# WITHDRAWAL: A READING OF ANTISOCIAL AFFECT IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of

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May 2021

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# Abstract

This thesis identifies the aesthetics of antisocial emotion in four contemporary novels, Carol Shields' *Unless*, Ali Smith's *There but for the*, Anna Burns' *Milkman*, and André Aciman's *Call My By Your Name*. It argues that these works represent the antisocial body not as something radically negated, but as experiences of the unique affective category of emotional withdrawal. Where affect and emotion are conventionally understood as systems for disclosing information to oneself and to others for the establishment of social reciprocity and synchronisation, withdrawal renders the subject uncommunicative and emotionally inaccessible. Forsaking emotional catharsis as the principle means of narrative fulfilment, these novels decline the normative bias towards self-expression and social involvement characteristic of a twenty-first century world that has inherited the Enlightenment value of self-representation and has escalated medical and popular therapeutic cultures alongside a capitalist investment in professional networking and perpetual engagement. Withdrawal, instead, registers the social world as a mode of assembly and association that can no longer sustain the participation, membership, or belonging of the subject. The novels demonstrate a new perspective on affective life, lived by a cohort of characters who encounter their disparate worlds not as dynamic spaces of urgent activity but as protracted impasses of uncertainty about the fantasy of social connection.

# Acknowledgements

My unconditional gratitude goes out to Rachel Sykes for their invaluable guidance and interminable patience, and to Angus Brown for his enlightening advice and encouragement. Thank you, immeasurably, to my mother and father and to my incredible friends for their unwavering support, selfless compassion, and immense generosity. Thank you to Rameri Moukam whose wisdom has stayed with me all these years. Thank you to Jon from Meridian, Sumita Williams (and to Adriene Mishler) for your teachings and emotional intelligence, and to YouTuber LoFi Girl whose perpetual playlist has seen me through many long days (and nights).

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# Introduction

This thesis comprises of three studies into forms of antisocial emotion in twenty-first century fiction which constitute, I argue, the affect of withdrawal. Withdrawal describes, primarily, the experience of not wanting to communicate with other people. In this project, this experience more precisely signifies a process of detachment from a social world in which relations with other people have become in some way unsustainable for the continuation of the subject. To be emotionally withdrawn might involve being seen as introverted, unsociable, inward-looking, unforthcoming, distant, reserved, reticent, shy, detached, reclusive, self-effacing, aloof, silent, quiet, and so on. In kinetic terms, the motion of withdrawal as an *e*motion – that is, the experience of *being moved* – is figured as movement backwards.[1] The OED contains several accounts of withdrawal's retractive mobility. Withdrawal is '[t]he act of taking back or away what has been held, occupied, or enjoyed' (OED 1), or '[t]he act of retiring or retreating *from* a place or position' (OED 4a, original emphasis). Definitionally, its physical movement is reflected in its psychological profile. Withdrawal describes '[t]he state or process of psychic retreat from objective reality or social involvement' (OED 4b). Similarly, to be 'withdrawn' might mean: 'of a mental state, detached' (OED).

In psychoanalytic theory, withdrawal 'reduces activity, heightens the barrier against stimulation, and conserves energy', and 'by its very nature involves much less of a demand on consciousness and upon the environment' than other affective states or drives.[2] It involves, George Engel argues, a 'warning of loss' accompanied by an attitude ‘to give up’, which distinguishes it specifically from anxiety – a similar but not identical affect of unpleasure.[3] The behavioural manifestations of withdrawal involve taking oneself away from a place or position, or to leave a situation, frequently in search of privacy and quiet. Withdrawal produces, therefore, occurrences of cessation. Withdrawal will suspend communication with others, participation in activities, memberships of teams or organisations, belonging to groups, spatial presence, and relationships with conditions of reality. It is marked by a recession of speech and expression, and, despite its retraction, a reduction of bodily motility. Indeed, to be ‘withdrawn’ is also, according to the OED to be, ‘sometimes *in a purely static sense*, secluded’ (OED, my emphasis). The conflations of motions of retreat with ‘purely static’ immobility means that withdrawal appears frequently as a paradoxical response of non-response, the expression of inexpressiveness, the emotion of unemotionality.

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[1] The OED derives the etymology of 'emotion' from the French émouvoir (excite) based on the Latin movere (move).

[2] George L. Engel, 'Anxiety and Depression-Withdrawal: The Primary Affects of Unpleasure', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 43 (1962), 89–97, 93–94. Engel speaks about the compound affect 'depression-withdrawal' throughout his essay. Since, as I go on to argue, withdrawal

I argue, here, that by reading a collection of twenty-first century texts, in which a primary mode of encountering the world and its predicaments presents with these various patterns, the phenomenon of withdrawal emerges as its own distinctive affect through which we can interpret the world. Methodologically, the thesis focuses primarily on novels: Carol Shield’s *Unless*, Ali Smith’s *There but for the*, Anna Burns’ *Milkman*, and André Aciman’s *Call Me By Your Name*. The final chapter, however, focusing on *Call Me By Your Name* attempts a wider reading of the romance genre, motivated by a contrast between the withdrawn forms of Aciman’s novel with the expressive forms of the song – and the only non-novel source – ‘Love Story’ by Taylor

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is not simply indicative of depression, there is a need to keep these emotional states distinct even as they frequently share aesthetics.

[3] Engel, p. 95.

Swift, which, despite its medium, nevertheless condenses a long literary history of coupledom into its emblematic love plot.

In this project, I have been influenced by a collection of works in cultural and literary studies which have, similarly, aimed to isolate or 'invent' specific feelings, emotions or affective experiences.[4] To 'invent' in this way means, according to Lauren Berlant, to describe a phenomenon or 'a thing you can recognise in yourself but also operating in the world', and from which you might build a wider analytical project.[5] Thus, whilst withdrawal is – perhaps inextricably – 'mixed with other affects, particularly guilt, shame, helplessness or hopelessness', and is variably entangled with terms such as 'sad, bereft, heavy, tired, weak, fatigued, no energy, no interest, no feeling, lost, and so on', it is not totally reducible to these forms.[6] The novels analysed in this thesis demonstrate, I argue, that even when withdrawal does not always feel like withdrawal, it is still recognisable as its own unique psycho-biological structure. This point might be clarified by invoking Berlant's distinctions between withdrawal as an affective structure, whereby subjectivity is reorganised (and the body is orientated, moved or not moved) in response to a predicament in which communication, and more widely the social itself, is no longer a sustainable faculty of the world, and withdrawal as an feeling in the body, which might certainly take the form of being withdrawn but also of being anxious, depressed, afraid, melancholic, a mixture of all these, and so on.[7]

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[4] The most important texts and their associated affects have included Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), and such feelings as 'hate', 'fear', 'shame', and 'love' in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2012); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); the emotions of 'animatedness', 'envy', 'irritation', 'anxiety', 'stuplimity', 'paranoia' and 'disgust' in Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005); and 'shame' in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[5] The idea of 'inventing' affects is described by Lauren Berlant in Coalition MARGINS, *Lauren Berlant - Cruel Optimism (Online Lecture @ Skopje Pride Weekend 2020)*, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xR7Iuf_jJIU> [accessed 25 March 2021].

[6] Engel, p. 95.

In the following sections, I will outline how withdrawal sits within the existing school of affect theory and how affect theory will inform the studies of this thesis. Out of the collection of inconsistent and often contradictory strands of theory that fall under this umbrella, I will expand primarily on the works of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, whose affect system allows for studies of discrete emotional experiences, even as withdrawal appears to be antithetical to the communicative motivations of this system.

Following this, I will discuss the forms of antisociality that code emotional withdrawal as emotional absence or negativity. This image of disaffect is a freighted concern for our contemporary culture of digitised mediation and networking, and for the pathologies of medical theories, such as trauma. Overall, this Introduction makes a case for moving away from the normative bias towards constant social involvement that supposedly characterises a healthy and well-adjusted affective life. I will expand, instead, on Bruno Latour's ideas of the social as a wide-reaching movement of association that might challenge normative images of the social to which withdrawal can only ever be antithetical.

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[7] This is adapted from Berlant's observation that '[t]he structure of grief (reorganizing subjectivity in response to the loss of something important) would not be the same as the emotion of grief (which is just one option in the range of ways to inhabit that structure, since people live loss differently, and are differently shattered and inflated by its effects on them).' Lauren Berlant, 'Thinking about Feeling Historical', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 1 (2008), 4–9, 7, n. 17. She makes, here, a distinction between 'structure [of affect]' and 'emotion' into which I do not intend to invest. Nevertheless, the distinction is helpful for clarifying how a particular affective/emotional state might orientate the body, and what certain orientations might inform us about the world, even when it does not feel like the feeling we expect.

## Withdrawal in the Affective Turn

A confusion of terminology is inherent in the school of affect theory that has never managed to arrive at any consensus of what affect, emotion or feeling really means or how they should be discussed. This confusion is partially a result of the emerging circumstances of the so-called affective turn in critical theory that in taking up emotions as an object of study has derived its theoretical foundations from a confused eclecticism of influences, which sometimes coalesce and sometimes contradict.

Affect theorists ranging from Brian Massumi, Lawrence Grossberg, Kathleen Stewart, Jasbir Puar, Steven Shaviro, and others have inherited the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who interpret affect as an intensity or impersonal force moving through the world and passing through bodies which are thereby *affected*. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth write that '[a]ffect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces— visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion— that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension'.[8] 'Beyond emotion' suggests the central split in Deleuzian affect between affects and emotions. Emotions, here, are the personal states arrived at by the individual processing of affective impulses, a cognitively impacted process producing individualised judgements of the world. Affect is the force that precedes emotion – it is pre-cognitive, pre-personal. It 'arises in the midst of in-betweeness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.'[9] In differentiating between emotion and structure, Berlant entertains this distinction: 'emotion is a kind of congealed, recognisable object that has norms associated with it, but affects are often inchoate senses that you have in your body that are the effect of the impact of the world that you mostly forget about because your body is always responding to the world'.[10] Although, in inventing affects she nonetheless has recourse to a specified and differentiated idea of those bodily senses that mix norms with sensory intuition.

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[8] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–25, p. 2.

[9] ibid, p. 1.

Like Sara Ahmed, I am not so much 'interested in distinguishing affect and emotion as if they refer to different aspects of experience.' I agree with Ahmed that it is important 'not to assume or create separate spheres between consciousness and intentionality, on the one hand, and physiological or bodily reactions on the other.'[11] Since the novels studied in this thesis demonstrate that withdrawal emerges in terms of both intentional behaviour and involuntary reflex, it becomes impossible to reproduce such a strong bisection between our experiences of cognition and feeling. Elsewhere, Ahmed writes that 'the distinction between affect/emotion can under-describe the work of emotions, which *involve* forms of intensity, bodily orientation, and direction that are not simply about "subjective content" or qualification of intensity. Emotions are not "after-thoughts" but shape how bodies are moved by the worlds they inhabit'. Affects and emotions are theoretically separable but practically 'they are contiguous; they slide into each other; they stick, and cohere'.[12] My understanding of affect and emotion does not overly prioritise either the bodily sensation of adjustment or the conceptual idea of the emotion, both of which inform mutually as opposed to one always and only preceding the other.

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[10] Berlant in Coalition MARGINS.
[11] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 208.
[12] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, pp. 230–31, n. 1. Original emphasis.

Like Ann Cvetkovich, I use affect in this thesis ‘in a generic sense, […] as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling’. The term ‘feeling’ does similarly generic work. Cvetkovich writes, ‘I favor *feeling* in part because it is intentionally imprecise, retaining the ambiguity between feeling as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences’ – an ambiguity that significantly bypasses a mind-body dualism suggested by Deleuzian affect theory.[13] Similarly, for Sianne Ngai a hard distinction between affect and emotion does not constitute her theoretical bedrock. Instead, she opts for ‘a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind.’[14] It is a shift that helps her maintain an ambivalence between subject and object, and between first and third person, which she sees as a problem integral to the very understanding of philosophical and psychoanalytic paradigms of emotion.

One interesting distinction worth reflecting on is made by Jonathan Flatley who writes that ‘[w]here *emotion* suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, *affect* indicates something relational and transformative’.[15] As a phenomenon, withdrawal’s diminished communication removes it from expressive activity, which would seem to establish it as an affect, something that, on Flatley’s terms, relates to ‘the relational more than the expressive’.[16] Yet, as withdrawal also compels the body towards a break in attachment, participation, and membership of association, it seems to be antithetical to both proposals, as if it were the absence of feeling itself. The uncertainties inherent to withdrawal between (in)expression and (non)relationality mean that, like Ngai, I understand this undecidability to be integral to the very ability to think of withdrawal affectively and emotionally. It is a slippage that we find colloquially in the way that the language of pop psychology shuttles between withdrawal as ‘emotional’ or ‘social’ as if they were synonymous.

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[13] Cvetkovich, *Depression*, p. 4. Original emphasis.
[14] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 27.
[15] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 12. Original emphasis.
[16] ibid, p. 11.

The alternative origins of affect theory, and the one which I am most drawn to, are those shaped by the works of American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, whose work has been revisited most influentially by Eve Sedgwick.[17] It is Tomkins himself, I believe, who in arguing against the legacies of Freudian drive theory and the idea of affect as psychologically undifferentiated arousal critiques *avant la lettre* the work of affect theorists like Massumi. Tomkins writes that ‘[s]urely no one who has experienced joy at one time and rage at another time would suppose that these radically different feelings were really the same except for different "interpretations" placed on similar "arousals."'[18] Tomkin’s viewed affect as its own autonomous biological system distinct from memory, perception, cognition, and drives. In his words, '[t]he primary function of affect is urgency via analogic and profile amplification to make one care by feeling’ (54). Things, objects, people, events, and so on become important to the subject because, Tomkins proposes, as an ‘analog amplifier’ affect mimics, in rate and duration, the qualities of the ‘activating trigger’ (53). The pistol shot, for example, is analogically amplified by the startle response both of which are ‘sudden in onset, very brief in duration, and equally sudden in decay’ (53). This is ‘the role of the affect mechanism as a separate but amplifying *co-assembly'* (32, my emphasis); '[t]he affect amplifies by increasing the urgency of anything with which it is co-assembled.' (53). In doing so, the startle response distributes awareness and assigns importance to the pistol shot, with which it is co-assembled as something that matters to the subject.

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[17] See Chapter 3. ‘Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins (Written with Adam Frank)’, in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 93–122; and *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adam Frank, and Irving E. Alexander (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

[18] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. by E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 35. He goes on to humorously tell us that such a theory of undifferentiated arousal ‘is as reasonable a possibility as a theory of pain and pleasure which argued that the difference between the pain of a toothache and the pleasure of an orgasm is not in the stimulation of different sensory receptors, but in the fact that since one experience occurs in a bedroom, the other in a dentist's office, one interprets the undifferentiated arousal state differently’ (ibid.). Further quotations from this source will be included parenthetically in the text.

This amplifying co-assembly links the subjective judgement of the urgent world with the involuntary somatic responses of the body, meaning affect co-assembles not only with that world but also with the diverse systems of the body. He writes that 'each innate affect is controlled by inherited programs that in turn control facial muscle responses, autonomic blood flow, respiratory, and vocal responses', and that 'these correlated sets of responses will define the number and specific types of primary affects' (58). Thus, Tomkins formulates his own collection of discrete primary innate affects, each with their own unique 'profile of activation, maintenance, and decay' (88). The positive responses – laughter, joy – are marked by decrease in the neurobiological activity that he calls 'neural firing', negative responses – anger, distress – are marked by high and constant levels of neural firing, and more neutral affects – startle, interest – are marked by rapid increases in neural firing. He succinctly writes, '[b]y being immediately activated and thereby co-assembled with its activator, affect either makes good things better or bad things worse, by conjointly simulating its activator in its profile of neural firing and by adding a special analogic quality which is intensely rewarding or punishing' (88). Through their analogical profiles, affects can inform us about the qualities of the world with which we interact.

This amplification is characterised by three principle qualities – its 'urgency' which makes objects relevant and important, its 'abstractness' whereby amplification is registered in internalised bodily increases or decreases, and its 'generality' that affords the affect system its ‘very great combinatorial flexibility’ (52), whereby ‘[w]ithout affect amplification nothing else matters, and with its amplification *anything can matter*’ (54, my emphasis). This entails a great theoretical portability. ‘The same generality of combinatorial co-assembly permits the differential magnification of biological, psychological, social, cultural, or historical determinants of affect.’ (56-57) This means, I suggest, that in terms of registering the external activators co-assembled with the subject through their affect system, the world becomes increasingly analysable in terms of the relationality between the individual and the world. In terms of withdrawal’s own unique profile – usually gradual in onset and decay, and long in duration – withdrawal aligns itself with the type of ambient emotions that Ngai calls ‘ugly feelings’: less powerful or cathartic than the emotions more classically interpreted by philosophy, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and so on – anger, fear, the sublime – and are instead ‘defined by a flatness or ongoingness’.[19] This ongoingness of withdrawal’s affective relationship with the world might help draw out the ambient, atmospheric, and ordinary conditions which have activated and sustained it. Withdrawal might itself be an ugly feeling, where its gaps, its incoherencies, its impotencies make important ‘similarly ambivalent situations of suspended agency.’[20]

## The Antisocial and Negation

Reflecting again on those common signals listed by Engel, withdrawal is classified by its relationship with ‘helplessness or hopeless’ and the emptiness of ‘no energy, no interest, no feeling’.[21] In terms of withdrawn children, he remarks that ‘[w]hat is actually felt by the child is difficult to know, because the child usually reports nothing'.[22] These common self-descriptions (or lack therefore) suggest that in common parlance, withdrawal is easily marked by negativity. That is to say that not only are its signs received with a general sense of its illegibility, dysphoria or otherwise 'ugly' connotations, but that – in contrast to larger and more visible emotions – it seems that withdrawal might be defined most readily by an innate absence. When Tomkins compiled his list of individual affects, he determined that each one was controlled by its unique innate programme that produces response in facial muscles, autonomic blood flow, body temperature, respiratory rates, vocal patterns, and so on, for the purpose of communicating information about the world. To reflect on withdrawal, on the contrary, is to reflect on the slowed down and often immobile body, the subtracted facial expression, the recession of vocalisation, and the general short-circuiting of reciprocity and synchronisation. Furthermore, insofar as it lacks any perceivable objects (withdrawal makes no expressive claim on anything external to it), and in the perceived lack of urgency (withdrawal produces no sense of movement or directive), it seems that withdrawal is a *deactivating* force on the body.

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[19] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 7.
[20] ibid, p. 1.
[21] Engel, p. 95.

In this apparent programme of *de*activating the body's 'neural firing' – to continue Tomkin's somewhat dubious scientific terminology – withdrawal would seem to diminish (as opposed to 'amplify') the affecting stimulus. Negation is not something widely dealt with by Tomkin's work in the affect system: the negation of the object of emotion, of its importance and urgency, of the relation between the feeling subject and their object, and therefore of relationality itself, all of which would seem to be antithetical to the affect system itself. Where affect links the body to the world through a process of co-assembly, withdrawal seems more inclined to *dis*assembly, an effect that can be understood finally as the postural enactment of a pure antisociality.

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[22] ibid.

Furthermore, insofar as our affective lives comes to be processed, habituated, and finally understood as expressing the internal truth of ourselves to the wider world, withdrawal starts to seem like the negation of subjectivity itself.[23] This is especially so for those us living through the so-called Information Age, where expanding digital technologies make increasing demands on our presence, attempt to monopolise our attention, and finally organise our subjectivities through algorithmic calculation in which participation (and even existence) is increasingly conditional on our public and perpetual expression and engagement. Paul Chan writes:

> The telecommunications and related technology industries have capitalized on the demand for communication by producing ever more robust and specialized platforms for making connections. But this is not necessarily so we communicate and understand one another more, but rather so there is simply more speech-material to gather, transmit, quantify, and capitalize. In other words, communication is being industrialized. In the economic scheme of things, forms of expression are now a natural resource, to be tapped and exploited for profit, like oil. And a productive life is today inextricably linked to generating more and more speech for others to hear, see, and read. To live fully in the present means to be in constant communication: the self as network. *Ego sum communicatio*.[24]

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[23] The idea that affect becomes the truth of the subject and the belief that people have that their feelings are what is true about them is discussed by Berlant in Coalition MARGINS.

[24] Paul Chan, ‘The Unthinkable Community’, *E-Flux*, 16 (2020) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61274/the-unthinkable-community/> [accessed 9 March 2021]. Original italics. Thank you to Rupi Dhillon for directing me to this essay.

He summarises that ‘[t]he network is a community as marketplace’, which means that our social space appears, in increasingly monopolised ways, at those moments of exchange and consumption. Our participation in marketplace models is increasingly reliant on our emotive expressions dislocated across multiple platforms that monetise engagement and participation through algorithmic computing. To keep to oneself is increasingly at odds with the compulsive demands of digital capitalist ideology.

Aside from this, withdrawal might also be figured by the negativity of the inexpressible effects of psychological trauma. Bessel van der Kolk’s contribution to trauma studies understands the uncommunicating body as the encapsulation of unhealed traumatic wounds. It is not only that ‘traumatized people often have enormous difficulty telling other people what has happened to them’, but that ‘[t]rauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past.’[25] Withdrawal correlates with trauma not only in its verbal incapacities, but additionally in the physical detachment from relationality and social involvement. He writes that ‘[e]verything about us – our brains, our minds, and our bodies – is geared towards collaboration in social systems. This is our most powerful survival strategy, the key to our success as a species, and it is precisely this that breaks down in most forms of mental suffering.’[26] Thus, ‘[t]rauma results in a breakdown of attuned physical synchrony’, and ‘[m]any traumatized people find themselves chronically out of sync with the people around them.’[27] In contrast, ‘*[c]ommunicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized.*’[28] Why might the desire to communicate indicate functional biological systems? In relation to threat and survival, social synchrony is prioritised above withdrawal and bodily retention, which are understood as last resorts for self-protection:

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[25] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 43.
[26] ibid., p. 166.
[27] ibid., p. 79.
[28] ibid., p. 235. My emphasis.

> Whenever we feel threatened, we instinctively turn to the first level, *social engagement*. We call out for help, support, and comfort from the people around us. But if no one comes to our aid, or we're in immediate danger, the organism reverts to a more primitive way to survive: *fight or flight*. We fight off our attacker, or we run to a safe place. However, if this fails – we can't get away, we're held down or trapped – the organism tries to preserve itself by shutting down and expending as little energy as possible. We are then in a state of *freeze* or *collapse*.[29]

The present age is characterised, perhaps, by an overdetermined proclivity for communication. It is an injunction of capitalist participation, on the one hand, that has become increasingly defined by skills of socialisation and networking,[30] but it is also the demonstration of appropriate psychobiological regulation and health. Thus, the texts I have selected in this thesis – Smith's *There but for the*, Shield's *Unless*, Burns' *Milkman*, Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name* - represent an archive produced in this contemporary era marked by increasing pressure towards communication and participation and yet are themselves marked by its antithetical forms of unfeeling and inexpression.

Whilst Smith's Miles Garth locks himself inside away from the world, Shields' Norah Winters sits (e)motionless on the street abstaining from all worldly activities and pleasures. The two narrators of Burns' and Aciman's novels, meanwhile, find themselves detaching from communal belonging and from the objects they desire, forsaking the structures of life we assume to be most motivating and aspirational. In the self-denial and recession of these characters, it is perhaps easy to see something of the ascetic life that Nietzsche interpreted as an idealisation of impotency and negativity. He writes, '*[t]hat* the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man […] is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its *horror vacui* [horror of a vacuum]. *[I]t needs a goal* – and it will rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.'[31] For him, perhaps, withdrawal might indeed be the posture of nothingness, the drive towards full negation for the sake of drive itself whereby one's growing passivity might at least be valorised as moral agency. On the contrary, it is these assertions of negativity, I argue, that reproduce what Anne-Lise François describes as 'the normative bias in favor of the demonstrable, dramatic development and realization of human powers characteristic of, but not limited to, the capitalist investment in value and work and the Enlightenment allegiance to rationalism and unbounded progress.'[32] Instead, these four novels demonstrate a compatibility between recessive forms and artistic literary production that dispels the predisposition to understand unfeeling as radical absence.

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[29] van der Kolk, p. 80. Original emphasis.

[30] Sianne Ngai writes about how the spirit of capitalism has adjusted towards 'encouraging workers, through a rhetoric of "networking," to bring their abilities to communicate, socialise, and even play to work.' *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 8.

## The Antisocial and the Reassembly of Associations

A connection between the co-assembling system of affect conceived by Tomkins and the experiences of relationality that become understood as the social might be established through the frame of Bruno Latour's asociality, which moves sociology away from the science of the 'social' to the science of associations. He argues that the '"social" is not some glue that could fix everything including what the other glues cannot fix; it is *what* is glued together by many *other* types of connectors'. This means it is important to 'consider social aggregates as what should be explained by the specific *associations* provided by economics, linguistics, psychology, law, management, etc.'[33] This shift moves us away from a pre-existing abstract social force that explains associated elements and towards an idea of the social that emerges out of association, taking us towards a much wider understanding of the diverse attachments that make up the reality of people's worlds. Sociology thus becomes 'the *tracing of associations*'.[34] Latour's provisional methodology in this book is called actor-network theory, which follows the movements of various actors (people, ideas, objects, etc.) in order to observe their interminably shifting relationship with their worlds and identify the assemblies of which they are inextricably a part. (The interlinking hyphen, meanwhile, demonstrates the impossible separation of the actor and its network). Thus, 'network' becomes, Ngai tells us, 'a technique of describing rather than the object described'.[35]

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[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Genealogy of Morals', in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. & trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), pp. 449–599, p. 533. Original emphasis.

[32] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. xvi.

Latour summarises that, 'I am going to define the social not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling.'[36] Through its capacity for co-assembly, then, affect can be understood as a social phenomenon. Whilst I do not intend to invoke actor-network theory explicitly in this work, I do intend to take on board the flexibility of 'assembly' as an idea by which aggregates might connect together to become social in ways foreclosed by limited by ideas of inherent sociality. Thus, the aesthetics of antisociality might point us not to any metaphysical claims about certain affects, behaviours, or ideas but instead point us to modes of assembly reproduced by systems of normativity. This takes seriously the claim by Berlant that 'affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory'.[37] Furthermore, by recognising the potential of interminable and unstable reassembly as inherent in the co-assembling systems of the body, withdrawal might suggest to us new ways connecting entities even as it purports to dissolve connection altogether. The antisociality of withdrawal does not necessitate that it be an absence of affect. Instead, it is affective in its very capacity for amplifying those assemblies unrecognised by normative readings of emotion.[38]

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[33] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5. Original emphasis.

[34] ibid. Original emphasis.

[35] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 114.

[36] Latour, p. 7.

Cvetkovich, in her study of depression, makes a clarification about withdrawal as a form. 'Depression', she writes, 'can take antisocial forms such as withdrawal or inertia, but it can also create new forms of sociality'.[39] Despite reinforcing a division between antisocially coded forms and sociality itself, I am incredibly influenced by her ability to recognise in cultural ideas of depression the potential for a reassembly of the world. Depression becomes a personal or collective impasse (her book is subtitled 'a public feeling') that is nevertheless a space for the subject or communities to reimagine relationality.

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[37] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 53.

[38] It might seem strange to take the ideas of reassembly from Latour, himself influenced by the assemblages and philosophical nomadology of Deleuze and Guattari, and shift them instead, in a potentially theoretical anatopism, towards the unmistakably psychological systems of Tomkins. Yet, it seems to me that Latour's own ambivalence towards ANT correlates with the essential undecidability of the studies of emotion as a whole. Actor-network carries the ambiguity over the origin of action and agency (see Latour, p. 46) that we see in the inherent uncertainty of all fields of affect theory between the pre- and the post-conscious, and between the intentionality and reflexivity of expression. It is through this word 'assembly' that the two strands of affect theory might best be brought into dialogue, although that is not within the scope of this project.

[39] Cvetkovich, *Depression*, p. 6.

This influence from Cvetkovich's project also helps to situate this thesis outside of the well-known debate in queer theory regarding the antisocial thesis, which has motivated my ideas about the social even as I move further from its increasingly unhelpful binarism. On the one hand the antisocial thesis reclaims the conceptualised figure of the queer as always antithetical to the reproduction of the social. Theorists like Lee Edelman and his followers propose that – as summarised by Jack Halberstam here – '[t]he queer subject […] is bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligibility, and – instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition – he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent.'[40] This work is not making a claim towards withdrawal in this way. I do not a propose that our negative and – more often than not – undesirable experiences of life are in fact good, nor that in some Neitzschean sense '[w]eakness is being lied into something *meritorious*' in the sense that our emotional registers of disenfranchisement become virtuous and valued in and for themselves.[41]

Neither is this thesis the inverse, as attempted by Michael Snediker, to champion some kind of 'queer optimism' that he proposes can counteract what he sees as the tendency towards 'queer theory's habitation of [a] pessimistic field' in which negative affects like '[m]elancholy, self-shattering, shame, and the death drive' are uniquely privileged as objects of study.[42] Between these positions that seem to align themselves with positivity/negativity, social/antisocial, affect proves to be a conceptual tool apt for interrogating the simultaneity of these forms. The texts I read in the following chapters demonstrate this simultaneity in disparate ways: through Shields's representations of the exclusions of white neoliberal feminism and domesticity that is also the renegotiation of modes of assembling, in Burns's depictions of the attritional slow violence of colonial war that is also the management of the subjective self in the face of overwhelming stress, or Aciman's portrayal of a unevenly sustainable genre of affirmational romance that is also the possibility of a sustaining bond untethered to the privileged forms of proximity and longevity. This thesis does not drive towards full reclamation or rejection of withdrawal but opens space for its 'critical productivity' for interpreting the world that has fashioned its reactions.[43] The impasses induced by withdrawal in the reproduction of the normative social assemblies are also moments and opportunities to consider what 'new forms of sociality' Cvetkovich thinks are necessary.

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[40] Jack Halberstam, in Robert L. Caserio and others, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory', *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 819–28, 823.

[41] Nietzsche, p. 483. Original emphasis.

[42] Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 4.

Cvetkovich's study in depression, then, is an attempt to 'depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis.'[44] Thinking of the centrality of withdrawal to van der Kolk's understanding of emotional dysfunction, Cvetkovich's earlier work has been equally as influential to me in contemplating 'a demedicalized and depathologized model of trauma'.[45] Like the negative affect of depression, Cvetkovich explores 'how trauma can be a foundation for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them.'[46] Trauma is not only a bodily incapacity but it is also the initiation of a certain discourse surrounding historical events and our psychological and emotional relationships with them. As a field of knowledge, pathology today marks a stage in a long genealogy of modern medicine’s disciplinary and biopolitical epistemology. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, governmental power has increasingly exercised itself through models of health and hygiene of the body (as individual) and the population (as a unit) and through establishing doctors and psychiatrists as its public intellectuals.[47] Like Cvetkovich’s work that has inspired it, this thesis represents a move away, I hope, from this medicalisation of emotion and the compulsory pathologisation of negative affect that would involve interpreting withdrawal intuitively through this biopolitical lens.

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[43] This methodology of observing the aesthetically and culturally negative side of affect in order to assess its 'critical productivity' is something I learned from Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.
[44] Cvetkovich, *Depression*, p. 2.
[45] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 12.
[46] ibid, p. 15.

In psychiatric rationality, withdrawal, while not understood as a discrete disorder in and of itself, is considered almost unanimously to be symptomatically informative of originating disorders: ‘it is not the display of solitude that is the problem; rather the central issue is that social withdrawal may reflect underlying difficulties of a social or emotional nature.’[48] As a symptomatic signifier, it seems that withdrawal is most commonly understood as a developmental concern insofar as much of the medico-scientific literature that discusses it centres around childhood psychology. Rubin, Coplan and Bowker state that ‘[t]he construct of social withdrawal is found in almost every textbook or review chapter on abnormal or clinical child psychology’ […] ‘In source after source, social withdrawal is contrasted with aggression as one of the two most frequently identified major dimensions of dysfunctional behavior in childhood.’[49]

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[47] Michel Foucault has written extensively about the history of these medical structures of knowledge. For the constitution of mental illness as a field of disciplinary intervention underlining the logics of curing and confining 'madness', see *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2001). For the birth of modern medicine, the clinical model, and the medical gaze which objectifies the individual body as the locus of disease, see *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003).

[48] Kenneth H. Rubin and Kim B. Burgess, ‘Social Withdrawal and Anxiety’, in *The Developmental Psychopathology of Anxiety*, ed. by Michael W. Vasey and Mark R. Dadds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 407–34, p. 407.

[49] Kenneth H. Rubin, Robert J. Coplan, and Julie C. Bowker, ‘Social Withdrawal in Childhood’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60 (2009), 141–71, 146.

Furthermore, and perhaps consequently, ‘social’ withdrawal reoccurs in the gospel scriptures of biopolitical medicine, pharmaceutical credibility, and actuarial calculation: ‘social withdrawal surfaces in numerous diagnostic categories of the two major classification systems, DSM-IV and ICD-10. Specifically, social withdrawal is listed as a symptom, or marker’.[50] Rupin, Coplan and Bowker understand its developmental incidents as predictive of several psychological diagnoses, including clinical depression, social anxiety, phobic disorders, and so-called developmental and personality disorders. Withdrawal is, therefore, a signpost towards preventative and/or interventional medicine and psychiatry. Rubin’s earlier conclusion encapsulates this attitude: ‘it appears that socially inhibited children have a *biological disposition* that fosters emotional dysregulation in the company of others’.[51] Psychiatry’s reductive aetiology of withdrawal locates it, as with the tendency of most Western medical models, within an individualised dysregulation and, as Cvetkovich finds in depression discourse, over-delegates responsibility to personal neurochemical makeup whilst deemphasising any broader contextual or historical factors.[52]

My search for withdrawal’s critical productivity counteractively looks outside of the individual’s biological insularity to place them back into a world of ‘external activators’, and repeated co-assembly. This deemphasises, I argue, the culpability of a ‘biological disposition’ and reimagines negative affect as, borrowing Mark Fisher’s description of depression, ‘a (neuro)philosophical (dis)position’, through which we develop ‘a theory about the world and life’.[53] This leaves space for changing the circumstances that make us feel bad without immediate recourse to intervening and reintegrating withdrawn people back into the worlds that *were already themselves the problem*.

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[50] Rubin, Coplan, and Bowker, 147.
[51] Rubin and Burgess, p. 427. My emphasis.
[52] For a discussion of the limitations of the medical model of depression and the search for alternative discourses, see Cvetkovich, *Depression*, Part II, Chapter 1. ‘Writing Depression: Acedia, History, and Medical Models’, pp. 85-114.
[53] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), p. 59.

Although the texts studied in this thesis emerge from an era of production informed by communicative ethics of twenty-first century culture, the scope of their narratives extends further: historically from the 1970s of Northern Ireland, to the 1980s Italian Riviera, to turn of the century Toronto, and to post-recession London of 2011. These texts range in geography, theme, genre, and style in a somewhat arbitrary manner, yet all contribute, I am arguing, to an 'archive of feeling' withdrawn. Despite the disparate nature of these contexts, I am conscious of an overrepresentation of whiteness throughout these works that makes their exemplifications much more monocultural than they initially appear. The prevalence of white subjects in this project troubles any kind of universalised affective experience that affect theory often leans towards and, at worse, reflects a systematic bias of methodology that not only fails to interrogate but directly reproduces something like 'the unthinkability of black affect', that makes racially marked subjects unintelligible in terms of emotional studies.[54]

Furthermore, the experience of withdrawal itself is doubly precluded for black subjects who cannot be figured by a negation of affect either. Quoting from the work of Kevin Everod Quashie in their study of 'quiet' American Fiction, Rachel Sykes writes that 'public expressiveness is the dominant framework for black culture and when blackness is commonly understood as loud, dramatic and public, the black subject is denied a quiet "sense of inwardness"'.[55] The movements of turning away and retreat that are the markers of an aesthetic of withdrawal cannot easily associate blackness with orientations in or away from cultural participation even as this is denied to them. In terms of production, as well, creativity of black culture is often refused a chance to explore the types of quietness that Quashie is interested in. Ngai also finds a 'demand that artworks by racialized subjects be expressive at any cost', as part of earning their place in the field of sentimentality.[56] Considering withdrawal's aesthetic profile of deflation and subtraction of affect, it is harder to recognise it as uncoupled from the perpetually deflecting and self-effacing disappearing act of whiteness (itself always receding). Ngai recognises how stereotypical 'exaggerated expressiveness' works to reinforce the perpetually racialised figure and that 'the kind of exaggerated emotional expressiveness I call animatedness seems to function as a marker for racial or ethnic otherness in general.'[57] An expanded project concerning withdrawal would have to contend with the increasingly 'epidermalized' nature of affect whereby the epistemologies of race would interpret either withdrawal or animatedness as functional signs of natural or authentic types of bodies and people.[58]

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[54] Tyrone S. Palmer, '"What Feels More Than Feeling?": Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect', *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 3.2 (2017), 31–56.

[55] Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 175.

## Thesis Structure

The following chapters take up withdrawal as the point of departure for exploring how withdrawal registers a social world in which it is no longer sustainable for the individual to speak, express, participate or to belong. Chapter 1 reads two novels, Carol Shields' *Unless* (2002) and Ali Smith's *There but for the* (2011), to examine two case studies of withdrawn characters who exist outside the primary narration of the texts and yet organise the novel around them as its central crisis. These two figures are inaccessible to both the characters and the readers and offer an opportunity to interpret both the conditions of external activation of this affect as well as the ramifications of withdrawal in the social worlds of these novels. This chapter will propose that withdrawal induces processes of conjunction – whereby different aggregates become joined together – as well as an inversion of social domestic space into a scene of *unheimlich* disturbance. These two processes collaborate to produce what I understand as a renegotiation of the social and its modes of assembly.

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[56] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 208.

[57] ibid, p. 94.

[58] 'Epidermalization' whereby atmospheric feelings transfer into the marked skin of the subject is an idea that Ngai acquires from the works of Franz Fanon. See *Ugly Feelings*, p. 184.

The following two chapters shift focus onto the withdrawn narrator, taking us inside the minds of two withdrawn characters navigating an affective life in situations of uncertainty. Chapter 2 turns to Anna Burns' 2018 novel *Milkman* where the young protagonist resides in the impasse of withdrawal as a way of managing the overwhelming chronic stress and threat of living through the violent upheaval of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Where the community is pernicious, gossiping and polices itself violently, the narrator turns away from the world and towards books as a strategy of underperformance and distracted hypervigilance. When an older man and paramilitary leader starts to stalk her, however, the carefully calibrated affective life begins to unravel in the face of unsustainable stress as withdrawal is no longer able to maintain the detached relationality necessary to survive. This chapter focuses on the duality of withdrawal as both a management strategy as well as a debilitative effect.

In Chapter 3, I move into an examination of romance ideology promulgated by the genre of the love plot. In this study I examine the technologies of genre embodied by the early works of Taylor Swift – primarily her hit song 'Love Story'. In our contemporary age, the pop song is able to consolidate and mobilise aesthetics of sexual fantasies through an easily circulated and repeatedly consumable cultural object. I argue that, as a text, this song represents a genre organised by romantic heteronormativity and its injunctions towards articulating oneself and expressing emotional transparency. In contrast, André Aciman’s *Call Me By Your Name* (2007) demonstrates a love story in which emphatic revelation and disclosure are undercut by the narrator’s predisposition to withdraw. The novel makes a question of the necessity of emotional affirmation to experiences of intimacy and demonstrates, on the contrary, a relationship unfolding in the spaces of ‘imperceptible affinities’. Where affirmation directs relationality into the future in pursuit of the promise of happiness, withdrawal looks back in time processing love as a melancholic impasse where fantasy can be sustained without the criteria of proximity or longevity.

# Chapter One – Renegotiating the Assembly: Withdrawal and the Antisocial in Carol Shields's *Unless* and Ali Smith's *There but for the*

In the Introduction, I described the affect of withdrawal as a suspension of expression, communication, participation, and membership in response to a conjuncture of the social world, the reproduction of which is no longer sustainable for the subject. I also suggested that the social impasse produced by withdrawal might present a space or temporality in which the renegotiation of associations might take place and through which new forms of sociality might be assembled. In this chapter, I explore the interpretations afforded, and the transformations induced, by two case studies of withdrawal at the centre of two novels, Carol Shields's *Unless* and Ali Smith's *There but for the*. The broad scope of discussion engendered by this comparative exercise entails a longer chapter than the two that follow, in which I will go on to outline two examples of first-person withdrawal. Here, we stay in the third-person position of the observer whilst we follow the traces most amplified by the inaccessible subject.

Even as they share this central topic, the two novels in question are surprisingly distinct in terms of tone, form, and genre. Carol Shields's final novel *Unless* (2002) tracks a single narrator, the forty-four-year-old translator and self-confessed light-fiction writer Reta Winters, whose eldest daughter Norah has recently and unexpectedly dropped out of her life to sit on a Toronto street corner holding a cardboard sign reading 'GOODNESS'.[1] Shields follows the grief, the confusion, and the despair felt by Reta who interprets withdrawal as the loss of her child. In a search for an answer to this crisis, Reta's mind follows many digressions as she distracts herself by writing a sequel to her first novel – a comic romantic fiction – and meditating on gender politics, feminism, women's writing, and the ordinary minutiae of her family's middle-class suburban life. On this meditative journey, it comes to light that her daughter has experienced a traumatic encounter with a young Muslim woman who has set herself on fire, enacting a violent awakening to the exclusions of the other and putting into question the capacity for explanatory forms.

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[1] Carol Shields, *Unless* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p. 11. Hereafter designated *U*. All further quotations will be included in the text parenthetically.

Ali Smith's *There but for the* (2011) provides a starkly contrasting tone and form, pursuing the satirical and carnivalesque repercussions of a dinner party at which one of the guests, Miles Garth, locks himself in a spare room and refuses to leave. During his long withdrawal from the world, Miles becomes a minor celebrity, fuelled by online culture and opportunists who reimagine him as 'Milo', the figurehead of revolution, and come to be known as 'The Milo Masses'.[2] Unlike Shields, Smith divides the four sections of her novel (each named for a word in the title) between four different individuals, connected by their vague association with Miles. Anna ('There'), recently unemployed from the Scottish immigration services, met Miles briefly as teenagers during a trip to Europe organised for the winners of a short story competition for young writers. Mark ('But') is the one who impulsively invited Miles to the dinner party after having just met him at a performance of *The Winter's Tale*, and whose deceased mother speaks to him in couplets from beyond the grave. May ('For') is an octogenarian dementia patient and the mother of a school friend of Miles who died just short of her sixteenth birthday. Finally, Brooke ('The') is the child of two post-graduate researchers in Greenwich (also guests of the party) and the precocious paronomasiac who is writing the history of Miles's withdrawal. Smith's novel reflects on the culture of celebrity and fame, property and precarity, and the nature of existence and connection in an increasingly mediated world.

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[2] Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), p. 313. Hereafter designated *Tbft*. All further quotations will be included in the text parenthetically.

In these two narratives, withdrawal is received not only as an isolated deviation from affective norms, but as a crisis in the reproduction of people's lives. To the characters impacted, the antisocial forms manifested by Norah and Miles represent an unbearable negation of those modes of assembly that make their worlds intelligible. However, where withdrawal appears as a rupture cutting off Norah and Miles from the world, antisociality paradoxically induces scenes of conjunction, theorised by Shields and Smith through primarily grammatical connections, as well as transformation, through scenes of inversion that reconfigure the private domestic home and its apparent opposite: the outside – public, strange, and unfamiliar.

In this chapter, I will focus first on the co-assembling forces of withdrawal by drawing out the themes of *conjunction* that provide a linguistic placeholder for thinking through the renegotiation of more general connectivity. Following this, I will look at a specific example of conjunction happening in these novels: the recourse to explanation that combines a collection of different and often conflicting theories and assembles the theorists together within these narratives. The failure of conclusive explanation will prove, I argue, to be a sign not of the negative disassociations of withdrawal but instead of a negotiation where there is no triumphant narrative, merely an expanded field of co-assembly.

Following this example of conjunction, I will reflect on how the drive to explanation wishes to break out of the impasse and return to recognisable forms of being together. I will examine how the affective interruptions of the social might, instead, reimagine those modes of sociality. The keyword that emerges is *inversion*, less intentional or directed than subversion whilst more productive and creative than the inhibited and disenfranchised body. Firstly, in the recession of the subject, withdrawal inverts how subjects are assumed to exercise their agency by producing a form of absent presence. Secondly, in terms of that subject's inhabitation of the world, withdrawal will reflect an inversion in the public/private organisation of the domestic home. For individuals who live in the middle-class, white, and (predominantly) Anglophonic Western suburbia, their lives are managed extensively by this institution of normativity and capital. Through these novels, withdrawal will set into motion an inversive transformation of these terms by which the fantasies of normality might prove to require new forms of participation.

## Part One: Withdrawal and the Co-assembly of the Antisocial

### i. The Productive Impasse and Flat Affect

As readers, we might wonder whether, in these twenty-first century texts, withdrawal might simply embody the flat and depthless affective life that characterises, for Fredric Jameson, the postmodern aesthetics of late capitalism. Miles and Norah, in this model, demonstrate the once contained and 'monadlike' subject who is now too hopelessly fragmented and dislocated to express itself.[3] This waning of affect divulges, perhaps, the stupefaction seen by Sianne Ngai in confrontations with the unspeakable and unrepresentable enormity of the present age. Withdrawal might be one of those 'aesthetic experiences linked to overpowering confrontations with technology, fleeting epiphanies about the inaccessibility of history, and knowledge of a global capitalism that fundamentally exceeds our currrent [*sic*] perceptual and cognitive abilities to capture it.'[4] The historical specificities of these novels refer fleetingly to the increasingly global and digital world of the twenty-first century. With *Unless* published in 2002 and *There* in 2011, these text cover on one end the election of George W Bush in the US and the peak of the dot-com bubble and on the other the perseverating fallout of the 2008 financial crash. They straddle a period of intense financial deregulation and growing neoliberal and neo-imperialist policy with implications for the global financial markets and conditions of exponential precarity.

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[3] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 15.

It is not so clear, however, that this escalation of late capitalism has seen a correlated atrophy of affect. Instead, our affective expression is increasingly privileged by its modes of reproduction. I explained in the Introduction that, according to Paul Chan, 'a productive life is today inextricably linked to generating more and more speech for others to hear, see, and read. To live fully in the present means to be in constant communication'.[5] These novels show that as late capitalism transmutes into the New Media Age, it is affective withdrawal that is received as the most antisocial failure or refusal to participate in culture production or consumption.[6] Mark Fisher writes, after all, that 'subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate' – a compulsory reciprocation with which non-participatory forms are most radically incompatible. [7]

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[4] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 22. See also Chapter 6. 'Stuplimity' in her *Ugly Feelings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 248–97, describing the unique conglomeration of the boring and the sublime that discloses the conditions of disorientation in the face of an increasingly modernised world.

[5] Paul Chan, 'The Unthinkable Community', *E-Flux*, 16 (2020) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61274/the-unthinkable-community/> [accessed 9 March 2021].

[6] It might also be noted that *withdrawal* as an affect that is formally flat and spatially instantiated – characteristics for Jameson of the postmodern aesthetic and its waning affect – is in fact, I argue, more consonant with the type of 'cultural pathology' that he associates with old high modernism: 'those canonical experiences of radical isolation and solitude, anomie, private revolt' and the general prevalence of alienation. Jameson, p. 14.

Perhaps, then, this waning of affect is more akin, as Lauren Berlant proposes, to a 'waning of genre', tracked in the gradual dissipation of 'affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold'.[8] The loss of genres for living means that people live permanently in the impasse, a space with no foreseeable exit and no possibility of moving forwards. With the fantasy of self-progression rapidly unravelling, it is unsurprising that it might be captured by these novels in the forms of affective flattening and behavioural interludes characteristic of withdrawal. Nor is it coincidental that, at the same time as these crises unfold, both novels provide an interrogation – in both content and form – into the substantiality of their own genres of fiction.

Berlant's intervention distinguishes between a waning of the genres of being social and the social capacity of the individual. This impasse of the withdrawn body might not be either inherently dysregulated or subjugated. Instead, what seems antisocial might be a protracted processing of unsustainable modes of being together. As in Ann Cvetkovich's study of depression, we should heed withdrawal's incitement to 'understand impasse itself to be a state that has productive potential.'[9] By taking up the focal lens of withdrawal's counterintuitive co-assembly with the world, traces of associations otherwise foreclosed by ideology, normativity, and the general modes of experience that prioritise progression may begin to emerge. At the same time, we might see a reduced monopoly for a mentality that is perhaps excessively quick to pathologise, moralise, and to correct alleged deviation. As opposed to demanding intervention, correction and finally reintegration into the assembly, withdrawal, as a site of the antisocial flatness and inexpression, might not be a *negation* of assembly but its *renegotiation*.

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[7] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), p. 12.

[8] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 6.

[9] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 23.

Homi Bhabha, in his theorising about theory, makes a similar move from negation towards negotiation to describe the process of dialectic which, instead of resolving antagonism through synthesis, discloses the truth of the radical ambivalence of politics, culture, and social assembly. ‘When I talk of *negotiation* rather than *negation* it is to convey a temporality that makes it possible to conceive of the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements: a dialectic without the emergence of a teleological or transcendent History, and beyond the prescriptive form of symptomatic reading’.[10] This means that negotiation is not the eventual supremacy of one theory over the other but a process where meaning is informed by both simultaneously. This dialectic negotiation is not collapsible into forms of direct subversion or revolution, images which insufficiently reinforce the normative models of direct, active, expressive, intentional, motivated, unequivocal, teleological participation in the social, the political, and the world at large. Its critical productivity is found, instead, in its expansion of association.

### ii. Conjunction

That these authors are interested in connectivity is evidenced by a shared preoccupation with conjunction. In novels about disconnected people, it is the connections of language that is a shared interest of both Miles and Reta. As novels, which self-referentially interrogate their own genres, ideas about conjunction are an extension of a general reflection on linguistic practices. Where old forms and genres of sociality can no longer sustain the subject's participation in the world, withdrawal as an inhabitation of this impasse might help the subject recalibrate themselves to less conventional, more precarious, and temporary forms of connection.[11] In terms of how withdrawal in these novels proliferates assemblies of people, associations of ideas and new types of being connected, it is difficult to maintain the characterisation of its fundamental negativity. In fact, accounting for the stickiness by which it gathers objects and the prolonged duration in which it does so, withdrawal seems especially prone to co-assembly.[12] 'Miles Garth, whoever he was, was making her join in all over again' (*Tbft*, 67), Anna remarks upon realising that her mind has been preoccupied with Miles's predicament.

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[10] Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in idem, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 37. Original emphasis.

When Miles withdraws, he temporarily assembles together our four unconnected main characters. Ulrike Tancke describes how 'Miles's intrusion into the Lee's home works as a narrative device that binds together the stories of a disconnected set of characters who have in some way been in contact with him.'[13] This binding device is developed by Smith's interest in conjunction. Whilst Shields's primary conjunction is, unsurprisingly, 'unless', for Smith it is 'but' which hangs together the title of her novel, *There but for the*. ‘But’ is in turn the title of the novel’s second section focused on Mark. ‘But’ is a conjunction with a distinctive duality whereby the units that are conjoined are simultaneously contrasted and opposed and, like ‘but’, Miles’s withdrawal assembles together the novel and affords it meaning. Miles himself also has his own theories about this conjunction, expressed in various notes and flashbacks. Whilst sharing a drink with Mark at the pub, Miles elaborates on the productive effects of ‘but’. Their conversation concerns Mark’s invitation to the dinner party which he does not want to attend. ‘Miles: So. You’ve been invited to this dinner party next week, *but* you don’t want to go. You don’t want to go, *but* – what comes next? See?’ (*Tbft*, 174, original emphasis). The use of ‘but’ drives the conversation from Mark’s invitation towards his own eventual invitation to Miles. In this section, ‘but’ is contrasted itself to ‘and’, where ‘but’ is figured as the unexpected reassembling of parts whilst ‘and’ is imagined as extending the pre-existing trajectory of conjunction. Miles explains to Mark how ‘but’ is tangential: ‘the thing I particularly like about the word but, now that I think about it, is that it always takes you off to the side, and where it takes you is always interesting’ (*Tbft*, 175). In the words of Nicholas Royle, the ‘“but” veers’.[14]

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[11] Lauren Berlant provides a useful expanded definition of the 'genre' as that which organises many of the patterns and infrastructures of our world. She writes, '[a] genre is a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take'. 'Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness', 2011, p. 2 <https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf> [accessed 8 June 2020].

[12] The 'stickiness' of affect is an idea explored by Sara Ahmed who seeks to 'track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they "stick" as well as move', and adhere together objects and subjects conditionally and provisionally. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 4.

[13] Ulrike Tancke, 'Narrating Intrusion: Deceptive Storytelling and Frustrated Desires in *The Accidental* and *There but for The'*, in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 75–88, p. 78. I prefer my own term 'withdrawal' to Tancke's 'intrusion' here because I consider it to describe better the moving *away* from participation in the world to which Miles already belonged (or, at least, to which he was invited into), as opposed to the form of *moving into* space in which one is unwelcome or uninvited, as 'intrusion' suggests.

Slotted between the second and third major sections, we encounter a note for Mark written by Miles whilst he occupied the spare room. In this note, Miles includes definitions of ‘but’, and conjunctions more widely, ‘according to my Chambers 21st Century Dictionary’ (*Tbft*, 195). The note’s concluding summary of conjunctions reads: ‘The way things connect’ (*Tbft*, 196). Formally, conjunctions attach together words, clauses, and sentences, altering the syntactic effects of meaning without themselves participating in reference or signification. Withdrawal, as I have proposed, marks predicaments of troubled or complex participation in a similar fashion: its co-assembly of the novel's components occur even as the subject or 'device', Miles himself, exists outside of the visible framing of the text or the location of narrative unfolding. These novels do not open with withdrawal but arrive *in medias res* as the register of life trying to adjust to the predicament. Significantly, when Miles advocates for 'but' over 'and' it is with a more lateral connectivity in mind. Miles's note reads as follows:

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[14] Nicholas Royle, ‘Even the Title: On the State of Narrative Theory Today’, *Narrative*, 22.1 (2014), 1–16, 3.

> the word conjunction […] means,
>
> union
>
> combination
>
> simultaneous occurrence in space and time
>
> a word that connects sentences, clauses and words
>
> one of the aspects of the planets, when two bodies have the same celestial longitude or the same right ascension (*Tbft*, 195)

These definitions clarify Miles's ideas about connectivity. Conjunction makes association occur where, in reality, there are only coincidences. The effect of shared presence or simultaneity is an implied creation of our use of linguistic devices suggesting that if association is not an innate component of things, then there emerges a possibility that things might assemble otherwise. This is Latour's point about the 'social' designating not the innate properties or materiality of a type of matter, but the coincidences and simultaneities that allow that 'all those heterogeneous elements [of the world] *might be* assembled anew in some given state of affairs.'[15] Miles's postulations about conjunction suggest an imagining of the social constructed along much more varied axes. Indeed, Miles's reflections do not run on one after the other along conventional page lines. Instead, each element comes above the next, stacked vertically instead of spread out horizontally and pointing to a new axis of connection, one veering off from the typical course. Similarly, the celestial bodies to which Miles refers orbit in directions that are not straight but elliptical lines that allows for junctions or interactions identifiable both as connection and coincidence. Much like the orbital paths of Smith's four characters, these celestial bodies are influenced by one another's gravity but not to the point of direct collision.

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[15] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5. Original emphasis.

Conjunction might renegotiate normative assemblies by associating those contradictions and antagonisms endemic in their mentalities and experiences. Miles's note draws our attention to the concept of 'conjuncture', defined by Miles as 'a combination of circumstances, esp one leading to a crisis' (*Tbft*, 196). Stuart Hall, in his conversation with Doreen Massey, elaborates on this combination, describing the conjuncture as when 'the different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape.'[16] Hall goes on the describe how conjunctures start to be shifted by the notion of crisis picked up by Miles, to the degree that *crisis* itself starts to appear as a conjunction. Hall says, 'history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis'.[17] Miles's withdrawal, already a crisis, seems increasingly prone to a co-assembly, which 'takes you off to the side' of the normative 'distinctive shape' of the social. Withdrawal as a crisis might inform us that something is happening in the shifting of genre, system, or structure, or that the contemporary conjuncture can no longer sustain unproblematic participation. It might, at the same time, indicate nothing. Crises are, in Halls words,

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[16] Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, 'Interpreting the Crisis', *Soundings*, 44.44 (2010), 57–71, 57.
[17] ibid.

‘moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. It may be that society moves to another version of the same thing […], or to a somewhat transformed version […]; or relations can be radically transformed.’[18] Withdrawal is not a paradigm of intentional action or revolution and has no dependable patterns of unfolding like a genre might.

*Unless* is also interested conjunction and, similarly to Smith’s novel, it takes one for its title. It also employs a similar aposiopesis, the sudden breaking off of speech that leaves open the completion of meaning: *There but for the…*, *Unless*… Each chapter, also similar to Smith’s sections, derives its heading from independent connective words or phrases: ‘wherein’, ‘otherwise’, ‘regarding’, ‘thereupon’, ‘whether’, and so on. The conjunctions that title the chapters remain free-floating, unattached to the contents of the sections even as they connect each chapter to the next. Like Miles, they are a remote yet connecting narrative device. Also like Miles, Reta undertakes her own ruminations about conjunction and the possibility for language to create connection and assembly. She writes that ‘life is full of isolated events, but these events, if they are to form a coherent narrative, require odd pieces of language to cement them together, little chips of grammar […] that are hard to define, since they are abstractions of location or relative position’ (*U*, 313). Reta recognises, furthermore, the interactions between linguistic constructions of connection and the modal shape of narrative genre. She observes that ‘[n]ovelists are always being accused of indulging in the artifice of coincidence’ (*U*, 314). But this remark finds the ‘truth’ of connectivity itself: that life seems to come together by chance rather than direction or design, and that it is the retroactive conjunction through words that assigns association to some coincidences and not to others. It is her daughter’s withdrawal, its lateral and aleatory setting into motion of reassembling, that disturbs Reta's confidence in genre and conventional balance – that unity and harmony that means '[e]verything is neatly wrapped up at the end' of a story (*U*, 317).

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[18] Hall and Massey, p. 57.

She tells us that before her daughter's withdrawal, 'I thought I understood something of a novel's architecture, the lovely slope of predicament, the tendrils of surface detail, the calculated curving upward into inevitability […] then the ending, a corruption of cause and effect and the gathering together of all the characters into a framed operatic circle of consolation and ecstasy' (*U*, 13). Instead, as Hilde Staels observes, '[t]he traditional coherent narrative with its continuity between past, present and future suddenly appears to be outdated.'[19] Where withdrawal has interrupted the reproduction of life, conjunctions form new spaces and temporalities of language neither linear nor with guaranteed direction. With the dissipation of conventional genre and its reliable expectations of narrative shape and telos, these novels recognise that they cannot tell a story with any guarantee that its predicament will always be surmounted by positive reconciliation with the world. Withdrawal emphasises, on the contrary, that it is participation with this world that is its predicament.

Instead of the curving slope of inevitability, then, Reta recognises how conjunction might lead off to the side, offer exceptions to the norm, and the possibility that something might be otherwise. This describes the conditionality of 'unless' as the primary conjunction of this novel. 'Unless' offers the possibility of alternatives to what has previously been stated. It is a connection that exists only within possibility, as something that may or may not come to be the case.  As an affective experience, Reta proposes that unless 'gives us hope' (*U*, 225): '*[u]nless* provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. *Unless* keeps you from drowning in the presiding arrangements […] *unless*, the lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective' (*U*, 224, original emphasis). For Reta, this hope becomes increasingly performed through her own writing. She wonders, 'what is really the point of novel writing when the unjust world howls and writhes? Novels helps us turn down the volume of our own interior "discourse," but unless they can provide an alternative hopeful course, they're just so much narrative crumble. Unless, unless' (*U*, 224). Yet, it is the quietening that leads *to* the unless, which 'flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it, and yet everything depends on its breathy presence' (*U*, 224). Norah has slowed down and quietened perhaps in order to hear the faint flutter of unless and in the very act of doing so has already conjoined together new possibilities of being and imagining. For Reta, these new ways constitute a crisis in the life of her daughter and family, but they might also constitute an 'unless' that, like for Miles locked in the room, can indicate a shift in the conjunctures of the social.

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[19] Hilde Staels, 'Verbalisation of Loss in Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries and Unless', *Zeitschrift Für Kanada-Studien*, 24.2 (2004), 118–31, 127.

Talking specifically of '[t]he conjunction and (sometimes) adverb *unless*, with its elegiac undertones,' Reta tells us that 'unless' 'is a term used in logic, a word breathed by the hopeful or by writers of fiction wanting to prise open the crusted world and reveal another plane of being' (*U*, 313-14). It is a consolidation of chance, and of the multiplicity of development that the editor of her upcoming novel, Arthur Springer, invested as he is in the masculinised routines of genre, wants her to turn into 'a serious work of art that acts as a critique of our society while, at the same time, unrolling itself like a carpet of inevitability, narrativistically speaking' (*U*, 286). Withdrawal is neither directed critique nor narrativistic inevitability. The role of coincidence in Norah's story is part of what allows it to resist the teleological narrative that demands a single definitive explanation.

### iii. The Conjunction of Negotiated Explanations

A specific look at the co-assembly of explanations made possible by these predicaments will exemplify the effect of conjunction caused by both Miles and Norah. In predicaments where the modes of living become disrupted, people search for intuitive signs of cause and effect. Both novels demonstrate the search for explanation by which the cause of disturbance might be uncovered and cured, and the withdrawn person might be returned to the patterns, habits and relationships that have made normative life: the antisocial is antidoted, what was negated is positively returned to the social.

Silvan Tomkins identified this unquestioned compulsion to derive rational meaning from our affective lives as characteristic of conventional psychological research. The drive for explanation cannot accept the possibility of an illogical person whose behaviours are not rationalised, intended, and directed. Tomkins expresses this in his caricature of the ‘Everyman’, a figure who theorises unwaveringly from the status quo:

> For some few thousand years Everyman has been a ‘cognitive’ theorist in explaining why we feel as we do. Everyone knows that we are happy when (and presumably because) things are going well and that we are unhappy when things do not go well. When someone who ‘should’ be happy is unhappy or suicides, Everyman is either puzzled or thinks that *perhaps there was a hidden reason, or failing that, insanity*. There are today a majority of theorists who postulate an evaluating, appraising homunculus (or at the least, an appraising process) that scrutinizes the world and declares it as an appropriate candidate

> for good or bad feelings. Once information has been so validated, it is ready to activate a specific affect. Such theorists, like Everyman, *cannot imagine feeling without an adequate 'reason'.* There must indeed be a cause or determinant of the affective response when it is activated, and the determinant might be a 'reason', but it need not be.[20]

If withdrawal is figured as the loss of subjectivity – the negation of affective 'truth' – it is inclined to require meaning and explanation. In the cases of Miles and Norah, their unfathomable affective experiences and unprecedented behaviours defy the repeated incantations of these cognitive genres of feeling. Taking up the role of the 'Everyman', multiple characters assemble around the withdrawn figure to discuss the cause of crisis. In Shields's *Unless*, this is most pronounced; everybody tries to have their theory heard and confirmed. As Reta herself tells us, '[w]e are all trying to figure out what's wrong with Norah' (*U*, 165); 'there had to be some perfectly logical explanation if I could just think my way through it' (*U*, 132). Reta's close circle of friends, who meet regularly for coffee, all offer a chorus of possibilities: 'A phase, Annette believes. A breakdown, thinks Sally. Lynn is certain the cause is physiological, glandular, hormonal' (*U*, 120). These explanations repeat the pathologisation of disaffect common in scenarios of antisociality. Tom, Reta's long-term partner and Norah's father, 'has come to believe she is suffering post-traumatic shock' (*U*, 263). Tom is the local general practitioner and dedicates an increasing proportion of his time to researching the aetiologies and prognoses of traumatic stress. Norah's sister Natalie seems to agree with him. She exclaims '"[w]hat happened? What terrible thing happened to her? There has to be a *thing*"' (*U*, 214, original emphasis).

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[20] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. by E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 44. My emphases. We might note that, although now awkwardly old-fashioned in its gendered language, the masculinised 'Everyman' nevertheless seems to correspond to a long history of Western intellectual culture and arrogance, which has continually divided rationality and emotion in correlation with a binary formulation of gender (masculine : rationality : feminine : emotionality). It is a phallocentric contrivance that Tomkin's characterisation manages to pick up, accidentally or not.

Reta is less sure, she recognises that Tom 'is a doctor', and so '[t]he idea of diagnosis and healing come naturally to him, a rhythmic arc of cause and effect that has its own built-in satisfactions' (*U*, 264). Instead, Reta – heavily influenced by her long-time mentor and feminist icon Danielle Westerman, whose memoirs Reta translates – comes to accept an explanation inflected by second-wave feminist theory and gender identity politics. Danielle 'believes that Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity, a kind of impotent piety. In doing nothing, she has claimed everything' (*U*, 104). Reta interprets Norah's sign spelling GOODNESS through a famous Westerman quote: '[g]oodness but not greatness' (*U*, 115), the succinct explanation of how women have been excluded from the full spectrum of life and confined into passive, domesticised, purified and impotent postures. Reta says, '[i]t sometimes occurs to me that there is for Norah not too much but too little; a gaping absence, a near-starvation. There is a bounteous feast going on […] but she has not been invited. […] A deterioration has occurred in the fabric of the world, the world that does not belong to her as she has been told. Again and again and again. She is prohibited from entering' (*U*, 134). Like Danielle, Reta interprets withdrawal as performing a 'project of self-extinction' (*U*, 165), by which a passive claim on goodness is all that can be acquired from a world unwilling to yield to women.

Similarly, in Smith's novel the chorus of explanation seeks to make sense of Miles's withdrawal. However, unlike Reta, for whom the course towards understanding dominates the narrative, for Smith's four protagonists, the project of explanation forms only the groundwork for wider existential deliberation. Genevieve Lee, the caricature of middle-class obnoxiousness in whose house Miles has ensconced himself, especially wishes to find a reason. In her email to Anna, she writes that ‘I/we have absolutely no idea whatsoever why Mr Garth has chosen to barricade himself into our house’ (*Tbtf*, 10). To find the answer, she follows some tenuous leads to bring Anna down from Scotland to London in an attempt to coerce him out, although Anna has only met him twice two decades or so earlier. In her Experience Column piece that Genevieve eventually contributes to one of the national newspapers, she grapples with her perplexity concerning the withdrawal. Miles, she writes, is ‘a man who seemed perfectly genial and normal and didn’t in any way arouse our suspicions or give any clue as to what was about the happen. He wasn’t poor, didn’t seem in distress […] The man has made himself incommunicado for an unfathomable reason in our spare room’ (*Tbft*, 104-05). What is ‘unfathomable’ is the behaviour unexplained or unwarned of by any of the signs she believes to successfully indicate deviation.

For Mark, the imagined voice of his deceased mother conveys his own perplexity. Through her characteristic couplets, she asks: ‘*but why would someone choose to disappear* | *and why would someone choose to do it here?*’ (*Tbft*, 112, original italics). Mark cannot answer the demand for explanation, partly because he does not really know Miles, but moreover because withdrawal itself is characterised by its profile of inaccessibility. In predicaments of withdrawal, those who aim for knowledge come up again and again against the form of the question. This is what Anna finds when she is drawn into the detective work of the Lees. Her mind is inundated with hypotheses, a sense that a piling up of rhetorical postulations might eventually arrive at understanding:

> What would happen if you did just shut a door and stop speaking? Hour after hour after hour of no words. Would you speak to yourself? Would words just

> stop being useful? Would you lose language altogether? Or would words mean more, would they start to mean in every direction, all somersault and assault, like a thuggery of fireworks? Would they proliferate, like untended plantlife? Would the inside of your head overgrow with every word that has ever come into it, every word that has ever silently taken seed or fallen dormant? Would your own silence make other things noisier? Would all the things you'd ever forgotten, all layered there inside you, come bouldering up and avalanche you? […] Did he want to know what it felt like to *not* be in the world? Had he closed the door on himself so he would know what it feels like, to be a prisoner? (*Tbft*, 66, original emphasis)

Withdrawal can be an evaluative hesitation in the face of the question as a form. Its pause can induce a decelerated posture of reflection by which uncertainty in the world might be lived with and not instinctively resisted or overcome. Its critical potential amplifies the form of asking over the content of what is asked. Smith herself makes this clear. She tells one interviewer that 'the question, the conundrum, is the impetus rather than any answer.'[21] Asking why, and not the correct theory, drives the plots of both novels. Nora Stovel understands *Unless* in a comparable way: 'The question is Why? *Unless* is a novel of interpretation – how to interpret Norah's defection from life.'[22] Reta's search for an answer overrides the answer itself, which, when it comes, seems to lack the meaning needed for restitution.

Eventually Miles's withdrawal garners global interest, and it begins to gather crowds of people interested in projecting onto this predicament their own anxieties about their lives and the world. 'All those people', Brooke's father says, '[i]t's terrible. They're here because they feel so disenfranchised' (*Tbft*, 313). There are crowds gathered with banners that read ‘Milo For Palestine and Milo for Israel’s Endangered Children and Milo For Peace and Not in Milo’s Name and Milo For The Troops Out Of Afghanistan’ (*Tbft*, 315). The distortion of the name Miles – which one attendee think is too ‘middle class’ (*Tbft*, 191) to invigorate the revolutionary impulses of the masses – into Milo demonstrates the superficial objectification of celebrity culture, but also the potential for the blankness of withdrawal to act as a projection screen. There is no difference for Miles’s blank subjectivity between engendering the digitised proliferation of public attention and holding out against ‘the conditions of ubiquitous visibility and hyper-clarity imposed *by* digital culture’.[23] The Milo Masses are conjoined by withdrawal into a mass of antagonistic yet co-habiting theories and desires expressed when Brooke hears ‘a bit of shouting from the Milo Masses: Milo, Milo, Never Come Out! Milo, Milo, Never Come Out! and Milo, Milo, Come Out Now! You Are Needed Here’ (*Tbft*, 312). The withdrawal sets into motion a co-assembly of contradictions that importantly do not compete and dominate one another but cohabit the space of disturbance.

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[21] Smith quoted in Jonathan Ruppin, 'Interview: There but for the', 2011 <https://www.foyles.co.uk/ali-smith> [accessed 11 February 2021].

[22] Nora Foster Stovel, '"Because She's a Woman": Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields's *Unless*', *English Studies in Canada*, 32.4 (2006), 51–73, 53.

Withdrawal, despite its negative profile, appears to have the capacity for extensive co-assembly through its recessive invitation to the theorising and projections of others. In her review of *There but for the*, Sarah Churchwell succinctly explains how ‘Miles turns the lives of those around him upside down not by his intrusiveness, but by his reclusiveness: he is the absent presence around which people's imagination increasingly begins to spin.’[24] Withdrawal seems primed to engender interpretations of its perplexity by its fundamental resistance to interpretation. Crossing the polarity between affect and disaffect, the ambiguity of withdrawal itself marks an amplification of uncertainty, enigma and, even more so, the undecidability of explanation.

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[23] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), p. 102. My emphasis.

[24] Sarah Churchwell, ‘*There but for the*, by Ali Smith – Review’, *Observer*, 5 June 2011.

This is perhaps why Reta does not abandon Danielle’s theory even in light of the novel’s supposed revelation. When it is discovered that Norah has suffered posttraumatic shock from attempting to save a young Muslim woman who had set herself on fire, Reta acknowledges that ‘mostly [Tom] was right’ (*U*, 309). Nevertheless, she reflects that ‘[m]y own theory – before we knew of the horrifying event – was that Norah had become aware of *an accretion of discouragement*, that she had awakened in her twentieth year to her solitary state of non-belonging, understanding at last how little she would be allowed to say’ (*U*, 309, my emphasis). The ‘accretion’ and the ‘event’ are seemingly incompatible for summarising this crisis, and yet Reta says ‘it may be that I am partly right and partly wrong. Or that Tom is partly right and partly wrong’ (*U*, 310). Significantly, she claims ‘[w]e’ll never know why’ (*U*, 310). In an interview with Shields, Terry Gross asks the author whether this novel demonstrates the limitations of feminist theory in understanding either Norah’s withdrawal or the world in general. Shields suggests that the situation might be the same for all totalising theories, replying that ‘all the people who offer advice are both right and […] wrong’. What has led to withdrawal is, in fact, ‘all of those things.’[25] Accretion and the event cannot be delinked even if it means forgoing the narrative conclusion we expect from a novelistic mystery.

Writing on precarity following the 2008 recession, Judith Butler wishes to reimagine how we conceive of occupation or assembly on the streets. Norah’s retreat onto the street might have potentials for self-assertion. Butler expounds on how

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[25] Shields speaking on ‘Novelist Carol Shields’, *Fresh Air* (NPR, 2003) <https://freshairarchive.org/segments/novelist-carol-shields-0> [accessed 2 November 2021].

'[w]hen people take to the streets together, they form something of a body politic, and even if that body politic does not speak in a single voice – *even when it does not speak at all or make any claims* – it still forms, asserting its presence as a plural and obdurate life.'[26] It is not inevitable that withdrawal, insofar as it reflects the occupying body, will produce critique of participatory norms so much as reiterate their exclusions, express their immovability, or initiate intervention into individual deviance. Nevertheless, withdrawal points to a space in which conflicts and contradictions can staged and associated without being surmounted. It might be a lateral or veering conjunction moving away from the crisis of the social's 'distinctive shape'. The modes of assembly are interrupted and in the moment that they fail to be intuitively reproduced, there is a chance in the antisocial for a renegotiation. I want to think about the processual structure of withdrawal as making possible this renegotiation. We cannot, I believe, conceive of withdrawal as some total negation or will to nothingness when its endurance is, on the contrary, productive of an assembly of discourse surrounding the *why?* of cognitive genre.

# Part Two: Inversion and the transformations of withdrawal

## i. Inversion

The conjunctions of these novels suggest different potentials for connection that do not participate in the modes of assembly or the conventional genres by which individuals are integrated into the social. As an inhibited posture, withdrawal's critical productivity emerges not in its assertion of resistance (an idea that would overly heroicize affect itself) but in its disclosure of unsustainable assembly and the possibilities of reassembly. Its processes of renegotiation are not articulated in terms of some subversive mentality but is captured in aesthetics of *inversion*, the instrumentality of which might help us interpret certain problems inherent in the social normality we are overly-adjusted to.

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[26] Butler, in Puar, Jasbir, ed., 'Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović', *TDR/The Drama Review*, 56.4 (2012), 163–77, 168. My emphasis.

Discussing *Unless*, Margaret Steffler elaborates on the meaning of inversion: ‘According to the OED, to invert is to turn the opposite way, to “turn things outside in, or inside out,” (OED 9); either action brings the inner to the outer and the outer to the inner’. An object, ‘when inverted or “turned inside out,” is, to use several OED definitions, “turned in an opposite direction” (OED 2a), “emptied” (OED 9b), “transformed” (OED 10).’[27] The link is clear between transformations, oppositions, reversals, and a form of negative emptying. Steffler is thinking, here, about a quote from Danielle who ‘has not swayed from her view that Norah has simply grown into the knowledge of her powerlessness and doesn’t know what to do with it. “Subversion of society is possible for a mere few; *inversion* is more commonly the tactic for the powerless, a retreat from society that borders on the catatonic”’ (*U*, 218, original emphasis). This distinction made by Danielle between ‘subversion’ and ‘inversion’ is helpful for understanding why levels of ambiguity attach to withdrawal’s effects – is it to show presence or absence? To resist something or to take something up? For Danielle, this is a concept with much recourse to a Nietzschean sanctification of one’s impotency. Yet, this may also help to explain a reoccurring characteristic of withdrawal as an affective duality: one that is (in simplistic terms) both symptom of and cure for a certain cluster of experiences. Inversion captures these faculties of withdrawal through the ways in which it can precipitate transformation in structures and hierarchies – of flipping things upside down, or inside out – whilst doing so through a posture that does not assert power or disruption, nor express a wilful intention to do so.

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[27] Margaret Steffler, ‘“To Be Faithful to the Idea of Being Good”: The Expansion to Goodness in Carol Shields’s Unless’, in *The Worlds of Carol Shields*, ed. by David Staines (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), pp. 143–60, p. 155.

For Steffler, the inversion understood by Danielle impacts two significant oppositions in the novel: goodness and greatness, and immanence – which here entails the confining of women within the boundaries of their own bodies and cultural roles – and transcendence – the ability to move beyond these boundaries. She proposes that Shield's novel utilises withdrawal to invert these ideas, suggesting not a subordination of one term to the other, but instead their radical compatibility. The inversion is not only of the terms but of their opposition. 'Shields's inversions turn the inside out, make the private public, and bravely expose the hidden inner life or immanence to the rest of the world.'[28] As she points out, Norah does not simply lose her privacy or inner life when she takes them outside onto the street. Steffler disagrees with Danielle's assessment of the 'catatonic' paralysis of inversion, seeing instead the possibility for it to transform and recuperate those terms denigrated by opposition.

I have in mind, whilst thinking about Danielle's commentary, Jameson's warnings about the illusion of 'subversion', which assumes that capitalist forces of domination and hegemony can be countered purely through conceptual resistances. He suggests instead that 'conscious ideologies of revolt, revolution, and even negative critique are – far from merely being "co-opted" by the system – an integral and functional part of the system's own internal strategies.'[29] Withdrawal's recessive renegotiation, on the other hand, might worry the strategies of the system, which, if it does attempt to co-opt its antisociality, cannot account for the fact that the ideologies of powerlessness are those which it has itself already induced. Instead, I wonder if inversion might alternatively co-opt the forms of domination itself and in doing so transform what might be intelligibly social. It remains a question of precision whether it is through mimicry or direct iteration of powerlessness that withdrawal seems to disturb precisely by performing powerlessness *too well*.[30]

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[28] Steffler, '"To Be Faithful to the Idea of Being Good"', p. 158.
[29] Jameson, p. 203.

With all this in mind, I want to proceed with a closer analysis of the effects of inversion on the modes of assembly showcased by these novels. Whilst Steffler interprets her findings on the ways inversion 'turn[s] things outside in, or inside out', or 'brings the inner to the outer and the outer to the inner' as relevant specifically to the antagonisms and ambivalences between transcendence and immanence, I wish to focus instead on two dualisms each relevant, respectively, to the individual and to the social. Firstly, I will look at withdrawal that produces an absent presence of the person. Secondly, I will look at how this absent presence in turn troubles one of the key nodes of the public/private opposition – the domestic home. Presence/absence, and public/private will be two principal oppositions affected by the processes of inversion involved in negotiating new assemblies of the allegedly antagonistic.

## ii. The Absent-Presence of Withdrawal

After Miles has withdrawn into the spare room, the voice of Mark's mother asks this question towards the start of the novel's second section: '*would a man in shutting himself in / be asking things to stop or to begin? Would he best testing whether he'd be missed / would such inversion mean he'd not exist?*' (*Tbft*, 85, original italics). There are some important concepts being attached, here, to an idea of 'inversion'. Firstly, the cessation, ‘to stop’ – to block, to obstruct, to prevent motion – and the commencement, ‘to begin’ – to initiate, to start to set into motion – and most significantly the equivocality between these two. Reta finds this sense of motion important in registering her daughter’s bodily withdrawal: ‘This is the place she’s claimed, a whole world constructed on stillness’ (*U*, 12); she enacts ‘unreadable immobility’ (*U*, 26), and ‘unmovable self-abnegation’ (*U*, 29). A second significant concept is the question of existence: of whether withdrawal might constitute an absence or a presence of the individual, or both, and what this might mean for the structures of loss, grief, inconvenience and crisis – are these suitable experiences of these scenarios? For Reta, her daughter’s absent presence certainly entails ‘a period of great unhappiness and loss’ (*U*, 1). But from my discussion on conjunction, withdrawal cannot be interpreted only as a negative absence of a relation.

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[30] Throughout *Ugly Feeling*, Ngai explores this idea that she develops from Deleuze's *Different and Repetition* of a strategy 'in which one disrupts a system not by breaking or challenging the rules from above but by adhering to a rule too well'. p. 67.

Thinking of the architecture of the novels themselves, their central support – our withdrawn characters – feature very little in the texts. We rarely hear them speak outside of flashbacks, they are physically removed from the unfolding of the plots and the travelling of the narrators, and the very act of withdrawal itself is, in neither case, also the beginning of the text. The perpetual presence of the withdrawn individual is not a prerequisite for the work of these novels. For Reta, ‘Norah embodies invisibility’ (*U*, 12). Her affective life is read in terms of ‘self-abnegation’ (*U*, 29), ‘self-renunciation’ (*U*, 42), she is engaged in a ‘project of self-extinction’ (*U*, 165) where ‘[h]er strategy is self-sacrifice’ (*U*, 248). Reta wonders: ‘What is she thinking, or is her mind a great blank?’ (*U*, 25). Nevertheless, she also concedes that ‘Norah’s posture excludes everything around her, *as though nothing is real except for her bent head and neck*’ (*U*, my emphasis). Withdrawal in performing an absence somehow simultaneously prioritises the presence or existence of the withdrawn person who approaches an inaccessible solipsism. Reta recognises Norah’s paradoxical predicament in which she is ‘claiming her existence by ceasing to exist’ (*U*, 105). This absent presence stages an existential contradiction and the effect is unsettling: Norah ‘spoke, in her own voice, but emptied of connection’ (*U*, 12). Rebecca Thomas recognises how ‘*Unless'*s other characters populate Reta's world but are so sketchily described as to be mere ghosts on the page. This is true even of Reta's daughter Norah, who Reta would have us believe is the reason for committing pen to paper.’[31] Even as it deactivates or minimises the subject, there is nevertheless a proliferation of their presence and of the importance assigned to their behaviours and feelings. The result is an absent presence conveyed by images of spectrality and shadow.

In Smith’s *There*, Miles’s withdrawal causes a similar experience in the Lee household. According to Genevieve, it ‘feels like I imagine being haunted must feel like’ (*Tbft*, 106). Miles’s ghostly figure entails contemplation into presence. The novel’s first section, ‘There’, unsurprisingly engages with themes of thereness. ‘There’, as a word that could be adverbial or nonreferential, can establish existential fact by denoting or pointing to presence in the world. In *There*, the word appears as a question, ‘Are you there?’ (*Tbft*, 12; 26), and is contrasted with the situated speaker who declares themselves by occupying a position: ‘Miles, it’s me. I’m here’ (*Tbft*, 70). That ‘there’ appears as a question directed *to* Miles announces the problematisation of presence. We see this also in the pun produced in dialogue between Genevieve and the child Brooke. Genevieve, talking to Anna about Miles, tells her that ‘[c]learly he’s not all there’. Brooke responds saying: ‘[h]e *is* all there […] Where else could he be?’ (*Tbft*, 22). The pun mixes up and entangles the ideas of physical and mental presence and directs us the very ambiguities of withdrawal that for many signify emotional disturbance and deviation. Is Miles there? He is always thought to be in the house although he is never fully visible. He cannot be made a direct object of observation. His presence is only an assumption: the narrators can see ‘the locked bedroom door behind which the man, whose name was Miles, theoretically was’ (*Tbft*, 3), and ‘the window behind which, presumably, Miles was’ (*Tbft*, 188), but the presence of the man himself is only inferred from those surfaces. In fact, towards the end of the novel, Miles hasn’t been in the room for a while; he has left the premises to the knowledge only of the young Brooke, protagonist of the final section.

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[31] Rebecca Thomas, ‘Plaintive Prose of Unless’, 18 October 2002 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/2340257.stm> [accessed 12 January 2019].

Anna in particular, as the central figure of ‘There’ (the chapter), is intrigued by this complication of presence. ‘There were several reasons at that particular time in Anna Hardie’s life for her wondering what it meant, herself, to be *there*’ (*Tbft*, 5, original emphasis). Anna finds a connection to Miles’s withdrawal relative to her old job, from which she has just resigned, as an auditor of the life stories of refugees, which she must truncate and summarise in as little words as possible as part of the UK procedures for asylum. ‘You are really good at this, the area head had told her. You have exactly the right kind of absent presence’ (*Tbft*, 60-61). Anna is inevitably intrigued by Miles’s own absent presence whereby existence itself becomes an uncertainty. At one point, she envisions a new concept called ‘Tennis Players Psychosis (TPP), where you went through life believing that an audience was always watching you, profoundly moved by your every move.’ In response to this coining, she asks: ‘[b]ut would this mean that people who *didn’t* have it were somehow less *there* in the world, or at least differently there, because they felt themselves less observed?’ (*Tbft*, 8, original emphasis). If surveillance is a precondition for existence or thereness, would one’s withdrawal act as a negation of the subject? She asks later, ‘[d]id [Miles] want to know what it felt like to *not* be in the world?' (*Tbft*, 66, original emphasis). Mark, our second narrator, posits a similar question: '*would such inversion mean he'd not exist?*' (*Tbft*, 85, original italics). The demand of continually articulated presence is a condition of the era in which Smith is writing where digital culture and technological surveillance has exploded enormously.

Withdrawal seems prime for the body's reactions to the conditions of this world. Withdrawal expresses – in the very forms of inexpression – an absent presence that troubles how we might instinctively imagine those subjects to participate and be in the (social) world. Judith Butler wants to ask these questions in light of the growing precariousness of peoples in the neoliberal West. Her questions seem pertinent to these novels when she states that 'perhaps we can ask more precisely, how to make sense of bodies who assemble on the street, or who occupy buildings'.[32] Norah's transformation of the street into a domestic scene and Miles's inhabitation of a house that becomes a site of heightened assembly both drive us towards a reconsideration of how space might be otherwise constructed. This is also a question of presence as well. Butler, talking about the assembly of bodies of the street, tells us how they are 'obdurate and persisting, insisting on the continuing and collective "thereness"'.[33] This idea of thereness returns again, like with Miles, when Reta who routinely drives by at a distance is comforted by Norah's resistance to disposability noting that 'at least nothing has changed. Still there. Still there. A dithering reassurance that pulls against the gravity of mourning' (*U*, 81). It is the recession, subtraction or indeed perceived *absence* of the subject that draws attention most impactfully onto the paradoxically enduring *presence* of the individual.

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[32] Buter, in Puar, 168.

[33] ibid.

### iii. The Public, Private, and Domestic Home

Two questions in *There*, the first asked by Anna the second by Mark, reflect on the significance that physical place has for Miles's withdrawal: 'why he'd chosen to shut himself in a hateful room in a hateful place?' (*Tbft*, 29), and '*why would someone choose to do it here?*' (*Tbft*, 112). Genevieve comments on this in her 'Real Life column', claiming that when they moved in, the house 'seemed to me to be asking to be a really sociable space' (*Tbft*, 103). Yet, since Miles's withdrawal, 'we do not know when our home will feel like home again' (*Tbft*, 107). Here, we start to notice a coupling of the material and the affective. 'Home' is a feeling attached to the private ownership of property, yet it is at the same time a feeling that property is a 'sociable' space. The novel demonstrates, however, that contrary to the house being a site of infinitely possible assembly, only a particular model of the social underpins the feeling of home for the Lee family. In fact, it is hard to ignore that Miles's withdrawal – with the global media attention it receives – makes the Lee household vastly more 'social' than it ever could have been before. It entails that 'home' as 'sociable space' emerges instead from a system of exclusion, where the comforts integral to home are produced by a careful curation of who gets to own and inhabit this space.

Norah too complicates the social nature of home by transplanting the disturbance of family life outside onto the street. But for Norah, in her act of moving outside of the physical home, she extrapolates the feeling of home to the wider contexts of the city and the nation. What does it mean to participate in national life and so feel that the nation itself is home? For Shields's *Unless* the domestic life stands in comparison with the national home both of which are troubled and transformed into crisis by the figure of the young Muslim woman who has set herself on fire in central Toronto. Reta, under the guidance of Danielle, believes that this powerlessness is an entirely gendered experience. Yet it is the dominant conjunctures of feminism itself that participate in the strategies of systematic exclusion even at those moments where they *feel* as if they are subversive. In this way, withdrawal comes to create the space in which subversive fantasies give way to an inversion.

Sara Ahmed has written about the role of affect in the construction and shaping of certain types of space. She writes that ‘emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allows us to distinguish an inside from an outside in the first place.’[34] The ‘home’ is one such example, where the surfaces and boundaries of certain buildings (houses or not), neighbourhoods, regions, and even nations have been shaped to accommodate and make comfortable certain types of bodies who are permitted to experience the familiar, the secure, and the private. In this process, affect merges these bodies with their spaces. She tells us, ‘[t]o be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view.’[35] Thus, ‘[d]iscomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled.’[36] ‘Discomfort is not simply a choice or decision – “I feel uncomfortable about this or that” – but an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or “extend” their shape.’[37] ‘Home’ distributes this comfort and discomfort along already stratified lines. Withdrawal, connected to home in these novels, troubles the presumption of that distribution when the ‘why here?’ becomes a question about the inhabitation of discomfort.

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[34] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 10.
[35] ibid., p. 148.
[36] ibid.
[37] ibid., p. 152.

The Lee’s home is a theatre of domestic normativity – the site of the reproduction of the status quo, where difference is a device by which social convention reinforces itself. (Indeed, the couple are called Gen and Eric, one of the books many puns.) The space around their dining table if offered with the condition that the invitee remain other to the home, their bodies always marked by their otherness – they are always and foremost ‘black’ guests, ‘Muslim’ guests, ‘Jewish’ guests, ‘Palestinian’ guests, ‘gay’ guests (*Tbft*, 18-19) – and so unable to recede or disappear into the space. Although not himself a target of tokenism, Miles does not immediately ‘fit’ into this space. Through his vegetarianism, Miles has already troubled the middle-class assumptions of his host. Furthermore, his career as an ethical consultant is contrasted awkwardly with the financial and military careers of the hosts and their friends.

It is his isolation and occupation, however, that disrupts the comfortable normativity of the home. By locking the door and making the room inaccessible, Miles literally alters the shape of the property and creates new surfaces through which the bodies of the Lees are no longer able to extend. Like the occupant it reflects, the door suggests both the presence and absence of the spare room that creates its unsettling eeriness. Ben Davies tells us that, ‘[a]lmost paradoxically, then, Miles lets the space of the room appear – “presence” itself – by closing it off: the boundary metaphorically marks the room off and displaces it from being simply an ignored room’.[38] The locked door reflects an inversion by which its image, that once reinforced the border of home against those outside, becomes the internal boundary by which the home is alienated from the family. In her Experience Column, Genevieve reflects on a new self-awareness made apparent by the discomfort of feeling one's own body in haunted space: '[i]t is strange having a stranger in the house with you all the time. It makes you strangely self-aware, strange to yourself. It is literally like living with a mystery. Sometimes I stand in the hall and listen to the silence. It sounds *uncanny* and feels like I imagine being haunted must feel like' (*Tbft*, 106, my emphasis).

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[38] Ben Davies, ‘The Complexities of Dwelling in Ali Smith’s There but for the’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.5 (2017), 509–20, 511.

Kathleen Stewart 'describes domestic comfort as a deceptive structure of feeling, the buffer that keeps bad feelings at bay, but […] an atmosphere that is also haunted by bad feelings, by the awareness that something is wrong, either inside or outside.'[39] With Miles's occupation, this haunting can no longer be ignored. Genevieve's adjustment to a haunting sense of the 'uncanny' inevitably reminds us of the apparent opposition between the *Heimlich* (homely) and the *Unheimlich* (uncanny) so famously analysed by Freud. It should not be forgotten that during his research Freud discovered that the *Heimlich* or the homely is not an inherent quality of certain conditions but a psychological effect of a certain position and perspective. *Heimlich* comes '*[f]rom the idea of "homelike," "belonging to the house," the further idea is developed of something* with*drawn from the eyes of others, something concealed, secret*'.[40] What is intimate, familiar, and comfortable for one inside and belonging to the home is secretive, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable to the stranger. Furthermore, in his analysis of the inversion of *Heimlich* into *Unheimlich*, Freud found that within the definitions of these words, the experience of the *Unheimlich* could not itself be a new affect. Instead, it is the *Heimlich* appearing from a different perspective. Meaning contained in the *Heimlich* (the known and familiar, but also the secret and unknown) overlaps with the semantics of the *Unheimlich* (in its negation of *Heimlich*: the unknown and unfamiliar, but also, then, the revealed and uncovered). Thus, 'the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimish*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it'; 'this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind'.[41] The unhomely is the home itself presented to oneself through an unfamiliar frame. Miles's withdrawal troubles bourgeois ideology of private domestic ownership by inverting what is concealed, secret, and accessible in the house and who is subject to the perspective of the unfamiliar, strange, and impenetrable. Hence, home no longer feels like home to Genevieve, instead '[i]t is strange having a stranger in the *house*'.

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[39] Cvetkovich, *Depression*, p. 156.

[40] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), XVII, pp. 217–56, p. 225.

Characteristically, Freud overly emphasises the role of repression in his desire to support a theory of the return of a radical castration anxiety from the unconscious. Nevertheless, why this is significant is that his treatment of the affective markers of displaced normativity can help us understand how affect functions of the level of ideological reproduction. The utility of his essay comes from the fact that the inversion of the *Heimlich* to the *Unheimlich* is not a transmutation from one property to another but a revelation that the one was the other already. This blurring between the ideas is consonant with Smith's own words regarding her novel, which is about 'living with the strangeness and the knownness of others'.[42] This emergence of the uncanny is a sign of the inversion of space, the estrangement of domestic ordinariness, the production of the unfamiliar familiarity that is an aesthetic consequence of the disaffect and its antisociality.

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[41] Freud, XVII, pp. 245; 241.
[42] Smith quoted in Ruppin.

That the *Unheimlich* would mark affective withdrawal as a crisis in a novel historically situated in 2011 is not coincidental. The promises of domesticity, family security, and home ownership – disseminated widely in the early eras of neoliberal economics – were among the most prominent to unravel following the 2008 global collapse of the housing market. Yet, these promises were never intended to be equally distributed in a city like Smith's London that was being gradually redesigned for the super-rich. In one of his essays reflecting on London in 2011 (written in the same month that Smith's novel was published), Mark Fisher elaborates on the experiences of a city increasingly gentrified and airbrushed by New Labour's regeneration policies. He tells us, '[s]pace is […] the commodity here. A trend that started 30 years ago, and intensified as council housing was sold off and not replaced, culminated in the insane super-inflation of property prices in the first years of the 21st century.'[43] And now, '[o]nce those spaces are enclosed, practically all of the city's energy is put into paying the mortgage or the rent.'[44] That Smith's novel captures a general atmosphere is clear in its parallels with the worldwide Occupy movement, despite being published three months before Occupy Wall Street took up their passive sit-in in New York City's Zuccotti Park.

This affective disenchantment no doubt found a resentment towards the comfortable privileges of the bourgeois class encapsulated by the Lees. This is what Anna reflects on when she asks: 'Who cared whether Miles Garth had invented the perfect rent-free way in a recession to be regularly fed, at least for a while? Who cared why he'd chosen to shut himself in a hateful room in a hateful place?' (*Tbft*, 29). That withdrawal has become conducive for subsistence in an increasingly precarious environment raises questions about the prioritisation of ownership and property above a world that can sustain life. It is the *spareness* of the room in which we find its expression of capital: in its surplus to living and its hoarded potential, not in its necessity. We see Genevieve bemoan that Miles has locked himself in ‘a room which we were about to turn into a badly needed study for our daughter who has important school exams this coming year’ (*Tbft*, 105). But what is ‘badly needed’, like the homely itself, is again a matter of perspective. In this withdrawal, Miles disturbs domestic life by using the room as an inflexible area for living, and not as a flexible space of improvised requirement.

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[43] Mark Fisher, '"Always Yearning For The Time That Just Eluded Us" - Introduction to Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah*', in idem, *Ghosts of My Life,* p. 186.
[44] Fisher, 'Always Yearning', pp. 186–87.

What withdrawal additionally points to in this novel is the growing separation of abstracted economic capital from the cultural institution of the nuclear family and its home. In a caricature of the growing entrepreneurial mentality, Genevieve Lee drives towards the co-opting strategies that Jameson sees in late capitalist aesthetics at the expense of her domestic security, her privacy, and finally, after her husband moves out, her marriage. With the fantasy of home inverted by withdrawal, Genevieve moves to expand her profiteering endeavours towards the ‘Milo Mania’ gathered outside. This is not simply through the media exposure she receives: from Channel 4 (*Tbft*, 184), as well as the global news networks (*Tbft*, 314). We also read that ‘[t]he Milo Merchandise stall that Mrs Lee organized is back, with the T-shirts and badges and flags saying MILO-HIGH ClUB and SMILE-O FOR MILO ;-), the Milo Little Ponies if people bring children’ (*Tbft*, 314), as well as ‘the caps and key rings and inscribed Easter Eggs that she organized and invested thousands and thousands of pounds in’ (*Tbft*, 317).

The shift from domestic normativity to entrepreneurial flexibility demonstrates, perhaps, the capacity for power to adapt to the growing disaffection of its subjects. According to Ngai, it is Paolo Virno who most effectively demonstrates how ‘capitalism’s classic affects of disaffection (and thus of potential social conflict and political antagonism) are neatly reabsorbed by the wage system and reconfigured into professional ideals.’ With anxiety, cynicism, insecurity, opportunism, ‘Virno shows how central and perversely *functional* such affective attitudes and dispositions have become, as the very lubricants of the economic system which they originally came into being to oppose.’[45] Miles’s rebranding into Milo allows for an image of revolution and resistance to be sold back to the people who have assembled under his banner of disenchantment, whether this reflects Miles’s true feelings or not.

Yet, there are signs that this antisocial predicament might not inevitably end in producing different but similarly dominating conjunctures. Since the productive mentality that demands that disaffection be transformed into lucrative or revolutionary effects never stems directly *from* Miles, his participation is never mandatory. His ability to leave the room, which he does by the end of the novel, demonstrates a freedom by which one’s affective detachment allows for giving up (in)activity and moving on. Instead, it is the image of the normative home that is left irreparable. Miles is ‘the one that was making Mrs Lee cry on the stairs yesterday’, not only because all of her merchandise ‘will soon maybe not be worth money any more’ (*Tbft*, 317), but also because in her opportunism, she has sacrificed her family life entirely. In an ironic twist, by imitating Miles’s hand reaching of the window to sustain the illusion that his withdrawal is ongoing, Genevieve must take the place of the very stranger that estranged the *heimlich* normality.

Meanwhile, Miles’s occupation of the space is not, strictly speaking, unproductive. The confinement of his body in space nevertheless yields to new forms of creation that need not be directed forwards or create transpositional movement. This shows the productive inhabitation of the impasse outlined by Cvetkovich's study of depression. 'I've been pretty busy, Mr Garth said and he showed her how many miles he'd done on the exercise bike speedo, which said 3,015.78 miles, so that meant nearly 3,016' (*Tbft*, 340). This distance which (from the postcode of the Greenwich observatory) could take you West as far as Ontario, Canada, or to the East Kazakhstan Region, demonstrates the capacity for movement to exist within the confines of demarcated private and interior space and the affective life of the impasse.

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[45] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 4. Original emphasis.

Norah's withdrawal, in contrast to Miles, has occupied a place of perpetual publicness and inverted it into a scene of domestic disturbance. Where crowds gather around Miles in a scene of continuous surveillance, Norah is an embarrassing presence for the public who avoid her. Instead, she becomes an object of intense scrutiny from her family and loved ones. By taking the domestic drama outside of the house and into apparently unsuitable space, Reta's home life, like Genevieve's, becomes a field of *unheimlich* inversion. She observes Tom's mother Lois (Norah's grandmother) who in particular 'grew steadily more passive at the dinner table, then silent. In recent weeks, her growing silence has become an uncanny reflection of Norah's silence, her posture is as defeated as Norah's'. Reta wonders whether 'we have all – Tom, Natalie, Chris, Lois – become actors in Norah's shadow play' (*U*, 234). Norah's play of shadows is an effect of her absent presence that seems to haunt another dinner table, and effects the general haunting of bad affect found by Stewart in domestic structures.

In her study of homelessness and the uncanny, Lindsey McCarthy contends that inhabitation outside of the house is not always to give up on home but to invert its meaning and value. She proposes that Freud's interpretation helps to collapse the unhelpful hierarchies surrounding inside and outside. She writes, ‘the oppressive oscillation between heimlich and unheimlich in the domestic sphere can be resisted: home did not have to be rooted in the domestic at all but in alternative “homeplaces”’.[46] ‘Re-figuring home and homelessness, in such a sense, blends and dissolves the binary oppositions well established in society and culture, which are typified by the opposition between “home” as the interior, safe space and “homeless” as the terrifying outside world.”’[47] This is not to suggest that Norah chooses to find alternative home outside of an oppressive domestic space – we cannot know her opinions on this. However, like the inversions provoked by Miles’s withdrawal, the crisis of family life inaugurates a disturbance in the reproduction of its norms by complicating who is excluded from participation by its unequal distribution. Mcarthy tells us that ‘[i]n scenarios where the arbitrary nature of the inside/outside, public/private dichotomy is exposed, the dweller is confronted with the falsity of the construction of the “private sphere as the utopia of the autonomous and the protected”’.[48] Reta can no longer overlook the fantasmatic affective scene of the dinner table now her daughter has withdrawn from its insulated sphere to live outside on the street.

As I have consistently argued, this abnegation of home is not explicitly that will to nothingness that both Nietzsche and Danielle might recognise. Steffler argues that ‘Norah’s position on the Toronto street corner is not necessarily passive. Nor is she giving up on a world that does not open itself to her. Instead she tried on the world from a different perspective than the one into which she was born, and, in the process, enlarges what she can reach, touch, and experience from where she sits.’[49] Norah’s asceticism is a meditative practice distinct from the indefatigable will towards the world. For Reta and Danielle, however, Norah’s denial is the negation of the social that has excluded women historically and universally. ‘Inversion’ has been introduced by Danielle to describe the disempowered reaction to a world of patriarchal domination and injustice. Withdrawal reflects affectively what Reta and Danielle see as a stalled potentiality for women. Early on, Danielle argues that ‘[w]omen possess power, but it is a power that has yet to be seized, ignited, and released, and so forth’ (*U*, 8). Reta struggles with this theory for most of the novel: ‘I half agree with her, but belief slips away. I don’t want to think Norah is concerned with power or lack of power’ (*U*, 104). Nevertheless, ‘Danielle’s hypothesis has moved into my body and occupies more and more space’ (*U*, 218), eventually dominating her theoretical energy.

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[46] Lindsey McCarthy, ‘(Re)Conceptualising the Boundaries between Home and Homelessness: The Unheimlich’, *Housing Studies*, 33.6 (2018), 960–85, 976.
[47] ibid, 978.
[48] ibid, 963.
[49] Margaret Steffler, ‘A Human Conversation about Goodness: Carol Shields’s *Unless*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 34.2 (2006), 223–44, 236.

Through Danielle’s guidance, Reta discovers a feminism that is highly invested in the model of biologically determined identity politics:

> Because Tom is a man, because I love him dearly, I haven’t told him what I believe: that the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us for fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing (*U*, 269-70).

Reta’s feminism is founded on a biological division but is also hampered in meaningful action by her domestic life. Her love for her husband prevents her from bringing up contentious issues of sex, gender and power, and from being what Sara Ahmed might call a ‘feminist killjoy’.[50] For her, the inversions of home signal a longer crisis in the imminent confinement of women. Withdrawal seems to assert the nothingness given to women by the drip feed of accretive oppression that she assumes is incompatible with the scene of trauma. Reta reflects that Norah’s predicament is a marker of ‘an unreal world with only fifty per cent participation’ (*U*, 119). By substituting gender politics for the traumatic event, Reta assumes she has understood the politics of participation that withdrawal often emerges to renegotiate. But it is precisely within the traumatic event informing this novel from its outside that this exclusion might be more fully understood. The simplistic fifty-fifty split does not describe the accurate distribution of participation along the axes of intersectionally impacted peoples who cannot themselves be the protagonists of genres of crisis.

The Muslim woman who dies from self-immolation and is purported to be the ‘cause’ of Norah’s traumatic break is referenced earlier in the novel when Reta gathers with her close circle of friends. During this conversation, they discuss various tragedies and injustices in the world and reflect on their own comforts and general lack of will for intervening in the world:

> “And remember,” Sally said, “that woman who set herself on fire last spring? That was right here in our own country, right in the middle of Toronto.”
>
> “In Nathan Philipps Square.”
>
> “No, I don’t think it was there. It was in front of–“
>
> “She was a Saudi woman, wearing one of those big black veil things. Self-immolation.”
>
> “Was she a Saudi? Was that established?”
>
> “A Muslim woman anyway. In traditional dress. They never found out who she was.”

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[50] See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), Chapter Two ‘Feminist Killjoys’, pp. 50-87.

> "A chador, isn't it?" Annette supplied. "The veil."
>
> "Or a burka."
>
> "Terrible," I said
>
> […]
>
> "She died. Needless to say," Annette said.
>
> "But someone did try to help her. I read about that. Someone tried to beat out the flames. A woman."
>
> "I didn't know that," I said. (*U*, 117-18)

The lack of knowledge concerning the young Muslim woman defines this conversation. The women's ignorance about traditional Islamic dress is an effect of the deeper erasure of Muslim women's identities in the West: 'They never found out who she was.' The name of the woman is never discovered, and her voice is not only never heard, but never considered. Steffler argues that, for Reta, the genre of explanation and white feminism assemble together in response to an apparent unfathomable disruption of their social expectations. She writes that, '[i]n Reta's circle, the "young Muslim woman" is reduced to a touchstone in attempts to understand and "save" Norah; the dead woman is relevant and valuable merely to the extent that she provides the most promising clue to Norah's condition.'[51] Brenda Beckman-Long describes how 'Reta's narrative betrays the scapegoat effect in the way that she and Norah are reconciled at the expense of an innocent third party.'[52] The scapegoating of the young Muslim woman reflects the essential exclusion of the other in the reproduction of a Western subject of liberal feminism. It is in this way that we may remember how the subaltern cannot speak, and indeed the self-immolation of brown women and other women of colour has long been a cultural image through which the Western narratives of saviour and victim, oppression and liberation become inflected.[53]

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[51] Steffler, 'A Human Conversation', p. 227.

[52] Brenda Beckman-Long, 'The Problem of the Subject of Feminism: Unless and Meta-Autobiography', in *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), pp. 109–26, p. 119.

Thus, whilst cognitive genres circle around the problem of Norah's behaviour, the Muslim woman with whom Norah made traumatic contact is not afforded a share of narrative participation. Her story cannot be folded into the story of a feminism whitewashed by its universal subject, or into a story of trauma that would give meaning to her actions of self-immolation outside of their relation to Norah's withdrawal. In the course of the novel's attempts to come to terms with the apparent negation of a subject of the social, Shields draws our attention towards the very antagonisms inherent in this position. For Beckman-Long, the failure of Reta's theories to explain withdrawal is a failure to contend with the subject of feminism itself. She writes that,

> Reta's autobiographical self-development remains incomplete and provisional because she has not fully confronted the political, economic, and ethical implications of the Muslim woman's immolation. In economic and political contexts, the crisis is unresolved, despite the supposedly happy ending of Norah's return. Implicit in this open ending is a failure of the individualist and Western discourses including the return home and the search for identity.[54]

Norah's absent presence carries the traces of the more total absence of the Muslim woman. Beckman-Long notes that '[t]he spectre of the Muslim woman troubles Reta's narrative just as it troubles Norah's memory'.[55] For Shields, Norah's withdrawal marks an inverted attempt to make the trauma connect meaningfully to its contextual world. Withdrawal induces an impasse in several Western assumptions – the subject of feminism and the subjugation of the powerless; the capacity to participate in assembly and to be recognised as doing so; and the construction of private *heimlich* space, which as a fantasy of Western ownership and security cannot account for the discomforts of those excluded and made the 'other'. Withdrawal marks deadlocks of the social that cannot simply be explained away but need renegotiation and to be understood through new types of conjunctures or sociality.

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[53] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous formulation of this phenomenon as 'white men saving brown women from brown men' is drawn from her reading of Sati, in which a widow sacrifices herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This practice was banned by the British Empire in a manoeuvre that Spivak interprets as a form of epistemic violence by which the colonised woman is rendered mute and without subjectivity in the name of saving her. See 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Carly Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

[54] Brenda Beckman-Long, 'The Problem of the Subject of Feminism: *Unless* and Meta-Autobiography', in idem. *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), pp. 109–26, p. 122.

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In conclusion, in these novels, withdrawal emerges as a crisis for normativity, invoking amplification of certain experience of uncertainty about social normality. In contrast to the pathological discourses that read into its forms the pure negation of the subject and the social, Miles and Norah shows how the inherent contradictions of assembly become co-assembled through by an affective impasse or, reading from Bhabha, a *temporality of renegotiation*. For Norah and Miles, there is a process of reflection induced by their emotional inaccessibility that registers a waning of social genres both for themselves as affective subjects and those invested in normative conjunctures. These two novels present this renegotiation through scenes both of conjunction and inversion that associate and transform the world laterally without the heroic intervention of a protagonist. These are not, therefore, subversive acts since affect is not directed by our cognitive or rational faculties. Yet, the critical potential of these predicaments might still disclose connections, in the words of Paolo Virno, 'open to radically conflicting developments.'[56] Here, I have retained a third-person observation of withdrawal. In the successive chapters, I will move within the subjects of withdrawal themselves to understand further about the antisocial as a lived experience.

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[55] Beckman-Long, p. 126.

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[56] Cited in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 4.

# Chapter Two – Both Symptom and Cure: Withdrawal and the Crisis Ordinariness of Anna Burns's *Milkman*

So far, I have examined the affect of withdrawal from the outside in two individuals who have made themselves inaccessible by sustaining the impasse of antisociality. The inversions of the antisocial have pointed us towards unsustainable modes in the reproduction of the social that withdrawal has interpreted as requiring renegotiation and new co-assemblies. In the two chapters that follow, I move inside the minds of our withdrawn protagonists and follow antisociality as a phenomenological experience. Here, our exploration takes us to Anna Burns' 2018 novel *Milkman*, which explores one narrator's attempts to navigate the crisis of the Irish Troubles whilst being stalked by an older man.

The novel is set in an unnamed city in the 1970s at the peak of the Troubles. According to Burns herself, '"[a]lthough it is recognisable as this skewed form of Belfast, it's not really Belfast in the 70s. I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions"'.[1] Locations are never specified, and characters are never named but are known instead by relational or personal sobriquets: ma, eldest sister, real milkman, maybe-boyfriend, longest friend.[2] The novel is 'hovering just above history', [3] eschewing overtly historical commentary whilst retaining its situatedness in colonial Northern Ireland, an environment characterised by a governmentality of perpetual war.[4]

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[1] Anna Burns quoted in Lisa Allardice, '"It's Nice to Feel I'm Solvent. That's a Huge Gift": Anna Burns on Her Life-Changing Booker Win', *Guardian*, 17 October 2018.

The events are recounted twenty years later by our narrator, eighteen at the time and known primarily as 'middle sister', who survives these hostile times through a similar hazy detachment from people and events. She largely keeps to herself, preferring to read while she walks as opposed to engaging in the world around that is overstimulating and stressful. Her withdrawn behaviour is considered abnormal by her community who have a tendency to cast out nonnormative people as 'beyond-the-pale'. [5] Her relationship with the local district deteriorates further when she finds herself stalked by a leading paramilitary figure, the 'milkman' of the title. The milkman is a largely absent antagonist, appearing more frequently in communal gossip than in real life. Despite her repulsion, middle sister's community – living together in a charged atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion – interpret this predation as a deliberately provocative affair, embroiling her in scandal that threatens her safety and survival. In an increasingly hypervigilant response to this double encroachment from the milkman and the community, middle sister's carefully calibrated habits of navigating the present collapse and she finds herself more and more numbed and detached, shrinking from any engagement with the people once closest to her, and sporadically overcome by a fit of muscular contractions that possess her body in the form of 'an anti-orgasm' (79).

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[2] Commentary on the absence of names in this novel has invited a rather stagnated discussion of the text's experimental features without much interest in what effects this might actually convey beyond a sense of some mere avant-gardism. Writing for *Vulture*, Maddie Crum suggests that '[t]he book's no-name effect is twofold. First, one feels that in this community, individual expression has been stamped out. Characters are not single entities but exist only in relation to one another. So-and-so is somebody's father, somebody else's ex-maybe-lover. It's a character's standing — within a family and within society at large — that matters most. And second, as a consequence, acts of violence are depersonalized.' Maddie Crum, 'Anna Burns's Booker Prize–Winning Milkman Offers Some Hope But No Change', *Vulture*, 2018 <https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/review-of-anna-burnss-booker-prizewinning-novel-milkman.html> [accessed 21 September 2020]. The personal and impersonal, expression and relationality are all essential to understanding the performance of affect and the scene of public legibility that will be marked by withdrawn emotion.

[3] Erin Schwartz, 'Nowhere to Run: The Claustrophobic World of Anna Burns's Milkman', *The Nation*, 21 February 2019 <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/anna-burns-man-booker-novel-milkman-review/> [accessed 28 September 2020].

[4] The genealogy of a politics characterised by a constitution of society as the permanent battlefront, which underpins the development of both disciplinary and biopolitical modes of power, is explored by Michel Foucault in *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. by David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004). His recuring aphorism by which he understands this phenomenon – itself an inversion of the words of Carl von Clausewitz – is that 'politics is the continuation of war by other means.' See, for example, pp. 15-16. For Foucault, even the processes of peacemaking are tied integrally to a logic of perpetual conflict.

[5] Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 59. All further citations will be included parenthetically in the text.

In this period of crisis, middle sister's withdrawal becomes increasingly amplified. Towards the middle of the novel, Burns' protagonist outlines her overall strategy for surviving these predicaments. As a response, she undergoes a 'systematic removal of myself from society', through which 'it was more than likely I'd be at the stage of no longer opening my mouth to anyone, anywhere, at all' (174). In place of melodramatic self-articulation, middle sister's affective life is increasingly represented by silence and through the immobile mouth.

Where genres of sentimentality and melodrama no longer obtain, in the words of Lauren Berlant, '[w]orlds and events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering—featuring amplified subjectivity, violent and reparative relationality, and assurance about what makes an event significant—appear with an asterisk of uncertainty.' [6] Withdrawal – not anger, pain or shock – emerges as the defining marker of suffering and crisis. What might withdrawal disclose about surviving in a community grappling with chronic violence and conflict? In asking this question, we might wonder what role an affect with a profile of diminished intensity could have in response to an environment where the chronic pressures of survival would intuitively require the most motivational urgency?[7] In the longstanding lessons of evolutionary biology, as well as in the more recent science of interpersonal neurobiology, social synchronisation is thought to be the most elemental and efficient system for staying alive.[8]

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[6] Lauren Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28.3 (2015), 191–213, 193.

The social world of *Milkman* is a world of sectarian division, compartmentalised by a pervasive 'psycho-political atmosphere' where 'its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed' (24) determine the modes of living. Individuality is policed and suppressed by unspoken rules of normativity, and conformity is enforced by communal surveillance and distrust. 'At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said "their side did it" or "our side did it," or "their religion did it" or "our religion did it" or "they did it" or "we did it" (21-22). Theorising about the Algerian war of independence from French colonial occupation, Franz Fanon finds that '[t]he colonial world is a world cut in two', 'inhabited by two different species', where 'what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species.'[9] The racialization of social belonging is, according the Fanon, a foundational organising principle of colonial rule and its institutions. In Northern Ireland, the situation is comparable: the bifurcation of Northern Irish society along lines of Union loyalist protestants and nationalist Catholics has shaped politics, culture, and geography into a permanently double experience: '"[u]s" and "them" was second nature' (22).

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[7] This chapter continues a dialogue with a central idea of Silvan Tomkins's affect theory in which '[t]he primary function of affect is urgency via analogic and profile amplification'. Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. by E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 54. It is unclear at this moment whether withdrawal complements the amplification of urgency but in counterintuitive ways, or whether withdrawal and its extended family of affect complexes might decentralise urgency as the most fundamental aim of affective activation.

[8] Tomkins himself discusses '[t]he general biological significance of social responsiveness' for the innate affect systems. He tells us that '[h]umans are among those animals whose individual survival and group reproduction rest heavily on social responsiveness'. Tomkins, pp. 80–81. For interpersonal neurobiological research, see the work of Stephen Porges, such as Stephen Porges, *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*, Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2011), or his video seminar *A Neural Love Code: The Body's Need to Engage and Bond* (PESI Publishing & Media, 2013).

[9] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 29–31.

In this world, then, social belonging starts to look like a prominent threat to individual life, and antisociality might even appear as the precondition for survival. Middle sister's isolating habits are what keep her grounded. She chooses silence over speaking out, deflection over confrontation, ignorance over knowledge. Primarily, she wanders the streets reading-while-walking, a method of keeping her head down and distracted whilst navigating the overwhelming tensions of her world. These autonomous survival strategies are complicated, however, by an increasing overlap with the automatism of the body itself and their conflict with the normative demands of the community. Middle sister describes how 'because of all these compounding violations, I was finding myself more and more circumscribed into an incoherent, debilitated place' (170). Withdrawal, as a sign of a debilitated body, recurs throughout this novel to undercut the self-protective agency of the narrator who is never certain about how much control she has over her affective life. Middle sister finds that the milkman's 'predatory behaviour pushed me into frozenness every time' (2). This tension between the 'systematic removal of myself' and 'incoherent, debilitated place' into which she feels confined will prove to be an informative antagonism concerning the experiences determined by the violations of oppression.

The 'compounding' nature of the debilitation cannot itself be overstated. The immobilised mouth is a sign of the negation of the narrator's voice typical of stories of sexual harassment: 'My belief from the outset was that not really would I have been heard or believed […] Was he actually doing anything?' (181-82). The absence of official vocabulary or meaningful event suggests that her withdrawal might indicate with its silent mouth to the conditions of cognitive dissonance and unreality that characterises cultures of sexual harassment. ‘At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment. *I had a feeling for them, an intuition*, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people, *but I did not know* intuition and repugnance counted’ (6, my emphases). Withdrawal as a feeling connects antisocial security with the unintelligible and inexpressible ordinariness of the violence against women by demonstrating, in the words of Christine St. Peter, ‘how difficult it has been for Northern women to insert their “voices” into the extravagantly militarized “masculine” discourses that still predominate’.[10] St. Peter goes to write that ‘women’s experiences, political voices, movements, and history have traditionally been occluded or subordinated to the demands of the conflict, a condition which homogenizes and falsifies the “sides” and promotes ever greater sectarian division.’[11] Withdrawal might express the difficultly of women’s narration not only of their own abuse but in turn the conditions of their colonial lives.

Furthermore, the immobilised mouth might signify symptomatically, as I discuss in the introduction to this thesis, the experience of psychological trauma that ‘results in a breakdown of attuned physical synchrony’ with others, which entails that ‘[c]ommunicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized’.[12] But the immobilised mouth is also, importantly, a sign of resistance to a community fuelled by gossip and informers, where information – true or not – organises oppression and violence. For middle sister, her flattened affect comes to evince her resistance to the structures of social belonging that keeps people tied to colonial war and sexual imposition: ‘I needed my silence, my unaccommodation, to shield me from pawing and from molestations’ (205). If communication is considered antithetical to traumatic stress, then it makes it difficult to understand those experiences in which communication and synchrony become themselves the foundations of trauma. When social belonging perpetuates instead of resolves war and conflict, it necessitates a reconsideration of how we think of trauma and strategies of survival.

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[10] St. Peter Christine, *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 2.

[11] ibid, pp. 95–96. Quoted in Eli Davies, ‘Writing and Women’, *Writing the Troubles*, 2018 <https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com/2018/02/02/writing-and-women/> [accessed 18 December 2020].

[12] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 213; 235.

Thus, this chapter will explore a reimaging of traumatic stress through an exploration of the conditions of crisis in which it might emerge. I will draw on theories that consider the incremental and attritional harm of crisis and trauma that have both become embedded in the ordinariness of daily life. Using withdrawal as a point of departure, we know that this affect is more likely to be activated by ongoing predicaments than sudden catastrophic events and so manages a present in which we find, once again, problems in the reproduction of social assembly.

The subsequent section explores the distracted and delegated casualisation of the nervous system enacted by middle sister’s habit of reading-while-walking. This form manifests her general sensibility of withdrawal by distracting her attention from the world, and exchanging communicative relationality with a delegation to imaginative escapism from which the overstimulating reality of the world can be mediated and made distant. In reading this hybrid habit, I unpick how withdrawal engages with literary genre and modes of *apprehension* that simultaneously observe the world and detach from it, allowing for synthesis of action and passivity and that produces a sustainable method of narrating and surviving middle sister’s oppressive conditions.

The following section elaborates further on the blurring of withdrawal between bodily autonomy and automatism, following the waning of the feeling of sovereignty once embodied in reading-while-walking. This will require the elaboration of the colonial scene of sociality, which will prove to be a crisis marked by extensive necropolitics, a system of reconstituting states of life as those already figured as death. Withdrawal in these situations of heightened negation by both state and revolutionary power requires thinking about agency through new forms of performativity.

Lauren Berlant's idea of 'underperformativity' is 'a mode of flat or flattened affect that shows up to perform its recession from melodramatic norms'.[13] It suspends full participation, accessibility and intelligibility of the individual, and houses them in a relational impasse where the social is made into a question rather than a guarantee. In zones of the underperformative, recessive activity like withdrawal can point to multiple causalities for its inexpression: sometimes resistant, sometimes traumatic and, often, both at once. This chapter argues for the dual nature of withdrawal that performs its affective contact with crisis ordinariness as a self-negation that is both its symptom and its cure.

## Part One: Withdrawal and the Atmosphere of Crisis Ordinariness

### i. *Milkman*'s present past

Arriving amidst the Brexit negotiations and their interminable deadlock concerning the future of the British-Irish border, *Milkman* has been recognised as a 'burningly topical' depiction of the Troubles.[14] Following its win of the prestigious Man Booker Prize, the upsurge in press recognition and public attention quickly connected the novel's 'hair-trigger society' (6) to the growing tensions over the Northern Ireland Protocol that have been gradually turning the screws on the already precarious peacetime of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the threat of a hard or no-deal Brexit seemed set on its inevitable collision course with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the treaty which brokered the demilitarisation of the border and assuaged conflict between unionist Ulster loyalists wanting to remain within the United Kingdom and Irish nationalist republicans who denounced their colonial occupiers and sought full reunification with the southern Republic.[15]

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[13] Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', p. 193.

Meanwhile, beyond the postcolonial backstory, the relevance of the past takes other forms. The primary plot – the predatory stalking of middle sister – has resonated with the growing public awareness campaign of the international #MeToo movement that has spoken aloud the open secret of Hollywood's historical sexual abuse and highlighted more widely a Western normalisation of sexual violence.[16] This movement marks a break with a different type of agreement, one more subliminally ratified but no less institutional: to keep abuse by the powerful in the closet. These coincidences leave us with the impression that the seemingly forgotten traumas of the past have been set to re-emerge both politically and culturally as the insistent return of the repressed: the colonial and patriarchal abuses that can no longer be swept under the rug.

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[14] John Sutherland, 'A Difficult Man Booker Winner Opens Old Wounds', *Financial Times*, 20 October 2018.

[15] See Charlotte Higgins, 'Milkman Is an Essential Novel for Our Times – Every Politician Should Read It', *Guardian*, 17 October 2018, and also the novel's characterisation as 'a Brexit horror story' in Daisy Buchanan, 'Milkman – a Worthy Man Booker Prize Winner', *Independent*, 16 October 2018.

[16] Ron Charles, 'Man Booker Prize Winner "Milkman" May Be a Difficult Read, but It's Perfect for the #MeToo Era', *The Lily*, 2018 <https://www.thelily.com/man-booker-prize-winner-milkman-may-be-a-difficult-read-but-its-perfect-for-the-metoo-era/?> [accessed 28 September 2020], and Bryony White, 'Anna Burns's "Milkman" Isn't "Impenetrable", It Maps the Complex Terrain of Sexual Harassment', *Frieze*, 2018 <https://www.frieze.com/article/anna-burnss-milkman-isnt-impenetrable-it-maps-complex-terrain-sexual-harassment> [accessed 28 September 2020], amongst others have followed the words of Kwame Anthony Appiah, chair of the Man Booker Prize 2018 panel, in addressing the novel's 'deep and subtle and morally and intellectually challenging picture of what #MeToo is about'. Appiah is quoted in Claire Armistead and Alison Flood, 'Anna Burns Wins Man Booker Prize for "Incredibly Original" Milkman', *Guardian*, 16 October 2018. Its specific emergence within the cultural climate of the US West coast has not diminished the relatability of #MeToo's core concerns with abuses of power and gendered violence with its worldwide trending on Twitter hitting 1.7 million tweets throughout 85 different countries at its 2017 peak. That this novel, evoking the unique history of Ireland's modern colonial occupation, has drawn these associations seems to speak to the prevalence of sexual violence transnationally and across history.

The return of the past is reflected in the memory of the novel. Anna Burns, herself writing from the twenty-first century, envisions a woman living in the late 1990s during the supposedly transitional Good Friday peace-making, who is herself remembering a period of her life in the 1970s. Cathy Caruth has written influentially about the inherent belatedness of psychological trauma and how the 'unassimilated nature' of the 'simple violent or original event' persists as the psyche's unhealed wound that goes on to 'haunt the survivor later on'.[17] The layering of memory and the belatedness of the narrative seem to speak to the impossibility of moving on from the legacy of past abuses, stress, and violence.

This is how Andrea DeHoed interprets the disorganised narrative voice in her article 'The Trauma of the Troubles'. This narrator 'moves around in a fog; her consciousness doesn't stream so much as it rushes and fumbles from one thing to another, dropping the reader into a torrent of dissociation and violence'; 'It's a voice that is never quite at ease, in which the syntax never quite fits together.' This prose 'dwells', DeHoed tells us, 'in the unspectacular ambient changes that conflict causes in the psychology of a society.'[18] Trauma, for DeHoed, is reflected in the incapacitated communication of this voice trying to stumble its way into coherent storytelling. The novel employs an oblique, evasive and digressive prose, which performs its struggle to communicate paradoxically in its excessively verbose style. The immobile mouth reflects, perhaps, what might be understood as the symptom's presentation of an enduring state of psychobiological paralysis.

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[17] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.
[18] Andrea DeHoed, 'The Trauma of the Troubles', *Dissent*, 67.1 (2020), 12–16, 14.

Bessel van der Kolk explains that trauma is characterised by its incommunicable qualities: '[i]t is enormously difficult to organize one's traumatic experiences into a coherent account – a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end.'[19] '[T]rauma', he tell us, 'is much more than a story about something that happened long ago. The emotions and physical sensations that were imprinted during the trauma are experienced not as memories but as *disruptive physical reactions in the present.*'[20] The withdrawn body could be read as disruptive physical reaction. Yet, the belatedness is not itself inherently disruptive. In fact, delayed memory seems to have been integral to the very production of the novel. As Clare Hutton proposes, 'one way of thinking about *Milkman* is as the record of a moment […] which has taken an inevitably long period to process and produce.'[21] Withdrawal produces a distance necessary for the body to process the overwhelming forces that have impacted it. The Troubles can be approached only through a delayed mediation. Burns herself has spoken on the distance, in both years and geography, that have been essential to her own capacity to come to terms with growing up in Ardoyne, Belfast, a district hit by especially violent upheaval.[22]

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[19] van der Kolk, p. 43.

[20] ibid, p. 204. My emphasis.

[21] Clare Hutton, 'The Moment and Technique of Milkman', *Essays in Criticism*, 69.3 (2019), 349–71, 352.

[22] See, for example, Eoin McNamee, 'Anna Burns: I Had to Get Myself Some Distance Away from the Troubles', *Irish Times*, 13 September 2018.

Furthermore, because middle sister's withdrawal enacts her disruptive response *within* the unfolding of crisis and not solely in its belated forgetting, we must ask what it means for trauma to be encoded and lived out simultaneously with its conditions of activation. Caruth tells us that 'trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events' that are encountered only through their 'inherent forgetting'. [23] The 'sudden' event, however, cannot be immediately collapsed into the 'ambient' conditions described by DeHoed, which is a much more diffuse and imprecise concept. Nor can the 'catastrophic' be made identical with the 'unspectacular'. Sianne Ngai explains, in fact, that the 'ambient aesthetic' is less logically promoted by emotional experiences of 'suddenness', such as those that might accompany the traumatic event, than by feelings with a more robust and ongoing temporality and without clear objects of orientation.[24]

Graham Dawon writes that in the context of the Irish Troubles, the centrality of memory to the practices of storytelling and conflict resolution is not a sign of the unassimilated moment of trauma but a demonstration of its ongoing conditions. He writes that 'the past continues to exercise pressure on the present in societies like those in still-partitioned Ireland where, political, cultural, and psychic landscapes continue to be shaped and polarized along lines inherited from an unresolved history of conflict.'[25] Quoting Michael Ignatieff, he tells us '"the past continues to torment because it is *not* past": it is not "over," "finished," "completed," but permeates the social and psychic realities of everyday life in the present.'[26] This is life, Dawson writes, 'conducted within the temporal frame of what I call the "present past"', where people live out the legacies of the past in traumatised psyches and destabilised geographies.[27] What feels like the return of antagonisms long resolved is the articulation of the fact that they had never gone away.

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[23] Caruth, pp. 11; 17.
[24] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 13.
[25] Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past?: Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 9.
[26] ibid, p. 10.

The idea of the ‘present past’ reimagines how we envision crises, not only of the past, or those seemingly emerging in our contemporary moment, but also how they connect and interact across time. Berlant explains that ‘the genre of crisis can distort something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional.’ [28] So even as the Troubles, for middle sister, ‘increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another’, Berlant is more precise with her terminology.[29] Where, ‘[t]he genre of crisis is itself a heightening interpretative genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life’, Berlant’s newer genre of ‘crisis ordinariness’ deflates the rhetoric of exception to relocate the obstacle to survival within everyday existence itself.[30] ‘Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming.’[31] Burns herself maintains that ‘“I see [the novel] as a fiction about an entire society living under extreme pressure, with long-term violence seen as the norm.”’[32] The ordinariness of crisis can explain how violence can lose its shocking rupture and become a slow and accretive deterioration of the subject.[33] Trauma might be represented, in these cases, in ambient and ongoing aesthetics as much as those of the sudden or catastrophic.

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[27] Dawson, p. 10.
[28] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 7. Bracketing, for the purposes of this chapter, the historical specificity of her work on ‘crisis ordinariness’ as the dominant mode for understanding the proliferating precariousness in the neoliberal age, and its extensive wearing away of good life fantasies that was magnified by the 2008 global financial crash, Berlant’s work on crisis genre feels nonetheless indispensable for how I have envisioned the affective schematics of this novel and their relationship to the ambivalences, ambiguities and antagonisms of being relational in the world.
[29] ibid, p. 7.
[30] ibid.
[31] ibid, p. 10.
[32] Burns quoted in Allardice.

### ii. Crisis Ordinariness

Crisis ordinariness can reframe the phenomenology of perpetual war characteristic of colonial and postcolonial settings. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, theorising from the context of postcolonial Cameroon, explain how subjects becomes figured by the process of crisis becoming ordinary. They tell us ‘it is in everyday life that the crisis as a limitless experience and a field dramatizing particular forms of subjectivity is authored, receives its translations, is institutionalised, loses its exceptional character, and in the end, as a “normal” ordinary, and banal phenomenon, becomes an imperative to consciousness.’[34] Consciousness is shaped by the daily slow violence of a crisis constituted and compounded by colonial and patriarchal violations of the body – one’s that are ‘everyday’, ‘limitless’, and so ‘banal’ that they cannot register as a catastrophic event. In crisis ordinariness, we find trauma in the open wound of everyday life in which the disrupted body is paradoxically the body that is least abnormal. In this story of navigating the overwhelming, middle sister experiences disruptive withdrawals and ‘anti-orgasmic’ contractions in her body perpetually registering its social belonging as a problem for survival.

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[33] This new representational possibility for violence is indebted to Rob Nixon’s theorising around ‘slow violence’. Violence that is slow is ‘neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales’. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.

[34] Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, ‘Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis’, in *The Geography of Identity*, ed. by Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 153–86, p. 155.

Middle sister's affective life is both strategic and disruptive, crossing frequently between bodily autonomy and automatism. Interestingly, in his interrogation of the psychiatric implications of the ongoing Algerian war, Fanon found a psychosomatic and affective rigidity in patients characterised by a similarly anti-orgasmic 'generalized muscular contraction'.[35] He finds that the subtracted response to survival time is both an effect of, and strategy for managing, the stress of conflict. Fanon says, '[t]his contracture is in fact simply the postural accompaniment to the native's reticence, the expression in muscular form of his rigidity and refusal'.[36] Why might withdrawal emerge as a dominant affective experience for conveying the native's contact with the urgencies of wartime? Fanon suggests a nuanced understanding of its concomitant disruptions and practicability when he tells us that '[t]his pathology is considered as a means whereby the organism responds to, in other words adapts itself to the conflict it is faced with, *the disorder being at the same time a symptom and a cure*.'[37] Fanon makes repeated references to colonialism's affective dimensions that require bodily adjustments irreducible to the singularly traumatic event, a framework which might otherwise make violent imperial occupation somehow exceptional to the lives of the colonised people. Significantly, he describes this phenomenon as '*a pathology of atmosphere*'.[38]

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[35] Fanon, p. 235. The colonial situations of Algeria and Ireland cannot, of course, be condensed together entirely without erasing the important specificities of race and geography that have informed their histories. Fanon's elaboration of the repercussions of the imperialist project on the mental health of colonised people is, however, interesting for my project for how he understands the psychiatric uniqueness of ongoing conditions.

[36] ibid.

[37] ibid, p. 234. My emphasis. The relation of this observation to contemporary trauma theory is made explicit when we find in van der Kolk's book such subtitles as 'When Problems are Really Solutions', emphasising the adaptive utility of much of the body's habitual reactivity. van der Kolk, p. 147.

[38] ibid. My emphasis.

Atmosphere, as we have seen already, is a defining affective shape of the Troubles.[39] The conventional diagnostics of *post*traumatic stress disorder cannot necessarily account for the narration of traumatic stress within the unfolding of those very events assumed to take hold only belatedly. As in all forms of colonialism, the past is now. In fact, even today, Northern Ireland is not exactly a *post*colony (that zone of the possible *post*traumatic); even in its democratic form, it remains under the jurisdiction of Westminster in England. Postcolonial theory provides historical specificity to the atmosphere of crisis ordinariness which shapes the body, in this novel, into repeated forms that are both its reactive survival and its disruptive symptom. *Milkman* depicts an atmosphere formed by the ordinariness of colonial war and sexual harassment, in which overstimulation and threat must be navigated by withdrawal.

As a shared 'psycho-political atmosphere', the historical normality of crisis is inevitably felt on a collective scale and is marked by strict affective self-control. In *Milkman*, middle sister finds an aversion within her community to expression that is overly personal and emotive. It is a place where people avoid 'emotional' words that are 'too much of a colorant, too high-flying, too posturing' (20-21). Instead, they use terms 'which toned things down, being more in keeping with societal toleration' (21). Vulnerability is something not tolerated: there is 'shaming for letting your guard down that went on in this place' (36). Instead of expressive discussion, things are decided by ‘unspoken agreement’ (22). They are not written down but sensed by ‘the spirit of the community’ (22). For middle sister, this characterises the late ‘70s. ‘In those days then, impossible it was not to be closed-up because closed-upness was everywhere’ (114). In the unfolding crisis, withdrawal is a public feeling that informs, and is informed by, an atmosphere of communicative hesitancy and distrust of social bonds. If to be vulnerable is to bear one’s internal feelings to others, the individual protects themselves by splitting their internal and external (private and public) subjectivities through withdrawal:

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[39] The idea of the 'atmosphere' as describing the collective environment in which people enter, evaluate and adjust to accordingly comes from Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). In this book, however, Brennan makes a hard distinction between affect and emotion that seems to detach affect entirely from its translation into cognitive knowing by emphasising its *pre*cognitive quality. I choose not to reproduce such a strong bisection here in favour of sustaining the messiness and ambiguity that exists between our experiences of cognition and feeling. As I discuss in the introduction, my understanding of affect and emotion does not overly prioritise either the bodily sensation of adjustment (affect for Brenan) or the conceptual idea of the emotion. I consider that, in the atmosphere, both cognitive and pre-cognitive faculties are always both at work.

> everybody read minds – had to, otherwise things got complicated. Just as most people here chose not to say what they meant in order to protect themselves, they could also, at certain moments when they knew their mind was being read, learn to present their topmost mental level to those who were reading it whilst in the undergrowth of their consciousness, inform themselves privately of what their true thinking was about (36-37).

To translate this ‘undergrowth of their consciousness’ into speech is to risk public and often violent access to oneself. ‘“[T]oo sad” was bad, and “too joyous” was bad, which meant you had to go around not being anything […] which was why everyone kept their private thoughts safe and sound in those recesses underneath’ (91). Middle sister’s withdrawal recognises a predicament of communication where, in this heavily policed environment, what and how you speak can put you at risk. Communicative expression presupposes trust in the social. In this normality of paranoid crisis and disorder, however, the dissolution of communal trust problematises the protections one might otherwise assume will arise from reciprocation or recognition. The distrust of relationality is, paradoxically, the most amplifying experience through which people relate to other members of their social ‘species’. In her outline of this historical structure of feeling, adjusting everyone to self-effacing surveillance, middle sister recognises the blueprints for her own withdrawal. In her habitual protection against the encroachment of the milkman and the gossip about their perceived affair, middle sister undergoes a withdrawal already integral to her consciousness as a subject of crisis: 'I'd learned by the end of primary school […] that it was best not to open my mouth' (174). This is not a sensibility that arrives on the back of her stalker; the immobile mouth is a posture long in the making.

Berlant tells us that '[e]xpression always denotes a register of vulnerability in the social, a recognition of relationality'.[40] When one speaks and participates in the social, there is a risk of violent relationality and obstructed agency. In this novel, anxieties over bodily ownership and autonomy are indicated by scenes of compromising vocalisation. The uncertainty of withdrawal, as discontinued communication, reflects this in scenes that adjudicate between speech and silence. When middle sister does speak out to another person about her problems with the milkman, she experiences diminished agency. In one scene she is speaking to 'real milkman', a close friend of her mother (and, unlike the milkman, he actually delivers milk), about her predicament. Compelled by the pressures of her emotional build-up, and despite the gendered rules about communication, she opens her mouth: '[t]here were many words *to come out of me* […] Later I was surprised at my forthrightness in speaking out to a male' (144, my emphasis). Later in the novel, during an intervention from her longest friend who has reached out to warn middle sister about the risks of her unconventional behaviour: 'I opened my mouth and *out it all came'* (197, my emphasis). Again, during a phone conversation in which her maybe-boyfriend demands to know why she has been avoiding him: '[a]fter a startled moment, my mouth fell open and despite all my long-held reasons for not telling, *spontaneous words came out of my mouth*. I heard myself speak' (281, my emphasis). The location of action in the grammar of her narration indicates a deferral of sovereignty to language itself. By speaking, middle sister's subjectivity is replaced by the agency of the words, which seem to annunciate themselves on her behalf. In the moments of honest communication, middle sister experiences a dissociation that undercuts the intentionality of emotional expression by way in which her agency is delegated to the words themselves and she instead bears witness to herself as speaking.

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[40] Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', 197.

Withdrawal is an inevitable response to these dizzyingly compromising speeches. Her reaction against communication is shaped historically by this crisis ordinariness. Yet, despite this determinism, withdrawal is also her habit of keeping herself grounded and secure, and of managing the overwhelming predicaments of her life and her social world that will no longer sustain her. Thus, the following section will explore the processing of withdrawal as it manifests formally in middle sister's reading-while-walking. As an affect that is both shaped by and reactive to historical unfolding, this chapter follows withdrawal with an eye to both its self-sustaining habits and the traumatic automatism of a nervous system hijacked by survival modes.

## Part Two: The Survival Habits of Reading-while-walking

### i. Withdrawal on the Move

Why is it that one of the most recurring forms through which middle sister realises her adaptive withdrawal from the world is through books? What does it mean that her pastime is taken up not in the safety of her own home but whilst walking in public spaces of heightened sociality? It is more than simply an act of dissociative escapism as she inhabits the urban space of political crisis. The refusal to surrender the outside and enact total isolation means that even as reading-while-walking takes the form of deliberate avoidance, it is still a distracted and delegatory relationship to the world. This requires a different understanding of agency that is not simply the sovereign acceptance or refusal of life. It is also a recognition that affect can inhabit an impasse, and that the body is not always compelled towards its communication and synchronisation. Withdrawal cannot be interpreted solely as blocked, backed-up, or repressed affect.

Reading-while-walking is the predominating habit by which middle sister regulates her encounters with, and adjustments to, danger. It complements 'the cauterising, the *jamais vu*, the blanking-out' (113) of her withdrawing consciousness by reducing her inhabitation of the outside both mentally (in its redirected focus) and physically (in the turning down of the head – the instant breaking of reciprocation). In its interpretations of threatening social assembly, withdrawal's bodily comportment materialises a self-protective dampening of the nervous system. 'Otherwise', she tells us, 'if unmediated forces and feelings burst into my consciousness, I wouldn't know what to do' (113). As the stage of perpetual conflict, outside urban space in this version of Northern Ireland is an environment of perpetual fear and persistent overstimulation. For middle sister, it is the act of reading that numbs her enough for this world to be bearable.

Escapism from the unmediated overpresence of the world has long been motivational for a retreat into literature. Reading as an act of mediating the indeterminable conditions of life has been central, for example, to the rhetorical and semiotic theories of Paul de Man. In Proust's work especially, he identifies how reading can perform the protective observation of a world made manageable by the distancing of representative language. In his analysis of *In Search of Lost Time* he notes that ‘reading is staged […] as a defensive motion in a dramatic contest of threats and defenses: it is an inner, sheltered place […] that has to protect itself against the invasion of an outside world’.[41] At the same time, de Man’s deconstructive interpretation reveals that the detached act of reading necessarily brings the world back into itself for it ‘nevertheless has to borrow from this world some of its properties’.[42] In order to protectively mediate her present, reading-while-walking must withdraw whilst retaining its relation with the object from which it withdraws. Unlike Proust’s characters, middle sister’s reading takes place in the external public world even as it shuts herself off from it. Reading-while-walking is not a simple evacuation of presence. Middle sister’s habit is complemented by her active ‘mental ticking-off of landmarks’ (36); ‘I had seven landmarks that peripherally I’d tick off in my head as I read my book and walked along’ (82). Like all reading interpreted by de Man, absorptive recourse to imaginative fiction necessitates an awareness – if only slight – of the factual world around her.

Reading becomes a habituated management of her withdrawal by allowing it to act out a familiarity even in the uncertain space of survival time. It is, as Berlant suggests, the ‘[u]nderperformative style’, which ‘is a resource for many […] to maintain relationality *in some way*, while keeping things apprehensively, hypervigilantly, suspended.’[43] On her walks between landmarks, therefore, reading helps create an identification between the world and the novel as a location of stable genre. This mode of turning to the familiar during periods of the unpredictable is a feature of a withdrawal that rescinds its participation in a world without narrative shape in favour of one with more predictable characters and events. This detached relationality makes sense of the world without fully belonging to it and so delegates its participatory agency through a manoeuvre that is as much a secure negotiation and it is the debilitative effects of stress.

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[41] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 59.
[42] ibid, p. 59.
[43] Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, 211. Original emphasis.

In embodying antisociality, middle sister is aware of the ambivalence between withdrawal being action and being acted upon. Her hope is that the integral confusion of her performance, not only to others but also to herself, will be authentically dissimulating without becoming confrontationally abnormal. The active and passive confusion of her reading-while-walking underpins the question of whether her actions involve ‘switching off or not switching off?’ (65). To middle sister, this question is beside the point. ‘It was my opinion that with my reading-while-walking I was doing both at the same time […] It was a vigilance not to be vigilant’ (65). Reading-while-walking is to simultaneously turn away from the sociality in which one performs and towards imaginary identifications with novelistic frameworks. The turn towards narrative, I argue here and in the following chapter, takes on the reaction of withdrawal – its turning inwards or into the object – to manage the scene of life’s heightened ambivalence. We can see in middle sister’s habituated reading-while-walking a literalisation of that wandering, dissociative yet hyperaware subject of the impasse searching for its genre.[44]

In this attempt to be both vigilant and non-vigilant, the adjudication between activity and passivity navigates the concourse of double binds that debilitate middle sister’s daily life. Reading is an act recognised as straddling the polarities between being affected and intentional interpretation. The work of de Man tells us that in order to acquire its acceptable coherency, ‘the inwardness of the sheltered reader must also acquire the power of a concrete action. The mental process of reading extends the function of consciousness beyond that of mere passive perception; it must acquire a wider dimension and become an action.’[45] Noticeably, he makes it important to stress that ‘’[t]he use of the term "action" […] does not mean that metaphor is here conceived as a speech act’;[46] action does not require direct vocalisation. As the novel repeatedly discloses, detachment of agency from the self-extending act of speech allows for the subject to apprehend the world that they also disavow. The action of reimagining a world that not only makes sense novelistically but is affectively manageable offers survivability for subjects of heightened crisis.

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[44] This is an image from Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4, outlining characteristics of the subjects of crisis ordinariness.

The vigilant-non-vigilance of reading-while-walking reflects a desire to extricate oneself from the trafficking of knowledge in a world where its circulation distributes violence. She tells us that

> I knew that by reading while I walked I was losing touch in a crucial sense with communal up-to-dateness and that that, indeed, was risky. It was important to be in the know, to keep up with, especially when things here got added onto at such a rapid compound rate. On the other hand, being up on, having awareness, clocking everything – both of rumour and of actuality – didn’t prevent things from happening or allow for intervention on, or reversal of things that had already happened. Knowledge didn’t guarantee power, safety or relief and often for some it meant the opposite of power, safety and relief […]

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[45] de Man, p. 63.
[46] ibid, p. 63, n. 9.

> *Purposely not wanting to know therefore, was exactly what my reading-while-walking was about*. (65, my emphasis)

Consonant with ‘not wanting to know’ is her regular repetition of the phrase ‘I don’t know’, that eventually becomes ‘the biggest player in my verbal defence repertoire’ (174) (a disavowal through which not wanting to know becomes conjoined with withdrawal’s not wanting to communicate). Insofar as one of middle sister’s infrequent verbal replies comprises of a disavowal of knowledge, the desire for ignorant inaccessibility must allow for a sense of agency for the subject otherwise disempowered by self-articulation.

## ii. Withdrawal and Life Before the Present

Reflecting the deployment of ‘I don’t know’, middle sister’s reading habits respond to a weaponization of knowledge. However, it is not only the act of reading in and of itself that constitutes her withdrawal from the present. What she reads matters too. The unmediated overpresence motivates not only a spatial retraction and avoidance, but also a temporal substitution whereby middle sister decides to ‘forgo the current codex altogether for the safety of the scroll and papyrus of earlier centuries’ (113). These earlier centuries are, more often than not, the nineteenth century (5). The withdrawn retreat of middle sister’s subjectivity is carried out doubly through the spatial body and the temporal consciousness.

The historical substitution of the nineteenth century and earlier for middle sister’s present moment represents an image of a world outside of perpetual war. When the present feels boundless to the point where the future can be imagined only as its inevitable extension, the past is perhaps the only place of comfortable residence.

Historical fiction offers a world, if not free of crisis, then engaged with a different set of a frames for understanding nationalism, imperialism, romance, valour, war, and so on. The recuperation of older realist genres of the self-continuous protagonist linearized in novelistic frameworks of melodramatic morals, tropes and temporalities – the chivalric quest of the Romantic *Ivanhoe*, for example – figures an agency of overcoming for middle sister disempowered in the ensemble cast of the present's morally hazy tribalism. In addition to this recuperation, reading these novels is furthermore a rejection of twentieth-century aesthetics that have increasingly represented a postmodern collapse of centred subjects and the genres assumed to give their lives predictable narrative form.

There is, perhaps, a specific literary aesthetic evoked here. The recourse to nineteenth-century literature, in a repeated scene of urban wandering that mediates emotional withdrawal, evokes the famed literary device of the *flâneur* and its strategies for managing the unfolding and overwhelming conditions of increasingly modernised life. Rachel Sykes has identified 'the interior life of a solipsistic *flâneur* who walks around a city in order to reflect', as a significant form for those grappling with the growing noise of urban modernisation and the production of the quieter aesthetics of rumination and introspection.[47] Reflection and walking are key to understanding the socially detached feelings of middle sister. The hyphenation of the habit itself 'reading-while-walking' – as has already been suggested by the collapsed binary found by de Man between what is inward and outward – locates the materialisation of withdrawal in the synthesis of these actions both passive and active, vigilant and non-vigilant. Thus, we can see how one unbearable encounter – 'in this instance I was having this strong response. I dealt with it by averting my eyes, by walking firmly on' (100) – resonates with the intentionality of others: 'this was not the moment to be sitting down but one in which to think and always my thinking was at its best, its most flowering, whenever I was walking' (80). Walking through the city and reading – distracted and apprehensive all at once – makes the space bearable.

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[47] Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 151.

The introspection of the *flâneur*, as it seems to do for middle sister, shores up the subject's consciousness against the overwhelming noise and momentum of one's surround. Berlant describes the proclivities of the *flâneur* (or *flâneuse*), 'whose modes of scanning and collecting the present are said to have relieved them of crisis, emancipated them from the private, but kept them mentally distant from the too-closeness of the world.'[48] Yet, she also recognises the incompatibility of these nineteenth-century aesthetics with the contemporary present dominated by extended crisis. Indeed, the *flâneur's* active attempts to understand their historical present moment and middle sister's recessive delegation of worldly observation to the historicised imaginings of these nineteenth-century writers actually oppose their urban wanderings against one another.

As Sykes tells us, '[t]he flâneur of the nineteenth century conceived their leisurely pace as an act of rebellion, one that opposed the accelerating tempo of modernity without entirely divorcing themselves from it.' Not strictly social withdrawal, although it may look like it, the '"rebellion" slows the experience of modernity *without removing the individual from the crowd*.'[49] The detachment of the traditional *flâneur* is not impacted by withdrawn affect even in the moment of hesitant uncertainty. The slowing down of the world necessitates, instead, an immersion within the sociality of the city.

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[48] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 8.
[49] Sykes, p. 159. My emphasis.

The extension of threat and vulnerability into the very fabric of normality informs the withdrawn specificity of being a subject in colonial crisis distinct from the modernist observer who is perhaps overwhelmed but rarely imperilled. *Where* withdrawal moves the subject away from tells us something about where crisis in *Milkman* is located. The momentum of the world is no longer imposed on the crowds as the spectators of industrialised life. Instead, it is now located within the associations of the crowd itself, assembled through their paranoiac and suspicious forms of tribal belonging. Chronic civil war transforms social life from a defence against technological acceleration into the material threat to the wanderer, whose participation becomes the necessary condition for conflict itself.[50] Whereas the traditional *flâneur*, as Berlant tells us, was 'emancipated from the private', we know already that middle sister desires to be emancipated from the *social*.

### iii. Apprehension and the Relief from the Relational

We have considered so far that reading-while-walking is a routinised way of detaching from the overpresence of the world, whilst maintaining a level of minimised presence within it. In the words of de Man, 'reading has to attempt the reconciliation between imagination and action and to resolve the ethical conflict that exists between them.'[51] By reading, the recessive subject of crisis ordinariness performs their reconciliation through a 'mode of encounter' that is 'less an [aesthetics] of expression than of *apprehension*.'[52] Berlant tells us that modes of apprehension foreground worlds in which '[t]he first impact of encounter does not constitute an event: it is just a disturbance that sets off a process […] 'incidents are sensed, and it remains to find a form for the disturbance'.[53] Apprehension often signals overwhelming, uncertain, and overdetermined causalities, which might be sensed but cannot be immediately known. Judith Butler contrasts apprehension with recognition in her study of the frames of war: '"[a]pprehension is less precise [than recognition], since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. If it is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always – or not yet – conceptual forms of knowledge.'[54] Apprehension is a form of affectively inhabiting a world that has foreclosed reliable genre and narrative.

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[50] We can certainly read this in such moments as when middle sister tells us, 'I didn't speak [my response], because I couldn't have done so without getting into a fight' (57). Conflict is entangled almost inextricably with acts of expression and social responsiveness.

[51] de Man, p. 64.

A deferral to the genre of crisis is itself a mode of apprehension. Mbembe and Roitman tell us that '[t]he very notion of the crisis widely serves as a structuring idiom. In this sense, it constitutes almost in and of itself a singular mode of *apprehending* (and hence narrating, or living) immediate agonies.'[55] Distinct from the conventional modes of expressive storytelling, crisis ordinariness as an idiom constitutes a methodology of making narratable the perpetual cruelty of colonial war. If apprehension might engender autobiography, then neither the immobile mouth nor the turn to reading are antithetical to the sharing of a life story. As I have noted already, the novel exists on account of withdrawal, firstly regarding its material production by the author and secondly in terms of the literary sustainment of the narrator.

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[52] Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', p. 195. My emphasis.

[53] ibid.

[54] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 4–5.

[55] Mbembe and Roitman, p. 155. My emphasis.

Reading-while-walking is a dialectic habit by which active and passive apprehension of the world holds it at bay and shores up the sense of middle sister's sovereignty. Yet, it is its abnormality which eventually comes to cast her – to her great surprise – as an abjected person 'beyong-the-pale'. Neither is it able to defend her against the advances of the milkman insofar as her withdrawal cannot placate the opinions of those in her community. In habits of delegated consciousness, we receive relief from the demand to be relational, and we act to imagine ourselves in control of the individual trajectories of our life. But, as we shall see, in a world organised around viral gossip and perpetual war, this balance is an increasingly unrealistic expression of a sovereignty that middle sister may never have had to begin with.

## Part Three: The Necropower of Crisis and The Underperformative Face

### i. The Necropolitics of Crisis Ordinariness

As I have outlined above, these modes of living have taken form in the normality of colonial crisis, which at this point may require some additional clarifications. Middle sister's district is an environment long since divested of the fantasy of social support. Social membership and survival have become polarised to the degree that middle sister feels as if her participation in life is also what threatens its sustainment. This is the totalitarian sociality that Burns describes in her interview. Colonial occupation has a long history of deploying the institutions of public life with the aim of allocating not only security and order to the ruling bloc but, concurrently, the destruction of inconvenient or undesirable life. This is an effect of the rationality of perpetual war instigated by the racialised splitting of the modern colonial world, which is, according to Foucault, ‘primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die.’[56] The genealogy of knowledge emerging out this ‘modern racism’ means that ‘society’ no longer assembles together disparate groups under a single imagined community that must be defended, but instead itself becomes the object imperilled by an internalised split between the dominant race (those whom society is ‘for’) and the dominated race (the aberrant threat to its supremacy and hygiene).

But the war represented here goes beyond rationalised killing. The ‘kangaroo courts and collusion and disloyalty and informership’ (32) of middle sister’s district, are effects of a crisis ongoingness marked by the (ir)rationalities of what Mbembe might call its ‘necropolitics’.[57] In worlds characterised by the addition of necropolitics into governmentality, ‘weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.’[58] The branches of the Northern Irish state (itself a branch of the British imperial project) – its military, its police, its justice system, and its medical services – have produced (through a cocktail of interminable occupation and neglect) zones in which life is no longer administered but left to deteriorate as if it were already extinguished.

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[56] Foucault, p. 254. Foucault’s use of ‘racism’ is by no means identical with our uses of the term today, which is embedded in the specific historical violence and geopolitical ramifications of the transatlantic slave trade and the construction of ‘whiteness’, which is absent from Foucault’s analysis. His historical genealogy refers more widely to a shift from conflict or struggle *between* ‘races’ understood as distinct historical groups – see, ’21 January 1976’, pp. 42-62 – into a ‘modern racism’ understood as a war ‘internal’ to a race and against its so-called defective or abnormal members that demand ethnic and colonial genocidal cleansing. See pp. 80-84, as well as pp. 254-63.

[57] Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15.1, 11–40. Mbembe describes the ‘certain type of madness’ (39) of living in late modern occupation. Of course, his essay is highly specific in his examples of contemporary colonialism in Africa and the Middle East, reflecting on the territorialisation and the vertical sovereignty of necropolitical Western warfare. Northern Ireland is more embedded in the whiteness of Western culture than the majority of postcolonial nations, and so the particulars of racial and geographical contexts cannot be subsumed entirely into an extrapolation of the necropolitical. Nevertheless, I wonder if there may be value in also thinking about the distribution of death and disposability concerning urban zoning and class demarcation in this novel in terms of how, as Mbembe describes, ‘the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where “peace” is more likely to take on the face of a “war without end”’ (23).

[58] ibid, p. 40. Original emphasis.

Dawson writes of how ‘Ardoyne [Burns’s home district] has endured a permanent condition of isolation and tension, fear and loss, the effects of which have pervaded a community grappling simultaneously with constant surveillance and harassment at the hands of police and the British Army, as well as […] the consequences of public neglect of a range of social needs’.[59] This collaboration of surveillance and neglect constructs zones of the walking dead excluded from individually valued life. Dawson writes of the ‘systematic blurring, by all protagonists of violence, of the categories of *armed combatants* and *unarmed civilians*’, that amplifies the distribution of death and destruction.[60] This is not the violence of Fanon’s decolonisation either, which ‘unifies the people’. According to him, ‘[v]iolence is in action all-inclusive and national. It follows that it is closely involved in the liquidation of regionalism and of tribalism.’[61] Yet, it is its all-inclusive nature that perpetuates the sectarian compartmentalisation of this world and has constructed its ordinary atmosphere of crisis.

In a necropolitical world, without the life conditions through which people can experience their fantasies of security, protection, national belonging, collective meaning, and so on, the community of middle sister’s district is organised by a ‘repertoire of gossip, secrecy and communal policing, plus the rules of what was allowed and not allowed' that are unspoken, mercurial and internally incoherent (59); 'in a district that thrived on suspicion, supposition and imprecision, where everything was so back-to-front it was impossible to tell a story properly, or not tell it but just remain quiet, nothing could get said here or not said' (229). Middle sister recognises that the surveillance and policing of this crisis, evacuated of the administration of strict biopower, expresses a terroristic unpredictability. To speak no longer represents the truth of oneself, even as an interpellated subject of power. In this novel, social belonging is always to participate in a conflict that does not recognise your sovereign life, and to be marked as an aberrance already 'antisocial' even before the body can withdraw.

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[59] Dawson, p. 11.

[60] ibid, p. 9. Original emphasis. Compare the words of Mbembe: the colonies ‘do not establish a distinction between combatants and noncombatants, or again between an “enemy” and a “criminal.” It is thus impossible to conclude peace with them. In sum, colonies are zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other.’ Mbembe, p. 24.

[61] Fanon, p. 74.

### ii. The Cure of Underperformative Withholding

In this 'certain type of madness' of necropolitical ordinariness, certain types of performance are inevitably foreclosed. In a death-world in which the autonomy of the walking dead is dissolved in their very conceptualisation by power, there can no longer be what Mbembe calls '[t]he romance of sovereignty', which 'rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning.'[62] Underperformativity, introduced above, no longer articulates the transparent sincerity of sovereign expression. Writing about direct performativity, Eve Sedgwick proclaims that 'the illusion of self-referential transparency in the explicit performative all require that illocution be, if not a simple thing – perhaps it can never be that – then at least always a single thing.'[63] But, as Fanon has shown, the bodily feedback of the subject of ongoing war is always double: symptom and cure. In this concluding section, I would like to utilise the underperformative as a framework through which withdrawal might be understood as both intentionally and unconsciously affective. Concentrating primarily on the face, I will reflect on the unfolding of middle sister's withdrawal amid the dissipating fantasy of her affective sovereignty.

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[62] Mbembe, p. 13.

[63] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 78. Sedgwick is talking here primarily about performativity in terms of

The underperformative, Berlant tells us, reads as 'a casualization of emotion' that 'can point to something stuck, neutral, or withheld in relationality'.[64] Her repeated disavowal, 'I don't know', withholds co-assembly with the social by presenting an ignorant obstacle to the transmission of gossip. This withholding is understood as a strategic defence against relationality:

> With it ['I don't know'] successfully I refused to be evoked, drawn out, shocked into revelation. Instead I minimalised, withheld, subverted thinking, dropped all interaction surplus to requirement which meant they got no public content, no symbolic content, no full-bodiedness, no bloodedness, no passion of the moment, no turn of plot, no sad shade, no angry shade, no panicked shade, no location of anything. Just me, downplayed. Just me, devoid. *Just me, uncommingled*. (174-75, my emphasis)

In the realm of the underperformative, tone is just as important as the words themselves – 'I don't know' requires a 'downplayed' and 'minimalised' vocalisation. Middle sister tells us that 'I had to speak my three syllables *in the most nonconfrontational manner* whilst concealing a crucial *but unacknowledged* preservation of distance' (175, my emphases). Contentless words must be

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speech acts. Nevertheless, as Tomkins has argued, the bodily feedback, and the face in particular, constitutes an innate expressive performance of the affect system and its co-assembly.

[64] Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', p. 195.

supplemented by diminished expressive feedback to preserve the ‘uncommingled’ or unassembled individual – ‘Just me’. Berlant tells us that ‘[p]erformative subtraction from the intelligibility of the scene loosens the event of the present’, which means ‘[i]t can point to the overcloseness of the world, and be a distancing mechanism.’ [65] Like reading-while-walking, this subtraction manages what is chronically overwhelming and, in its habituation, becomes transcribed into a gestural reflex. Middle sister supplements ‘I don’t know’ with an emptying of her facial expression.

The empty face complements Tomkin’s working hypothesis that '[t]he face now appears to me […] the central site of affect responses and their feedback’.[66] Tomkins’s theory of the face prioritises its location at the centre of emotional communication and social coordination: 'The evolution of the human face has moved in the direction of increasing expressiveness through greater visibility […] Thus, it seems to have been evolved in part as an organ for the maximal transmission of information, to the self and to others’.[67] Middle sister, alongside Tomkins, considers the expressive face to be the locus of social co-assembly. ‘My careful rendering of “*I don’t know*,”’ is ‘combined with a terminal face – nothing in it, nothing behind it, a well-turned-out nothing’ […] I’d hoped the sheer nullity of me would lead them to doubt their inventions and their convictions’ (176, original emphasis). She hopes that her community might ‘come to the conclusion that I must not understand language in some prevailing, basal, social-code way. It was that I couldn’t grasp what was being asked of me because *the whole issue of emotional and psychological communication must be missing for me*’ (176, my emphasis). The disavowal of emotional communication conveys an optimism in a protective unintelligibility. For a while, it seems to work: ‘I said my three words and I displayed my depersonalisation and did succeed in puzzling them’ (177). By negating herself as a feeling and knowing subject, she tries to protect herself from being the object of gossip in a community where speaking the truth about her harassment is not possible.

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[65] Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, pp. 193; 195.
[66] Tomkins, p. 89.
[67] Silvan S. Tomkins and Robert McCarter, ‘What and Where Are the Primary Affects? Some Evidence for a Theory’, in *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. by E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 217–62, p. 218.

The blank disavowal presents only that top level of thinking that she claims is essential to surviving this affectively hostile environment. Faced this community, ‘[t]he only way […] I knew how to counter them was by doing my own dissembling’ (174). Middle sister understands that she cannot be fully emotionally vulnerable or explicitly performative. But in her withdrawal, she is not otherwise forsaking affective life in its entirety; she wishes to retain some semblance of herself as a living emotional subject. Middle sister informs us that ‘[a]lthough I’d said it was imperative to present myself as blank and empty, what I meant was *almost*-blank and *almost*-empty’ (179, original emphasis). ‘I was almost-inordinately blank, almost-lifeless, almost-sterile, almost-counter-intuitive’, as well as ‘*near*-arid, *near*-solitary, *near*-deprogrammed’ (179, original emphasis). Underperformed emotion allows for a withholding of synchronisation whilst also denying her figuration as the fully negated subject of necropower. In these regards, middle sister understands herself as an intentional actor. Her ‘defensive, protective, “giving nothing away” mode’, is described as ‘a deliberate withholding on my part’ (51). She proclaims that ‘I needed my silence, my unaccommodation, to shield me from pawing and from molestations by questions’ (205). Underperformance creates unreadable subjects, whose inaccessibility might prove to be an impenetrable defence against the world.

### iii. The Symptom of Underperformative Stuckness

But, if withdrawal feels at one point like a defensive withholding, it might, as Berlant suggests, just as likely to point to predicaments of traumatic stuckness or immobility. Upon the arrival of the milkman, Middle sister discovers that her strategic underperformance is not necessarily under her full control – '[t]hen came complications' (175). Her facial emptying, as with her spoken confessions above, starts to develop its own agency. She tells us, '[i]t got stuck (176). Her affective stuckness starts to resemble too closely the social death to which she has been systematically assigned. This zombielike automatism of unfeeling reveals an uncertainty about the status of her sovereign ability to resist or subvert. In such amphibological prose of this compound noun, 'my hardly ever opening my mouth to defend or shield myself' (107), we can observe the agential uncertainty inherent in her grammar – is it that she hardly ever opens her mouth *in order* to defend herself, or is that she *fails to* defend herself by hardly ever opening her mouth? The narrative voice itself suggests that, in crisis, performative agency can never be guaranteed.

Indeed, as the structure of withdrawal repeats the dominating figurations of crisis, it starts to assert itself and displace middle sister as the sovereign subject: 'outside of expectation, and without the least warning, *it began to take over proceedings*' (176, my emphasis). She '[t]hought too, I'd chosen a subordinate to assist me and not some rebel to turn tables and override me' (176). Instead, 'I was attacking myself and it was my face, the expression on my face – one I had intended as temporary, as provisional, which surely and truly I believed could be nothing but provisional' (175-76). Where speech once asserted itself as the hijacking actor, now withdrawal begins to do the same. Middle sister tells us that 'before I'd gained the understanding of what was happening, my seemingly flattened approach to life became less a pretence and more and more real as time went on. At first an emotional numbness set in' (177). Next, 'my feelings stopped expressing. Then they stopped existing. And now this numbance from nowhere had come so far on in its development that along with others in the area finding me inaccessible, I, too, came to find me inaccessible. My inner world, it seemed, had gone away' (178). The waning of interiority – the location of her protected and private self – is the cost paid to survive in a world that demands expressive participation yet is simultaneously hostile to it. 'I'd assumed that how my face looked, how I was making it look, how I presented it outwardly, was down to me, under the control of me, the "*I am*" deep in the council chamber. I thought this real me was in there, in charge, hidden from them but directing from the undergrowth' (176, original emphasis). The dissolution of the monadic protagonist accompanies the loss of the narrative shape of the world, where the normality of crisis cannot sustain the fantasy of bodily control and self-determination.

Moreover, as Mbembe argues, the merging of resistance and death is always complicated 'under conditions of necropower', in which 'the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred.'[68] Thus, middle sister realises that 'I too, was beginning to lose my power of reason, my ability to see obvious connections and to retain even the most elementary sense of how to survive in this place' (177). '[T]his place' indicates a zone in which surviving and dying (socially and literally) are becoming increasingly synonymous. The attempt to hang on to the fantasy of the internal subject persist nonetheless: 'Of course I believed myself sentient. Of course I knew I was angry. Of course I knew I was frightened, that I had no doubt my body, to me, was brimming with a natural reaction. At first I could feel this reaction which confirmed I was alive, that I was in there, inside my body, experiencing this under-the-surface turbulence' (177). This 'of course' latches itself to the protective fantasy of private interiority but, in the form of its anaphoric repetition, merely amplifies the ambiguity of whether it every truly existed.[69] Once habits for survival like reading-while-walking are suppressed under the pressures not only of cultural and biopolitical normativity but of the necropolitical loss of sovereign performance, withdrawal loses its forms for managing crisis ordinariness. Neither the expression nor the negation of affect, middle sister discovers, can reliably protect her from the violent sociality of her world in which she is always at once figured as the dead aberrant object of political destruction as well as the non-consensually socialised object of sexual harassment.

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[68] Mbembe, p. 40.

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In this chapter, I have argued that withdrawal is one of the primary activated affects adjusting the body of middle sister to her world of colonial necropolitics and perpetual warfare. Withdrawal, as an affect with a profile of protracted duration and slow decay, discloses this novel's predicaments of ongoingness and reimagines its violent crisis as crisis ordinariness. This new genre of discussing crisis recognises, firstly, that conditions of threat to continued life are simultaneously the normalised conditions of the everyday, wherewith improvisations of survival have become integral to the consciousness of its subjects. Secondly, crisis ordinariness recognises the present past of colonial violence. It allows for a representation of trauma as an ongoing and accretive phenomenon perpetually deteriorating the subject, and is less embedded in psychiatric paradigms of singular and belated life events. By suspending communication, middle sister takes up forms of underperformance: in the vigilant non-vigilant habit of reading-while-walking and finally in the blank face and subtracted tone of her relational engagements. Under these doubly traumatic and ordinary conditions of sociality, withdrawal manages stress by registering social belonging as the foundations of violence, violation and death, but also reasserts itself as an automatism in the increasingly compounded body. Her affective life is lived, therefore, in a double bind in which her oppression and her resistance take on the same form: a withdrawal borne in a necropolitical crisis ordinariness that is both its symptom and its cure.

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[69] In her reading of Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, Sianne Ngai explicates the literary effects by which 'the disturbance of this proprietary relationship between subject and feeling is echoed in anaphora's capacity to disturb the relationship between substance and its formally distinct attributes'. Anaphoric repetition amplifies the continual attempt to capture – and inevitable escape of – affect itself and discloses to us 'the doomed effort to verify its subjective ownability'. Ngai, pp. 66–68.

# Chapter Three – From Affirmation to Withdrawal: The Love Stories of Taylor Swift and *Call Me By Your Name*

In this final chapter, I move my focus into the geographically idyllic space of André Aciman’s 2007 novel *Call Me By Your Name*. This novel portrays a love story born in a fantastic Italian Riviera of the 1980s characterised by its natural beauty, eternal sunshine, and the languorous privileges of the leisure class. This world is a far cry away from the preceding chapter and the crisis of Anna Burns’ colonial Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, there are several striking similarities underpinning this succession of chapters. Both narrators, young and reserved, effect a prose that is anxious, hypervigilant, and digressively nonlinear. Speaking from a period of twenty years after the events of the plot, both narrators recount a period of their life in which the ordinariness of living – whether that is an ordinariness of crisis or good fortune – is disrupted by the appearance of a man who desires them, and to whom they develop an apprehensive and withdrawn relationality. Furthermore, they are concerned – directly or obliquely – with the organisations of *genre*.

Aciman’s novel concentrates on his protagonist and narrator Elio who longs obsessively for American grad student Oliver – his parents’ opaque and enigmatic houseguest – who is staying at his family villa for a six-week period of the summer to work on his manuscript. Elio, young and without experience of such powerful disturbances of desire, is struck by the overwhelming uncertainty of how he feels and what actions he should take. The novel is framed as a recollection of their brief summer together, when romantic and erotic connections emerge ephemerally out of a mutually feigned indifference and just as quickly dissipate once Oliver returns home to the US. Elio’s reminiscence, two decades later, inaugurates Oliver as a formative tipping point for his coming-of-age, whilst also being the object of a love perpetually haunted by what might have been.

In telling this story, Aciman's novel, I argue, effects a self-reflection about its participation in the genre of the love plot. Towards the end of Part One of this novel, in the grips his anxious indecision, Elio recalls coming across a story of a chivalric romance:

> While reading in my father's library one evening, I came upon the story of a handsome young knight who is madly in love with a princess. She too is in love with him, though she seems not to be entirely aware of it, and despite the friendship that blossoms between them, or perhaps because of that very friendship, he finds himself so humbled and speechless owing to her forbidding candor that he is totally unable to bring up the subject of his love. One day he asks her point-blank: 'Is it better to speak or die?'[1]

That his interest is caught by a conventional tale of courtly love during a period of his own unfolding desire is hardly coincidental. It is not simply the unselective literary historical interest of our nevertheless precocious and erudite speaker. Nor is it entirely the anachronistic intrusion an outdated genre – one that participates in the figuring of the Mediterranean as eternally 'delayed modernization'.[2] What is made most apparent by Elio's turn to literature is perhaps the organising principle of genre itself. As 'a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take', genre might offer Elio dependable predictions about his own predicament of uncertainty.[3] This turn to genre will lead, he hopes, to an answer to the central question both he and the knight share – should I communicate my feelings?

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[1] André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name: A Novel* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), pp. 62–63. All further references to this work will be included parenthetically within the text.

[2] For a reading of both academic and fictional Mediterranean literature (including Aciman's novel) as enacting a flattening erasure of diverse geographies and voices, see Paolo Giacarria and Claudio Minca, 'The Mediterranean Alternative', *Progress in Human Geography*, 35.3 (2010), 345–65. They propose that this 'delayed modernization' (352) – or 'not-yet-modern world' (351) of uncontaminated eternal culture – allows for a homogenised space of the Mediterranean within which writers can then produce transgressive fantasies.

The love genre has long been a tool for facing the ambivalent motivations of desire. This drive to feel simple and coherent, Lauren Berlant tells us, is at the heart of romantic ideology, which works 'to disavow erotic ambivalence and install, in its place, a love plot – a temporal sequence in which erotic antagonism or anxiety is overcome by events that lead to fulfilment.'[4] The resonance of the love genre across time, from the Medieval court to the 1980s Italy of the novel, is just one of innumerable examples of how romance encompasses a highly robust set of conventions through which we can reinterpret the 'erotic ambivalences' of our desires as something inconvenient yet superable. Elio's turn to literature makes sense for the bookish specificity of his character. But it also literalises our more general adherence to genre as a reliable forecast that our lives will eventually add up to something.

Released only a couple of years after *Call Me By Your Name*, Taylor Swift's hit song 'Love Story' (2009) encapsulates this genre of romance that dominates the fantasy factory of heterosexuality. As a cultural object synthesising and condensing a long literary history within the compact circulation of a wish fulfilment, there is little better, I argue, to encapsulate the self-reproducing fantasies of popular culture. It is in popular culture, as Berlant tells us, where our ability to be intimate is most profoundly shaped by the 'distilled emotional truths about love's nature and force' that proselytises the one love story as the only story. As a medium for popular circulation, Swift's pop song is the paradigmatic and contemporary model of the long literary and mythological history of heterosexual coupledom and, in this chapter, Swift's song stands in for genre itself as recyclable model for our erotic imaginations.

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[3] This description of 'genre' that describes a recognisable form of living accompanied by predictions that are either fulfilled or not comes from Lauren Berlant, 'Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness', 2011, p. 2 <https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf> [accessed 8 June 2020].

[4] Lauren Berlant, Desire/Love (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2012), p. 25. Berlant's provisional introduction into these two concepts, 'love' and 'desire', has been integral to my own thinking through these ideas and the way in which their narrative genres suggests ethics and paradigms for living.

Ten years after the release of Aciman's novel, the 2017 film adaptation of *Call Me By Your Name* underwent a similarly lyrical imagining of romance that shirked some of the essential affective dimensions of its source material. Evacuating the novel's play with memory, the film reproduces the past as its present moment of fantasy – the intimacy of conjoined soulmates, lost but with the sentimental and commercial hope of a sequel – and succeeds in folding same-sex desire into the restrictively representative ethics of mass cultural imagination. The film substitutes a thematic of true love for the novel's tone of anxiety, paranoia, jealousy, melancholy, and lustful desire that had allowed for a story of love marked by 'the violence of regret', 'the agony of remembering', and 'the exquisite suffering' of desire.[5] The relationship between the love genre and the love story of Aciman's novel leads to the primary scope of this chapter. Where the generic embodiments of the Love Story traffic in an affectively sanitised and simplified sentimentality, Aciman makes clear the complex circularity, loss, negativity, and illegibility of romantic bonds.

For the ideology of the love plot, the answer to the question, 'Is it better to speak or to die?', would be to speak. Romance ideology naturalises melodramatic conventions and prioritises expressive acts of *affirmation*, a performativity through which knowledge can be made legitimate by its emphatic and vocalised public annunciation. The affirmation is encapsulated, I argue, in the unequivocal 'yes', the speech act that underpins, for Swift, the naturalness of publicly affirmed coupledom. For Aciman's novel, there is no declarative 'yes'. This narrative identification leaves Elio – quite literarily – with more questions than it answers: 'Is it better to speak or die?'. Elio's hesitancy, doubt, anxiety, and shyness reiterate that speech is not always the simple answer. A structure of withdrawal repeatedly orientates him *away* from his object of desire. Where Oliver is detached and aloof, Elio responds in kind. 'Better stay away from him, I thought' (9); 'Stay away from him' (12); 'stay away' (32). 'I had to let him know I was totally indifferent to him' (52). Yet, despite the transmutations of withdrawal, here, from instinctive self-retention to deliberate self-instruction, the romantic bond only intensifies and brings the couple together.

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[5] Nicole Krauss, Review excerpt, in *Call Me By Your Name: A Novel*, by André Aciman (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

My argument in this chapter is that withdrawal is key for developing the romance between Elio and Oliver. It is not the case, I should stress, that withdrawal is the *only* affective experience of desire important in this novel since intimacy is certainly experienced in explicit contact and through moments of candidness. By a comparative reading with the ethics of affirmation, however, I suggest that romance can constitute a relationality separate from the desire to communicate and make it visible. Withdrawal points to predicaments in which the activity of communication is suspended and put under question, and where desire does not point forward in life but is lived out in an uncertain impasse, not only in the present disturbance but in the long future of its processing.

This chapter utilises two parts. Firstly, drawing on the works of Ahmed and Foucault, I will outline the machineries of affirmative ethics that underpins love as a publicly ratified infrastructure for reproducing the social order. In this section, I will analyse the rhetorical components of Swift's 'Love Story', which embodies the romantic genre directed by values of emotional sincerity, openness, and confessional truth. As a cultural object coeval with *Call Me By Your Name*, this song will exemplify the role of emotional expression in twenty-first century romantic normativity, which necessitates not only its affirmation but the rhetorical construction of narrative genre out of the internal ambivalences of attachment. In contrast, I will expand on how withdrawal orientates Aciman's novel backwards, associating it more significantly with the past than the future, and with turning the body away more than turning it towards its objects. This will draw on the chapter's engagements with queer theory and its modal interest in negative affective structures associated with but not identical to withdrawal: namely depression and melancholia.

Following this, I will unpick moments of withdrawal in Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name* to consider how romantic love is lived by some through ambiguous or evacuated communication. By undercutting the role of confession and knowledge, the affirmative 'yes' is replaced by the open secret, a model of recessive action that prioritises detachment, subtraction and other disaffective forms in its very structure of disclosure. In this ambivalence, then, the detachment of the two lovers works to link them together even as they are formally orientated apart. This is example of the co-assembling effects of withdrawal not as a recourse to urgency as Tomkins suggests but as a facilitation of an assembly in which '[e]verything was casual' (40), and where associations can easily be remade and reassembled. Desire is captured not by the normative teleological forwardness of the affirmative. It is lived out through a bodily knowledge in the atmospherically affective field of imperceptible affinity both induced and sustained through a structure of withdrawal.

# Part One: ‘You have to believe in love stories’

## i. The Affirmative: Looking Forwards

The narrative of Taylor Swift’s song ‘Love Story’ is a predictable one: boy and girl fall in love, they want to be together but various and vague cultural forces conspire to separate them. Eventually, true love wins out. The parents (or, more accurately, the father) concede to the indefatigable forces of heterosexual monogamous love, and the narrative is consummated in a climactic proposal of marriage completed by the essential ‘ring’ and ‘white dress’.[6] Significantly, Swift describes ‘Love Story’ as ‘the most romantic song I’ve written’.[7] It is also her mostly widely purchased single worldwide and one of the bestselling singles in history. The song is steeped in traditional and literary images of romance: the figures of Romeo and Juliet, alongside *The Scarlet Letter*, convey to the listener a depiction of young, passionate, and rebellious love emerging within a long historical lineage of the love plot.[8]

In this song, the narrative of clandestine and misunderstood love culminates in the emphatic ‘yes’ of affirmation. When Swift implores her lover to ‘just say “yes”’, it is with the knowledge of the performative power of this affirmation to fold their love into the world. To bring about the officiality of this romantic bond, all that is required is its verbalisation as an open and candid confirmation of intimacy and the lovers’ serious commitment to its truth. The denouement of this song arrives when the ‘Romeo’ stand-in pacifies the father and proposes to Swift, requesting that the same performative ‘yes’ be reciprocated. This affirmative moment assembles together the conciliated parties and inaugurates a future of affective reliability in which negative feelings – ‘I’ve been feeling so alone’ – are transformed into guarantees – ‘you’ll never have to be alone’. Love, here, is a fantasy of transforming life into a dependable shape.

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[6] Taylor Swift, 'Love Story', track 3, *Fearless* (Nashville: Big Machine Records, 2008).
[7] Taylor Swift, ‘10 Questions’, *Time*, 173.17 (2009), 4.
[8] The actual destructive and tragic content of these plots are, of course, less significant than the literary historical genealogy in which they participate and cultural logo of romance which they represent. Death and ostracization, in fact, only serve to amplify the desirability of true love!

This refrain of Swift’s song, as a repeated invitation to speak, predicates the success of romance on underscoring its expression of *true feeling*. When Swift laments that ‘they’re trying to tell me how to feel’, she means to certify something beyond the reaches of institutional or conventional imposition. Whatever is being imposed by ‘them’ is in contrast with a state of pure emotion, of an organic and natural love unadulterated by outside influence, so potently indomitable that its only option is to be announced in resistance to suppressive forces, and in spite of the pain felt from the frictions between desire and communal belonging. The suffering provoked by the presumed incompatibility between love and the social order is endured as proof of the authenticity of emotion – ‘this love is difficult, but it’s real’.

Validity of feeling is part of the naturalising groundwork of heteronormativity that asserts its radical simplicity. Berlant explains that ‘[t]he story that love is invulnerable to the instabilities of narrative or history, and is a beautifully shaped web of lyrical mutuality, is at the ideological core of modern heterosexuality. It enables heterosexuality to be construed as a relation of desire that expresses people’s true feelings.’[9] Truth is recognised in its demand to be spoken, and the boldness of its catharsis renders its obstacles obsolete. As performative acts, speaking and silence have long been recognised as actions through which subjects reproduce their subjectivities and participate in the modes of association. Michel Foucault has shown most influentially how an exhortation to speak (on the sexual in particular) constitutes the disciplinary machineries by which subjects become individuated before the law and their confessions eventually come to produce and then reflect the truth of their identity.[10]

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[9] Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 92.

'Love Story' is a testament to the emotional vulnerability of self-expression, and of being true to oneself in the face of hardship. Released as a lead single, this story was intended to encapsulate the mood of her *Fearless* album and the sincerity of song-writing Swift wanted to bring to her explorations of romance. As a concept that was to define the whole musical era, fearlessness was 'not the absence of fear. It's not being completely unafraid. To me, FEARLESS is having fears. FEARLESS is having doubts. Lots of them. To me, FEARLESS is living in spite of those things that scare you to death.'[11] The themes of romantic attachment are processed through honest self-reflection, as well as through the liberatory and legitimising powers of speaking in the face of fearful opposition. To be FEARLESS in this love story is to underscore what Ann-Lise François describes as '[t]he continued faith in the unambiguous good of articulation and expression' that produces the valuation of 'terms such as *frankness*, *directness*, *transparency*, or *self-expression*' as performatively sociable and socialising values.[12]

This song is not faith in the power of expression alone, however. To affirm is as equally about the obstacles to expression as it is about what one is saying 'yes' to. Hence the paradoxical formula by which Swift lives and writes: '[t]o me, FEARLESS is having fears.' Romantic ideology proposes that we overcome obstacles to love in order to affirm the true happiness of its simple and coherent non-ambiguity. This obstacle is functional in the sense that the ambivalence of desire can be refigured as pointing the way forward and as that which affirmation can overcome. Similarly, Foucault describes confession as ‘a ritual in which *the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount* in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, *produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it*’.[13] To affirm in Swift’s song, as to confess in Foucault’s interpretations, is to make public the hidden truth of oneself and be transformed as such.

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[10] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), especially Part Two, Chapter 1, 'The Incitement to Discourse', pp. 17-35.
[11] Taylor Swift, Sleeve Notes, from *Fearless* [CD] (Nashville: Big Machine Records, 2008).
[12] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. xvi. Original Emphasis. It is of no small significance, perhaps, that Swift's follow-up album would go on to be called *Speak Now*.

In Berlant’s words, we can see how the institutions of romance:

> manage ambivalence; designate the individual as the unit of social transformation; reduce the overwhelming world to an intensified space of personal relations; establish dramas of love, sexuality, and reproduction as the dramas central to living; and install the institutions of intimacy (most explicitly the married couple and the intergenerational family) as the proper sites for providing the life plot in which a subject has ‘a life’ and a future.[14]

In defining her musical era, Swift’s imperatives are caught up with the installation of normative fantasies. She proposes that ‘no matter what love throws at you, you have to believe in it. *You have to believe in love stories* and prince charmings and happily ever after. That’s why I write these songs. Because I think love is FEARLESS.’[15] As suggested here, to make one’s life intelligible means that the love plot, its conventional dramas, heterosexual objects and institutional forms become parts of a compulsory genre – no matter what opposition you feel, their dominance in the reproduction of life and belonging is axiomatic.[16]

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[13] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 62. My emphasis.
[14] Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 86.
[15] Swift, Sleeve Notes. My emphasis.

This compulsory ’happily ever after’ is essential to affirmative politics. This temporality of enduring love perpetuates itself through the rhetorical victory of articulated true feeling. The rhetorical production of temporality, Paul de Man tells us, is important for constituting the narrative shape of the world. He tells us that the illusionary linearity of plot is ‘the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject.’[17] Romance ideology creates coherence out love by spreading out its internal ambiguities along a timeline that separates and orders them. This imaginary axis is another way of thinking about the rhetorical effects of what Sara Ahmed calls ‘the promise of happiness’. She explores how the idea of happiness – or more precisely its deferred potential – constructs the horizon for the subject who seeks it in the procession of its associated objects. The circulation of the promise constructs objects as containers of happiness and orientates subjects towards a future in which those objects can be attained. She tells us that ‘[t]he promising nature of happiness suggests happiness lies ahead of us, at least if we do the right thing. To promise after all is to make the future into an object, into something that can be declared in advance of its arrival.’[18] The romantic couple is a ‘happiness object’, directing the two lovers towards one another in relation to a fantasy of a dependable future.

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[16] The idea that in patriarchal cultures, heterosexuality (and its forms) is always assumed and therefore mandated comes from Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5.4 (1980), 631–60.

[17] Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in idem. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 225.

[18] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 29.

Ahmed's work on the promise of happiness is useful for thinking about the rhetoric of temporality by way of which it understands the collaboration of affect and affirmation. The love plot as a genre of affirmation relies on what Ahmed calls 'the affirmative turn'. The ethics of this 'turn' extrapolates a mandate for living out of positive encounters and in so doing 'creates a distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as oriented toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that "stops" the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated with moving up, as creating the very promise of a future.'[19] Feeling good is to feel a sense of one's life being directed *towards* the future.

The courtly love plot with which Elio identifies traffics heavily in the mobilisation of this promise. Normative ideas of narrative engage repeatedly with this orientating structure. Ahmed tells us explicitly that 'happiness is crucial to the energy or "forward direction" of narrative.'[20] Narrative and novelistic frameworks represent to us the naturalness of towardness and forwardness, which arrange and direct subjects along a timeline of affirmative telos. Ahmed expands on this in a footnote: 'Narratives after all are "directed." The narrative "moves forward" toward something: the ending. The shape of the narrative could be described as its plot; events are sequenced in time to explain how things happen; how as it were one thing leads to another'.[21] The sequencing is essential to the construction of the love plot as directing us forward toward the horizons we think we desire.[22]

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[19] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, pp. 216–17.

[20] ibid, p. 32.

[21] ibid, p. 235, n. 20.

[22] In this same footnote, Ahmed quotes from Peter Brooks who writes about how the shaping of the plot replicates a 'thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name' – a 'thrust' which propels us forward through the plot. He tells us that '[n]arratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots, and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire' (quoted

Elio’s turn to literature is, like Swift’s, a recourse to the long history of trying to make sense of love. Courtly love itself is a bedrock for the evolution of the structure of sequential romance. In her analysis of how our obstacles to happiness reproduce the fantasy of its promise, Ahmed cites Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of courtly love as an exemplary genre for this reproduction. Lacan tells us that this form of romance ideology ‘is an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relation by pretending that it is we who put up an obstacle to it’.[23] the internal and irresolvable ambiguity of desire is given narrative sense by the temporal sequence of the love plot. This is the production of the obstacle that can intelligibly verify *true* love. Expanding on Lacan’s reading, the genre’s psychic function, Ahmed tells us, ‘preserves the fantasy that we would have love if only the obstacle did not get in the way. Likewise, the very obstacle to happiness is what allows happiness to be sustained as the promise of the good life’.[24] The promise of happiness organises the direction of normativity. The linking of love to this promise suggests how Ahmed understands the work of the romantic couple as a happiness object as directing us – knowingly or not – ‘toward some life choices and not others’.[25]

For Swift’s lover, to be exhorted to affirm is to be organised as a couple forward and together. The regime of being distributed through sequences of time, which in their repetition and endurance come to feel normal and natural, is what Elisabeth

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in Ahmed, pp. 235–36, n. 20). Whilst I agree with Brooks about how narrative and desire can frequently overlap in their directionality and that this desire can often elude a recognition of itself in name, I think the reduction of this thrust of desire as moving predominantly forward not only reiterates the overemphasis that normativity places on the forward motions of emotion, but further undercuts the evasive sense of desire itself already identified by Brooks through this very reticence. Instead, my study wants to put under pressure the notion that desire might always move us forward, even – or especially – in narrative. Ahmed is quoting, here, from Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 61.

[23] Jacques Lacan, ‘God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman’, in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 137–49, p. 141. Cited in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 32.

[24] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 32.

[25] ibid, p. 234, n. 11.

Freeman terms ‘chrononormativity’, which describes how ‘people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time’.[26] The chrononormativity of the love plot is effectuated by the value ascribed to and sometime measured by the longevity of the bond. Speech confirms this chronology, which is why chrononormativity and narrative form are intricately linked: ‘having a life entails the ability to narrate it […] in a novelistic framework: as event-centred, goal-orientated, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations.’[27] The self-transforming power of affirmation reiterates its central position in genre’s novelistic understanding of our lives. This ‘yes’, then, orientates the lovers towards one another and then through that form of the couple (that is ratified by the truth of their love – itself verified by the overcoming of its obstacles, that are its own ambiguities narrativized and made temporally dislocated) reproduces the modes of association required for belonging and membership in the social order. Affirmation operates in the various infrastructures of normativity constructing the couple in terms of the proximity (in space) and the longevity (in time).

## ii. Withdrawal: Looking Backwards

The turn to narrativization that we see in Aciman’s novel is not the eventual affirmation of a bond, intimately or publicly. If saying ‘yes’ to the promise of happiness is enough to reproduce its form, why does Elio’s turn to literature invoke not an instruction to speak but a question? more specifically, a question *about* affirmation? If we follow the structure of withdrawal that questions instead of reproduces the affirmative, then Elio’s turn towards narrative might in fact be a *turning away* from proximity to the object and the longevity of the bond and, therefore, a backwardness incompatible with the structure of the promise altogether. Ahmed has, elsewhere, written about the potential for a queer phenomenology to make sense of those moments when our attention is drawn or directed ‘toward different objects, those that are “less proximate”.[28] Consonant with withdrawal’s profile of physical retreat, queer theory has frequently grappled with forms of backwards orientations incompatible with affirmative demands.

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[26] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3.
[27] ibid, p. 5.

In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love explores how ‘queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects.’[29] Similarly, in contrast to the politics of chrononormativity, Freeman understands that ‘stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development)’ can often be ‘a hallmark of queer affect’.[30] She writes that ‘shame, passivity, melancholy, and recoil, to name but a few, were ways of refusing the progressive logic by which becoming ever more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom.’[31] Queer affective phenomenology appears drawn to the perpetual turning away both in space (from the object) and in time (into the past towards the lost object). If the recall of Anna Burns’s protagonist, then, might in some way be understood through the frame of trauma, Elio’s attachment to the past might draw associations of the queer melancholic.

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[28] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3.

[29] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 7.

[30] Freeman, p. 8.

[31] ibid, p. 9.

In thinking about experiences of desire, and same-sex desire in particular, it is relevant to consider how affective expression might be impacted by certain repressive norms. Queer affect in this novel (withdrawal, stubborn lingering) might constitute what Silvan Tomkins understands as 'backed-up affect' that is the result of certain cultural injunctions to 'suppress the free vocalization of affect' and organise 'strict control over affect expression' in general.[32] The type of homophobic cultures, for example, that limit the expression of queer love and mourning.[33] For Freud, however, Elio's unresolved attachment to Oliver suggests an incomplete processing of affective conflict induced by an internal pathology that emerges from a failure to mourn the loss of the object of desire. For Freud, where mourning is a slow detachment of libidinal investment from the lost object, melancholia is the failure to let go; the melancholic sustains a debilitative attachment to whatever has vanished. In melancholia, withdrawal and disaffect in general is indicative of this pathologized psyche. Freud writes that, '[m]elacholia is mentally characterised by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, *the inhibition of any kind of performance, and a reduction in the sense of self*'.[34] In these medicalising models, withdrawal's backwards orientation reflects a subject maladjusted to their desire and incapacitated in their actions and expressions.

On the other hand, like Ahmed, I want us to consider whether 'the desire to maintain attachments with the lost other is enabling, rather than blocking new forms of attachment'.[35] Jonathan Flatley understands that, in melancholia, withdrawal is not the full negation of affective attachment. He writes that '[w]ithin the discourse of melancholia we find a dialectic between emotional withdrawal and its apparent opposite, the most intense or exceptional devotion of affective energy.'[36] In emphasising the work of this dialectic, Flatley suggests that withdrawal's suspension of relationality is not also its outright refusal and negation. Instead, it might be a sign of relationality's endurance and the subject's attachment to a particular freeze frame of its libidinal investment. Like Mark Fisher's discussion of 'hauntological' melancholy, '[t]he kind of melancholia I'm talking about […] consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield.'[37] The sustained impasse of withdrawal might indicate a process of renegotiating the promise of desire. In this light, this chapter imagines itself in terms similar to Ann Cvetkovich's restorative relationship to the impasse of depression, where its inability to move forward is not a failure but a space for exploration. Cvetkovich understands this impasse as 'the occasion for the ongoing process of adjustment, interpretation, and new ways of living' – ways that do not necessitate the forward movement of progress.[38]

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[32] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. by E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 93.

[33] For a discussion of the limitations placed on queer grief see Chapter 7. 'Queer Feelings', in Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 144–67.

[34] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 204. My emphasis.

[35] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 159.

Thus, whilst the novel is melancholic in its refusal to give up the impasse, it is also a fantasy of romance. The geographic space is itself an imaginary rendering of a Mediterranean where, as Giacarria and Minca tell us, homosexual fantasies of transgression can be realised.[39] It is a fantasy in other senses as well. In terms of the inexhaustible privileges of wealthy white Europeans, the novel eludes a narrative of material struggle antithetical, perhaps, to the reality of sexual minorities existing in '80s Italy (indeed specifying terms like 'bisexual', 'homosexual', or 'gay' are never employed or considered). Aciman’s novel peruses a love story emerging from a realm of rural isolation, middle-class security, detachment from the alienating and exploitative modes of production, delegation of labour to domestic servants, casualised lifestyles where excessive leisure emerges as the dominant mode of living, liberal familial relations, and economic and migratory mobility.

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[36] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 1.
[37] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), p. 24.
[38] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 140.
[39] Giacarria and Minca, 351.

The relations between ‘feeling backwards’ and normative social reproduction in this fantasy makes complex work of any ‘queer’ identifications. If the novel is queer in any sense, it is not through its representational work. Instead, I suggest it is most explicit within the very question of the courtly drama between speech and silence. The question I opened this chapter with exemplifies, I suggest, the problem expressed by Eve Sedgwick that ‘no one person can take control over the multiple, often contradictory codes by which information about sexual identity and activity can seem to be conveyed.’[40] The queerness of the novel arrives, perhaps, not in any liberatory potential, but at those moments when the relationships with objects of desire are organised and troubled by the tensions between secrecy and disclosure and the complexly coded structure of the open secret.

Elio’s affective relationship with the world, that is self-retentive and introverted, is transplanted into his sexual desire, and through this the novel outlines a compatibility between total intimacy and emotional inaccessibility. Withdrawal is not, however, the *opposite* of affirmation as, firstly, a blank silence. As Foucault explains, [t]here is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say’.[41] Nor is it ‘the primacy of a constant *no* in response to the law of the Symbolic’ of the kind of anti-yes antisociality *par excellence* embraced by Lee Edelman.[42] I wish to read it, instead, as a suspended sociality inhabiting an impasse in which minor contact, reduced performativity, and incomplete expression – forms of withdrawn antisociality nonetheless – produce a relationality somewhere in the ambiguous ground between 'yes' and 'no'.

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[40] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 79.
[41] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 27.

## Part Two: Withdrawal and Imperceptible Connection

### i. The Fudged Confession and the Open Secret

Where affirmation produces clarity, withdrawal points us towards the limitations of communicative forms and the opportunities for more ambiguous connection. When Oliver asks Elio about the resolution of the story, 'So does [the knight] speak?', Elio replies to him, 'No, he fudges' (68). That *to fudge*, by which the speaker avoids straightforwardly addressing a subject or answering a question, should be understood by Elio as the negative of speaking – this 'No' – draws on the perceived incompatibility between the love plot and the nuance of confession. At the same time, it suggests that in the conventional narratives we turn towards, there exists already a recognition of the unpredictability of affective life. When Elio eventually makes his own declaration to Oliver only a few pages later, it is with no less fudging than the knight. Nevertheless, despite his conviction that the knight has failed to speak, he sees in himself a confirmation that '[t]here, I had said it' (73).

And what does Elio say? When Elio finally tells Oliver about his feelings, it is in response to Oliver's question, 'Is there anything you don't know?' (71). Elio responds with, ‘If you only knew how little I know about the things that matter’ (72). In this exchange, knowledge is not what is possessed and concealed or exposed. It is instead a theme or trope that stands in for its own content and by doing so waives the requirement for elaboration. This fudged reply relays information that is not spoken, and so evades signifying the very thing it seeks to establish: the shared desire between the two men. The dialogue runs like this (for brevity I have included, predominantly, direct speech):

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[42] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 5. Original emphasis.

> ‘“What things that matter?”
> […]
> “You know what things. By now *you* of all people should know.”
> Silence.
> “Why are you telling me all this?”
> “Because I thought you should know.”
> “Because you thought I should know.” He repeated my words slowly
> […]
> “Because I wanted *you* to know,” I blurted out
> […]
> “Do you know what you are saying?”
> “Yes, I know what I’m saying and you’re not mistaking *any* of it. I’m just not very good at speaking. But you’re welcome never to speak to me again.”
> “Wait. Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”
> “Ye-es.”
> (72-73, original emphasis)

In this oblique, non-cathartic disclosure, the truth of desire is found not in the meanings of the words but in the sensed atmosphere. Emotional truth is not exteriorised outwards from the subject but is already external. There is no self-expansion of subjectivity. Instead, they both shift into a nondramatic impasse that slows down the unfolding of the scene as they adjust to the minor fluctuations between them. The scene evades communication, producing a casualised co-assembly where the declarative 'yes' of Swift is itself dislocated into a hesitant 'ye-es', which carries the 'laid-back' and 'mildly exasperated' deflation of tonal underscoring (73).

This is not the only moment where Elio's 'yes' wavers with uncertainty. When speaking with his father in the final section of the novel, following Oliver's departure, Elio finds the topic of their relationship hovering in the background of their public conversation. When Oliver is brought up, his father says to him '"[y]ou two had a nice friendship"' (222). Elio weighs down his affirmative through a tonal deflation that brings it back to the rhetoric of the *question*: '"Yes," I replied, trying to leave my "yes" hanging in midair as though buoyed by a rise of a negative qualifier that was ultimately suppressed. I just hoped that he hadn't caught the mildly hostile, evasive, seemingly fatigued *Yes, and so?* In my voice' (222-23, original emphasis). Withdrawal is not declarative but leads back to the question of communicative potential itself and is experienced in modes of apprehensive rather than emotive encounters with the truth. His father's therapeutic monologue reproduces the evasive manoeuvres of earlier conversations that discuss the romance indirectly. The father's 'tone said: *We don't have to speak about it, but let's not pretend we don't know what I'm saying*. Speaking abstractly was the only way to speak the truth to him' (224, original emphasis). For another example, again following Oliver's departure, the gardener Anchise comments on the sadness of the occasion: '"Triste," he remarked'. Elio responds, '"[y]es, a bit." […] I avoided his eyes. I did not want to encourage him to say anything or even to bring up the subject' (213). The bodily aversion and the subtractive qualifier of 'a bit' deflates the 'yes' as an effect of Elio's withdrawal.

We might understand this structure of withdrawal through the frame of the open secret. Anne-Lise François writes that 'the term *open secret* refers to nonemphatic revelation – revelation without insistence and without rhetorical underscoring'; it exemplifies 'a mode of recessive action that takes itself away as it occurs'.[43] The open secret has long been a structure through which same-sex bonds have been interpreted, and through which their methodologies of knowledge have been established. Experiences that make use of the open secret are not, François tells us, necessarily denials of self or narrative; they might instead demonstrate a freedom from 'the work of self-concealment and self-presentation'.[44] Elio is a protagonist far more anxious, hypervigilant, and paranoid than the subjects of the calm and meditative 'grace' that François examines. Nevertheless, the capacity for affective withdrawal to relieve us of the pressures of affirmative agency might underpin Elio's propensity for structures that are both revealing and concealing, both participatory and abstaining.

The impasse emerges, in this novel, in moments of the open secret. When Elio confesses his feelings to Oliver, his narration tracks the realisation of what has been unfolding but suspends the moment of public revelation through a dogpaddling around the spoken yet unspoken truth:[45]

> I was treading water, trying neither to drown nor to swim to safety, just staying in place, because here was the truth – *even if I couldn't speak the truth, or even hint at it, yet I could swear it lay around us*, the way we say of a necklace we've just lost while swimming: I know it's down there somewhere. If he knew, if he

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[43] François, p. xvi.
[44] ibid.
[45] Imagery of dogpaddling and treading water repeat throughout Berlant's depiction of the impasse as a genre of an extended present. The imagery of motionless or non-forwardness is important when thinking about how static periods feel for the subject as withdrawal. It also represents the paralysing sense of comorbid affects like anxiety, which attach to the haziness of the object or atmosphere of whatever is affecting you. See, for example, where she tells us that '[a]n impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure.' Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 199.

> only knew that I was giving him every chance to put two and two together and come up with a number bigger than infinity. (72, my emphasis)

The truth is not confessed here in movement from mouth to ear. It is not directly represented, and, in fact, it cannot be spoken. It exists outside of the relationship between speaker and interlocutor, displaced onto the figurative necklace – possessable but also transferable, detachable, able to be circulated or lost. Stemming from the limitations of communication registered by withdrawal, the open secret allows for an intimacy that need not be spoken aloud to be felt. It is atmospherically instantiated, existing in the very mediation between the two men. Furthermore, through withdrawal, Elio delegates to Oliver agency over the scene by allowing him the option of recognising or ignoring what has already been sensed. Elio, like François states, relieves himself of the work for either self-revelation or self-concealment.

This is an emulation of the knight's own withdrawn tactics effectuated by his question. In fact, in a reading of the coercive speech acts located in the source text of Elio's courtly drama, the sixteenth-century *The Heptaméron*, Steven Rendall recognises a recessive delegation of action by the speaker who asks, 'Is it better to speak or die?'. He writes, 'This question might be seen as rhetorical and intended chiefly to shift onto his interlocutor, by a kind of projection, the responsibility for his decision to speak, thus making it seem that she is telling him what to do rather than the other way around.'[46] Withdrawal might be a feeling of defence against the vulnerability that one's affirmation might not be recognised and reciprocated. By disavowing personal communication, withdrawal delegates affective accountability to the space of atmosphere that creates a feeling of impersonal or shared action. It allows experiences of intimacy and connection to go unclaimed and be neither transformative nor revealing.

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[46] Steven Rendall, 'Force and Language: *Heptameron* 10', *Comparative Literature*, 60.1 (2008), 74–80, 75. The original text is not named in Aciman's novel, although it can be inferred from the details provided. In Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film adaptation, we do hear the name of the text. It is Elio's mother who reads him the story, translating from an edition in German.

The open secret can produce indirect suggestions of feeling not identical to the incitement to discourse. It suggests alternative avenues for participatory performance aside from the individualised subject of the 'traditional Enlightenment values of proprietary responsibility and public accountability', which 'dictate the privileging of communicative speech as the upper limit toward which subjective, reflective experience supposedly tends'.[47] The recessive act, François argues, 'frees characters […] first from the work of speaking for themselves, giving accounts, and making themselves legible to others […] and then from the no less onerous burden of having to signal "deep" or unfathomable emotion.'[48] Elio's confession does not require full self-transformation or surmounted obstacles in order to produce liveable intimacy. His fudged speech produces sufficient shifts in the atmosphere, to which adjustment may or may not occur, without the necessity for what Foucault calls 'the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile'.[49] This fudging of the affirmation suggests possibilities beyond either speaking or dying as the binary of participation. Recessive revelation can sustain its appeal to intimacy but allow the subject to avoid the confessional structures by which the movement from being spoken to being heard produces the responsibility of the individual for their own feelings.

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[47] François, p. 14.
[48] ibid.
[49] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pp. 61–62.

In contrast to the protracted impasse of withdrawal, in the moment of spoken – albeit fudged – confession, speech is recognised as a rupturing and unsustainable form of coupledom. '"I wish I hadn't spoken," I finally said. I knew as soon as I said it that I'd broken the exiguous spell between us'. Oliver responds, "I'm going to pretend you never did"' (75). Spoken expression dispels, here, the atmospheric connection of unspoken intimacy between them, and Oliver's response entails the necessity of withdrawal for sustaining it. Elio proceeds to ask, '"[d]oes that mean we're on speaking terms – but not really?"', and Oliver replies, '"[l]ook, we can't talk about such things. We really can't"' (75). Withdrawal is activated not only by the intensification of unspoken intimacy but also, this implies, by the barriers against unacceptable public speech. The open secret, on the other hand, allows for the confessional moment to perseverate even as it recedes. This state of being 'on speaking terms – but not really' is the most sustainable structure of sociality and, therefore, organises both the intimacy of live romance (in its suspended or delegated proximity) as well as the melancholic attachment that prolongs its longevity through its disavowed communication.

## ii. Imperceptible Affinities

Elio himself describes withdrawn attachments and the atmospheric open secret as 'imperceptible affinities' (23). This idea suggests a form of obscured relationality. In its unqualified state, Ahmed discusses affinity in terms of relationships of social reproduction. She writes that '[t]he word "affinity" […] does not just refer to "relationship by marriage," […] but also to "resemblance or similarity," and even to "a natural or chemical attraction" […] The affinity of the couple is socially binding: premised as it is on resemblance and on the "naturalness" of the direction of desire, which produce the couple as an entity'.[50] However where affinity might be affirmatively declared and ratified by public accountability, the imperceptibility of Elio and Oliver's bonds might point to less socially reproducing orientations. The imperceptibility of affinity is an effect, firstly, of the structure of the open secret, where knowledge is confirmed through its simultaneous disavowal or ambiguation. Describing these affinities, Elio says that '[t]here may have been nothing there, and I might have invented the whole thing. But both of us knew what the other had seen' (23). Secondly, it is the site of a potentially queer arousal that produces 'shrewd, devious, guilty pleasure' in sensing an atmosphere that has not been signified (23). Pleasurable aspects of affinity are found in the recession of its public annunciation. Elio tells us that, 'I liked how our minds seemed to travel in parallel, how we instantly inferred what words the other was toying with but at the last moment held back' (9). This pleasurable similarity emerges many years later during the two men's reunion in New England when Elio recognises that his 'favorite Oliver' is 'the one who thought exactly like me' (240). This is the premise of the novel's title, where each addresses the other by their own name in a performative enactment of the merging and fungibility of the two men that proves to be the moment of erotic climax.

Withdrawal in these moments is not simply an incapacity to overcome shy or anxious blockages to speech. The nonverbal and invisible moments of minor contact facilitate erotic and romantic connection. Elio tells us that 'I liked having my mind read' (7). In conversations devoid of dialogue, 'I offered the same smile as before. He understood, said nothing, we laughed' (7). The meeting of gazes is a minor method of communication not reliant of public affirmation. Intimacy that is invisible is not simply repressed – Elio *offers* the glance, after all – but has found itself in a pleasurable telepathy that bolsters the likeness between them as opposed to obscuring it. The reciprocated stare resonates with sensed affinity. 'The staring was no longer a part of the conversation, or even of the fooling around with translation; it has superseded it and become its own subject, except *neither dared nor wanted to bring it up'* (159, my emphasis). These affinities transform minor gestures into sites of intense potentiality and convey desire through a desire to not communicate its meaning out loud.

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[50] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 83–84.

In one section, when the characters are gathered in the living room and Elio's father has chastised him for spending too much time by himself, Oliver asks Elio directly but casually if he wants to go to the cinema. Elio observes that 'he had asked the question in far too breezy and spontaneous a manner, as though he wanted me and everyone else in the living room to know that he was hardly invested in going to the movies and could just as readily stay home and go over his manuscript' (22). This underperformed verbalisation contains an excess of meaning in its subtracted tone imperceptible to those unable to, or not invested in, interpreting it. The chiding from Elio's father provides the context within which the question may be posed (according to Elio that is) as meaning more than what it says by performing its own casualisation:

> I smiled, not at the offer, but at the double-edged maneuver. He immediately caught my smile. And having caught it, smiled back, almost in self-mockery, sensing that if he gave any sign of guessing I'd seen through his ruse he'd be confirming his guilt, but that refusing to own up to it, after I'd made clear I'd intercepted it, would indict him even more. […] The whole thing thrilled me. (22-23)

We have spent time in the preceding chapter with the idea of 'underperformativity', defined by Berlant as 'a mode of flat or flattened affect that shows up to perform its recession from melodramatic norms'.[51] Affinity evolves in the imperceptible atmosphere induced by a style of underperformative affect. Oliver's public speech is not a move towards social participation or membership. In its nonemphatic tone, which immediately deflates its claim to action within the very act of making it, it detaches Oliver and Elio from the social scene in which it is spoken and co-assembles them together. This imperceptible game is thrilling, locating affinity most intensely in its least public manifestation.

If the shared atmosphere is the predominating shape of connection, then even emotional detachment and inaccessibility can become an opportunity for mirrored affinity. Where withdrawal becomes the structural repetition within which the two are orientated away from one another, this mirrored repetition reformulates withdrawal as similarity. Throughout the text, Elio's detachment is in response to Oliver's supposed unsociability. This unsociability is itself condensed for Elio within Oliver's repeated refrain, '*Later!*', itself a performative act of the deferral that will constitute Elio's own desire. Indeed, '*Later!*' (3) is the very first word of the novel, and so sets up the content of the text already in its state of perpetual dislocation and evasion.[52] Oliver's alleged coldness is distilled, for Elio, into this motto of deferred action. Elio finds Oliver's 'Later!' to be 'harsh, curt, and dismissive, spoken with the veiled indifference of people who may not care to see or hear from you again' (3); '[h]is one word send-off' reads as 'brisk, bold, and blunted – take your pick, he couldn't be bothered which' (4); '*Later!*'

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[51] Lauren Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28.3 (2015), 191–213, 193.

[52] When referring to this refrain, I will maintain – without relentlessly reiterating – the italic emphasis that repeats throughout the text and that links stylistically always back to this opening word of the novel. All other emphasis in the novel will be noted, as usual, in parenthesis.

is ‘gruff’ and ‘slapdash’, and marks Oliver as ‘[t]he unapproachable sort’ (4); Oliver says ‘“Later. Maybe”’ with a ‘[p]olite indifference, as if he’d spotted my misplaced zeal to play up to him and was summarily pushing me away’ (6); ‘*Later!* was a chilling, slam-dunk salutation that shoved aside all our honeyed European niceties. *Later!* always left a sharp aftertaste to what until then may have been a warm, heart-to-heart moment. *Later!* didn’t close things neatly or allow them to trail off. It slammed them shut’ (33); *Later!* Is ‘a summary and unconditional goodbye, spoken not as you were leaving, but after you were out the door. You said it with your back to those you were leaving behind’ (41). In this last quote, Elio recognises the physical turning away and retreat of deferral that will be the model for the affective turnings away of withdrawal shared between them.

Even as this refrain is received negatively as a sign of an undesirable sensibility, Elio himself takes up ‘later’ as the management of his own desire. He invokes his own motto of deferral that repeats instead of dissolves his attachment:

> *Try again later* were the last words I’d spoken to myself every night when I’d sworn to do something to bring Oliver closer to me. *Try again later* meant, I haven’t the courage now. Things weren’t ready *just yet*. Where I’d find the will and the courage to *try again later* I didn’t know. But resolving to do something rather than sit passively made me feel that I was already doing something, like reaping a profit on money I hadn’t invested, much less earned yet. (51-52, original emphasis)

‘*Try again later*’ are also words uttered by Oliver in response to Elio’s announcement that he has almost slept with his childhood friend Marzia the previous night (discussed, in perhaps an excessively liberal scene, at the family breakfast table). Elio recognises his own desire in Oliver’s repetition of this phrase: the promise to himself that he will speak in the future. Yet this promise proves to be its own deferral, practiced in the recessive *non-performativity* of his commitment to ‘*try again later*’, which has the effect of making Elio ‘feel that I was already doing something’ even as its very utterance immediately relieves him of the duty to do so.[53]

By repeating and vocalising Elio’s ‘*try again later*’, Oliver reiterates his position as the embodiment of deferral. Hence, in the form of affinity, Elio imitates the detachment in Oliver that he also resents him for. It is, as he states below, this game of deferral that allows for an experience of sustained attachment, which leads always to the self-perpetuating question without an answer. And this question is the impasse not (only) of obstructed romantic bonds but is itself a space of persisting coupledom.

> [W]ould I prefer a lifetime of longing provided we both kept this little Ping-Pong game going: not knowing, not-not knowing, not-not-not knowing? Just be quiet, sat nothing, and if you can’t say “yes,” don’t say “no,” say “later.” Is this why people say “maybe” when they mean “yes,” but hope you’ll think it’s a “no” when all they really mean is, *Please, just ask me once more, and once more after that?* (18, original emphasis)

We can see in this passage the recognition of the complex instability of affirmation, where ‘yes’ can never mean the transparent simplicity of Swift’s ‘yes’. Here, ‘yes’ might be transmuted into its own delayed affirmation through the ‘maybe’ that means both

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[53] The language of non-performativity comes from the work of Ahmed. See, for some examples, work on her feministkilljoys blog, such as ‘Creating Feminist Paths’, *Feministkilljoys*, 2013 <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/08/27/creating-feminist-paths/> [accessed 19 June 2020], where she writes, 'non-performatives describes the “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse” does *not* produce “the effects that it names.” In the world of the non-performative, to name is not to bring into effect. Non-performatives are taken up *as if* they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects that they name), such that the names comes to stand in for the effects.' See also, Sara Ahmed, ‘The Nonperformativity of Antiracism’, *Meridians*, 7.1 (2006), 104–26, where Ahmed talks specifically about how commitments can become non-performative acts.

‘yes’ and ‘no’ simultaneously within a structure that reproduces the original question – and not its answer – *as the aim*. The ‘later’, here, seems to represent the middle-ground between ‘yes’ and ‘no’, between affirmation and denial, in a speech act that might certainly be called *fudging*. Deferral extends the question to which ‘yes’ might be an answer wherewith the process of making questions forms the grounding for affinity.

Elio’s memory of romance, that indexes its intensities through these minor moments of similarity, redistributes our attention given most readily to romantic scenes that resemble enacted agency and dramatic visible contact. Withdrawal – as a recessive inducement to (in)activity – registers those ‘experiences no less realized or complete for not concretizing themselves *out loud* in addressed verbal expression’.[54] Significantly for Elio’s reflection, the visibility of intimacy is not the metric by which its impacts are quantified. The pleasurable contact comes from the affinities he senses if not sees, and that through withdrawal and its deferrals might be inexhaustibly reproduced.

## iii. Knowledge and its Thematic Circulation

We have seen already how the recessive confession, the open secret, and the pleasure of imperceptible affinities relaxes the necessity for publicly affirmed coupledom. In these forms of sociality, knowledge is not a thing possessed but becomes a circulated trope through which sexual attraction might be sublimated or delegated. In this novel, consequently, the binary between speaking or not speaking becomes sutured to the binary between knowing and not-knowing. Withdrawal, then, increasingly marks those moments where the subject relinquishes themselves of the burdens both of speaking and knowledge, and of silence and ignorance.

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[54] François, p. 15. Original emphasis. François goes on to argue that ‘the “failure” of such moments to result in spoken communication need not, although it may, signify their elision, undervaluing, or mystification’ (*ibid*). The link between verbalisation, visibility and completeness – and the instinctive valuations it involves – is something continually questioned in her study of the open secret.

Eve Sedgwick's work has intricately explored how 'ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge'; they circulate alongside it as opposed to being representative of its absence.[55] We have already reflected on how the sexuality of the novel might be played out most frequently in the tensions between secrecy and disclosure, and in the hypervigilant readings of coded relationality. Knowledge, and its declaration, is a particularly charged field for same-sex relationships. Sedgwick has examined many of the vast dialogisms inflected by a genealogy of knowledge emerging around the turn of the twentieth century when the 'homosexual' was constituted as a conceivable and analysable population. She tells us that over the last hundred years, 'the subject – the thematics – of knowledge and ignorance themselves, of innocence and initiation, of secrecy and disclosure, became not contingently but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition: no longer sexuality as a whole but even more specifically, now, the homosexual topic.'[56] Sedgwick's work is invested in detailing the closeted nature of knowledge itself which in the reduction of its fluid dynamisms to a model of liberal progressivism (that seeks always to replace the 'absence' of ignorance with the 'positivity' of knowledge) occults the mechanisms of desire that sustain it and move it around.

The capacity for 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' as themes to signify homosexuality emerges from the unstable constitution of the closet – concealed but already known, unspoken but already communicated. In one scene, Elio experiences the unstable and anxiogenic loss of control induced by the binaries of the closet. After Oliver attempts to massage his shoulder, Elio retracts his arm unable to navigate the experience of desire this causes. He finds that ignorance underpins his inability to communicate, and his lack of control stems from his inexperience with the open secret and its terms of exchange.

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[55] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the* Closet, p. 4.
[56] ibid, p. 74.

> [B]ecause I didn’t know how to speak in code, I didn’t’ know how to speak at all. I felt like a deaf and dumb person who can’t even use sign language. I stammered all manner of things so as not to speak my mind. That was the extent of my code. So long as I had breath to put words in my mouth, I could more or less carry it off. Otherwise, the silence between us would probably give me away – which was why anything, even the most spluttered nonsense, was preferable to silence. Silence would expose me. But what was certain to expose me even more was my struggle to overcome it in front of others. (17)

Foucault has outlined the ability for silence to speak of desire, expounding the multiplicities of ‘not one but many silences’, that operate alongside verbalised language to ‘determine the different ways of not saying […] things’, and ‘how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed’.[57] Elio’s a-signifying splutters and stammers are uncommunicative utterances that attempt to reinforce the protective form of the closet. There is no answer to the question to speak or not when both silence and affirmation are ultimately ways of exposing the same thing. The binary between speech and silence proves to be a false opposition and control over the terms of communication is increasingly compromised for Elio who assumes his withdrawal is his mastery over his own emotions. Hence, we see the paradoxical slippage between Elio not knowing how to speak and him expending all his effort in stopping himself from speaking his mind as if the very thing he is unable to do is also the thing he is at risk of doing too much.

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[57] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 27.

In this moment, the lack and excess of language signifies simultaneously the lack and excess of knowledge. As we have seen, when Elio confesses to Oliver it is not through direct signification nor is it through silence. It is by the disclosure of ignorance: '"If only you knew how little I know about the things that really matter"' (72). In the game of deferral, it is ignorance that sustains the structure of the open secret: 'not knowing, not-not knowing, not-not-not knowing' (18). But these 'not's are not the disavowal of knowledge. They sustain the impasse of secrecy and disclosure through which the affinities between the men can be simultaneously spoken and unspoken, known about and not know about.

Knowledge and self-knowledge are repeated themes in this novel emphasised and moved around by the tension between speech and silence and their articulations of imperceptible pleasures. In contrast to Elio's turbulent confusion about his feelings, Oliver appears acutely self-aware. In one scene, whilst eating breakfast with Elio and his parents, Oliver refuses a third soft-boiled egg. He tells Mafalada, the cook, that 'I know myself' (34). If he indulges his desire, it will run away with him: 'If I have three, I'll have a fourth, and more.' Elio reflects on this minor incident, thinking 'I had never heard someone his age say, *I know myself*. It intimidated me' (34, original emphasis). Oliver's self-knowledge is intimidating partly because it means Elio must feel his own insecurity and inexperience. Following their first kiss, Oliver cites the same reasoning for why they cannot progress further: 'We can't do this – I know myself' (82). Self-knowledge is associated with a tempering of desire, and its disclosure performs a selfrestraint. Thinking on these words, ‘I know myself’, Elio understands them to mean ‘*I’m dying to, but may not be able to hold back once I start, so I’d rather not start*. What aplomb to tell someone you can’t touch him because you know yourself’ (95, original emphasis). Yet, in this retreat *from* desire, self-knowledge as a declaration is also in this moment a way of expressing the desire to touch the other. It is one of the many ways in which ‘knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ as objects circulate and make affective and erotic contact possible between them. If the expression of knowledge results in a holding back of desire, and disclosures of ignorance suggest an orientation towards coupledom, then the ethics of affirmation that values the consolidation of public knowledge may not always be a compulsory model.

Withdrawal points to an uncertainty about the duty to speak. Recognised and reciprocated awareness of one another’s feelings need not be confirmed by the subject’s exteriorisation and self-expansion. In their place, avoided speech creates a bodily knowledge of affinity: ‘Perhaps in looking the other way, and knowing we had looked the other way to avoid “speeches,” we might have found a reason to smile at each other, for I’m sure he knew I knew he knew I was avoiding all mention of Monet’s berm [the spot where they shared their first kiss], and that *this avoidance, which gave every indication of drawing us apart, was, instead, a perfectly synchronized moment of intimacy*’ (106, my emphasis). Similarly, demonstrating the extension of the structure of withdrawal through history, the open secret persists when the two men meet twenty years later. Looking back in time on the memories of looking away from one another in the past, detaches intimacy from the ideological drive of orientations towards each other and forward to future longevity. ‘In the weeks we’d been thrown together that summer, our lives had scarcely touched, but we had crossed to the other bank, where time stops […] We looked the other way. We spoke about everything but.

*But we've always known, and not saying anything now confirmed it all the more*' (243-44, my emphasis). It is through the impasse made by withdrawal, that is, and not through affirmation, that knowledge of intimacy – and intimacy through the sharing of knowledge – is made most clear to them both.

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To conclude, the Love Story as a monopolistic institution of our affective lives, is condensed, I argue, in the singular 'Love Story' of Taylor Swift that take its name. In this genre, the mythology and rhetorical technology by which the ambiguities of our lives are given narrative meaning and predictability are reinforced through the performativities and teleological forwardness of affirmation. These ethics constitute an injunction towards vocalised affect, towards communication and synchronised sociality as foundational for belonging and participation in fantasies of our real and imagined communities. The affective self-containment and antisociality of withdrawal are incompatible, then, with a love story sanitised of its negativity and illegibility.

Andre Aciman's novel postulates romantic fantasy lived in the detached relationality of withdrawal. In opposition to the demands to make oneself publicly legible, love in this narrative persists unaffirmed, growing instead out of 'imperceptible affinities', translated through the thematic of knowledge and made atmospherically apprehensible through the structure of the open secret. All of these techniques of recessive activity reflect the bodily adjustments of withdrawal that orientates the feeling subject away from their object of desire, subtracts their tonal gestural and linguistic performances, and suspends conventional forms of communication. In place of the affirmative Love Story, Aciman represents a withdrawn story of anxious and melancholic detachment that discloses a fantasy of love no longer tied to, and measured by, either the proximity to the loved object or the longevity of the bond. Instead, it is most profoundly experienced within its undisclosed and uncommunicated dimensions.

# Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined the emotional aesthetics of four novels, which isolate a form of affect I call withdrawal as their central topic or as a dominant mode of relating to the world. These works demonstrate, I have argued, firstly the capacity for withdrawal to produce conjunction and association and to renegotiate modes of assembly; secondly, the duality of withdrawal as both a deployable strategy for managing chronic crisis and a debilitative effect of chronic trauma; and thirdly, through a comparative study with normative genre, the counterintuitive ability for withdrawal to organise erotic and romantic relationships.

I have proposed that by focusing on the discrete experience of emotional withdrawal, these texts aid us in clarifying our understanding of social normality and expanding our understanding of affect as a relationship between the body and the world. If affects or emotions, as Silvan Tomkins theorises, are aimed primarily at communicating information about this relationship to oneself as the subject but also outwards to others as the underpinning of our social synchronisations, then withdrawal is the paradoxical affect of non-communication. Withdrawal detaches the subject from social membership, belonging, and participation and puts the communicative faculties of the body in abeyance. In summary, withdrawal activates under conditions in which the modes of assembly – those repeated patterns and forms by which the social order becomes recognisable and normalised – are no longer sustainable for the continuation of the subject.

In these novels, the reasons for this vary enormously – withdrawal might be an ethical or political refusal of certain associations, it might be traumatic incapacitation induced by repetitive and normalised experiences, it might be a form of delegated or disavowed responsibility for one's public life, it might be a habituated strategy for managing overwhelming stress of unfamiliar disturbance, it might be total apathy or intense fear. Formally, it presents through a casualised subject, which I understand as the antithesis of the injunction to urgency that underpins Tomkin's affect system. The physical body might retreat or deflate: the head might lower or avoid reciprocation, verbal tone might flatten, speech becomes rationed or terminated, facial musculature might become frozen or imperceptible, the subject might physically remove themselves in space, their psychosomatic faculties will become slowed instead of accelerated.[1] No matter the context or composition, withdrawal describes the feeling and behavioural display of suspended communication.

This project has been a contribution to affect theory, looking at what Sianne Ngai might call an 'ugly feeling' and trying to imagine what its experiences are communicating to us about the world, about individuals and what it means to be together 'socially'. In line with Ngai's programme, and the work of Ann Cvetkovich and her study of depression, this is not an attempt to rehabilitate withdrawal as an act of good. This thesis is a meditation on the critical productivity of negative affect. Withdrawal, I argue, conveys experiences of antisociality that medicine and normativity are quick to sanitise and resolve without recognising the character of the world that gives rise to them in the first place. What these novels have disclosed to us, on the contrary, is that antisocial emotion finds what is dysfunctional not in ourselves but in the social involvements which we resist and from which we retreat.

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[1] The avoidant head is, of course, an integral aspect to one of Tomkin's primary affects of shame. Sedgwick describes how 'the "fallen face" with eyes down and head averted' is one of shame's primary operations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 36. What distinguishes these affects, however, is that shame is activated through the attempt and subsequent failure of relationality, whereas withdrawal is constituted by a primary avoidance of relationality in the first place, although both affects may interlink, activate or magnify one another.

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