

⁷³ Orange, *There There*, p. 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

social norms, Edwin worrying if his Facebook profile picture is ‘the socially unacceptable kind of sad’.⁷⁶ Later, he predicts the coming ‘singularity [...] an eventuality, and inevitability, that we’d end up merging with artificial intelligence. Once we saw that it was superior, once it asserted itself as superior, we would need to adapt, to merge so as not to be swallowed, taken over’.⁷⁷ On one level, Edwin’s concern about the singularity is symptomatic of his addiction to obscure internet theories. However, coming directly after his account of his unstable Native identity, the passage exemplifies the novel’s ambivalence about the digital. The internet appears to reduce Edwin’s abilities: ‘I depend on the internet for recall now [...] Remembering itself is becoming old-fashioned’.⁷⁸ Exteriorizing his memory, the internet provides a prosthetic that Edwin views as a ‘sick addiction’ slowly destroying his body—he is overweight and constipated due to spending all his time online.⁷⁹ Thematically, then, Edwin’s use of the internet initially runs parallel to the alcoholism and substance abuse affecting several other characters.

Compared to the Prologue, the depiction of the internet as addictive in Edwin’s narrative is familiar terrain for twenty-first-century fiction, appearing across the novels I have examined in this thesis. It most closely resembles that of the character referred to by the online pseudonym ‘Pwnage’ in Nathan Hill’s *The Nix*. Relating in scientific detail Pwnage’s bodily degeneration and near-death as he plays the fictional videogame *Elfscape* for days without pause, the narrator suggesting this might have been avoided ‘if his dorsolateral prefrontal cortex weren’t completely shut down, this brain area being responsible for decision-making and emotion control and which went dormant in the brains of heavy multitaskers during what might be called “information overload”’.⁸⁰ Pwnage’s addiction parallels Laura’s reliance on the social media platform ‘iFeel’ in the same novel, both being symptoms of these characters’ desires to escape

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁰ Nathan Hill, *The Nix* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 491.

the exhausting complexity of the twenty-first-century American socioeconomic system. However, the broader framing of this addiction in *There There* differs to that offered in *The Nix*. With its Prologue and Interlude firmly situating its narrative in the long history of imperialism, *There There* considers the psychological effects of internet addiction as one element in the broader, longstanding, systemic marginalisation of indigenous people by the U.S. government. Moreover, while several characters of *The Nix* escape the perils of new technologies by turning back to older media such as the novel, Orange's characters lack a clear residual culture to retreat into.

The narratives of technological progress that *The Nix* challenge emerge in enlightenment philosophy, placing indigenous populations at one end of a timeline and 'modern civilization' at another. As Deloria Jr. observes, 'tribal people with a crude mechanical technology illustrated the early kinds of human societies and ancient Near Eastern peoples became the predecessors of the modern industrial state, moderated eventually by the innate gentility of the Anglo-Saxon genes'.⁸¹ In the nineteenth-century, following centuries of missionaries' attempts to convert indigenous people to Christianity and its associated moral and social orders, the U.S. state pursued policies that would force indigenous peoples to assimilate into its national culture. Townsend describes how young Native Americans were 'forcibly removed from their families, from their communities, from their culture' and sent to schools that allowed 'only the most minimal contact between parents and child'.⁸² This forced separation alienated those educated in Euro-American disciplines and values from their parents and the rest of their tribe. This effort to impose 'progress' on indigenous populations necessitated breaking the transmission of indigenous customs and beliefs, producing a stark generational divide between them and the older members of their tribes. The MFA programme

⁸¹ Deloria Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies*, p. 49.

⁸² Townsend, *First Americans*, p. 368.

at the Institute of American Indian Arts constitutes one effort to create a form of education that does not reproduce such a break.

The term ‘digital native’ usually plays into this enlightenment teleology in which technological ‘progress’ is both inevitable and desirable. Michael Thomas describes the term as ‘a type of technoevangelism, helping to make straight the roads of the global knowledge economy’.⁸³ Attempts to export information technology to remote communities as part of what Lisa Parks refers to as ‘development ideology’, constitutes a ‘blind faith’ that digital media technologies can “modernize” and “enhance” the lives of anyone fortunate enough to come within their reach’.⁸⁴ This ideology ‘sets the tone for many projects seeking to extend digital technologies to the so called ‘other 3 billion’—the mass of people still without Internet access who are alternatively imagined as a technologically disenfranchised class or a giant untapped market.⁸⁵ Digital apparatuses of capitalist production strive to identify ‘digital natives’ and ‘immigrants’ where there were not any previously, imposing a Eurocentric narrative of technological progress on indigenous cultures in order to extend its extractive apparatus. As Richard Sandford notes, the ‘digital native’ metaphor frames the ‘digital’ as ‘a bold new world that somehow sprang into being from nothing, a place into which young people were somehow magically born’.⁸⁶ To contest this, he introduces the term ‘digital colonist’ to describe a generation who created the infrastructure upon which digital culture is produced and imposed upon a younger generation.⁸⁷

⁸³ Michael Thomas, ‘Technology, Education, and the Discourse of the Digital Native: Between Evangelists and Dissenters’, in *Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, technology and the New Literacies*, ed. by Michael Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-11, (p. 4).

⁸⁴ Lisa Parks, ‘Water, Energy, Access: Materializing the Internet in Rural Zambia’ in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, ed. by Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 115-136 (p. 116).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁸⁶ Richard Sandford, ‘Digital post-colonialism’, *Flux*, 14 December 2006 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070309113420/http://flux.futurelab.org.uk/2006/12/14/digital-post-colonialism/>> [accessed 13 May 2019], n. pag.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, n. pag.

In *There There*, Thomas witnesses an ongoing digital colonisation in the ‘hipsters and artists who hover and buzz around Oakland like flies, America’s white suburban vanilla youth, searching for some invisible thing Oakland might give them, street cred or inner-city inspiration’.⁸⁸ In parallel to a generation of Native Americans exploring new notions of indigeneity, the Bay Area tech industry produces new waves of colonisation, displacing and extracting cultural capital from Urban Indians. Edwin depicts this in a short story in which a man, Phil, finds his home ‘fills up with squatters, hipsters, corporate tech nerds, and every kind of young white person imaginable’.⁸⁹ When Dene arrives at the interview for his Arts grant, he meets Rob, a young white man who approvingly describes Oakland as ‘dirt cheap’.⁹⁰ Asserting that ‘no one’s really from here’, Rob quotes Gertrude Stein’s description of Oakland: ‘There is no there there’.⁹¹ Dene, however, has ‘looked up the quote in its original context [...] that so much development had happened [in Oakland]’ and observes that ‘for Native people in this country, all over the Americas, it’s been developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory’.⁹² In representing the digital as both an experiential base for a new indignity and a material infrastructure installed for colonial extraction, *There There* complicates the framing of the digital native as neutral, inevitable ‘progress’.

Orange’s depiction of a gentrifying Oakland offers an alternative perspective on the material impact of technological progress than other novels examined in this thesis. Early in *Purity*, Pip lives in Oakland in a house under threat of repossession. At the end of the novel, Dreyfuss, the owner, is reluctant to accept Pip’s offer to rescue the house with her unexpected inheritance, a stubbornness represented sympathetically as a misplaced idealism. Accepting

⁸⁸ Orange, *There There*, p. 215.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

Pip's individual gift is 'realistic', while political or communal actions are ineffective: Dreyfuss's parasitic housemates "'assaulted" a real-estate agent attempting to show Dreyfuss's house to prospective buyers, and crowdfunding by their anarchist friends had yet to raise enough bail for both of them'.⁹³ Here, gentrification is an unfortunate fact of life that one must prove individually and psychologically resilient to. At other points the Old-Man perspective makes references to 'nice racially diverse Oakland people' and 'angry young women in Oakland' as metonym's for an inauthentic technological progressivism whose presence contrasts the 'ordinary, seldom very heavy' Bay Area weather and climate, as well as the 'freeway' and 'industrial East Bay bottomlands'.⁹⁴ *Purity* thereby places technological progressivism into conflict with an authentic, pre-digital America represented by sedate industrial landscapes rather than communities of people. *There There* challenges this kind of opposition by identifying continuities between earlier colonial practices and twenty-first-century patterns of gentrification.

Private Citizens, whose protagonists settle in the Bay Area after attending Stanford University, offers a depiction of gentrification from its opposite end. Linda chases the 'street cred' of metropolises, favouring the 'tremendous vile heart' of New York over the 'ukulele-strumming cuddle party' of a gentrified San Francisco: 'Haight-Ashbury radicalism had been flushed out in a thunderous enema of tourist cash; the Mission was annexed by Silicon Valley'.⁹⁵ This reflects Linda's nomadic individualism, with her noting that, 'one city was as good as another—it was what happened when people shared'.⁹⁶ As in *There There*, the novel locates the mid-00s tech boom to previous patterns of capitalism and settler colonialism. Cory tells Will that '[i]t's cliché to say, but tech companies have ruined the Mission [District]', and

⁹³ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: 4th Estate, 2015), p. 520.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 56; 259; 517; 64.

⁹⁵ Tony Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, pp. 2; 4

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

he replies ‘Gold rushes have always been “ruining” San Francisco. Ruining it with money and jobs’.⁹⁷ This unresolved stand-off exemplifies the novel’s reluctance to take a political stance, further demonstrated when Cory is later pushed into hypocrisy as her community event in Dolores Park becomes a corporate event, contributing to the area’s gentrification. Meanwhile, Linda’s nomadic lifestyle ultimately ends in her injuring herself and relying on her friends. *Private Citizens* therefore uses the gentrification of San Francisco to construct the individual hubris of its characters. *There There*, in contrast, examines gentrification and colonialism as concrete and contested material relations, rather than as devices in service to more abstracted notion of individual identity.

One particularly ambivalent technology depicted in *There There* is a drone purchased by Daniel to oversee the heist of the Oakland Powwow at the novel’s conclusion. The drone is a military technology developed for surveillance, distraction and long-range attack by the U.S. and other powers’ of the Global North. Its use in the ongoing ‘war on terror’ has depended on ‘extraordinarily broad and vague rules of targeting and engagement [...] in effect turn[ing] large parts of the world into a free-fire zone’.⁹⁸ Regularly used by the militaries of the global north to target individuals in the global south, it has also been used to surveille targets within the borders of America.⁹⁹ More recently, drones have become consumer technologies, broadening the frontiers of contemporary surveillance culture. In *There There*, militarist origins remain embedded in these consumer drones. Opal ‘hears a sound up above somewhere. A nasty buzz slicing through the air. She looks up and sees a drone, then looks around to see who might be flying it. When she doesn’t see anyone, she puts her earphones back in’.¹⁰⁰ The drone’s ‘slicing’

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

⁹⁸ Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 73.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 87-90.

¹⁰⁰ Orange, *There There*, p. 162.

and ‘angry buzz’, its apparent autonomy and its unexplained presence in mundane settings together constitute an ambient threat of colonial violence.

The drone and its violent connotations are simultaneously threatening and somewhat banal to Opal, who, unable to do anything about its presence, tries to ignore it. Drone warfare forces assimilation to a particular understanding of ‘normalcy’, with Air Force intelligence searching for deviations from ‘patterns of life’ as indicators of threat to national security.¹⁰¹ Those who do not cohere to a pattern marked normal are a target. As Stephen Graham argues, the belief that drone operators have a God-like omnipotence obscures the situated and limited frameworks through which they interpret the behaviour of the individuals they surveille: ‘this imperialist apparatus of knowledge can turn any aspects of normal, civilian life into clear evidence that they are watching “insurgents” or “terrorists” who can be fired upon at will’.¹⁰² This constitutes a mode of what Grégoire Chamayou calls ‘winged panoptics’, in which subjects are implicitly forced to behave in ways that will not be read as abnormal by ‘Western’ operators.¹⁰³ Drones embody the threats of the hard, fast future sought out by the U.S. government—and those of other nations of the Global North—at the expense of peoples of the Americas and across the world.

There There presents this imperialist panoptics at work when Bill encounters ‘[a] drone plane like they’d been flying into terrorist hideouts and caves in the Middle East’.¹⁰⁴ Mapping the gaze of the drone onto the relationship between the U.S. government and its enemies, Bill’s initial reaction to it is to defend himself, ‘swat[ting] the drone with his trash-grabber. The thing floats back, then turns around and floats where he can’t see it’.¹⁰⁵ The experience of being unable to see the drone is unnerving. He ‘tries to keep it in his scope, but it’s hard while walking,

¹⁰¹ Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (New York: The New Press, 2015), p. 43.

¹⁰² Graham, *Vertical*, p. 79.

¹⁰³ Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁴ Orange, *There There*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

the binoculars shake, and the thing keeps moving'.¹⁰⁶ He feels energized to 'destroy the thing', however and manages to hit it once, before it 'flies straight up, quick, ten and twenty, fifty feet in seconds' and out of view.¹⁰⁷ Here, the drone is encountered as a discrete and sentient machine rather than an assemblage involving a human pilot and a distributed technical apparatus. This reifies an asymmetrical power dynamic in which Bill is the object of a gaze and unable to direct a gaze back.

In these invocations of the military origins of the consumer drone, *There There* literalizes its claim in the Prologue that 'you can't leave war once you've been', relocating the U.S government's betrayal of Native American Vietnam veterans in the contemporary technological context of drone warfare.¹⁰⁸ However, Orange's focus on colonial history runs the risk of resembling Hill's framing of twenty-first century political developments as inevitable recurrences of past ones in *The Nix*, obscuring what might be new about the digital. As Grégoire Chamayou notes, situating the drone in a longer colonial history has in fact been a rhetorical tactic employed by apologists for asymmetrical drone warfare: '[t]he spectre of colonial violence is tacitly called upon in order to revitalize present violence by setting it within the tranquil continuity of past tradition, and then it is immediately covered up, for no attempt is made to spell out the real content of that tradition'.¹⁰⁹ Orange avoids this with the blunt register of the Prologue and its visceral account of colonial violence which is frequently alluded to throughout the narrative, making violence rather than tradition the context for the drone's appearance.

This attention to the real content of the colonial tradition from which drone technology emerges are missing in *Sympathy*, when Alice uses the drone as a metaphor: 'It seemed that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 94.

something in my feet, controlled remotely, had brought me to a halt. My brain, calmly hovering above like a drone, had not made the command and was surprised by it'.¹¹⁰ Here, the novel uses the drone to create a dualist metaphor for free will: the mind controls the body just as the human operator controls the drone. However, in this case, the transmission has been hijacked by some unseen subject. Drone imagery recurs later, taking on a generational dimension as Alice explores the Columbia University campus, where her parents worked:

I wanted to weep for future generations [...] I sensed that the strange, disembodied controller had come back, the disapproving drone operator or whoever it was, pulling me upright [...] It was certainly conservative. *It's your duty to your ancestors. Doesn't matter whether they're directly yours or not. It's the principle of the thing.*¹¹¹

Drone surveillance, based in interpreting normal and abnormal behaviour, is used as a way of conceptualising a forced transmission of cultural heritage on an individual. The drone is abstracted from its contemporary neo-colonial context and used to embody more abstract themes, such as determinism, standing in for a generalised uncanny experience of a technological present.

In *There There*, Daniel views an ambiguous potential in the drone when he purchases it alongside a virtual reality headset: 'he'd read that flying one with a camera and live feed, with VR goggles, felt like flying'.¹¹² Benjamin Noys has argued that the drone promotes 'a field of theological metaphysics, embodying dreams of transcendence and destruction that have haunted the Western imagination'.¹¹³ Daniel desires to transcend the materiality of his body, a sense of power and an affective thrill that Daniel re-experiences by watching the video of Bill 'over and over. Especially the part where the guy almost got me. Shit was exciting. Real. Like I'd been there'.¹¹⁴ Here, the novel evokes the ways in which piloting a drone 'blur[s] the line

¹¹⁰ Sudjic, *Sympathy*, p. 49

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹¹² Orange, *There There*, p. 195.

¹¹³ Benjamin Noys, 'Drone Metaphysics', *Culture Machine*, 16 (2015), 1-22, (p. 2)

¹¹⁴ Orange, *There There*, p. 196.

separating weapons systems and entertainment systems'.¹¹⁵ The drone offers Daniel an entertaining experience of transcending the limits of the human body yet seemingly unable to transcend the implications of ongoing imperialism and drone technology's application within it. However, this reading is complicated by Daniel's experience of encountering Bill when flying the drone: 'What could he do? Nothing. I flew almost all the way up to the guy's face, and he tried to reach out to the drone. He got mad. I realized I was messing with him. I shouldn't have'.¹¹⁶ Despite blurring boundaries between violence and entertainment, piloting the drone does not block Daniel's sense of empathy for Bill.

Whereas the older characters Opal and Bill view the drone from afar and contextualise it within their broader experience of violence, Daniel, a digital native, approaches it as a technology for protection. He initially buys the drone in order oversee the powwow and make sure that Octavio's heist 'went all right. Otherwise it was on me'.¹¹⁷ Ultimately, however, he uses the drone as an improvised weapon against Carlos when the participants begin to turn on one another, 'crashing [it] down on his head' as Carlos shoots Octavio in the back.¹¹⁸ The drone therefore fulfils its symbolic resonance as a weapon, albeit in an unexpected way. This final adaption of the drone resembles the appropriation of the technology by activists Standing Rock to counter-surveil the U.S state and provide counter-evidence to their claims concerning clashes between them and protestors.¹¹⁹ Searching for resonances and uses for the drone beyond those dictated by imperialism, *There There* enacts what Sarah Tuck has described as 'a view from above [that] connotes various ways of thinking beyond borders [and] that has as yet no

¹¹⁵ Graham, *Vertical*, p. 69

¹¹⁶ Orange, *There There*, p. 195.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹¹⁹ See: Sara Rafasky, 'Standing Rock and the Future of Drone Activism and Journalism', *Witness Media Lab*, 2 November 2017 <<https://witness.org/standing-rock-drone-activism-journalism/>> [accessed 16 June 2019]; See also: J. D. Schnepf, 'Unsettling Aerial Surveillance: Surveillance Studies after Standing Rock', *Surveillance & Society*, 17.5 (2019) <<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/article/view/13480>> [accessed 13 December 2019]

viable political, social and economic framework, even as it glances at the world as other to the prerequisites of the nation state'.¹²⁰ In this way, *There There* maintains an ambiguous stance towards the new technology despite locating it within a longer history of colonial violence. As will be explored further in the next section, it demonstrates an alertness to potentials for continued violence while also exploring possibilities for an appropriation of technologies that have long been used to target Native Americans.

To (re)construct the 'digital native' as a viable political subject, *There There* sets out to locate it within—and then identify ways to detach it from—the enlightenment narrative of technological progress used by successive U.S. governments to justify policies of forced assimilation. As exemplified by the consumer drone, the digital technologies from which the younger characters of *There There* interpret their indigeneity are haunted by longer patterns of colonial displacement and violence. However, Orange's novel differs from the others I have examined, which go no further than critiquing the utopian delusions of a technological progressivism, by asking how these digital futures might be recontextualised by way of alternative cultural milieus to those produced by the capitalist state. *There There* searches for ways to separate technologies from the socioeconomic relations that drive imperialist violence and relocate them in altogether different trajectories as tools for liberation. It constructs its notion of digital indigeneity as a trajectory for appropriating technologies for practices of indigenous survivance.

¹²⁰ Sarah Tuck, 'Drone Vision and Protest', *photographies*, 11.2-3 (2018), 169-175 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2018.1445020>> (p. 172)

Survivance Technics

Challenging a reliance on ancient Greek philosophical notions of *technē* in prominent philosophical critiques of modern technology, Yuk Hui offers an entirely different understanding of technics from a Chinese philosophical tradition. He suggests that different understandings of technics emerge alongside the different cultures' *cosmologies*: the relations and moral ordering of the universe implicit in the 'everyday practice' of that culture.¹²¹ However, Euro-American technological thought has expanded across cultures under historical colonialism and the 'neo-colonialism' of global capitalism. As Hui writes, 'while it is insufficient to simply revive the traditional metaphysics, it is crucial we *start* from it in order to seek ways other than affirmative Prometheanism or neo-colonial critique to think and challenge global technological hegemony'.¹²² As indicated in its exploration of Urbanity, *There There* is similarly uninterested in reviving a lost past but, as I will argue, seeks to break through colonial applications of technology into a future borne on a new survivance technics. As the narrative *There There* progresses through its various focalizations, the use of digital technologies by the younger characters works through a tension between their emergence within an oppressive colonial history and their potential for alternative uses.

A flashback to Tony's childhood at the end of *There There* provides an analogy for the novel's reconceptualization of indigeneity. As a child, working through his disappointment at the death of Optimus Prime at the end of the 1986 animated film *Transformers*, Tony conceives of an alternate ending in which 'Optimus Prime say[s], "We're made of metal, made hard, able to take it. We were made to transform'.¹²³ The scene suggests that conceptualisations of what

¹²¹ Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), p. 21.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹²³ Orange, *There There*, p. 290.

it means to be Native are ongoing rather than fixed, a mode of survivance rather than a mark of disappearance. In its elaboration of an open understanding of 'Indian-ness', *There There* is an example of what Vizenor terms 'survival stories':

renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance.¹²⁴

Survival stories do not resurrect lost traditions but rather the everyday practices that elude the efforts of colonial governance and sustain a culture over generations. *There There* locates its elaboration of an indigenous technics in this ongoing survivance, rather than in past cultural milieus that prove impossible to access following centuries of settler colonial rule.

There There is full of examples of survivance. For instance, Edwin describes his interest in the music of A Tribe Called Red, who

make electronic music with samples from powwow drum groups. It's the most modern, or most postmodern, form of Indigenous music I've heard that's both traditional and new-sounding. The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it's stuck in the past. The catch, or the double bind about the whole thing is this: If it isn't pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And if it is stuck in tradition, in the past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous people living now, how can it be modern?¹²⁵

There There works with this question without offering a definitive answer, identifying various tensions between a tradition under threat and an ongoing lived reality. This passage also frames the novel's depiction of digital technologies. Edwin remarks that A Tribe Called Red gave their 'particularly accessible self-titled album [...] in the spirit of the age of the mixtape [...] away for free online'.¹²⁶ This music is 'accessible' both in engaging with popular culture and in its use of the Internet to eschew barriers of cost and scarcity. As a form of digital transmission of cultural heritage, it contrasts with the 'hero' of Lucas's film and their impossible return to a pre-colonial past.

¹²⁴ Vizenor, 'Aesthetics of Survivance', p. 1.

¹²⁵ Orange, *There There*, p. 77.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

In *There There*, digital technologies provide a means of transforming in order to survive. In this respect, they are not merely imposed on indigenous societies in such a way that refashions them entirely in the image of the coloniser. Technology is a broad term that encompasses objects and practices beyond the ‘modern’ technologies coming from Euro-American traditions. The particular culture of each society includes its own pre-existing technological traditions. Euro-American colonists have historically expected Native Americans to keep up with the fast-paced rhythm of technological change without offering a stable alternative worldview to that of existing indigenous traditions.¹²⁷ Rather than simply seeing modern technology as disconnecting an individual from their authentic connection to an environment, *There There* tries to locate the potential for a use of modern technology that does not simply reinforce colonialist notions of national identity. It considers these technologies within a wider, culturally-informed ‘technics’: the practices of making that exist before, within and beyond modern technology. The novel’s depiction of digital natives elaborates a particularly Native ‘technics’ at play within its characters’ use of digital technologies.

However, the tribal technics of North America are difficult to recuperate due to Euro-American colonial practices of forced assimilation and destruction, which have cut many indigenous peoples off from the knowledge practices of their ancestors. Gregory Cajete, has sought to (re)construct a pan-Indigenous understanding of technics deriving from centuries-old and ongoing indigenous knowledge practices. This, he argues, ‘exists at the margins of modern society as an unconscious memory, a myth, a dream, a longing, and as the lived experience of the few Indigenous societies that have not yet been totally displaced by the modern technologically-mediated world’.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, he states that in indigenous cultures,

¹²⁷ Vine Deloria Jr., qtd. in Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literature and Native American Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 114.

¹²⁸ Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), p. 69., p. 23.

Adoption of technology is conservative and based on intrinsic need, and care is taken to ensure that technologies adopted and applied do not disrupt a particular ecology. Such care is grounded in the belief that it is possible to live well through adhering to a cosmology and philosophy honoring balance, harmony, and ecologically sustainable relationships.¹²⁹

Whereas Euro-American technologies have often been based in a ‘disassociation’ from nature, this technics is based in ‘creative participation with nature’.¹³⁰ Cajete’s pan-indigenous technics draws on a tribal memory of and research into indigenous cosmologies, as well as a yearning for an active and ongoing alternative to Euro-American technological traditions that continue to destroy cultures and environments.

The retellings of Sweet Medicine’s prophecy I referenced earlier trace a history of adapting and integrating technologies into native traditions without accepting colonisers’ cosmologies. As David J. Silverman writes, Native Americans ‘were not only the buyers but often the purveyors of arms and ammunition’ and that their use of the horse afforded the ability to hunt bison at a far faster rate, granting ‘unprecedented access to a seemingly limitless supply’ of meat, fur and other goods.¹³¹ In accelerating hunting practices, use of the horse reverberated across tribal culture, changing gender roles and increasing clashes with neighbouring tribes. Guns and horses became part of the texture of the everyday for Cheyennes as they navigated the already equestrian Sioux tribes’ unprecedented dominance of the Plains. They later became means for the Plains tribes to resist their forced dislocation by the U.S. government. Guns and horses, both European technologies, were significant elements in Native tribes’ and nations’ multifaceted adaption and resistance to the colonization of the North American continent. In other words, technology has historically offered an ambivalent means of resistance and survivance.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

¹³¹ David J. Silverman, *Thundersticks: Firearms and the Violent Transformation of Native America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), pp. 222, 227.

For the characters belonging to the youngest generation represented in the novel, the transmission of their cultural heritage appears to have been broken. Orvil's siblings Lony and Looter, —the youngest characters in the novel—struggle to understand the importance of maintaining traditions. Lony asks him 'what's a powwow', despite having witnessed several, because 'I never asked anybody [...] I didn't know what we were looking at'.¹³² Orvil replies that 'They're just old ways, Lony. Dancing, singing Indian. We gotta carry it on'.¹³³ However, when Lony continues to press him on why, Orvil struggles to explain. We are told that one of the few Native American traditions Orvil's grandmother continues is cooking 'Indian tacos', yet 'she was always sure to remind them that it's not traditional, and that it comes from lacking resources and wanting comfort food'.¹³⁴ This cultural practice reacts to the transmission of cultural heritage from generation to generation being disrupted by the material conditions imposed on Native Americans by the U.S. government. Orvil's grandmother views her practice of cooking and eating Indian tacos as just such an act of perseverance, a mode of survivance that achieves the imperfect regeneration of a culture against a hegemony that would see it extinguished.

The younger characters adapt other tools available to them in order to continue this practice. Orvil maintains a transmission of native culture by learning about it online. We are told that

virtually everything Orvil had learned about being Indian he'd learned virtually. From watching hours and hours of powwow footage, documentaries on YouTube, by reading all that there was to read on sites like Wikipedia, PowWows.com, and *Indian Country Today*. Googling stuff like "What does it mean to be a real Indian, which led him several clicks through some pretty fucked-up, judgemental forums, and finally to an UrbanDictionary.com word he'd never heard before: *Pretendian*.¹³⁵

¹³² Orange, *There There*, p. 130.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Here, websites and platforms become sites for the transmission of cultural heritage. As with *Urbanity*, the novel defends this digital transmission of culture. Orvil feels self-conscious—a ‘pretendian’—about learning to dance from videos, believing that this might be an ‘inauthentic’ way of gaining cultural knowledge, however there is little alternative in his situation. Orvil also uses his phone in order to train, recording videos of himself dancing. When Opal discovers these, she notes that he ‘dances like he knows exactly what he’s doing’.¹³⁶ Orvil’s access to native culture through digital technology is presented as no more ‘authentic’, nor any less, than Opal and Lucas attending a Native center and learning ‘from an elder what goes into making regelia’.¹³⁷

In *There There*, the decentralization of media enabled by the internet has provided Orvil with an alternative space for the transmission of cultural heritage when funding to community programs is under threat, one that proves preferable to the violent-nostalgic stereotypes offered by centralised broadcast media and cinema. In this respect, *There There* appears out of step with more critical representations of surveillance capitalism, such as those made in the Silicon Valley novel genre. As Martin Eve and Joe Street observe, many contemporary American novels—including *Purity* and *The Nix*—frame digital media as solely ‘part of a dialectic of enlightenment in which techno-progression is socio-regressive’.¹³⁸ In *Private Citizens*, Vanya’s experience in creating Sable suggests that advocacy projects on a capitalist Web 2.0 can inevitably drift towards what Shoshana Zuboff terms the ‘instrumentarian’ capture of marginalised bodies by online corporations.¹³⁹ *There There* does not explore the profit motives of such platforms and, although it specifically names YouTube as a site for cultural transmission

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 163.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 163-4.

¹³⁸ Martin Paul Eve and Joe Street, ‘The Silicon Valley Novel’, *Literature & History*, 27.1 (2018), pp. 81-97 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306197318755680>> (p. 83).

¹³⁹ *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), p. 360.

of native cultures, any link between this and the material presence of its parent company Alphabet in the Bay Area is subtly rather than explicitly drawn.

There There bucks this trend, however, by attempting to relocate digital technologies within this complex and ongoing history of adaption and exploitation. It also differs from the other novels I have examined by using the techno-generational framework as a means of conceptualising this survivance technics. *The Nix* and *Purity* both give digital technology a central role in disrupting common cultural heritage. *Taipei* and *Surveys*, meanwhile, use the generation as a hinge between past and present that frames certain residual cultural traditions as irrelevant to the material conditions of their digital native characters. *There There*, however, uses techno-generational frameworks to represent continuity. As Thom van Dooran has written of the generation: ‘[Generations] ‘do not just happen, but must be achieved [...] What is tied together is not “the past” and “the future” as abstract temporal horizons, but real embodied generations—ancestors and descendants—in rich but imperfect relationships of inheritance, nourishment, and care’.¹⁴⁰ In *There There*, use of digital media among a younger generation constitutes a survivance technics, a way of achieving the continuance of a tradition.

It could be argued that *There There* is surprisingly sanguine in its depiction of online platforms as spaces for native survivance. Interviewing native elders on their opinion about education blogs on native culture, Angela M. Haas notes the potential dangers of online places providing ‘more opportunities for ethnic fraud and the appropriation of American Indian intellectual property’. She suggests that certain ‘craft tutorials’ such as the dancing lessons viewed by Orvil might potentially undermine the cultural sovereignty of a native tribe or nation, as well as threatening the profitability of these skills in a U.S. capitalist context.¹⁴¹ Ultimately,

¹⁴⁰ Thom van Dooran, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 27-9.

¹⁴¹ Angela M. Haas, ‘A Rhetoric of Alliance: What American Indians Can Tell us About Digital and Visual Rhetoric’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008), pp. 135-6.

however, Haas aligns with *There There*'s more positive treatment of such blogs by noting that appropriation occurred before the internet and that such blogs are valuable in fostering a sense of community to geographically distributed populations of tribes. Like Orvil, Edwin uses the internet to access a Native culture. Although he knows little about his Native heritage, he has '660 [Facebook] friends. Tons of Native friends in my feed. Most of my friends, though, are people I don't know, who'd happily friended me upon request'.¹⁴² He uses Facebook to reach out to his estranged biological father, again demonstrating how such platforms can serve as channels for cultural transmission that had been disrupted by policies of relocation and termination.

In this case, however, *There There* is not entirely uncritical of the platform. For Edwin's estranged sister, Blue, Facebook withholds the promise of a networked community: she opens it to find 'a tired feed she'd read last night before going to bed', and 'thinks that she should open her *other* Facebook feed [...] [where] she'd find the information and media she'd always been looking for [...] true connection. That is where she'd always wanted to be. But there is nothing else to check, there *is* no other Facebook'.¹⁴³ These thoughts are broken by Edwin 'holding two [coffee] mugs', a symbol of community that Facebook does not provide.¹⁴⁴ It is Edwin's participation in organising the powwow, together with Blue who feels similarly alienated, that constitutes their 'Indian-ness', as suggested when Edwin states that he 'got a job in Oakland at the Indian Center and that helped me to feel more like I belonged somewhere'.¹⁴⁵ This suggests that online platforms like Facebook cannot sustain survivance alone, but rather might provide one dimension for a broader community practice.

¹⁴² Orange, *There There*, p. 69.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

Contrast this with *Surveys*, in which Colleen's generation's formative experiences with the internet occur in relation with anonymous others. Colleen comes to use the internet not as a tool for solidifying existing communities but for forging alternatives centred around anonymity. These early online experiences 'became a tugging part of our personalities [...] we hid a blog from even our own friends, especially them, because it was for strangers to find. Maybe strangers would tell us they understood that part of us our friends couldn't.¹⁴⁶ Together, online subjects produce these relations through their mediated performances and, as per the central theme of the novel, the feedback received from the anonymous others' mediated gaze: online strangers accessing, interpreting and reproducing one another's performances. In Colleen's description, the internet is both a communal experience yet one that maintains a sense of alienation and loneliness among its users. As I mentioned above, Edwin and Blue experience a similar alienation when relying solely on the internet alone for community. However, these are also the tools they use to forge initial connections with other Native people by answering online job adverts posted by Native Centres.

The ambivalent representation of digital technologies in *There There*—from the browser to the drone—foregrounds the degree to which technologies are always produced and deployed in social, economic and cultural contexts. A technology that emerges in one context, for example the neo-colonial context of American foreign policy, can be appropriated to entirely different effect if embedded in another context, such as Native American practices of survivance. Haas notes '[a]lthough American Indians may not have influenced the Western definition of technology, it doesn't mean that they haven't used technologies in unique, productive, innovative, generous, and culturally-relevant ways'.¹⁴⁷ We might therefore see

¹⁴⁶ Stagg, *Surveys*, pp. 99-100.

¹⁴⁷ Haas, 'A Rhetoric of Alliance', pp. 77-78.

There There as emphasising the ‘cultural usability’ of these technologies : the ways in which Native cultures use and adapt them to particular, localized, indigenous ends.¹⁴⁸

Long before his role in the heist at the novel’s end, Daniel takes advantage of online anonymity to become part of a Norwegian online community called ‘Vunderkode’ and learns ‘from YouTube how to code. Shit like JavaScript, Python, SQL, Ruby, C++, HTML, Java, PHP’.¹⁴⁹ He does this in order to rebel against structural imbalances in U.S. capitalism, ‘[f]iguring out a way around a big fucking bully system that only gives those that came from money or power the means to make it’.¹⁵⁰ As with Orvil’s learning from YouTube, critics of platform capitalism may contest that such individual actions do not challenge the fundamental material structures that Daniel gestures to here. However, *There There* presses further with the question of cultural usability in relation to Daniel through his use of a newer technology: digital fabrication, the process of designing an object on a computer and automatically producing it through a ‘3D printer’. Both production and design are automated, requiring little in expertise: ‘a digital design file specifies exactly what a machine should produce; the result is pre-determined by the file. Once a design file is created, the object it specifies is infinitely reproducible’.¹⁵¹ Moreover, one 3D printer can produce another. Were such ‘self-replicating machines’ to become widely available, the means of production could be distributed from the corporations at the industrial centre to a wider public. As Adam Greenfield goes so far as to suggest, ‘an established practice of distributed fabrication is freedom from want’.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Huatong Sun, ‘The Triumph of Users: Achieving Cultural Usability Goals with User Localization’, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 15.4 (2006), pp. 457-481

¹⁴⁹ Orange, *There There*, p. 191.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-1.

¹⁵¹ Amit Zoran and Leah Buechley, ‘Hybrid Reassemblage: An Exploration of Craft, Digital Fabrication and Artifact Uniqueness’, *Leonardo* 46.1 (2013): 4–10 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_00477> (p.6)

¹⁵² Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2017), Kindle ebook, loc. 1483.

However, the technology for digital fabrication remains expensive, complicated and laborious. It therefore exists in discourse as potential, a future promise based in the assumption of perpetual technological progress, or ‘Moore’s Law’. Greenfield argues that, since it cannot yet be justified in economic terms, digital fabrication has usually been promoted on ideological terms. Usually, this ideological justification is libertarian, the right to produce forbidden things, most notably weaponry. In 2013, Cody Wilson, a young white American man and a self-proclaimed ‘crypto-anarchist’, uploaded plans for a 3D-printed pistol which he termed the ‘Liberator’. Each pistol printed according to these plans existed outside the regulation of firearms, bearing no serial number and appearing in no data base, and cost ‘5 percent of the retail price of a new weapon in the same caliber’.¹⁵³ These plastic pistols provide the archetype for the weapons used by the characters of *There There*. 3D-printed guns are mentioned at points throughout the novel, foregrounding, like Chekhov’s gun, their discharging at the novel’s climax.

When Octavio shows one of these guns to Tony, he ‘couldn’t tell at first [that] it was a gun. It was small and all white’.¹⁵⁴ The whiteness of the 3D-printed gun bluntly symbolises that of the European colonizers’ skin. Its danger, despite its smallness, is revealed when Tony fires it at a Pepsi can in Octavio’s backyard: ‘There was a moment where I didn’t know what was happening. The squeeze brought the sound of the boom and my whole body became a boom and a drop’.¹⁵⁵ This sequence presents the 3D-printed guns to the reader as compressed sites of violence. The 3D-printed guns are further foregrounded by the passage in the Prologue in which Orange describes the Sand Creek massacre and describes the bullets as ‘premonitions, ghosts from dreams of a hard, fast future’.¹⁵⁶ This passage suggests that stray bullets that kill many of

¹⁵³ Ibid., loc. 1772.

¹⁵⁴ Orange, *There There*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

the characters at the Big Oakland Powwow at the end of *There There* are initially shot by European colonizers, who ‘fired their guns into the air in victory and the strays flew out into the nothingness of histories written wrong and meant to be forgotten. Stray bullets and consequences are landing on our unsuspected bodies even now’.¹⁵⁷ On one level, therefore, the 3D-printed firearms are embodiments of the systemic racism that European capitalism has perpetuated against Native Americans over centuries.

While the specific weapons are linked to colonial violence, digital fabrication more broadly is portrayed with more ambiguity. During a scene in which Calvin Johnson, Octavio and Charles are high, Octavio briefly threatens Calvin with a 3D printed gun, pointing it at his head, before laughing and putting it down. He then tells Charles that David ‘made [the guns] in his fucking basement’, implying his incredulity at this easy working around U.S. firearm regulation in a mundane, domestic setting.¹⁵⁸ For these young characters, witnessing or even hearing about digital fabrication and self-replicating machines constitutes an event, a rupture within the existing fabric of normal ‘reality’. As Daniel tells his deceased brother, ‘The 3-D printer I got was itself printed by a 3-D printer. No shit, a 3-D printer printed by a 3-D printer’.¹⁵⁹ The potentials of digital fabrication and self-replicating machines disrupt the standards by which technologies are distributed across a population. Daniel creates the weapon by downloading a ‘the .cad file, the G-code’.¹⁶⁰ Digital fabrication and open source protocol provide a means for Daniel to bypass the capitalist system he had identified earlier. However, as Dermott McMeel notes is somewhat typical, the depiction of the digital fabrication process itself in *There There* is romanticised, hidden from view and therefore stripped of its material

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 193.

dimensions.¹⁶¹ In this sense, the narrative obscures much of the material process in order to maintain focus on digital fabrication as pure potential. It demonstrates more interest in the impact it has on its young characters' perspectives towards their material conditions than it does in the specificities of the technology itself.

The potential of digital fabrication is therefore, in keeping with the novel's broader attitude towards digital technologies, ambivalent. Daniel's use of the 3D printer to create firearms ties back to a longer history of Native American survivance. Silverman writes that the sale of weapons by Native peoples contributed to the 'spread of gun frontiers far away from the centers of colonial population and power'.¹⁶² Dutch colonialists first traded flintlock muskets with League nations in the 1630s. However, over the next two centuries, tribes across the continent sought European firearms to protect themselves from those tribes who already had access to them, as well as from the colonists. Originally denied access to firearms, Native American peoples began trading and hunting with them as a means of surviving amidst competing colonial powers.

New forms of technology such as digital fabrication do not allow the characters of *There There* to become 'self-sufficient', but rather to explore alternative social relations to those mandated by the U.S. capitalist state, explorations that draw on longer indigenous traditions without being wholly defined by this pre-colonial past. They become a way to, as Rennard Strickland puts it, to 'forge the sword of sovereignty into a weapon capable of attacking the basic human problems of Indian people'.¹⁶³ Like indigeneity, sovereignty is a highly contested term in Native American studies. Ideas that we now recognise under the term existed in indigenous societies long before the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Robert Warrior

¹⁶¹ Darmott McMeel, 'Material Control: Reflections on the social and material practices of digital fabrication', *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15.2 (2007), pp. 103-117 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2017.1375739>> (p. 104).

¹⁶² Silverman, *Thundersticks*, p. 222.

¹⁶³ Rennard Strickland, *Tonto's Revenge* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), p. 52.

argues for using it ‘in a rather undefined way’, as ‘a definition of sovereignty should emerge from the experience of communities rather than in academic discourse’.¹⁶⁴ Such an open understanding of sovereignty dovetails with Orange’s open treatment of indigeneity, and stands in contrast to the particular model of legal sovereignty aimed for by contemporary separatist groups such as the Native American Affairs Coalition.

In suggesting that these modern technologies, which emerge in imperialist and capitalist milieus, might be adapted into survivance technics, Orange’s techno-generational framework enunciates a new trajectory, rather than a cultural decline. *There There* explores the potentials of these new technologies for the sovereignty of indigenous peoples where the other novels I have analysed have largely been concerned with the deleterious impact of digital technologies on the bourgeois individual. Digital fabrication similarly provides the Native characters of *There There* a means of working around a capitalist market that systemically marginalises them. However, because this work around is channelled into individual rather than communitarian desires, the radical potential of digital fabrication is turned back on Native American community, leading to violence and death at the powwow at the novel’s climax. *There There* suggests that new, often oppressive technologies that have emerged from recent forms of capitalism might be repurposed in order to produce new forms of cultural sovereignty. In suggesting that these modern technologies, which emerge in imperialist and capitalist milieus, might be adapted into survivance technics, *There There* depicts a generation as marking a new formation of struggle, rather than cultural decline. However, this remains a latent potential within the realistic parameters of the narrative rather than a fully realised eventuality.

If digital technology is a dream from the hard, fast future mentioned in the Prologue, this dream does not necessarily constitute a threat. *There There* associates technology and

¹⁶⁴ Robert Warrior, ““Temporary Visibility”: Deloria on Sovereignty and AIM”, *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, ed. by Alan R. Velie (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pp. 51–62 (p. 51).

dreams at several points. Edwin tells us ‘I dream of dark geometric shapes drifting noiselessly across a pink, black, and purple pixelated colorscape. Screen-saver dreams’.¹⁶⁵ He dismisses the idea that these dreams carry significance: ‘I dream of the internet, of keyword search phrases that make complete sense in the dream, are the key to the dream’s meaning, but which make no sense in the morning, like all the dreams I’ve ever had’.¹⁶⁶ The unresolved ambiguity of these dreams contributes to the novel’s open understanding of indigeneity, in which digital technology can play a productive role. Edwin notes that ‘[s]ometimes the internet can think with you or even for you, lead you in mysterious ways to information you need and would never have thought to think of or research on your own’.¹⁶⁷ This could imply the controlling power exerted by online platforms; however, here, rather than disrupting the transmission of Native American culture, Edwin’s experience of the internet resonates with the role of dreams and vision quests. Elaborating a pan-indigenous ‘Native Science’, Cajete notes that in many indigenous traditions, ‘[d]reams are considered gateways to creative possibilities if used wisely and practically’.¹⁶⁸ Suggesting that technologies might play this role recuperates them from a purely oppressive history.

Locating technologies within indigenous philosophies regarding dreams and vision questions offers one example of how *There There* relocates the potentials of digital technologies in ongoing Native cosmologies. The potential for embedding digital fabrication within survivance technics is identified when Daniel describes a dream he had in which his brother produces an infinite number of pit bulls from a shopping cart: ‘You were handing me the puppies as they duplicated in your shopping cart’.¹⁶⁹ That Daniel associates the 3D printer with a dream is significant to the novel’s elaboration of a digital native identity. Daniel’s perspective

¹⁶⁵ Orange, *There There*, p. 64.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 65.

¹⁶⁸ Gregory Cajete, *Native Science*, p. 65.

¹⁶⁹ Orange, *There There*, p. 192.

regarding his 3D printer takes on a dream-like quality, disturbing the fabric of normalcy with creative possibility and lifting the technology out of the American libertarian tradition in which he initially discovers it. Importantly, this affective resonance with the potential of 3D printing exists in the novel prior to its use to reproduce violence: ‘when I first heard about this 3-D printer that could print a version of itself I thought of you and the pit bulls. The idea about the gun came later’.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, through his desperation for money, a gun is ‘the first thing I printed’.¹⁷¹ With Dene’s dream, *There There* points to the radical potential of digital fabrication for reordering society around distributed sites of production and thereby opening new possibilities for Native sovereignty, free from dependence on an exploitative capitalist system. However, it appears pessimistic in the potential for these technologies to be realised when they are used for individualist, capitalist ends rather than a survivance technics.

This recuperation contrasts with the way Will uses technologies to think through his racial identity in *Private Citizens*. Will is as concerned about historical stereotypes as Orange’s characters. Early in the novel, the narration remarks that ‘The choice was between inauthenticity and archetype’.¹⁷² Since childhood, Will has been hyperaware of a racialized gaze that objectifies him, describing photographs of his childhood self as ‘A visual primer of internalized racism and its hysterical overcorrection [...] Anyone who saw these pictures could make a thousand racist assumptions and be dead right’.¹⁷³ This inauthenticity refers to the attempts to escape aspects of his appearance and character that are stereotypical. In this view, Will can continue with these attempts, or embrace his stereotypically Asian characteristics so as to not lend too much power to stereotypes. However, this balance between not conforming to stereotypes without succumbing to White norms—‘not generically Asian, not aspiringly

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁷² Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens*, p. 54.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 53.

white’—becomes impossible: ‘eventually the stereotype overran everything, becoming as plural as individuality itself. Until you were not reduced, but particularized to a stereotype’.¹⁷⁴

In his ongoing struggle, Will’s self-consciousness about his race intersects with his misogyny, with him believing that ‘Most women would exclude him for being five four, some for being Asian’.¹⁷⁵ Regarding any pornographic video with an Asian male actor he does find, he finds it ‘depressing to see the low user rating and comments it always got’.¹⁷⁶ Will’s attitudes towards women, and his desire to see greater representation of Asian men in pornography, take on a similar dynamic to what bell hooks terms an ‘oppositional gaze’, a desire to ‘look back’ and readdress the racist imbalance of hegemonic American culture.¹⁷⁷ However, by placing himself as the masculine ‘hero’ in the active/passive sexual dynamics of mainstream pornography he reinforces the primacy of the male gaze. In many ways, the numerous stereotypes of Asians are reflected in the proliferating categories of pornography he views, which the narrator mocks by listing their obscure intersections: ‘POV FFFM CFNM A2M DTD BJ’.¹⁷⁸ Here, Will’s desire is depicted as tied to the metadata of platform capitalism. It does not attempt to find alternatives to a racist socioeconomic system but rather secure a position of power within it.

The violent ending of *There There* contrasts with the individual exits from technocapitalism staged in several of the other novels I have examined. In *Purity*, Pip eschews expressing any politicised anger over fundamental material conflicts, instead turning towards values that stress mutual understanding between individuals. She ends the novel playing tennis and working on her own wellbeing, while political questions that had been vaguely explored

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, pp. 253-2.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁷⁷ bell hooks, *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 247-264 (p. 248)

¹⁷⁸ Tulathimutte, *Private Citizens.*, p. 113.

throughout the novel are abandoned. Similarly, in *Private Citizens*, the refusal of Will and Cory to continue their lines of work is supported by their already accumulated or inherited wealth, something systematically denied to the native characters of *There There*. Meanwhile, *The Nix*, *Surveys* and *Sympathy* all conclude with a self-reflexive reveal regarding why their protagonists and/or narrators have related this narrative as a novel. This move fetishizes the novel as a pointedly old media form that proves preferable for working through the themes of the narrative, and therefore constitutes something of a formal exodus from the media technologies these novels represent. While Edwin and Dene are both storytellers in *There There*, their narratives are ongoing and incomplete projects that do not establish themselves in an opposition between new and old media. Such a move would undermine the political potential the narrative identifies in the figure of the digital native.

The youngest characters of *There There* might be called digital natives insofar as they are adept at using digital technologies and construct their sense of personal and social identity through their use of these technologies. However, the novel locates the ‘digital’ that these natives are born into within the centuries long history of how colonialists used technology. Technology has long been a site through which imperialist-military infrastructure and consumer culture overlap. The young characters of *There There* not only use computers and the internet but also more overtly militaristic technologies such as the drone and the gun. The novel makes frequent reference to the ways in which new digital technologies are not a new phenomenon but are rather bound up in wider systems of colonial oppression. Nevertheless, these technologies offer modes for cultural transmission to be maintained across generations of tribes and nations dispersed by colonial violence, even as this transmission is exteriorised in technical objects controlled by corporations and the colonial state rather than Native peoples. For the digital natives of *There There*, digital technologies offer new trajectories that hold the potential to renew and reconfigure cultural traditions even as they appear to disrupt them within a

colonial paradigm. Such cultural adaptations to oppressive policies are here both part of and apart from an ongoing cultural heritage, which is transmitted from generation to generation not as perfect reproduction but as adaptation, excess, survivance.

CONCLUSION

The Limitations of Techno-Generational Frameworks

In this thesis I analysed different novelistic treatments of ‘digital natives’, the first generation to grow up with and shape their worldviews around digital media. To do this, I followed the lead of literary scholars such as Caroline Levine in their commitment to connecting aesthetic and conceptual forms to history and culture. The realist novel has provided an arena in which to interrogate the conceptual forms we use in ordinary life, forms like the generation that are worth considering because of the degree to which they structure our ideas about social relationships. Each form provides particular opportunities and limitations to our capacity to imagine how these relationships have changed, are changing, and will change in the future. Here, the focus of analysis is not on uncovering the hidden truth behind aesthetic forms but rather on understanding the way they are used and the way that they could be used to different ends.

Although forms like the generation emerge in historical contingencies, their iterability, their capacity to reproduce across entirely different contexts means that they cannot be understood as passive reflections of the time of their initial formulation. Instead, a form’s deployment across different situations and in different aesthetic and social situations can extend, warp and/or subvert its characteristics. The generation, for example, began as a means of describing family lineage and then transformed as it was applied to broader social constructs. This thesis has offered an approach to analysis of generational themes that does not passively accept the generation as a fact while also paying attention to its productive capacity as a conceptual form to organise material in meaningful ways. It has therefore contributed to ‘new

formalism' and its adjacent methodologies by interrogating the various limitations and ideological implications of the generation as a conceptual form while also demonstrating the way in this conceptual form might be reappropriated and deployed against the grain of hegemonic cultures.

The generation is now so widely used as to appear natural. Nevertheless, in its sociological form—in which its subject is broadened from familial relationships to social ones—it is historically contingent, emerging alongside the industrial revolution and being inflected by subsequent developments. The social generation has long been a form for thinking through an accelerated sense of large-scale change associated with modern technologies. The idea of a digital native generation grounds the significance of ineffable digital processes in the observable behaviour of individuals. For the most part, however, such techno-generational frameworks prove problematic in their claims to represent contemporary societies. Together, the chapters of my thesis testify to the limitations and contradictions within techno-generational frameworks. By rarely reproducing the notion of the digital native without complication, the texts I examined suggested that this techno-generational label is as much—if not more—a cultural archetype as it is a 'real' sociological or psychological phenomenon.

In *Surveys*, Colleen locates techno-generational subdivisions, defining herself as a digital native yet also distinguishing herself from a younger acquaintance: '[g]rowing up for a bigger percentage of his life than me, he'd posted stuff I was never young enough to get into'.¹ Alice's narration in *Sympathy*, meanwhile, both criticises and broadens the category of the digital native. She finds that Mizuko uses the term as a barrier between, them: she 'seemed obsessed with my generation. She had led a class about how my generation couldn't physically cope with books anymore; they had been rewired and could now learn only through

¹ Natasha Stagg, *Surveys* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext[e], 2016), p. 91.

“gamification”². Alice is irritated when Mizuko calls her a digital native, telling us ‘it pained me to be made into anything but her image’ even though ‘despite Mizuko’s insistence on this digital divide, I was sure her mind worked like mine’.³ Mizuko appears as addicted to digital devices as Alice. However, even as the novel stresses that any irresolvable difference between them is personal rather than generational, it does differentiate between Alice and her mother and grandmother on generational terms, using knowledge of technology as a dividing line.

Complicating techno-generational frameworks in these ways reveals the extent to which, as Karen Foster writes, the generation is ‘a vehicle for thought and action, a concept and a mental structure that provides people with, and limits them to, specific way(s) of understanding, speaking about, and acting in the world around them’.⁴ In my Introduction, I identified a discursive overlap between the ‘digital native’ and the so-called ‘millennial’, a social generation purported to be born somewhere between the early 1980s and early 2000s. The overlap between these two figures is not essential, yet it proves near-unavoidable in the context of contemporary cultural discourse in anglophone countries of the Global North. The renewed interest in generational identities sparked by Howe and Strauss’s *Generations* (1991) coincides with the rise of political demography, commercialised international communications, accelerating capitalist globalisation and declarations of the ‘End of History’.⁵ As Kier Milburn observes, Howe and Strauss’s focus on child-rearing as defining generations reflects a neoliberal emphasis on the family as the basic unit of society.⁶ Moreover, where technologies had been located within modern narratives of progress as a means to an end, the technocapitalist

² Olivia Sudjic, *Sympathy* (London: ONE, 2017), p. 78.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Karen Foster, ‘Generation and discourse in working life stories’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 64.2 (2013), 195-215 (p. 198). See also: Karen Foster, *Generation, Discourse, and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2013)

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18.

⁶ Kier Milburn, *Generation Left* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 12.

drive of Silicon Valley places technological solutions before identifying social problems.⁷ With the exception of *There There*, the techno-generational frameworks of the novels I examined reflect this attitude, attempting to measure retroactively what digital technologies have done to society, rather than asking what they might do for it.

The vast literature about ‘millennials’ both off and online exports generational discourse to various contexts, and in doing so multiplies the contradictions inherent in the generation as a conceptual form. In recent years, the ‘millennial’ has become contested as an identity group and political formulation, and the literary press—itsself caught within the imperatives of Web 2.0—has sought its ‘representation’ in fiction. The fascination with generational identities is further driven by the commercialised circuits of affective expression and representative politics in what Jodi Dean calls ‘communicative capitalism’: ‘that form of late capitalism in which [...] [i]deals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications’.⁸ Widely shared defences of millennials by ‘guru’ Simon Sinek’s in 2017 and Anne Helen Petersen in 2019 demonstrate the potency of the ‘millennial’ label for generating attention, debate and advertising revenue online.⁹ By virtue of its coming-of-age alongside the emergence of Web 2.0, which has greatly expanded opportunities for publishing cultural analysis and has accelerated its circulation in public discourse, the ‘millennial generation’ is the most discussed and overdetermined generational identity in history.

⁷ Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems that Don't Exist* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 5-6; 18.

⁸ Jodi Dean, ‘Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics’, *Cultural Politics* 1.1 (2005), pp. 51-74 (p. 55).

⁹ MTV Australia, ‘MTV News | This Guy Just Nailed What it Is To Be A Millennial’, Facebook, 3 January 2017 <<https://www.facebook.com/MTVAUSTRALIA/videos/10154938261678993/>> [accessed 1 August 2019]; Anne Helen Petersen, ‘How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation’, *Buzzfeed*, 5 January 2019 <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>> [accessed 1 August 2019]

Moreover, the Howe-Strauss iteration of the generational form is increasingly coded into institutions. For example, Facebook Ads lists ‘millennials’ as an ‘interest’ rather than a stable ‘demographic’ for clients to select when targeting the platform’s users, a classification that reflects the fact that generational categories are discursive formations yet nonetheless reinforces the prominence of generational discourse in users’ feeds. In its own demographic technology, meanwhile, Facebook gleams its ‘insights’ from more flexible distributions of age ranges immanent to its data. These are then plugged back into the Howe-Strauss discursive generational framework to package its advertising products to clients, resulting in a fairly loose definition of ‘millennials’ who were aged 18-35 in 2015, aged 24-33 in 2019, and aged 18-38 in 2019.¹⁰ As the imperatives of platform capitalism begin to codify these generational identities and use them to target and incentivise certain behaviours of their platform, it becomes clear that its influence is not limited to abstract discourse but inscribed in material practices.

Such an encoding both reflects and feeds back into the extent to which today’s generational discourse resembles what Hiroki Azuma terms ‘database consumption’: a form of cultural engagement in which, rather than reading individual texts as reflections of a deep, universal narrative truth, they are approached as remixes of a growing organisation of interchangeable datapoints and disembodied tropes.¹¹ There is no coherent narrative ‘behind’ the mass of commentary about generational differences, nor an original author-figure from whom it derives, Howe and Strauss’s initial portrait of the generation being largely abandoned. Instead, the generational differences are constructed from an evolving database of elements

¹⁰ See: Facebook IQ, ‘Raising the Bar: The New Millennial CPG Shopper’, *Facebook Business*, 3 December 2015 <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/raising-the-bar-the-new-millennial-cpg-shopper?ref=search_new_15> [accessed 2 August 2019]; Facebook IQ, ‘Four ways to matter to millennials at work and beyond’, *Facebook Business*, 28 November 2018 <<https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/4-ways-to-matter-to-millennials-at-work-and-beyond>> [accessed 2 August 2019]; Facebook IQ, ‘Understanding the journey of the connected insurance consumer’, *Facebook Business*, 19 February 2019 <<https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/understanding-the-journey-of-the-connected-insurance-consumer>> [accessed 2 August 2019].

¹¹ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, trans. by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001), p. 54.

derived from countless polls, surveys, studies, blogs and think-pieces; what Azuma describes as an ‘aggregate of settings’ rather than a deeper ‘truth’ about social change.¹² My analysis has demonstrated that realist realist representations demonstrate where these characterisations break down.. This breakdown is humorously invoked in Candice Carty Williams’s novel *Queenie* (2019) when the eponymous narrator mocks ‘one of those mainstream millennials’.

Her friend asks what she means, and Queenie is taken aback:

“Have I made this term up?” I questioned myself. “I’m sure I’ve seen it on the Internet. You know, those men: bike riding, knitted sweater? Pretends Facebook isn’t important to him but it really is?” I was met with a blank stare, so carried on. “Craft beer, start-ups, sense of entitlement? Reads books by Alain de Botton, needs a girlfriend who doesn’t threaten his mediocrity?”¹³

Queenie is unable to locate a specific origin for the millennial, instead accessing a database of characteristics accumulated online. The millennial does not exist as a reality to be better represented, but as an amalgamation of shifting associations and tropes, an aggregate of settings for a communicative-capitalist culture to revise endlessly.

Nonetheless, this shuffling of elements does not foreclose strong affective attachment and animosity. Sara Ahmed describes how ‘emotions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects’.¹⁴ This contact ‘involves the subject, as well as histories that come before the subject’.¹⁵ A subject—you or I—can never encounter an object before it has already become ‘sticky’ with associated signifiers: ‘what sticks “shows us” where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object’.¹⁶ Articles or other media about millennials, no matter which of the two prominent narrative they propagate, arrive always already entangled in a thick network of assertions, clichés and ‘sticky emotions’. The

¹² Ibid., p. 55.

¹³ Candice Carty-Williams, *Queenie* (New York: Scout Press, 2019), p. 316.

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

hyperlinked structure of digital news, along with algorithmic recommendations, further intensifies the sticking of certain feelings to generational categories. Many online articles about millennials, particularly those that seek to defend the generation, feature a paragraph of hyperlinks to examples of the now-well-worn trope about millennials ‘destroying’ established industries or cultural practices.¹⁷ In this thesis, I analysed how such efforts are deployed and deconstructed within the narratives of texts themselves.

The millennial generation is, supposedly, my own. In a sense, it is a label that I am ‘too close’ to. As I researched and wrote this thesis, I often had to check my own affective attachment to this label, especially as it became increasingly politicised by way of age differences relating to the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2016 U.S. Election, the U.K. elections of 2017 and 2019 and the build-up to the 2020 U.S. Election. Moreover, as I discussed my research with others in and outside academia, of similar age to me and older, I found that the generation proved a difficult conceptual form to avoid. In casual conversation, many academics converse about teaching in increasingly marketized university institutions by describing generational difference in their students—something that resonated uncomfortably with problematic dimensions of *The Nix*. Even as I expressed my scepticism towards the coherence or usefulness of the generation to scholars steeped in a poststructuralist suspicion of coherent identities, I would often find the conversation sliding towards detailing generational differences. In analysing literary narratives in this thesis, I interrogated this entanglement and explored alternative perspectives to the ontological claims made in demographic, journalistic and sociological studies of generations.

¹⁷ Thompson, Derek, ‘Millennials Didn’t Kill the Economy. The Economy Killed Millennials’, *The Atlantic*, 6 December 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/stop-blaming-millennials-killing-economy/577408/>> [accessed 9 August 2019], n. pag.

Generational Conflict

During the writing of this thesis, the overlap between the millennial and the digital native has been complicated by the regular churn of the Howe-Strauss generational framework, which dictates that the generation ‘after’ millennials has now come of age. Focus is shifting towards ‘Generation Z’, occasionally referred to as ‘Zoomers’, as a generation somehow even *more* native to the digital than millennials. Jean Twenge writes, ‘If the Millennial generation lasts the same amount of time as GenX, the last Millennial birth year is instead 1994, meaning that iGen begins with those born in 1995—conveniently, that’s also the year the Internet was born’.¹⁸ This sentence is exemplary of the questionable metastructure of techno-generational frameworks: Twenge takes the idea that generations necessarily ‘last’ for similar durations as a given, retrofitting a Mannheimian defining event to justify it. For, ‘iGen’—her pitch for a more exciting name than Generation Z—‘grew up with cell phones, had an Instagram page before they started high school, and do not remember a time before the Internet’.¹⁹ Twenge particularly draws focus to the smartphone as justifying a differentiation between iGen and millennials: ‘They are the first generation for whom Internet access has been constantly available, right there in their hands’. Their other characteristics—‘individualism’ and ‘income inequality’—are secondary to this technological determinism.²⁰ Again, this discourse takes for granted the Howe-Strauss turnover of a new generation. The communicative capitalist drive behind the discursive shift towards assigning particular cultural traits to Generation Z was already parodied in 2017 by fashion blogs’ efforts to displace the contrived ubiquity of ‘millennial pink’ with

¹⁸ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2018), p. 5. Twenge’s book *Generation Me* (2006) was influential in the constructing of the ‘millennial’ as a cultural archetype. See: Joel Stein, ‘Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation’, *TIME*, 20 May 2013 <<http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>> [accessed 19 February 2019], n. pag.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

‘Gen-Z yellow’.²¹ However, this turnover shows no signs of abating, its arbitrariness having been apparent since the initially temporary label ‘Generation X’ failed to find its particularity and birthed the placeholders ‘Generation Y’ and ‘Generation Z’.

As of yet, literary fiction has demonstrated relatively little interest in ‘Generation Z’ as a distinct generational identity. This contrasts with film and television, in which something of a ‘Gen Z’ canon is already being amassed.²² This thesis has offered a methodological approach to understanding why and how such techno-generational frameworks are applied, as well as demonstrating the ways in which narrative fiction provides an arena for unpacking the assumptions and political mobilisations built into different deployments of the conceptual form. This approach does not ignore or dismiss generational identities but rather asks us to remain alert to their construction and their political function.

In this respect, this thesis converges with Anna Kornbluh’s 2019 contribution to the field of new formalism, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*. In this work, Kornbluh also considers how the deployment of aesthetic forms in the realist novel can provide new structures of possibility. She argues that

²¹ Haley Nahman, ‘Move Over, Millennial Pink—There’s a New Sheriff in Town’, *Man Repeller*, 15 August 2017 <<https://www.manrepeller.com/2017/08/yellow-is-trending.html>> [accessed 30 October 2019]; Lauren Adhav, ‘Definitive Proof That Gen-Z Yellow Is the New Millennial Pink’, *Cosmopolitan*, 11 April 2018 <<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/a19701564/gen-z-yellow/>> [accessed 30 October 2019]

²² The 2019 high-school comedy *Booksmart* was hailed as Generation Z’s ‘coming-of-age classic’, its director stating that it is ‘specifically Gen-Z focused’. See: David Sims, ‘Generation Z Gets Its Coming-of-Age Classic’, *The Atlantic*, 24 May 2019 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/05/booksmart-review-olivia-wilde/590044/>> [accessed 1 November 2019]; Olivia Wilde, ‘Olivia Wilde: “I wanted it to resonate with old people like me, but it’s very specific to Gen-Z”’ (interviewed by Phil de Semlyen for *Timeout*), 22 May 2019 <<https://www.timeout.com/london/film/olivia-wilde-i-wanted-it-to-resonate-with-old-people-like-me-but-its-very-specific-to-gen-z>> [accessed 1 November 2019]. In the same year, reviews of the television series *Euphoria*, which depicts the anxiety, drug-use and sexual habits of a group of American high-school students, debated what the ‘gritty realism’ of its self-styled ‘punishing Gen Z exposé’ gets ‘right’ about the generation. See: Sana Noor Haq, ‘Five Gen Z writers review *Euphoria*’s hedonism, pessimism, and gritty realism’, *gal-dem*, 7 August 2019 <<http://gal-dem.com/teen-gen-z-review-euphoria-hbo/>> [accessed 30 October 2019]; Doreen St. Félix, “‘Euphoria’ and the Flawed Art of Gen Z Prophesying”, *The New Yorker*, 16 June 2019 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/euphoria-and-the-flawed-art-of-gen-z-prophesying>> [accessed 30 October 2019]; Günseli Yalcinkaya, ‘What *Euphoria* gets right about Gen Z’, *Dazed*, 7 August 2019 <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/45533/1/what-euphoria-gets-right-about-gen-z-teen-tv-drugs-queer-stories>> [accessed 30 October 2019]

Theorizing realism as model dispenses with the problematic of mimetic fidelity to the single world, privileging realism's drafting and projecting of worlds: realism fundamentally designs and erects socialities, imagines the grounds of collectivities, probes the mystique of materialities, modulates institutions and productions beyond the scope of the given.²³

My analysis throughout this thesis has complemented rather than reflected Kornbluh's. My approach to realism resembles what she terms as her 'antimimetic theory of realism as production', insofar as I have not evaluated whether generations are accurately represented in realist fiction but rather approached realism as a genre that reproduces and reformulates contemporary generational discourse.²⁴ However, I have not gone as far as Kornbluh in dismissing what she calls the 'referentialist fallacy' about realism: that it attempts to represent reality beyond the text.²⁵ As I argue in my Introduction and demonstrate throughout the Chapters that follow, the genre contract of realism is bound up in its epistemological claims, and it is through these claims that forms such as the generation traverse the boundary between the social and aesthetic. Moreover, it is in its claim to represent real a world outside the text that contemporary realism can demonstrate for readers how such forms impose certain limitations on, or provide certain opportunities for, the ways we conceptualise society at broad scales.

In contrast to Kornbluh's broad survey of 'political formalism' in canonical realist novels, I have also provided a detailed analysis of how one particular form—the generation—is used in twenty-first century realist novels to conceptualise a set of phenomena related to technological change. This focus has enabled my analysis to foreground how the generation as an ongoing terrain of struggle rather than a model posited by one particular political orientation. My analysis in Chapter One showed how realist texts might deploy techno-generational

²³ Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

frameworks in order to identify and thereby isolate a potential disruption to humanist cultural values by a reductive computational logic. The realist texts I examined in Chapter Two, meanwhile, used techno-generational frameworks to stand-in for realism's historical interest in class difference. Here, a realist impulse to uncover the hidden labour performed by influencers encountered the limits of novelistic representation regarding the complexity and scale of the platform economy. In Chapter Three, I examined how techno-generational frameworks might be employed to trouble the affective conventions of realist narratives, presenting a flattened sense of intimacy that forces a confrontation with the novelty of being with digital media. Finally, in Chapter Four I explored how realism might employ techno-generational frameworks to conceptualise a potential rupture in the fabric of normalcy, a vision of technology rooted in subaltern cultural practices rather than Euro-American capitalist hegemony. In each case, realism participates in the broader attachment of affects to the generational form as we use to conceptualise social reality. Furthermore, by situating these forms in longform narratives, it provides a unique theatre for detailing, stretching and destabilising them in relation to numerous other forms.

As I was completing this thesis in late-2019, the networks of communicative capitalism have produced a renewed interest in intergenerational animosity. This has been sparked by social media users' adoption of the phrase 'OK Boomer' to dismiss the conservative opinions of older people expressed online, a phrase the *The New York Times* sardonically described as 'mark[ing] the end of friendly generational relations'.²⁶ While its reach is easily overstated, this more aggressive coalescing around generational identities on social media follows a longer term intensification following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, following which some

²⁶ Taylor Lorenz, "'OK Boomer' Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations", *The New York Times*, 29 October 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/style/ok-boomer.html>> [accessed 30 October 2019]

commentators blamed a lack of ‘millennial’ turnout for Donald Trump’s victory.²⁷ Arthur Asa Burger suggests that the generation’s relative support for left-wing Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders was a means of asserting ‘their independence from their parents and help resolve their Oedipal conflicts’.²⁸ Such a reading appeals to a rigid generational framework that fits an event into the pre-existing narrative of millennials as entitled and narcissistic.

Barbara Kingsolver’s 2018 novel *Unsheltered* demonstrates the limitations of reading politics through the Howe-Strauss framework. It depicts intra-familial disagreements between ‘tradition-agnostic baby boomers’ and millennials who are ‘jaded about the fate of the world, idealistic about personal prospects’.²⁹ Tig, the unemployed daughter of the protagonist Willa, condemns ‘her elders’ for ‘shoring up [their] bankruptcy with the only tools [they] know how’.³⁰ Believing in gradual generational progress, She tells Willa that ‘people have to come around in their own ways, Mom. Only when they’re ready. Most people will die first’.³¹ Willa, can ‘see the reason’ in Tig’s frustration, even though she finds it ‘unnerving’.³² Ultimately Tig’s inevitablist vision of the future wins over her parents, contrasting with the antagonistic ‘team loyalty’ of selfie-taking Bernie Sanders supporters, who harass Willa’s elderly Republican father-in-law.³³ The promise of generational change inspires a political passivity. *Unsheltered* thereby resembles efforts in *Purity* to define a moderate future amidst the perceived radicalism of the millennial generation. *Purity* uses Pip’s impulsive behaviour to gesture to a broken socioeconomic system that loads future debt onto her generation. However, the novel criticises narratives of technological progress ingrained in contemporary capitalism, only to fall back on

²⁷ Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 37, 101-2, 108, 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Unsheltered* (London: Faver & Faber, 2018), pp. 22; 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 408.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-9.

the naturalised ‘common sense’ of neoliberalism that naturalises current material relations as inevitable.

Realist fiction aims to connect the experiences of individuals to the broader social relations within which they exist. It has traditionally relied on the period as a framing for this connection, presenting a clear depiction of ‘the present’ that ties together the experiences of different characters. When the notion of the present appears increasingly difficult to periodize, the ‘generation’ has also provided a useful alternative, offering way of imposing a flexible order upon the uneven way in which societies experience change over time. However, the novels I have examined demonstrate that changes brought about by the domestication of digital media—the devices of which are both so ubiquitous and personal on the one hand, and distant and opaque on the other—remain stubbornly difficult to represent. In rendering broad social change ‘visible’ in the represented experience of individuals and families, literary realism reinforces readers’ expectations regarding the ‘normal’ while representing deviations from it.

An alternative use of generational discourse today attempts to use the generation to elaborate a more radical trajectory. Shaun Scott holds on to the projected virtues of Howe-Strauss’s positive ‘hero’ generation as, to borrow from Mark Fisher, ‘a tendency, a virtual trajectory’.³⁴ He writes that ‘the diverse population of economically insecure Millennials employed in precarious fields of work can drive a new Left turn in American politics’.³⁵ In *Generation Left* (2019), Kier Milburn argues that the horizontalist protests of the 2011 Occupy movement and the ‘electoralist turn’ towards Sanders in recent elections constitute moments in a long-term formulation of a generational consciousness and movement.³⁶ Again, these attempts to claim the ‘millennial’ label for a left-wing political perspective, do not simply

³⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2014), pp. 22, 19.

³⁵ Scott, *Millennials and the Moments that Made Us*, p. 227.

³⁶ Milburn, *Generation Left*, pp. 57-104.

reflect reality: 41% of white ‘millennials’ voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, suggesting that generation is hardly the primary dividing line in electoral politics.³⁷

John Clarke et al. critique generational discourse for displacing class as a ‘primary index of social position’ in cultural discourse during the post-war period when a ‘combined mythos of ‘affluence, [political] consensus and embourgeoisement’ introduced a teleology in which each new generation benefits from gradual reforms to existing institutions.³⁸ This ‘generational consciousness’ further displaces class through accessible youth culture’s embrace of it, emphasising individual identity and aspiration rather than collective action.³⁹ Yet this generational consciousness ‘did have a “rational core” in the very experience of working-class young [...], the institutions in which post-war changes were encountered, and above all, in the way this sphere was reshaped by changes in the leisure market’.⁴⁰ As the class constitutions particular to industrial capitalism are replaced by those of post-industrial capitalism, its distinction from age becomes even less clear. Milburn suggests class is often defined by whether one performs manual or non-manual labour, with ‘income levels, job security or ownership of wealth’ of post-industrial non-manual labour largely ignored.⁴¹

In this context, a temporary strategy of privileging age over class categories may serve as a tool in the ‘cognitive mapping’ of the structures and ‘totality’ of a larger socioeconomic system.⁴² Furthermore, generational identity serves as a terrain of struggle, something to be

³⁷ See: ‘Why 41 percent of white millennials voted for Trump’, *The Washington Post*, 15 December 2017 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/12/15/racial-resentment-is-why-41-percent-of-white-millennials-voted-for-trump-in-2016/>> [accessed 9 August 2019]

³⁸ John Clarke, et al. ‘Subcultures, Cultures and Class’, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 9–74 (pp. 21–2).

³⁹ Clarke, et al., ‘Subcultures, Cultures and Class’, p. 51.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 51. In the same volume, Graham Murdock and Robin McCron describe the generation as ‘an increasingly important mediation of class [...] structuring both the forms of class experience and the ways in which these experiences are worked through. Graham Murdock and Robin McCron, ‘Consciousness of Class and Consciousness of Generation’, *Resistance Through Rituals*, pp. 192–208 (p. 199).

⁴¹ Milburn, *Generation Left*, p. 22.

⁴² Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 54; pp. 414–5.

claimed amidst its overlaps with other social identities. Insisting that there is no shared essence to a generational identity like the ‘millennial’ can therefore miss the point. As with gender, it is perhaps the very imperfection and amorphousness of today’s generational identities—‘digital native’, ‘millennial’, etc.—that ensures their longevity, since they can never be isolated enough to adequately deconstruct.⁴³ Moreover, efforts to define these identities mediate material conflicts and perhaps play, to borrow phrasing from Stuart Hall on cultural identity, ‘a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role [...] a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life’.⁴⁴ Alternative cultural representations are not only descriptions of a prior reality but a terrain for constituting a new political subjectivity. This is what Julia Kristeva suggests when she states that she uses the generation as ‘not a chronology but a *signifying space*, a both corporeal and desiring mental space’.⁴⁵ Even as floating marketing signifiers, contradictory and exclusionary in practice, the combination of their prominence, the temporal significance and malleability of generational identities makes them valuable sites for projecting future-oriented politics.

Yet a singular focus on generational politics is limited, as demonstrated by Daniel Torday’s satirical 2018 novel *Boomer1*. Isaac, a middle-class, self-identified millennial vents his frustration about his job insecurity online. His videos are widely shared and inspire shadowy internet groups to begin planning acts of ‘generational domestic terrorism’, bombing a Social Security Administration Building in Maryland.⁴⁶ As in *The Nix*, this generational animosity is compared to that of the 1960s. However, *Boomer1* does not dismiss political movements. Rather, it satirises the limitations of generational identity as a foundation. Tommy Orange’s

⁴³ Judith Halberstram, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 20

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morely and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 440-449 (p. 443).

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs*, 7.1 (Autumn 1981), pp. 13-35 (p. 33).

⁴⁶ Daniel Torday, *Boomer1* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), p. 78.

novel *There There* avoids these limitations by situating generational identity within a postcolonial politics. Operating within this specific context, it reinterprets traditional generational frameworks of indigenous communities, e.g. the Seventh Generation, through political tactics centred around digital media technologies. Unlike other novels I examined, it addresses the collectivist potentials of these technologies alongside the impacts they have on individual characters.

Techno-generational frameworks have found aesthetic expression in twenty-first century realist narratives because the genre locates the ‘unrepresentable’ dimensions of digital systems and the changes they bring within the bounds of its familiar aesthetic conventions and thematic concerns. In rendering broad social change ‘visible’ in the represented experience of individuals and families, literary realism reinforces readers’ expectations regarding the ‘normal’ while representing deviations from it. The genre expectations of these realist novels compel them to locate technologies within broader cultural practices. Therefore, whether through experimentation, self-contradiction, or plain discrimination, these novels demonstrate how techno-generational frameworks inherit the limitations of technological determinism. Taking technology as their subject, as a distinct actor separable from broader social relations and cultural practices, clashes with the requirement to detail the broader socioeconomic and cultural milieus out of which technologies emerge and within which they are used. These novels’ digital native characters therefore become sites for the overlap and clashes between techno-generational frameworks and other models of social change. In a discursive context in which generational categories such as the ‘digital native’, ‘millennial’ and ‘Generation Z’ abound, we must remain critical of attempts to explain material changes by recourse to them. This is particularly the case as generations and technology are drawn further into the centre of efforts to make sense of recent political and economic shocks that fail to cohere to a particular bourgeois understanding of political ‘normality’.

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