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The End of The Middle: Middle-Class Downward Mobility

in the Contemporary Autofiction Novel

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen the autofiction novel become a cultural hegemon in North American and European literature. While many scholars have argued that the form's popularity is purely the result of an aesthetic turn away from postmodernism towards new experiments with sincerity and the 'real', I instead argue that this aesthetic turn has economic determinants. Since the 1970s, the middle-classes of North America and Europe have seen their living standards eroded and have increasingly faced the same insecurities of temporary work and renting as the working-class. Autofiction is frequently used by authors such as Dave Eggers, Megan Boyle, Heike Geissler and Lauren Oyler to narrate their experiences of downward mobility. I argue that the inclusion of the onomastic author-protagonist as a volatile blend of real and fictional, textual and extratextual, stable and unstable expresses the cultural and economic volatilities that have attended the gradual erosion of the North American and European middle-class and the bourgeois values that undergird it.

Autofiction captures in a range of formally inventive ways both the personal experience and impersonal economic structures associated with downward mobility. Scholars have argued that in the nineteenth century realism gave downwardly mobile writers a form in which the world came to seem more stable and solid. Today, I argue, this aesthetic role has largely fallen to autofiction. Its central focus being the inner world of the self rather than the outer world of tangible things, autofiction expresses a class that tends to understand downward mobility less overtly through the disappearance of a solid world of commodities and property but instead through the oscillations of "human capital", an ideological dominant during the neoliberal period. The promise of stability is found in the literary construction of an authentic image of selfhood, in ways that often register the social phenomenon of "self-branding".

These rich portrayals of the author's self-image often substitute for sensuous descriptions of the outer world. Unlike literary forms such as naturalism that in many instances demonstrated the bourgeoisie's mastery over reality by mapping the world of objects in luscious detail, autofiction tends to withdraw from sensuous experience. To varying degrees, the fictional worlds that feature in this thesis are sparse, even minimalist, and certainly do not open out into the thick descriptions of reality readers have come to associate with bourgeois realism. This absence, I argue, displays a terminal point in the fortunes of the middle-class, whereby the tangible world of property can no longer be relied on to offer stability.

Most writers of autofiction came of age when the aspirational promises of the bourgeois 'good life' were ubiquitous in popular culture, even as the economic prospects of the middle-class had entered decline, leaving a cleavage between expectations and lived reality. As this thesis shows, disappointment, regret and disorientation are among the most persistent affective experiences of the downwardly mobile. Autofiction's undecidable facticity, its tendency to drift between the real and the imaginary, lends itself to narratives that are very often about reality not turning out as expected. Contemporary autofiction is often a fiction of economic trauma, insecurity and immobility.

Contents

Introduction

The following dissertation argues that the contemporary autofiction novel has been defined by middle-class downward mobility. Autofiction, the purposeful marrying of autobiographical and fictional writing, has had something of a renaissance in contemporary literary culture in the last three decades. This thesis argues that this is partly due to the form offering authors – mainly those from North America and Europe – an aesthetic avenue to narrate, describe and formalise their experiences of downward mobility.

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Both 'autofiction' and the 'middle-class' are problematic concepts riddled with tensions and inconsistencies, and are all too often ascribed boundaries so porous that they come to lose descriptive accuracy. Considering that autobiographical elements always permeate an author's work, one might reasonably ask when precisely does an 'autofiction' become a fiction, and in what sense does it differ from the multitude of other terms used to describe similar aesthetic forms: 'autobiografiction', 'autotheory', 'autobiographical fiction' and even 'memoir' (Saunders; Fournier).[1] Similarly, at what point and in what sense does the 'middle class' become distinct from labour and capital; or is it never entirely distinct? This thesis recognises that in both terms such ambiguity is necessary and, indeed, often generative. Both terms describe volatile 'between-stages': one between autobiography and fiction, and the other between capital and labour. As mediators between supposedly more solid boundaries, the terms offer volatile condensations of a series of unresolvable antagonisms. Over the course of this thesis, I show that the affinity between autofiction and today's downwardly mobile middle-class lies in such shared volatility.

Such volatility makes 'autofiction' a difficult term to define. Though only regarded as a distinct phenomenon toward the end of the twentieth century, one can easily find precursors in the künstlerroman novels of writers such as James Joyce and D.H.

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[1] Max Saunders creates the term 'autobiografiction' in *Self-Impression: Life Writing, Autobiographical and the Forms of Modern Literature* to describe life writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Lauren Fournier uses the term 'autotheory' in *Autotheory as Feminist Practise in Art, Writing and Criticism* to consider the discursive strategies that contemporary feminist authors have used to bring theory to life via autobiographical writing.

Lawrence.[2] In recent years, efforts to bring the term semantic consistency have often privileged either the 'auto' or the 'fiction'. In her influential study *The Story of Me: Contemporary American Autofiction,* Marjorie Worthington (1) defines autofiction as 'novels that feature a character who shares his/her name with the author'. Offering what is now perhaps the most common understanding of 'autofiction', Worthington centres the 'fiction' to which 'auto' is merely a supplement. She argues that the inclusion of the author 'toys with reader's sense of reality' by portraying a life that simultaneously resembles the author's but often diverges from it in important ways (Worthington 2). The author will, for instance, appear in situations that are obviously fictional (Worthington 2). By this account, novels such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions,* which both include an author-protagonist, are ultimately fictions with troubled boundaries, continually subverting the reader's expectations of what fiction can and should be.

However, continual references to an extratextual author necessarily trouble any clear delineation between fiction and nonfiction and should inhibit any attempt to privilege either term. Considering so much of the material in both *Lunar Park* and *Breakfast of Champions* is biographical, Worthington could just as well describe them as autobiographies with fictional elements. In this regard, Worthington's definition removes some of the necessary ambiguity that originally surrounded 'autofiction'. Serge Doubrovsky, widely regarded as having coined the term to define his particular style of writing in the novel *Fils,* used the term to think about the self in ways that blurred the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Though the term does not appear in the book itself, it appears on the novel's cover: 'Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement reels; si l' on veut autofiction' [Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; autofiction if you will'] (Doubrovsky). Neither 'auto' or 'fiction' is privileged in Doubrovsky's understanding, but there is an emphasis on the text being understood as a novel rather than a memoir. Writing of Doubrovsky's novels, Mortimer (25) argues that autofiction opposes both the verisimilar and the false, creating a kind of undecidable self-truth, woven from the real and the fictional.

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[2] Please see James Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D.H. Lawrence's 1913 *Sons and Lovers*

Autofiction may at times be more autobiographical than fictional, or vice versa. What matters is that autofiction invites us to read the main character as a cipher for the author while at the same time including content or formal techniques we associate with fictional writing. In this regard, autofiction has more licence to fabricate than, say, memoir, but it must still remain within the boundaries of what plausibly happened. This often creates undecidable generic boundaries. In the writings of typically postmodern writers such as Vonnegut, Philip Roth or Richard Powers, for instance, autofiction offers a route to deconstruct fiction itself. The onomastic link between the author and named character appears irrefutable but simultaneously unstable (Worthington 23, 62).

In the contemporary moment, however, texts that weave together life writing and fiction tend toward the biographical. While autofiction is still undoubtedly used as a method for exploring the ontological contours of fiction and nonfiction, it is worth emphasising that today's writers tend to privilege the 'auto' over the 'fiction', focussing disproportionately on the biographical writing of the self. Much criticism on the subject agrees that the form's regained popularity relates to the ascendancy of individualism in the latter part of the twentieth century, with a number of diverging interpretations as to precisely why a new generation of writers has taken the form up with such enthusiasm. One common argument is that autofiction represents the novelist's attempt to respond, or even exploit, a celebrity culture that encourages gratuitous acts of self-exposure (Nicol 255-256). In a similar vein, Teresa Pepe (25) points out how "the global spread of autofiction has coincided with the growing use of the Internet as a platform for self-expression [and] this is not a mere coincidence". Others have looked more directly to the changing nature of capitalism from a production-led system to one governed by finance. Showing the considerable links between financial and autofictional form in the work of Ben Lerner, Arne De Boever (*Finance* 154) argues that in some cases autofiction allows the author to effectively model their work as a 'financial instrument, a tool for speculative value generation'. In this sense, he contends that the autofiction novel may be the neoliberal aesthetic form par excellence (De Boever 'Neoliberal' 157-158).

This thesis will build on such insights. But it will also take a considerably more materialist approach to the question of contemporary autofiction by considering the new class dynamics that underpin issues of self-expression and -exposure, authorial

entrepreneurship, artist insecurity and the growing role of online platforms in literary production. Many of the writers featured in this thesis, all of whom were born in the post-1970s period – what might be called the 'neoliberal era' – use the form to negotiate the shifting parameters of the self, identity and, more fundamentally, class position in a moment of social and economic upheaval. In the novels of Dave Eggers, Heike Geissler, Megan Boyle, Lauren Oyler, Tao Lin, Ben Lerner and Sheila Heti, autofiction allows the authors to explore their newfound precarious status in a moment when the fortunes of the Global North's middle class have changed for the worse.

In recent years, there has been a seemingly endless stream of high-profile experts warning of the impending doom of the middle-class. Peter Temin, emeritus professor of economics at MIT has written a full-length study titled *The Vanishing Middle Class*. Since 2008, Pew Research has put out a stream of reports, briefings and blog posts with titles like 'The American Middle-Class is Losing Ground'.[3] In her popular book *Squeezed: why our families can't afford America,* Alissa Quart (2, 34-35) paints vivid pictures of the average middle-class 'American', struggling against the rising tides of rental prices, or suffering the precarious world of adjunct work in universities.

Taken in the context of the wider OECD, the middle-class appears to be doing little better. An OECD report 'Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class', finds a context in which middle incomes are stagnating, middle-skilled jobs are being automated away and the costs of housing and goods – the stuff of what might be called a "middle class lifestyle" – are rising year on year. In the UK, news media from across the political spectrum breathlessly deliver news of the 'strange death of the British middle class'.[4] In 2009, sometime before the current trend of proclaiming the death of the middle, the TUC put out a report titled 'Unfair to Middling: How Middle-Income Britain's shrinking wages fuelled the crash and threaten recovery', which places the middle-class at the centre of our moment's economic and political woes.

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[3] The reports include Pew Research Center. "The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground: No longer the majority and falling behind financially." Washington, D.C, 2015; Pew Research Center. "America's Shrinking Middle Class: A Close Look at Changes Within Metropolitan Areas". Washington DC, 2016; Desilver, Drew. "America's middle class is shrinking: so who's leaving it?' *Pew Research.* 14 Dec. 2015.

[4] See: West, Ed. 'The Strange Death of the British Middle Class'. *The Spectator.* 24 Aug. 2013.

Importantly, the middle-class in this discourse is a moving target, sometimes defined by income, other times defined by lifestyle and taste, but never by its political relationship to capital and labour. There are, then, reasons to be suspicious of this discourse. David Roediger (8) sees it as largely concocted for political purposes, rather than representing social reality in any meaningful sense. He (8) argues that since the mid-1990s, a 'self-serving' discourse about 'saving the middle class' has helped to occasion a conservative political shift, displacing public discussion around both race and class. The conveniently vague parameters of this discourse has helped to exclude a significant section of those 'squeezed' 'Americans', who are perhaps materially somewhere in the middle, but whose racial identity excludes them from this category, a point that I consider more fully in Chapter One.

Roediger's argument stands, but it is also true that since the 1970s in the global North, the middle class has been under increased strain from a capitalist system that has seen wages stagnate, asset values rise, and the proletarianization of once professional occupations. Goran Therborn (85) notes that the 'middle class nightmare' of popular discourse is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but this does not erase the fact that neoliberalism has seen a growing convergence between the rising incomes of the South's middle-class and the declining incomes of the North.

The declining material conditions of the North's middle-class has not only attracted political and economic commentators. Recent studies in literature and media have found in today's most popular cultural products an obsession with middle-class decline, most notably in TV shows which have explicitly dealt with this issue. Michael Szalay cites the 'industrious family drama', epitomised by T*he Sopranos, Breaking Bad* and *Ozark*, as a central genre through which today's middle-class comes to understand its newly precarious status: 'the genre finds white middle-class families living secret second lives, while working furiously, typically in black markets, to outpace a threatening downward mobility.' Stephen Shapiro (*Shield* 188) argues that prestige TV shows such as *The Shield* and *Homeland* reflect their middle-class audiences 'foreboding sense that the seemingly assured comforts of the long economic boom, from the mid-1990s to roughly 2007–2008, was a sensationalist fiction and was coming to an unhappy end.' Of *Homeland,* he writes that the show encourages its middle-class audience to develop a 'tactical response' to crisis (Shapiro *Homeland* 153). By revealing in their temporalities

longer historical arcs, such shows help audiences to locate "the singular or exceptional moment against a pattern of longer duration." (Shapiro *Homeland* 153)

Yet, there remains a dearth of scholarship on how literary representations of middle-class crisis have similarly helped authors and audiences alike navigate a world of shattered illusions. The texts that form the primary focus of my four chapters all feature author-protagonists struggling in an economy that no longer offers the capricious assurances of old: well-paid work, wage rises, decent housing, welfare and security as well as consensus bourgeois culture. Literary writing has typically been either the preserve of the leisured classes or something produced beyond the hours of the workday. What we find in these texts, however, are authors describing the challenges of writing alongside temporary jobs or the struggles associated with unemployment. In Eggers' 2000 work *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius,* the author works a multitude of 'temp' positions while attempting to achieve his literary ambitions; in Geissler's 2018 *Seasonal Associate,* the unnamed protagonist is forced through a lack of writing commissions to take on a seasonal role in an Amazon Warehouse; in Boyle's 2018 *Liveblog,* Boyle is unemployed and living at home, struggling to find the motivation to write or look for other work; and in Oyler's 2021 *Fake Accounts,* the unnamed protagonist hates her job and continually lies about what she does to soothe her insecurities.

These material conditions offer a way to interpret these authors' continual efforts to use literary form as a means of self-exposure. In a post-industrial landscape of temporary, part-time and gig service work, individuals are continually encouraged to work on their employability, as a means to tie together an array of loose projects and jobs. It is presented as the secret ingredient to success in a context of declining labour demand and rising competition (Benanav 45-46). As Colin Cremin (*Capitalism's* 43). notes, 'We are never employable enough. Employability [is] the thing always wanted and never obtained, onto which, like a comfort blanket promising security, we accumulate the detritus of skills and attributes employers seem to want.' An eminently discursive practice, 'The process of becoming employable involves a gathering up of signifiers – accredited skills, traits and experiences' (Cremin *Totalled* 86). Skills and experiences must then be signified via a CV, a face-to-face interview or, more likely today, a "self-brand". Branding the self entails a complex intertextual linking of one's online profiles

to create a consistent image of one's life. As I show in Chapter One, it is a kind of biographical text, though one of a highly commodified and promissory nature. In a moment of ubiquitous social media, artists and authors are, like other kinds of worker, continually compelled to curate acts of self-exposure to demonstrate their portfolio of past experiences and achievements. Creating a brand, in ways resembling the writing of autofiction, involves forming the self, and often in ways that rely on significant fabrication. Autofiction allows authors to control and manipulate their self-image, hence why many of the novelists I consider in this thesis use the form to negotiate and, in some cases, subvert the pressures of self-exposure that employability demands.

The working lives of these authors do not reflect that of the mid-twentieth century writer, supported by generous grants, government programs and a hospitable university environment. Nor are they what came to be associated with middle-class work over the same period: the dull, conformist professional misery that C. Wright Mills describes in his classic work on the subject, *White Collar*. For the middle-class is not a stable position, nor does it maintain a pole in a consistent antagonism to capital or labour. As Harry Braverman (280-281) shows in his 1974 *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism,* this 'intermediate' class strata sits between this antagonism and its fortunes fluctuate in line with the volatile shifts in power that characterise the ongoing conflict between these two poles. This contradictory political nature has been clearly demonstrated in the work of Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, who argue in *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* that at times of crisis the middle class will select a political alliance with either capital or labour against the other.

Throughout this thesis, Erik Olin Wright's work on 'contradictory class locations' is a constant companion to my readings of autofiction and middle-class decline. Complicating the reductive dichotomy between capital and labour, Wright argues that the many and growing ambiguities of class position require a schema that includes class locations that share in the characteristics of both poles. To some degree, all class relations are contradictory. But, for Wright (26), there are a great many which are doubly contradictory. He first defines three basic, familiar 'classes': 'bourgeoisie', 'proletariat' and 'petty bourgeoisie' (Wright 27). He then goes on to develop three further 'locations': managers, who are somewhere between the proletariat and bourgeoisie; 'small employers' who have both the characteristics of the bourgeoisie and

petty bourgeoisie; and 'semi autonomous workers' – such as academics, teachers and doctors – who are effectively part of the proletariat but enjoy some of the freedoms and independence of the petty bourgeoisie (Wright 27).

These engineers, accountants, draftsmen, technicians, doctors, teachers and the now dwindling ranks of supervisors and middle managers – the basis of what some called the 'new middle class' in the 1970s – were said to enjoy some of the benefits of capital such as autonomy, company shares, decent salary rises and stability. But, as Braverman (282) predicted, they have since found themselves increasingly facing the pressures of a mass labour market in the form of growing labour reserves and rationalisation. On top of this, many of these workers were invited over the course of the twentieth century to share in the gains of financial investment, notably the housing market, which under the auspices of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Third Way neoliberals became a central marker of middle-class status (Adkins, Cooper and Konings 9). But, as the texts in this thesis demonstrate, this process has been in no way stable or consistent and since 2008 has largely faltered. Most of the writers in this thesis describe their poor experience of the rental market. None, it would seem, have benefited from the so-called "democratisation" of home ownership that began in the 1980s.

In the majority of the texts I consider, the author-protagonists are not so much casualties of what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the 'fear of falling' – an anxiety that essentially pervades the middle-class – as they are genuine victims of material decline. Some might wonder, then, whether these texts, in some sense, refute Walter Benjamin's argument that the writer can never be proletariat but can only have solidarity with that class ('Author' 102). An argument to the contrary could equally be made: that some of these texts represent the inverse of Benjamin's formulation; the writer has indeed become proletarianized but still identifies strongly with the middle-class and has little to no sense of solidarity with the class that it is joining. Benjamin ('Author' 102), of course, meant that the radical writer's education meant by definition they could never be truly proletariat but only a kind of defector from the bourgeoisie. But we might want to push against this definition somewhat: can a writer still exist beyond the reaches of the proletariat if they spend their days working in an Amazon Warehouse?

With such a sense of class dislocation, it is hardly surprising that many of the texts featured in this thesis capture a feeling that reality has not turned out as promised, a sense that autofiction's undecidable facticity is particularly well attuned to. For these writers, the secure careers, decent housing and stable domesticity, once held up as pinnacles of the "good life", never appeared or else vanished. Subsequently, downward mobility is often depicted as a sense of unreality. In Geissler's *Seasonal Associate,* the author-protagonist represents her experience of leaving the relatively comfortable world of creative writing for a job in an Amazon warehouse as an experience of total self-estrangement:

> [F]irst of all we'll set out, because you have a job interview. You set out and I'll accompany you and tell you what it's all like and what's happening to you. From now on, you are me. That means you're female; please don't forget that because it's important in places. You're a writer and translator, and at this point in life you have two sons and a partner who suits you well, something you're usually aware of. Another important thing, which you rarely think about but which has to be said: You're German, but the country you were born in no longer exists. (Geissler 11)

Opening the novel, the passage anticipates the parts of the protagonist's life that she will, to varying degrees, leave behind once she begins her work at Amazon. It prefaces later parts in the novel where she realises that she has become estranged from her relationships, her chosen occupation and her previous experience of gender and nationality. It is as if working at Amazon, faced with the full force of the capitalist system, makes viscerally real the fact that her home country of East Germany no longer exists. Any alternative to capitalism, and any trace of that alternative in her identity, is brutally expunged by the shock of Amazon's labour regime. Proletarianization reveals in brutal fashion that her stable sense of national and gender identity are bound up with what turns out to be a precarious middle-class status. In Chapter Two, I will consider more deeply the ways that such unstable features of character figure the traumatic experience of proletarianization the protagonist undergoes at Amazon.

The passage shows how downward mobility introduces a deep cleavage between past and present self, between a once relatively stable existence and a newly precarious one.

The author-protagonist has been cut off from her past reality and, as I explore in more detail in Chapter Two, forced into the brutal and alien world of proletariat labour, a world so disorienting that the protagonist struggles to recall her life before it. Here and in other passages, the novel evokes Karl Marx's (*Selected* 88) understanding of alienation: 'labour is exterior to the worker, that is, it does not belong to his essence. Therefore he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy… Thus the worker only feels a stranger. He is at home when he is not working and when he works he is not at home'. A separation emerges, a doubling of one's subjective experience of the world, which splits the individual in two.

The autofiction form is particularly sensitive to the splits that attend proletariat labour. As we can see in the above passage, it allows Geissler to essentially double the authorial self as protagonist and extratextual author. The authorial, 'I' separates from the proletariat 'You' in ways that capture the splitting of subjectivity that attends alienated labour. The bourgeois 'I' loses its definition, as the author-protagonist's life diverges between labour time and the receding sphere of fulfilling activities and relationships associated with her once middle-class existence. As the novel develops, and as I argue in Chapter Two, the reader experiences the protagonist's proletarianization as a stable autobiographical character becoming increasingly unreal and dissociative.

The consistent, self-identical character of nineteenth century realism was a key part of building out the bourgeois world. Refusing to offer the reader these characteristics, Geissler's novel frequently leaves the reader wondering where the extratextual begins and ends, creating a volatile character estranged from a stable textual reality. It is worth noting that early bourgeois fiction, which depicted the rise of the middle-class to cultural and economic dominance, often guarded against the incursion of the extratextual into the fictional. In *Genres of the Credit Economy,* Mary Poovey (113) shows that the social role of nineteenth-century realism was to create a stable sense of character, one that was credible, trust-worthy and self-consistent amid a capitalist system increasingly organised around the vicissitudes of paper money. Character was a way of creating a sense of bourgeois solidity, used to 'draw distinct boundaries' around the text's 'fictional worlds', so that the reader had a stable sense of textual and extratextual reality (Poovey 361). In a similar vein, Franco Moretti (16) argues in *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature,* that the early bourgeois character was

consistent, continuous and often subjugated to the diktats of narrative, but, most importantly, it did not draw attention to itself or its own production. It is worth quoting Moretti at length:

> …whereas the aristocracy had shamelessly idealised itself in a whole gallery of intrepid knights, the bourgeoisie produced no such myth of itself. The great mechanism of adventure was being eroded by bourgeois civilization—and without adventure, characters lost the stamp of *uniqueness* that comes from the encounter with the unknown. Compared to a knight, a bourgeois appears un-marked and elusive; similar to any other bourgeois (Moretti, 16).

We can glean from this that the bourgeoisie sought to blend in with its surroundings. Fiction offered a way of naturalising the bourgeoisie, of making them seem as objective as the commodity world they fostered and inhabited. Thus, characters appear as ordinary, mundane, as part of the novel's furniture. Even as they suffer and struggle, they are very much at home in the fictional world into which they are written. Looked at in the context of literary history, the most striking aspect of a character such as Emma in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is her regularity and relatability. She is, in no sense, superhuman but like other members of the bourgeoisie is repressed, solemn and often bored by the world she finds herself in.

Geissler's novel epitomises a very different role for character, which emerges as a dominant amid late twentieth century fiction and consolidates in the twenty-first century autofiction novel. In the neoliberal era, where character can often equate to author, the protagonist is not recentreed in these texts by some great retrieval of mythic or heroic qualities, but precisely the opposite: by the consciously methodical removal of anything even approaching the fabled or fantastical, which appears as continual meta-referential reminders that the character is little more than the author in sublimated form. In a sense more precisely related to my present purposes, the author-protagonist is not entirely at home in the fictional world they inhabit but estranged from the text by their extratextuality.

This is, in no small part, because contemporary autofiction often entails a disproportionate focus on authorial selfhood, which acts as a kind of sanctuary – albeit a

false one – from an increasingly hostile external reality. To greater or lesser degrees, all of the novels analysed in this thesis feature forms of characterisation that do not open out into rich, sensuous descriptions of reality in the way readers came to expect of bourgeois realism. Rich descriptions of the external world are sacrificed for details about the internal world of the author. As Mark McGurl (218) writes of autofiction in *Everything and Less,* 'Preferring a small world to a sprawling one, it tends to condense a great deal of symbolic struggle into protagonist names and pronouns.' He describes autofiction as a 'minimalist' form, of which Tao Lin's 2013 novel *Taipei* is exemplary (McGurl 222). McGurl (222) offers plenty of examples from the text but, somewhat reductively, cites 'social media' as the key factor in the rise of autofiction.

It is worth turning briefly to Lin's 2013 *Taipei* to better understand the links between autofictional minimalism and downward mobility. Written and published in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, it displays a millennial generation increasingly stagnant in a system that offers few economic prospects. The novel's protagonist Paul – whose life resembles Lin's in most respects – spends his days listlessly wandering around New York, making money by selling drugs and falling out with his friends and girlfriends. Paul's detached tone and apparent indifference to the world around him lends the text an eerily affectless feel and, more fundamentally, a chronic sense that reality increasingly holds little of interest. Though the novel's autobiographical element aims toward a certain kind of realism, very few of Paul's experiences and relationships garner the rich descriptions one would associate with bourgeois realism. Food features frequently throughout the text but appears to be included for the sole purpose of accentuating the lack of sensuous description in contexts that would usually inspire such detail. When Paul and Erin eat a luxurious dinner in a seafood bar, the meal is seemingly devoid of aesthetic properties:

> When Paul's salad and clam chowder arrived he
> moved something fried from the salad, with a feeling
> of efficacy, into the soup, then ate it with a spoon.
> His steamed Lobster with fries and Erin's broiled
> monkfish with mesclun salad arrived. He ate his
> fries using all his butter and ketchup and, at her
> offer, most of Erin's butter (Lin *Taipei* 216).

The food appears to have no taste or smell. It inspires no excitement, no joy or feelings of comfort. Indeed, the only feeling mentioned in the passage is Paul's sense of 'efficacy', a curiously mechanistic term in the context of eating a luxurious meal. Considering Paul's poor mood throughout the narrative, one might simply interpret the passage as the result of a more generalised depression. But the novel depicts Paul's mood as a response to the depressing travails of millennial life: insecure and cramped housing, few job prospects and an overwhelming experience of personal stagnancy. His financial and psychological insecurity, and a pervasive sense of disenchantment cloud normally enjoyable experiences. The narrative is often spent anxiously negotiating Paul's internal world rather than exploring his relationship to the outer world. Paul seems reluctant to pursue meaning in a world that seems inhospitable and perennially disappointing.

The literary aesthetics of a middle-class seemingly in permanent decline differ markedly from fictional writing as it developed during the ascent of the bourgeoisie. The above passage certainly does not depict the confident European middle-class of the nineteenth century, which via the novel form meticulously mapped the commodity world and its associated sensuous experiences. It presents a middle-class that no longer experiences itself as part of this reality, a middle-class that is little at home in the world that it once made familiar via fictional writing. Contrast the above description of food with Emile Zola's (213) description of camembert in his 1873 novel *The Belly of Paris*:

> This cheese, with its gamy odour, had overpowered
> the milder smells of the *marolles* and the *limbourg*;
> its power was remarkable. Every now and then,
> however, a slight whiff, a flute like note, came from
> the *parmesan* while the *bries* came into play with
> their soft, musty smell, the gentle sound, so to speak,
> of a damp tambourine. The *livarot* launched into an
> overwhelming reprise, and the géromé kept up the
> symphony with a sustained high note.

Sensations are meticulously brought into the realm of language. The 'codification of affect', to use Fredric Jameson's (*Antinomies* 45) term, represents the bourgeois attempt to dominate sensuous reality, to map its vicissitudes and bring them under control. The realist novel's capacity to describe, organise and order was part of what Jameson (*Antinomies* 65) terms 'the mastering of affect by ideology'. The rich, multisensory descriptions, the exuberant use of metaphor and the sense of mastery this achieves, is

exemplary of how fiction could bring sensation into the world of bourgeois manners. Zola's rigorously precise description of what surrounds him epitomises a middle-class that feels very much at one with the world around it.

Of particular interest here is what Jameson (*Antinomies* 65) terms the unique 'temporal organisation' of these frequent and often lengthy digressions into sensuous experience. Somewhat oddly, Jameson does not directly link this orientation to class position and perspective. What we find in Zola's excursion into the sensory properties of cheese is the middle-class' sense of possibility, a confidence that present reality is brimming with novel and unknown pleasures, which make the future seem equally rich with wonderful new prospects. Zola's excitation of the senses expresses a deep sense of optimism, an almost unbounded joy in the possibilities of sensuous experience. It contains at once the comforting limitations of codification, which serves to make familiar –- and, thus, congenial – the infinite possibilities of available pleasure, registered in the above passage as multisensory and synaesthetic description.

Returning to Lin's glum meal, we find little in the way of bourgeois optimism, but rather a middle-class subject who finds in reality only the thinnest outline of experience. Its milieu is devoid of possibility. Objects that once promised pleasure now appear torpid, dull and empty of significance, reflecting the stagnant state of the subject that perceives them: a middle-class that feels increasingly alienated from the culture it once dominated. Where in realism we find thick descriptions of material experience, in *Taipei* we find semantic ambiguity, with Paul repeatedly using the words 'something' or 'somewhere' as 'placeholder[s]' for a richer portrayal of material reality (Lin *Taipei* 4, 8, 14, 34, 44, 63). Instead of thinking about a particular place, Paul 'meditatively' ponders 'somewhere'; to a friend he 'mumble[s] something about "going somewhere"'; and while looking for a beer finds himself 'waiting… to think or do something' (Lin *Taipei* 4, 45). Such linguistic vagueness unsettles the familiar markers of the bourgeois everyday such as taking pleasure in and confidently describing acts of consumption. The text revels in ambiguity, and the term 'something' becomes the key symbol for such sensuous annulment, later pushed to parody in a scene where Paul and Erin discuss making a movie on their iPhones entitled 'Or Something' in which '"or something" is said hundreds of times, in a montage, sometimes with context, to convey a range of meanings' (Lin *Taipei* 131). 'Something' is a vague referent, an abstraction from the

definite and substantial properties of objects, thus its ubiquity in *Taipei* seems to suggest a fading bourgeois culture that can no longer offer a rich cartography of the senses.

The vague use of 'something' in place of proper description exemplifies how contemporary autofiction is often an exercise in alienating the author-protagonist from its surroundings. Yet, it is also fair to say of *Taipei* that, despite its refusal to offer rich description, plot is almost entirely overwhelmed by what Moretti calls 'fillers', the parts in a narrative that 'happen between one turning point and the next', which often involve lavish descriptions of characters and their experiences as a means to enrich the plot (Moretti 70, 71). Without notable turning points, however, *Taipei* might well be described as all filler, which could equally be said of other autofictions such as Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*. Central to the narrative thrust of all three novels is a deepening sense of the author-protagonist's alienation and dissatisfaction through their often detached interactions with the world around them. The filler is no longer rich descriptions of a discreetly textual world. Rather, it tends to centre on the author-protagonist's theories, opinions, ideas and beliefs, which continually invite the reader out of the text and into the life of the author, in ways that resemble what some have termed 'autotheory' (Fournier).

If the inner world of the author-protagonist represents a kind of literary sanctuary from the horrors of downward mobility, it is of a different sort to those of old. In *Downwardly Mobile: the changing fortunes of the middle class,* Andrew Lawson (2) argues that nineteenth century US realism represents a middle-class aesthetic response to downward mobility amid ceaseless financial turbulence. As the material markers of class status were liquidated during the late nineteenth century's many financial crises, middle-class writers sought solidity by describing the objective world around them (Lawson 2). The dematerialising effects of endless busts and crashes propelled a new 'mimetic literature' which balanced the airiness of finance capital with 'the solid world of facts' (Lawson 2). Just as rich descriptions of the material world once helped an ascendant bourgeois map reality, they also provided reassurance in times of crisis – a way, as it were, of remapping a changed world.

In some respects, Lawson's focus on facticity can help explain why today's downwardly mobile middle has taken up the autofictional form with such gusto. Autofiction, like nineteenth century realism, seeks to catch the stubbornness of everyday life that even amid crisis retains a certain consistency – a mundanity and ordinariness that provides reassurance. In bourgeois realism, Lawson (2, 4, 9) suggests, the 'solid world of fact' often relates to the appearance, texture and social experience of commodities, land and, in particular, property. It should be emphasised that autofiction's investment in facticity is almost exclusively on the authentic "facts" of the author's existence. Indeed, for today's middle-class, the material world of property appears to no longer provide the reassuring facts of life. As we have already seen, this may be because the middle-class is increasingly little an owning class, but one that must now suffer the caprices of rent and private debt. Lawson (1) notes that nineteenth century realist writers would 'detail the material comforts of [the] home' to ward off the threatening sense of downward mobility. But if one is transiently renting can the home still provide the same feelings of comfort and security? As we will see across this thesis, for contemporary writers, home often means renting unfit properties or living at home with one's parents and is often a source of insecurity, guilt and disappointment rather than security and comfort.

If writers find reassurance in contemporary autofiction, it comes in the form of the self and its potential economic value. Property is experienced less in the material world of assets and consumables, and more in the less tangible realm of the self, that is, more in one's beliefs, thoughts, opinions and, perhaps most fundamentally, past achievements. As the texts dealt with in the following chapters show, this is because in the latter part of the twentieth century status and security came to be oriented by the ideological diktats of 'human capital' theory. The push towards a personal responsibility model of employability that appeared in the 1990s in many countries in the global North helped to realise what Michel Foucault (226) critically describes in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* as the entrepreneurial subject. In what has now become a grand discursive shift, Foucault (226) critiques the work of the Chicago school economists, Gary Becker and Theodor Schultz, to argue that the liberal subject has been replaced by the neoliberal 'entrepreneur of himself', who no longer receives a wage but an income, is no longer a labourer but an enterprise, and no longer produces a commodity but their own capital. In his 1975 work *Human*

Capital, Becker (9) extends the traditional economic ground of monetary income to incorporate 'psychic incomes' – the subjective benefits and satisfactions derived from life more generally. Understood so, life becomes a seamless series of investments made to enhance one's present value – each moment an entrepreneurial opportunity to maximise one's worth, and competitively advance one's position in the social order.

While I do not subscribe to the ontological claim that labour no longer exists, I recognise that the human capital framework has proven to be ideologically potent to the point that many workers – including writers – now understand themselves primarily as entrepreneurs rather than producers. I would also argue – judging by the writers examined in this thesis – that it has been particularly potent among today's middle-class, whose origins in the European bourgeoisie predispose it to such an ideological framework. For creative professionals, in particular, this framework has become near all pervasive. As Leigh Claire La Berge ('Wages' 573) notes in the context of visual art, 'the artist no longer views herself as a worker, but as an investor in herself who protects her brand, itself an aestheticized capture of possible future value given present representation'.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that many of the authors' anxieties about downward mobility are worked through using this particular ideological lens. This has been exacerbated, I suggest in Chapters Three and Four, by the rise of what Nick Srnick terms 'platform capitalism', a business model that relies on seducing individuals into revealing ever-more of their personal lives online so that tech giants such as Facebook, Twitter and Google can extract data to exchange for advertising revenue. Part of the seduction, as Boyle's *Liveblog* demonstrates, is that writing – either on blogs or social media – purportedly offers a way of economically and psychically enhancing the self.

Without the sanctuary of tangible private property, individuals have increasingly turned to the intangible realm of brands, identities, beliefs and opinions to offer a sense of middle-class consistency, in no small part to assert their distinction in the social hierarchy. Autofiction, I argue, is in some sense a response to this shift away from the tangible stability offered by, say, home ownership to the intangible realm of personal brands and 'followers'. In Chapter One, I consider how Eggers explicitly uses the autofictional form to promote his self-image. Often understood by critics

straightforwardly as a memoir about the author's traumatic loss of his parents and experience caring for his younger brother under newly precarious financial circumstances, the text also relies heavily on the formal tropes of postmodern fiction. Lengthy paratexts, circuitous metareference and blank irony are all employed by the author to help construct his self-brand via fictional writing. I argue that in various sublimated ways, Eggers' attempt to create a personal brand formalises the material pressures of downward mobility. As Chapter One will show, what emerges is a text that sits uncomfortably between literary fiction, memoir, self-brand and CV.

In Chapter Two, I consider how Geissler uses autofiction to narrate the trauma of middle-class proletarianization. The novel splits the author-protagonist into two selves: a first person 'I' which narrates the story after the author-protagonist has finished her period of seasonal work at the Amazon Warehouse; and a second person 'you' who is currently undergoing the traumatic experience of warehouse work. The narrator 'I' should be read as attempting to bring narrative coherence to the trauma she experiences at the warehouse, that is, the way that proletarianization compels a split in her subjectivity. The is further complicated by the author's experience of her class position as essentially split between her life before her work at Amazon and her life during and after. Part of the traumatic realisation is that the middle-class at all times – and particularly at times of crisis such as the years surrounding 2008 – precariously balances on the precipice of becoming proletariat. The novel demonstrates that autofiction's own instability as an aesthetic form offers particularly fertile ground for representing a middle-class losing its sense of security.

In Chapter Three, I consider how Megan Boyle's 2018 *Liveblog: a novel* formalises economic stagnancy both at the social and personal level. The novel is constructed from posts that Boyle posted on her Tumblr account in 2013, which was dedicated to real-time updates about Boyle's life. This excess of autobiographical detail entirely disrupts the text's narrative flow and, in doing so, captures the torpor of the author's life, who at the time of writing the blog was unemployed and still living at home with her parents in her late twenties. The text, I argue, pushes the idea of 'fiction' in 'autofiction' to its limit to formalise the arrested life course of millennials who came of age following the 2008 financial crisis. The sense of stagnancy that pervades the text, I argue, helps to explain the project's commitment to nostalgia, which, rather than simply offering

comfort, appears in ways that are ominous, weird and frequently surreal. In this respect, the novel offers new ways to think about the temporal experience of downward mobility, represented as a backward-looking experience, where the past comes to overwhelm and unsettle the present.

The final chapter considers how Lauren Oyler's 2021 *Fake Accounts* renders what Ehrenreich has called the middle-class' 'fear of falling' as anxieties about conspiracy theories and post-truth. The novel uses autofiction's undecidable facticity to formalise these anxieties and place the reader in the role of having to discern what counts as truth and lies. It suggests that sincere truth telling, once regarded as a significant cultural force behind the bourgeois self, has been eroded by social media, which encourages a form of sociality based on sensationalism and exaggeration. Unlike other novels in this thesis that adopt a posture of sincerity, *Fake Accounts* remains both aesthetically and politically ambivalent about its potential rejuvenation as a dominant literary mode. As I show throughout the chapter, the novel is deeply pessimistic about the kinds of subjectivity produced by social media, and suggests that what is increasingly replacing the bourgeois culture fading alongside the middle-class is altogether more egoistic and violent.

Chapter One: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Branding

Author, editor, filmmaker, artist, publisher and charity worker: Eggers' career epitomises the ways in which cultural production has taken on the flexible and fragmented work patterns of a low growth US economy. While Eggers' evident success across a wide range of entrepreneurial pursuits might make him an unlikely candidate for a discussion about downward mobility, it is exactly the diversity of his interests and projects that makes him typical of our present juncture, in which artists are supposed to wield a wide portfolio of achievements and pursuits. As David Watson (97) argues, 'The career of Dave Eggers may be exemplary' of a culture in which 'creatives' are expected to 'bundle together different artistic and entrepreneurial identities'. Caroline Hamilton (5) similarly emphasises the diversity of Eggers' achievements across 'marketing, media, film, visual arts, education and politics'. While these authors have traced the longer arc of Eggers' career as a gradual shift from writer to business owner, this chapter instead looks at the period of downward mobility Eggers experienced before his success, as depicted in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (AHBWOSG).* This period intersects with a growing employability culture under the Clinton administration, in which self-branding is becoming a significant ideological pressure, particularly for the growing numbers made precarious by the solidification of a new flexible labour consensus. *AHBWOSG,* I argue, formalises Eggers' efforts to turn himself into a brand via literary techniques.

Central to the narrative of *AHBWOSG* is Eggers' sudden loss of his two parents in rapid succession – both to cancer – and the subsequent responsibility of having to look after his younger brother Toph. The emotional suffering that follows is the narrative prism through which scholars have tended to understand the novel's formal qualities and thematic investments. Some scholars suggest that the metafictional quality of Eggers' prose and the lengthy paratext that forms the novel's introduction display his efforts to use autobiography as an opportunity to mitigate feelings of loss via self-promotion, reading the novel as a kind of prelude to his later career success (Hamilton 30; Miller 991). According to this reading, Eggers' motivations for self-promotion are nearly always linked to suffering and emotional insecurity – turning on a standard psychological narrative of the fame seeker as ultimately seeking to fill a lack.

What I want to suggest in this chapter is that this theory only makes sense if we treat Eggers' loss as primarily psychological, rather than material. A closer reading of the novel in fact demonstrates that the emotional fallout forms only one part of the loss. Some scholars have understood the novel's semantic register through a purely psychoanalytic lens (Miller 989). For instance, when Eggers (*Heartbreaking* xxix, 236) describes his parents' deaths as leaving him in a 'world with neither floor nor ceiling', and his life as 'rootless, ripped from all foundations', Miller (984) considers these sections as exemplary of the novel's tendency to focus on emotional suffering. But the choice of metaphors could just as easily be read as exemplary of the novel's interest in the material changes to Eggers' life following his parent's deaths, describing the experience of being thrown from relative comfort into financial insecurity. Indeed, the sense of being left in a 'world with neither floor nor ceiling' may in fact be a more literal description of Eggers' domestic trajectory out of a financially comfortable middle-class home into a less than welcoming rental market (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 72-73).

What has been overlooked in the novel, then, is the downward class mobility set in process by the traumatic loss, which rapidly throws Eggers into a world of responsibilities that were not part of his previous middle-class existence: precarious work, rental housing and claiming social security. Rather, it is these more material qualities of the loss that generate the novel's formal attempts at self-promotion. Instead of reading Eggers' efforts to promote himself as emotionally motivated, we might read these efforts more generously as the impetus to make oneself employable, to secure one's social reproduction amid financial precarity and the growing sense of ruin that attends it. I argue that toward the end of the twentieth century, with the growth of "self-branding" discourse, employability becomes an increasingly autobiographical activity. The impetus to sell oneself, and to do so authentically, is the same demand placed on writers of memoir and autobiography at the turn of the twenty first century. This theme recurs throughout the novels in this thesis, and I regard it as one of the central pressures placed on fiction in the twenty-first century.

In some respect, *AHBWOSG* may appear to subvert the tropes of "self-branding" precisely through its playful treatments of autobiographical writing. But, as this chapter demonstrates, what appears to be subversion is more often covert forms of sublimation.

By falsely resolving the tensions of self-branding, I argue, the novel invites the reader to identify with the lifeworld of a middle-class in decline, reframing the pressures of precarity and employability as unproblematic aspects of a new social compact between capital and labour. Written toward the end of the Clinton administration's second term, the narrative's ideological investments express 'Third Way' strategies that aim to repackage the twin pressures of precarity and employability as independence and entrepreneurialism. Like the Clinton administration itself, the novel attempts to reconcile the outcomes of fiscal conservatism with the rhetoric of 'middle-class' salvation – a class which in reality was coming to be defined by the same material processes that characterise the proletariat (Roediger 8). One of the Clinton administration's great policy interventions was to reinvent the ideological contours of the middle-class, even as this class's material basis was being eroded behind the seductive fictions of cheap consumer credit and rising property prices (Roediger 73). The novel similarly centres around an ideological conjuring trick of bringing into being a new sense of the middle-class, even as the conditions for its existence are vanishingly thin. Following the rhetoric of the Clinton administration, fictions of an 'American middle class' hover weightlessly above a neoliberal consensus characterised by wage stagnation, household debt and diminished welfare (Peck 242-243).

The first part of this chapter considers how the novel falsely resolves the middle class's economic, political and ideological contradictions to produce a new sense of the middle-class that harmonises with Clinton's highly racialized appeals to a 'hard working forgotten middle class' (Roediger 73). The novel does this, I argue, through carefully constructed acts of irony and sincerity that embody something akin to the 'post-ideological' politics of Clinton's Third Way. In the second part of the chapter, I show how the novel helps to resolve the tensions between the political rhetoric of a rejuvenated middle class and the increasing downward mobility that came to characterise the middle class's material existence. In the third section, I show how downward mobility generates many of the novel's formal investments – namely, its tendency to act as a tool for the promotion of Eggers' 'self-brand' – that other scholars argue is the result of the author's emotional insecurity. The text, I argue, gives aesthetic form to the pressures of employability that emerged under Clinton as social security was cut. Finally, I consider how Eggers has pioneered a literary culture of self-branding by

focussing on a number of other contemporary writers, namely Tao Lin and Sheila Heti, who have adopted similar strategies of self-promotion via literary form.

Gravitating toward the middle

In this first section, I consider how the novel falsely resolves the contradictory class location of the middle class in ways that bolser the Clintonite myth of a newly compendious American middle. Eggers depicts his life before the death of his parents as the domestic stereotype of middle-class life found across US culture from the sentimental bourgeois novels of the nineteenth century to the prestige 'industrious family dramas' on streaming networks today (Szalay). He lives with his family in the wealthy suburb of Lake Forest just outside of Chicago (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 184). His mother was a teacher but stopped working and his father, the breadwinner, works as a futures trading lawyer – jobs standardly considered to be part of what Barbara Ehrenreich (5) has termed the 'professional middle-class'.

The novel presents Eggers' childhood as constituted by the ideological and political tensions that wrack a middle class increasingly under threat from economic stagnation and fiscal conservativism. These tensions are revealed when Eggers is asked by the interviewer, 'did you have money growing up?'. To which Eggers replies:

> I don't know. Sometimes. Sometimes not. We were
> never really lacking for anything, but my mom had a
> way of making us feel like we were just scraping by.
> "You're driving us to the poorhouse!" she would
> yell, usually at our dad but also to anyone, to no one
> in particular. We never really knew what was going
> on, but it would be ridiculous to complain. We lived
> in a house in this nice town, had our own bedrooms,
> clothes, food, toys, went on vacation in Florida –
> though we always drove, mind you. We all worked
> from the time we were thirteen or so, all summer,
> Bill and I cut lawns… all went to public schools,
> state schools for college (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 185-
> 186)

Below the somewhat contrived efforts to convince the interviewer of his working-class credentials – the pretence of not having much wealth or security – one also finds in these passages a clear yearning for greater wealth. There is an acute awareness of what one does not have access to - expensive private schooling, excessive leisure time - in

short, the trappings of an upper middle-class existence. Though these yearnings sit alongside a simulacra of "hard-working America" – there is no sense that Eggers and his brother needed to work from a young age to financially support the family, but rather to learn the rigours of graft in preparation for a normative middle-class adulthood. The parents' attempt to teach their children the meaning of hard graft represents the middle-class impulse to "get ahead", but it also in the above passage seems to function as a kind of insurance against transgenerational downward mobility.

The passage occurs only a few paragraphs after Eggers tells the interviewer that his father is a corporate finance lawyer and that they live in one of the most expensive suburbs in Chicago. In this regard, the passage contains a contradiction peculiar to the middle-class. Eggers' words suggest a family that does not feel rich enough – that feels significantly less wealthy than their neighbours – yet at the same time does not want to be seen as rich. The passage thus expresses a contradiction that taps into the fundamentally contradictory position that the middle-class holds in capitalist society. This is the ideologically pained expression of a class location struggling to resolve its identification with both capital and labour. Eggers' circuitous answer to the interviewer's question moves through the political, ideological and semantic maze that comprises what Erik Olin Wright (26) has called the 'contradictory locations' of the middle-class.

Against the simple capital vs labour dichotomy (sometimes awkwardly punctured by an intermediary petite bourgeoisie), Wright argues that to deal with the many ambiguities of class position a more sophisticated understanding of contradictory class locations must be arrived at. All class relations are contradictory, Wright (26) notes. But there are some which are doubly contradictory in that they 'represent positions which are torn between the basic contradictory class relations of capitalist society' (Wright 26). Wright devised a number of schemas to understand this contradictory class locations, but here his six-point model will suffice to illustrate the various positions the middle-class holds in regards to the Eggers' family (Wright 27). He defines three basic categories: bourgeoisie, proletariat and petty bourgeoisie. Between the proletariat and bourgeoisie are 'managers'; between the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie are 'small employers'; and between the proletariat and petty bourgeoisie are 'semi-autonomous workers' - more often referred to as 'professionals' – academics, doctors, teachers etc. (Wright 27).

Aside from the bourgeoisie and proletariat, we can think of the other four categories as composing a highly variegated middle-class.

Where the Eggers family precisely fits within this schema is less important than the effects such a contradictory location introduces into their daily lives, shuttling its members between the ideological assumptions of the working and capitalist class. Antagonisms and tensions thus register among the family at the levels of morality, emotion and taste. The contradictory fact that Eggers was as a child encouraged to work despite there being no economic necessity reveals a moral attachment to a working-class ideology of 'respectability' and 'hard work'. Work is necessary, even though, as Eggers himself explains, his family life was very comfortable. The contradiction between this ideological impulse to work and a leisure class economy of comfort and ease produces a strange moral attachment to work as a virtue in itself.

Contradictions also register at the emotional level. Much has been made of how these antagonistic political and economic interests create social dislocation that emerges as 'middle class pain', a tendency toward neurosis that has provided much grist for the culture industry mill (Roediger 178). Comfort and stability tend to go hand in hand with levels of conformity that bring existential horror. Though never stated explicitly, Eggers' father's poor moods and drinking evidently relate to his work as a lawyer. His suit becomes a kind of sartorial expression of white-collar despair: 'in the middle of the white silver screen, my father was in his suit, a gray suit, dressed for work… He did not move. His suit, even with him kneeling, leaning forward, was loose on his shoulders and back' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 12). This iconic lonely image of the dishevelled professional captures the alienation of the white-collar worker, as found in US culture from Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* to Joel Schumacher's violent Hollywood revenge film *Falling Down.*

Eggers' father appears only a handful of times in the novel before his death, but always as someone static and distant: 'My Father had not moved… He was about ten feet from the street… His head tilted back for a moment as he looked up, not to the sky, but to the trees in the neighbour's backyard. He was still on his knees. He had gone to get the newspaper.' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 20). The eerie stasis suggested in both of the images included in these sections of the novel imply the social paralysis white-collar work so often entails, and the misery it causes in an ideological formation that

continually encourages impossible acts of social mobility. These melancholic images offer a prelude to Eggers' father's death, which it seems is partly the result of alcoholism. Tellingly at his funeral, the minister, who did not know his father or anything about him, talks – to Eggers' surprise – about 'how much he enjoyed his work.' (*Heartbreaking* 33). 'Did he?' Eggers wonders (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 33). Suggested in this rhetorical question is all the novel does not say explicitly about how work has impacted on Eggers' father's psyche.

While much has been made of the psychopathologies that emerge from the contradictions of middle-class life, less has been said about how these contradictions generate aesthetic sensibilities. This contradictory location appears in the normatively middle-class dispositions and tastes that we find in Eggers' description of his family home. Like all good middle-class participants, Eggers' family displays its class status through the pretensions and contrived aesthetic sensibilities that Pierre Bourdieu describes in *Distinction* (6). Eggers describes his home's furnishings as 'jumbled, the furniture competing with clenched teeth and sharp elbows' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 6). The living room, once the home of 'blood orange' chairs, now houses a 'tan coloured velour' couch and:

> In front of the couch is a coffee table made from a cross section of a tree, cut in such a way that the bark is still there, albeit heavily lacquered. We brought it back, many years ago, from California and it, like most of the house's furniture, is evidence of an empathetic sort of decorating philosophy – for aesthetically disenfranchised furnishings we are like the family that adopt troubled children and refugees from around the world – we see beauty within and cannot say no (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 7).

Eggers is at pains to emphasise the kitsch value of the decorations in his family home. This ability to value kitsch, in the term of Pierre Bourdieu (279), is a means of middle-class 'distinction'. It demonstrates 'the power… to constitute insignificant objects as works of art' (Bourdieu 279). A sense of irony and play, 'a second-degree delight', transforms the vulgar into something supposedly significant (Bourdieu 279). Such ludic consumption is, for Bourdieu (279-280), excessive and thus marks out those who have the financial means and cultural capital to engage in the riskiest acts of distinction. The worldly nature of the kitsch suggests worldly people too. Via Bourdieu's definition, we

can think of kitsch as a hallmark of postmodern middle-class taste. To push this further, the fascination with kitsch itself registers a contradictory class location. The fetishization of cheap, mass-produced goods made for a working population – a pseudo identification with a proletariat aesthetic – here mingles with an effort to culturally dominate – an explicitly bourgeois tendency. It is not coincidental that Eggers draws a symmetry between his family's attitude to homing old furniture and adopting 'troubled children and refugees'. The furniture effectively sublimates the middle-class family's attempts to empathise with those financially worse off. But this is far from simple: such empathy is itself refigured in the bourgeois calculus of status, carrying the potential to signify one's rank and emotional intelligence.

Yet, despite the tensions that lurk beneath the surface of Eggers' descriptions of his middle-class childhood, the author is mostly at pains to resolve these tensions as simply the normality of family life. During an interview to star on the MTV reality TV show *Real World,* Eggers attempts to play down any sense of his family as wealthy, instead opting to emphasise the ordinariness of his family's social standing (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 187-188). In emphasising these characteristics, Eggers restates a standard myth of the middle class as 'social norm', what Ehrenreich (3) describes as the 'bland and neutral mainstream – from which every other group or class is ultimately a kind of deviation'. The interviewer asks Eggers if in his neighbourhood while growing up there were social divisions based on wealth; to which Eggers responds:

> 'The kids who acted and dressed like they had
> money were outcasts, were pitied, weren't really
> allowed to be popular… So being obviously wealthy
> was the same as being too tall, too fat, having a boil
> on your neck. We all gravitated toward the middle.
> The popular kids drove trucks, bought the shittiest
> cars, had parents who were divorced or drunk or
> both, who lived far from the areas considered
> desirable. The rich kids, like the ones whose shorts
> were always tucked in, whose hair was always just
> so, or those who went to the private schools in town,
> were considered hopeless, troubled, eccentric'
> (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 187-188).

The 'middle class' here appears as the norm around which all other class positions are outliers. The more one gravitates toward this imaginary middle point the more normal one is considered to be. The normal American is, ultimately, the middle-class

American. Separating himself from the 'hopeless, troubled and eccentric' wealthier children, Eggers evidently sees himself as part of this middle.

As Ehrenreich (4) notes, many of the most 'familiar and important books about the American experience and character turn out to be entries into the swelling biography of the middle-class'. What Ehrenreich does not emphasise is that the effort to make the middle-class a metonym for the American people is part of a wider political project. It stages the myth of an exceptional nation where all are invited to partake in upward social mobility. Material contradictions and inconsistencies make the ideological parameters of the middle-class incredibly flexible. Eggers' above characterisation stretches the definition from those who drive 'the shittiest cars' – presumably the neighbourhood's poorer folk – to anyone who is not quite 'rich'. An overly compendious category of the 'middle-class' is undoubtedly a stable part of a national mythos reaching back to the settler period, but the definition offered here more specifically traces shifts in policy at the end of the twentieth century. Under the auspices of a Clinton administration attempting to regenerate the wavering myths of opportunity and mobility, the 'middle class' came to contain the majority of the US population, including a great many whose material circumstances were unequivocally that of the working class.

In *The Sinking Middle Class,* David Roediger traces Clinton's policy shift to his advisor and pollster Stanley Greenberg, who wrote a book influential in government circles titled *Middle Class Dreams,* which argued that the term 'middle class' should encompass its working counterpart because it defines an aspiration rather than a position, and one that is open even to those of modest means (Roediger 59). Greenberg was the intellectual force behind Clinton's initial candidacy in 1992, which campaigned around the issue of a "hard-working forgotten middle-class" (Roediger 73). This early conflation of the middle-class with "hard working America" became a staple of Clinton's appeals to a new era of social mobility, which exploited the various contradictory class positions that people in the US inhabit.

But as Roediger (73-74) points out, this apparent expansion of the middle class was in fact a recapitulation to a previous kind of exclusion. Clinton's and Greenberg's invocations of a middle-class were, more fundamentally, dog whistles to a white suburban population that sought to imply shared political interest (Roediger 73-74). The

rhetorical strategy Greenberg developed for Clinton came out of focus groups comprised exclusively of white people in Macomb County, from which Greenberg (325-326) took the following message: 'Not being black was what constituted being middle-class, not living with blacks was what made a neighbourhood a decent place to live'. Greenberg understood that appeals to the middle-class were heard by the electorate as appeals to white family values – a message central to Clinton's 1992 campaign.

Eggers' childhood milieu is the ideal that Clinton sought to invoke during his 1992 campaign: white, heterosexual "hardworking America". When the interviewer on *Real World,* provocatively puts to Eggers that his hometown 'was a fairly intolerant' place, Eggers responds by contending: 'Homogenous, yes; intolerant, no. It was overwhelmingly white, of course, but racism of any kind – at least outwardly expressed – is kind of gauche, so we basically grew up without any sense of prejudice, firsthand or even in the abstract' (Eggers 187). This passage perfectly encapsulates the racialized politics of Third Way policy: overt individual acts of racism are to be deplored, but racism can continue at institutional, geographical and economic levels so long as it does not draw attention to itself. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1362) argues that such shallow expressions of 'post-racial America' in fact constitute a 'new racism'. With the end to Jim Crow in the proper legal sense, Bonilla-Silva (1362-1363) claims, racism was further integrated at the economic level. For example, the residential segregation central to Jim Crow instead becomes embedded in housing and lending policy, credit worthiness and real estate steering (Bonilla-Silva 1362). For Bonilla-Silva (1362), '[t]hese practices illustrate new style discrimination because all of them are hard to detect and even harder to label "racial."'. Post-racial racism is ever-more built into economic dynamics in part because it no longer has an explicit legal channel.

The covert segregation of space is here key to producing the sense of post-racial America that Eggers invokes. In the almost exclusively white suburb of Lake Forest, 'prejudice' does not exist only because the objects of prejudice do not exist there. The only black residents to have ever lived in the neighbourhood during Eggers' childhood include 'four or five' families and the star of hit TV show *The A Team,* Mr T (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 189-190). In places like Lake Forest, racism is not an overt act but hidden as a social Darwinist ideology embedded in the everyday.

The community in which Eggers grew up was nearly exclusively white. In this sense, Eggers presents the middle class as a post-racial category only in as much as there were no black people around to test its boundaries. It is precisely this racialized model of the middle-class that provides a blueprint for community in the novel in a wider sense. Eggers' attempt to use the novel as a tool for constructing a community around his work has been well documented (Hamilton 32). As Hamilton (32) argues, 'Eggers casts himself as the Walt Whitman of Generation X: an ideal representative of a new community united in its obsession with self-promotion and attention' (32). But, as Hamilton notes (31), this is a peculiar form of community, modelled around narrow parameters: Eggers 'had only ever conceived of his readers *in his own image:* an audience of young people just like him.' In the introductory paratext, he tells the reader that 'he is like you' and in later sections describes himself as the 'common multiplier' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* xxvii, 236). Left out of Hamilton's account is Eggers' own description of who comprises this imagined community. To a friend, he later describes the 'collective' using the following terms: 'All-inclusive'; 'Raceless'; 'Genderless'; 'Youth'; 'Strength'; 'Potential' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 148). These terms suggest a sense of vitality, a sense of being able to develop into something new, or more fundamentally the myth of mobility that sits at the heart of middle-class life. But, as we have already seen, 'Raceless' to Eggers effectively means a lack of anyone who is not white. If we are left with any doubt that the middle-class community Eggers has in mind is exclusively white, he later spells it out – only somewhat glibly – during his job interview for a role on *Real World:* '[y]ou need someone like me. I represent tens of millions, I represent everyone who grew up suburban and white' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 205).

Like other sections of the novel, irony here strains against sincerity. One scholar notes that apparent irony in the novel is often absorbed by the more overwhelming acts of sincere emotion in which they are embedded (Smith 84). The jokes remain frivolous – ultimately meaningless – because the crux of the text is the trauma of familial death and the emotive language Eggers uses to describe it. But Eggers' use of irony is somewhat more complex than this reading of the novel suggests. Irony becomes a way to hedge sincerity, to avoid being perceived as earnest or pious, but mostly to avert accusations of being mercenary. Eggers wants to tell the reader that he intends to represent the white middle-class, mostly for financial gain, but he also wants to create sufficient uncertainty

around such statements to ward off potential criticism. As earlier noted, overt expressions of racism are considered by Eggers to be 'kind of gauche' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 187). Yet, targeting specific races for market interests is perfectly acceptable, so long as one does so with a wink and a nudge.

There is something of Slavoj Zizek's (*Sublime* 26-27) definition of 'cynical reason' to Eggers' mode of address. Using the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's concept of 'cynical reason', Zizek (*Sublime* 19) distinguishes between Marx's definition of ideology as false consciousness - 'they do not know it but they are doing it' - and its ironic contemporary form - 'they know very well what they are doing, but, still, they do it'. When Eggers asserts that he represents tens of millions of white, middle-class Americans, he knows that he is asserting something deeply ideological. But by saying it as a 'joke', he can get away with saying what he means without *really* saying it.

Rather than an example of cynical irony, scholarship tends to position the text as a pioneer of a new aesthetic gesture that goes beyond postmodernism, what some scholars have termed 'post-irony' (Konstantinou 164). Lee Konstantinou (164), for instance, regards Eggers writing as exemplary of an aesthetic mode that uses sincerity strategically to transcend the limits of cynical irony. He regards Eggers as part of a group of literary authors he refers to as 'postironists', who seek to retain postmodernism's critical insights but at the same time offer a critique of its tendency toward cynicism and apathy. Yet, this reading conveniently ignores Eggers' use of blank irony to resist commitment to sincere expression.

Other scholars have preferred the term 'New Sincerity' to 'post-irony' to make a similar argument. As Adam Kelly ('David' 136) argues, this peculiar 'new' kind of sincerity is where 'the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behaviour begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status, and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic'. Lost to this definition is the standard and by no means unproblematic version of sincerity as the true expression of one's authentic feelings. Kelly ('David' passim) instead argues for a new kind of sincerity as primarily performance-based, in the wake of a postmodern moment that has deconstructed a stable subject capable of entirely authentic acts.

This part of Kelly's more comprehensive thesis helps us to build a theory of sincerity and irony in *AHBWOSG*. Eggers' particular brand of sincerity might in fact be best referred to as 'cynical', in that it effectively crafts sincere acts in anticipation of the reader's response—Eggers knows very well that simple acts of sincerity are no longer possible or indeed aesthetically straightforward but he performs them anyway. There is something ironic about this kind of sincerity in the twofold Adornian sense of 'expression of meaning by use of words normally conveying the opposite meaning' and 'apparent perversity of fate or circumstances' (Rose 22). Sincerity has, in the postmodern moment, somewhat perversely gone beyond the conditions of its possibility, yet Eggers acts as if it were still possible.

Rather than defining the text as essentially sincere or ironic, better to understand it as shifting gears between performances of irony and sincerity, both of which are driven by a cynical recognition that one does not truly believe what they are asserting, but one will say it if it brings about material gain. As we will see in section three, Eggers' motives are not, as Konstantinou and Kelly respectively suggest, purely aesthetic, driven by an impulse to break free from the shackles of postmodernism, but are largely economic. The anticipatory use of irony and sincerity, in part, expresses the precarious position that Eggers comes to occupy alongside the endless acts of self-PR necessary to protect one's employability amid such precarity. Before we get to this stage of the argument, we must first consider precisely how Eggers uses rhetorical shifts between sincerity and irony to help reimagine the middle-class in ways that harmonise with the policy programme of the Clinton administration.

The Precarious Middle

AHBWOSG aesthetically colludes in a strategy to expand at the level of the imaginary the number of white US citizens who count as middle-class and, in so doing, the novel further advances the narrative taken up by the Clinton administration of the white middle-class as the political and cultural norm of US society, even as the administration introduced fiscal measures that contracted the material base of this class position. The point of the Clinton administration's new capacious 'middle-class' category was to incorporate those falling down the social ladder within a rhetoric that appealed to their sentiments and values. To do so, the contours of the middle-class had to be stretched at the level of the imaginary, but in ways that elided its debased material status. In a

moment when US class boundaries and positions had been disrupted by the neoliberal policy programmes of Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior, the middle-class was ripe for reshaping.

In *The Bourgeois,* Franco Moretti (14) argues that literature originally gave shape to a nascent middle-class, whereby 'the spasms of capitalist modernization' were 'matched and reshaped by literary form-giving'. The 'bourgeois' or middle-class—the two are often interchangeable throughout the book's pages— was 'resolved' in writing while the tensions that gave birth to it 'vanished from sight' (Moretti 14). Literature gave 'regularity', a 'solid' form, to what was otherwise nascent and indistinct (Moretti 15). Through certain 'keywords', or key ideas, Morretti (19) claims in the book's introduction, 'the peculiarities of bourgeois culture will emerge from the implicit, and often buried dimension of language: a 'mentality' made of unconscious grammatical patterns and semantic associations, more than clear and distinct ideas.'

Moretti's argument is perhaps somewhat literature-centric in a moment when other cultural forms such as social media tend to be the places where the ideological contours of class relations are negotiated. Nonetheless, the 'mentality' of grammar and semantics remain a repository for material relations, and changes in accordance with these relations. As the material relations that determine the middle-class shift, so too must the ideological parameters that give it form. The middle class structured by the stable Fordist wage looks very different to the one that emerges from neoliberalism's flexible form of accumulation, which tends to privilege temporary labour contracts, short-term profits and few sunk costs. This economic shift was well under way before Clinton came to power, but his administration accelerated these processes and consolidated them into a new labour market consensus. It was around this shift that a new idiom - a new set of 'keywords' - emerged, though in a prototypically bourgeois register, that repackaged insecurity as "choice" and "independence", and employability as "entrepreneurship" and "self-branding".

After his parent's deaths, Eggers experiences domestic and labour based precarity, but the passages that deal with this experience tend to be rendered in a light-hearted, often casual tone. There are a few exceptions. When Eggers attempts to find rental accommodation for him and his brother soon after his parents' deaths, he reflects on the 'relatively dingy reality' of their 'new lives':

> We would have no garage, no washer and dryer, no
> dishwasher, no disposal, no closets, no bathtub.
> Some of the places we saw didn't even have doors
> on the bedroom. I felt terrible, felt personally
> responsible; I began to look without Toph, to spare
> him the gore. We were in decline. In Chicago, we
> had a house, an ample kind of house, four bedrooms,
> a yard, a creek running behind, huge, hundred-year-
> old trees, a little hill, some woods (Eggers
> *Heartbreaking* 72).

The middle-class world Eggers once belonged to has dematerialized in front of his eyes. The banal things that signified stability and security - closets, bathtubs and garages - are now imbued with significance, appearing as melancholic testaments to a life now gone. In their place, he finds the 'gore' of horrible rental properties. Their stark lack of luxury brings home to Eggers his material decline. As he notes of his surviving family a few pages later, 'we had all accepted smaller, humbler situations' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 73).

These passages stand out in the book as brief moments when Eggers recognises his new downwardly mobile status. When Eggers eventually finds a 'not at all perfect' rental property, he states 'We feel temporary here' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 75, 78). But unlike the above passage Eggers does not valorise this feeling as either positive or negative. Indeed, in the book's later chapters, the insecurities that come with being temporary are not only accepted but sincerely celebrated as independence and choice, much in the manner that precarity was being sold to individuals by policymakers. While living in San Francisco, Eggers works as a temp, presumably via an agency, for a variety of different companies. Unlike his evidently ambiguous feelings around living in temporary accommodation, Eggers overall finds temporary work to be a positive experience, in ways that reflect the ideological efforts of capital and government during the period to make white collar insecurity appear attractive. While undertaking a temporary position at a geographical surveying company, Eggers explain:

> The temp doesn't have to pretend that he cares about
> their company and they don't have to pretend that
> they owe him anything. And finally, just when the
> job, like almost any job would, becomes too boring
> to continue, when the temp has learned anything he
> could have learned, and has milked it for the $18/hr
> and whatever kitsch value it may have had, when to
> continue anymore would be a sort of death and

would show a terrible lack of respect for his valuable
time—usually after three or four days—then, neatly
enough, the assignment is over. *Perfect* (Eggers
Heartbreaking 85).

Eggers works in the IT industry where the 'permatemp' of white-collar work first became a business staple in the early 1990s (Hyman 255-257). Though the wages are measly, and the work is dull, Eggers values temporary work because it offers autonomy, independence and the ability to move out of a job before it becomes too boring. There is a certain amount of irony in how Eggers treats the content of the job, but it mostly disguises a genuine desire for a more flexible form of work. In Eggers' understanding, neither worker nor employer have a responsibility to the other, so 'one can bring a walkman if one so desires, can take a fifteen-minute break, walk around, read— It's bliss' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 85). But, in a very clear way, this understanding reflects the efforts of US governments from the Reagan administration onwards to reimagine the management and organisation of white-collar work in ways that make precariousness seem attractive, what Louis Hyman (210) in *Temp: how American work, American business and the American dream became temporary* calls 'restructuring the American dream'. It is the moment in Hyman's (253) telling when the white-collar worker increasingly comes to have the same set of rights and benefits as the itinerant worker, justified by the ideological mantra of the 'lean corporation'. Or, to paraphrase Eggers, this is the moment when the company no longer has to pretend to owe the white-collar worker anything other than a wage. It is telling that Eggers does not frame his temporary work in the same manner that he does his temporary housing situation. Rather, following the ideological restructuring described by Hyman, temporary work presents greater choice, flexibility and independence. From Eggers' perspective, there are few drawbacks to this newfound freedom.

The above passage expresses a particular cultural trend that helped to solidify precarious white-collar work as a new labour market dominant. Eggers' apathetic attitude in the above passage seems in part to be lambasting the pejorative term 'slackers' applied to Generation X in the 1990s. The term denotes a generation that supposedly lacks vitality. But, as Hyman (267) notes, the so called "slackers" of the 1990s might better be seen as labour market slack, 'the leftovers in a downsized economy'. Slacker culture may better be understood as the cultural expression of a labour market that offers very little in the way of care and responsibility. For the most part, temps were only recently workers

who would have had long-term, full-time employee status. Rather than a term to moralise the supposedly workshy attitude of Gen Xers, the above passage suggests, 'slacker' became a way to give this new labour market consensus a kind of ironic significance, an almost countercultural value on the part of the worker. Part of the way that government and company management turned involuntary temp status into a new consensus was by presenting the transformation in the perversely optimistic tone that seems to be reflected in the above passage by Eggers. Allegedly, the worker would now have greater freedom and flexibility as a temp than as a full-time employee; employers would have greater flexibility to downsize as and when the market dictated, which, as Eggers seems to suggest, is a win-win situation.

Precariousness and temporariness might also be the best terms to describe the working lives of Eggers' peers, none of whom are in full-time or waged employment, and instead work insecurely either as freelancers or interns in the media industry growing up alongside Silicon Valley (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 170-171). A work life fragmented across entrepreneurial pursuits, temping and auditions for reality TV as well as the casual basis of the little wage labour undertaken offer a precarious existence, but one that is here rendered in the same terms as the techno-futuristic boosterism of Silicon Valley advocates. Eggers describes the building where he has started his magazine *Might* as 'a place where people are creating and working to change the *very way we live'* (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 170). It houses *Wired,* 'countless software start-up companies, web developers, Internet providers magazines… graphic designers, architects' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 170). It is the home of:

> a green oval teeming with the vernal and progressive
> and new and beautiful. They have tattoos before
> everyone has tattoos. They ride motorcycles, and
> their leather is amazing… there are bike messengers
> who also write socialist tracts, and bike messengers
> who are 200lb transvestites, and writers who prefer
> to surf, and raves are still attracting crowds, and the
> young creative elites of San Francisco are here and
> only here, do not want to be elsewhere, because
> technology-wise New York is ten or twelve years
> behind—you can't even email anyone there yet—and
> style-wise L.A. is so 80s, because here, in stark
> contrast, there is no money, no one is allowed to
> make money, or spend money, or like you've spent
> money, money is suspect, the making of money and

caring about money (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 170-171).

The passage seems to satirise the myth of the genius and glamour of the hipster dreamworld that grew up around Silicon Valley in the late 1990s. It appears to cast a knowing eye on the myth of the 'creative class' that Sarah Brouillette (21) finds in the literature on the subject during that period: 'They are attracted not to big sports complexes or Opera houses but to authentic bohemian downtowns, peppered with coffee shops, music venues and a mix of people from diverse races and classes and with different sexual orientations'. But the ironic register that characterises the passage is precisely the kind of in-jokey bonhomie that the rising tech industry used to make a new regime of precarious work appear as if it were the preserve of a new elite community, what Eggers calls 'the young creative elite'. This is another example of how the text shifts between and blurs acts of irony and sincerity in ways that reflect capitalism's growing ideological tendency in the 1990s toward cynical reason. As Naomi Klein (69) notes, in the 1990s, a certain countercultural cool became central to the marketing strategies of Apple and Microsoft, which sought through edgy, often ironic advertising to distinguish themselves from the grey, fusty tech companies of old such as IBM. But as Klein (249-250) shows, the image cultivated by capitalists such as Bill Gates hid the reality that most of their 'creative elite' workforce were in fact 'permatemps'.

This being so, the above passage suggests that the trend of wearing cheap clothes described above may have been a way of presenting poverty and precarity as countercultural cachet, a fashion response to bad material conditions, which was later coopted by those who had power and money, hence the casual dress of today's Silicon magnates. One might reasonably conclude from Eggers' words that it was uncool to make money because in Silicon Valley, despite the image being sold, getting rich was for the majority of creatives close to impossible. Instead, the culture gave people opportunities to feel "cool", and essentially involved in something meaningful. Even more fundamentally, this cynical irony appears to be a particularly neoliberal cultural response to worsening material conditions, an attempt to deflect and essentially repress the new, emerging class-based reality of downward mobility.

These passages show how creative class rhetoric was not only used to impart privilege on a specific section of the workforce, but mainly to disguise the worsening conditions of the majority. The bike messengers, for instance, in the above passage are part of the

newly thriving 'gig economy' that appears in the late 1990s with the birth of Craigslist in the bay area (Hyman 293-294). Interestingly, these messengers are rendered in the same group as software developers and graphic designers, showing the ways in which precarious work was reimagined, at least at the level of marketing, as in some sense cool or glamorous. Similarly, it should again be emphasised that even jobs such as graphic designers and IT specialists were in the process of being proletarianized during this period, as both Hyman (288-289) and Klein (249). As the ironic tone of the above passage implies, new kinds of precarious work were tolerated, even invited, by the middle-class so long as they were considered cool, had a semblance of "autonomy" and appealed to middle-class sensibilities of what Eggers earlier describes in reference to his temp job as 'kitsch value' (*Heartbreaking* 85). The work is in 'poor taste' but so long as one knows this and demonstrates one's knowingness then there is little to feel ashamed about in terms of one's declining class position. Indeed, having a bad job and knowing it, Eggers seems to suggest, is itself demonstrative of high cultural capital, and is evidence to others that one is still middle-class.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Branding

As I argued in the previous section, *AHBWOSG* helps to give shape to an increasingly precarious middle-class, in ways that promote both Clinton's and capital's attempts to reestablish the middle-class on new grounds, all the while erasing at the level of policy the material conditions that make this class possible. In this section, I consider more specifically how Eggers gives aesthetic shape to a newly precarious, downwardly mobile middle class by integrating employability at the level of narrative form. Like other novels featured in this study, *AHBWOSG* is, in no small part, an act of self-branding – or, more fundamentally, an act of employability – which ultimately normalises employability as part of middle-class existence. In this way, the novel makes legible at the level of aesthetics the neoliberal shift to greater labour flexibility and fiscal tightening under the Clinton administration.

As a number of contemporary scholars have argued, those who experience their labour through precarity and superfluity as opposed to more stable forms of exploitation are likely to spend more of their time looking for work than actually doing it. In this spirit, large portions of *AHBWOSG* are taken up by Eggers struggling to find a job. In one of

the text's longest sections, Eggers interviews for a part on MTV's reality TV show, Real-World, an interview that does not land him the gig but nonetheless operates on a metafictional level to enhance his employability *outside* of the text, notably through ironizing the very acts of self-promotion required to make oneself employable. The way that the author achieves this relies on autobiographical techniques that present the character Eggers as a veracious representation of himself. Referencing the ambition of the novel, the character Eggers boldly states to the interviewer his ambition to reveal the "true" story of his parents' deaths and to play the part of traumatized orphan: 'Let me share this with millions. I will do it slowly, subtly, tastefully', then going on to plead:

> I promise I will be good. I will be sad and hopeful. I will be the conduit. I will be the beating heart. Please see this! I am the common multiplier for 47million! I am the perfect amalgam! I was born of both stability and chaos. I have seen nothing and everything. I am twenty-four but feel ten thousand years old. I am emboldened by youth, unfettered and hopeful (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 235-236).

There are a couple of things worthy of note in the above passage: first, the emphasis on promises; and second, Eggers' excessive efforts to appear authentic, here to the fictional interviewer but more generally throughout the text to the reader, which here hypertrophies to the point of satire. As we will soon see, these two aspects – promises and authenticity – are bound together in our modern culture of employability, but are also – to slightly differing degrees – key formal qualities of the memoir form. What I want to suggest here is that Eggers uses the memoir form as a means to enhance his employability, as an act of self-branding, even as he ironizes the use of the form for such purposes. Other scholars have sought to read these sections through the lens of celebrity culture, and Eggers' efforts to become a 'one man zeitgeist', an accolade that the novel in no small part helped to realise for the author (Hamilton 5).[5] But Eggers' relationship with celebrity throughout *AHBWOSG* can only be understood if we recognise the more fundamental necessity to work for a living that ultimately drives his urge for recognition. As earlier noted, Eggers may now be one of the most financially successful authors working in the world today, but the story told in *AHBWOSG* is of the

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[5] For original use of the term 'one man zeitgeist', see: Daniel Stacey's article 'No More Brilliance' in the *Australian*. Throughout this chapter I refer to Hamilton's use of the term to consider Eggers efforts to fashion himself as an entrepreneur as well as writer.

years preceding his fame, when Eggers was still working precarious agency jobs, struggling to pay the rent and to financially support his younger brother.

To start, it is worth considering the relationship between employability and promises. Eggers's initial promise to be good is a promise to do the job well, which in this case means being entertaining. An interview itself may be taken as a promise of the candidate's ability to perform. In other words, the interview represents the candidate's employability. *AHBWOSG* was written against a backdrop of the US government replacing Keynesian stimulus packages which aimed at ensuring labour demand with job training and assistance initiatives with a new flexible regime that instead makes the worker entirely accountable for gaining and presenting their skills. In 1996, only a few years before Eggers wrote *AHBWOSG*, the Clinton Administration enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which reduced welfare access to low-income families and sought to encourage large numbers of the jobless back into the labour market. Describing an earlier iteration of the bill in a 1994 address to congress, Clinton stated: 'Each recipient will be required to develop a personal employability plan designed to move that individual into the workforce as quickly as possible' (Clinton). Termed by Wendy Brown (132-133) 'responsibilization', the spirit of the bill became a more general strategy at the level of governmental and institutional policy across the global North, framing problems once considered social as the sole responsibility of the individual.

As entrenched economic problems are outsourced to individuals, the worker is forced to increasingly 'work-for-labour' – work that, in Guy Standing's (141) words, often 'does not have exchange value but which is necessary or advisable'. 'Working hard *and* hardly working' captures the liminal position of a worker that spends more time crafting their social media presence, updating their CV, rehearsing for interviews and undertaking 'internships' than performing the wage labour such activities aim toward (La Berge 'Decommodified'). 'Employability' is the name most often attributed to the various responsibilities that comprise 'work-for-labour' – responsibilities that, following Eggers' choice of words, centre around the worker's 'promise'. In their critique of Wolfgang Haug's *Commodity Aesthetics*, Matt Phull and Will Stronge argue that 'employability' represents the *aesthetic* promise of labour-power. Extending Haug's theory of marketing and advertising to Marx's (*Capital* 270) 'special commodity', they

consider the aesthetic processes by which the worker markets themselves. Haug (*Critique* 13-17) locates marketing in a problem inherent to the exchange relation: how to maintain a continual and smooth passage for value between seller and buyer. For value to be realised, the commodity must be sold, which depends on a buyer desiring its use value. A buyer will only purchase a Macbook pro, for instance, if they have some purpose for it. But this raises the question: in a market saturated with laptops, why buy this particular model? Haug (*Critique* 16) asserts that the problem of how to cathect a buyer to a particular product leads to 'a tendency time and again to modify the commodity body, i.e. its 'use form'. Thus, 'the *appearance* of use value', 'the impression of use', not the use-value itself, is what draws the buyer into a purchase (Haug *Critique* 16-17). This distinction is important because 'until the sale is effected, the commodity's promise of use-value is all that counts.' (Haug *Critique* 16). Thus, all the semantic and affective connotations evinced in the design and marketing of a Macbook promise the buyer a particular use, which may be as abstract as a particular lifestyle or as concrete as user-friendly software. From the illusion of cosmopolitan cool promised by a Macbook Pro to a billboard depicting a can of Coca-Cola dripping with condensation, the promissory aesthetics of the commodity over its objective form is ultimately what leads to a sale and the realisation of value.

Somewhat oddly, Haug does not apply his theory of commodity aesthetics to the labour-power commodity. Elaborating Haug's work, Phull and Stronge argue that the use-value of labour-power similarly transpires as an illusory promise in advance of its sale in the wage relation. In the most fundamental sense, the body of the labour-power commodity itself, that is, the labourer's body, makes a promise to the capitalist buyer (Phull and Stronge). This might be the promise of an able body at the factory gate; the promise of a child's small frame to fit in a narrow chimney; or the promise of the female body to do reproductive labour.[6] More pertinent to our current purposes, in a moment when the mediation of things and bodies is ubiquitous, the promise of labour power takes the shape of an '[a]esthetic abstraction', which 'detaches sensuousness and sense from an object and makes them available separately' (Haug *Commodity* 115). This 'second surface', 'incomparably more perfect than the first' might take the form of a CV or social media profile such as

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[6] Through Federici's theory of the female body as reproductive labourer, we can read femininity itself as promising a woman's capacity to reproduce the workforce (17).

LinkedIn, which presents labour-power in an illusory ideal form.(Haug *Commodity* 115) Indeed, much as any other commodity, the promise of labour-power comprises a range of promises to solicit a range of buyers, marketing itself through manners, sartorial choices, as well as online media.

Returning to the above passage from *AHBWOSG,* Eggers' effort to present himself to the interviewer as an immaculate expression of the zeitgeist strongly echoes Haug's illusory commodity promise. Describing himself to the interviewer as 'the common multiplier for 47million…the perfect amalgam' Eggers translates himself into an aesthetic abstraction. He crafts a 'second surface' to appeal to the interviewer and his reader. Much like any good interviewee, he is willing at that moment to turn himself into whatever is necessary to get the job. That is to say, he crafts himself in an attractive light for the interviewer, who he regards as warden to both the means of survival and recognition – a surrogate, I would argue, for the reader, the real target of Eggers' seductive efforts.

To look at Eggers' later career and the 'new sincerity' aesthetic he is said to have pioneered, one might read the terms he chooses in this passage as extraordinarily portentous, but only if one were to not read the novel as a calculated act of self-branding. As we will see in a later section, Eggers claim that 'I will be sad and hopeful' and 'the beating heart', promise the reader an affective register that not only moves through *AHBWOSG,* but also Eggers' wider oeuvre. The felt experience of emotional authenticity, a sincerity of feeling is, then, the promise that Eggers not only makes to the interviewer but also the reader. Though Eggers' promise of raw emotion is illusory to such a gratuitous degree that the illusion immediately breaks—that is to say, he does not receive the job—his authentic honesty about failing at something important might only be said to further ingratiate Eggers to the novel's audience. In the lengthy paratext that forms the book's preface, Eggers (*Heartbreaking* xxxii) notes with a degree of self-irony that 'We all like full disclosure, particularly if it includes the admission of one's 1) mortality 2) propensity to fail'. Eggers' willingness to admit his flaws to the reader, his failed attempts at fame and ongoing emotional insecurity, making him seem in his own words 'at once pitiful and monstrous', is supposed to demonstrate a refreshing realness, but one not entirely adverse to irony – a 'new sincerity' if you will (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 236).

Formal experiments with irony, however, are always at the behest of sincere emotional communication. In the paratext that introduces the novel, Eggers refers to these experiments as 'gimmickry', 'a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and too blinding to look at—*avert…your…eyes*!' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* xxx). In a kind of humble brag, the reader is warned that the emotional content of the book is too potent and, therefore, must be laced with a few jokes to be bearable. Beneath the formal experiments, which appears to treat the reader with intellectual generosity, is a didactic impulse that right from the novel's outset tells the reader how to feel.

For this reason, many critics of the novel have noted Eggers' tendency to use emotion in ways that reflect a "neoliberal" mode of subjectivity, that trades on sincere emotion for entrepreneurial gain (R. Smith 85) (Worden 167). This stretches across Eggers' wider enterprise, as Daniel Worden (167) writes of the author in his critique of memoir and neoliberalism: 'Eggers and his McSweeneys publishing ventures are dependent on valorising the personal and intimate, as the aesthetic category of the New Sincerity often invoked to discuss McSweeneys points out'. As earlier noted, the term 'New Sincerity' has been used to generically differentiate the intimate and personal narratives that have ostensibly superseded a postmodern moment of ironic detachment, and may signal a shift toward something resembling a neoliberal aesthetic. R. Smith (85) takes *AHBWOSG* as indicative of this shift, claiming that by offering the reader a sense of radical textual agency while simultaneously absorbing such agency in sentimental emotion, the formal structure of *AHBWOSG* traces the neoliberal tendency to elevate individual choice while systemically restricting it. Irony and satire, on the one hand, act to deconstruct the memoir form, offering the reader a sense of transparency and choice, while a forceful and ultimately instrumental sincerity uses the emotional registers of the form to create a stifling affective terrain, which, I would argue, ultimately serves to enlist the reader as Eggers' acolyte.

The effect of the novel, I would argue, is to cathect the reader to Eggers as opposed to the text itself. R. Smith's argument that the novel uses an overwhelming emotional register is here useful, but it tends to focus on how this register confounds the reader's agency in ways that resemble neoliberal forms of governance, rather than considering

how it bonds the reader to Eggers himself. To demonstrate this argument one need look no further than the final paragraph of the novel, in which Eggers delivers what might be called a neoliberal soliloquy:

> I am somewhere on some stupid rickety scaffolding
> and I'm trying to show you this– What the fuck
> does it take to show you motherfuckers, what does it
> fucking take what do you want how much do you
> want because I am willing and I'll stand before you
> and I'll raise my arms and give you my chest and
> throat and wait, and I've been so old for so long, for
> you, for you, I want it fast and right through me–
> Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you
> fuckers finally, finally, finally (Eggers
> *Heartbreaking* 437).

The novel climaxes in an overwhelming spectacle of sincerity, where the emotional weight of Eggers performance is overtly directed at his audience. He assures us that the confession that forms the body of the text – the heartbreaking work – has been written solely for the reader, and that the writing of the novel, the experience of laying bare his traumatic experience, has been a painful one. Yet, the image of Eggers on the scaffolding, precariously stood above the reader, hoping to secure their attention, suggests that the book is not really about the reader at all, but the author. What is most immediate about these passages is the emotional weight of Eggers' performance, but what this actually aims to achieve is a readerly commitment to the author as a kind of damaged hero. These passages, as R. Smith (85) rightly contends, are emotionally absorptive and ultimately seek to paralyse the readers' agency. But, it should be added, they absorb the reader not merely into the text but also into the world of the author.

So far, my contention that Eggers simply overwhelms the reader's emotions for economic gain remains too distant from the concrete of Eggers' material conditions. In what sense precisely is emotion leveraged for economic gain and by what economic logic? Indeed, in what sense is this supposedly neoliberal author different from any other novelist who writes for a living? One could similarly accuse the Pynchons and Nabokovs of the so-called postmodern period of using irony for economic gain. What scholars like Hamilton and R. Smith suggest, but never quite arrive at as an explicit position, is that *AHBWOSG* differs from a typically postmodern text in that it *acts*

economically, not only in the sense that it makes money for the author on the market (like any successful novel), but as a form in its own right, i.e., a component of his self-brand.

There is certainly something of the *neoliberal* to all of this: the entrepreneurial ambitions, the shameless self-promotion and false sense of readerly choice, which one can locate throughout the novel's pages. A more historically precise and theoretically rigorous answer, however, might be arrived at if we consider how Eggers' use of sincerity for explicitly economic purposes reflects his material experience throughout the narrative. i.e., the downward mobility that pushes him towards acts of self-promotion, namely to find work. Monolithic abstractions such as "neoliberal subjectivity" perhaps forget the more concrete material experiences that comprise subjectivity in an economic context of precarious work, bad housing and diminished state welfare. If we read the novel's form as driven by Eggers' desire to find and maintain decent work – as both an expression and an act of employability – a brand promise – we can incorporate the other material experiences that critics have omitted from their readings of the novel as a neoliberal text.

Brand Eggers and the Promise of Memoir

Self-branding might be regarded as the ur-form of employability in a US of slowing job growth, where policymakers have sought to shift a culture of so-called state dependence to one of individual independence. It allows policymakers to reframe the jobless, the jobseeker and the barely employed as something like Michel Foucault's (226) corporation of one. More precisely, as Ilana Gershon (2, 29) notes in her study of work and hiring in contemporary San Francisco and Silicon Valley, *Down and Out in the New Economy,* personal branding discourse emerges from a new metaphor for labour practises that reframes an increasingly precarious worker as a firm. As *AHBWOSG* reveals, Eggers existed in the San Francisco tech milieu that Gershon contends incubated the kinds of corporate-based metaphors that now dominate employability discourse. His magazine *Might* is located in the same offices as 'countless start up software companies, Web developers, Internet providers' as well as, *Wired,* a magazine now synonymous with the culture of the 'new economy' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 170). Focussing on the 'lifestyles' of those associated with the dot-com boom, we can say that

Eggers' magazine cultivated this growing economy of digital media, an economy that later became a target of critique in his novel *The Circle*. No such critique exists in *AHBWOSG*. Rather, as earlier noted, Eggers describes the milieu as a 'green oval teeming with the vernal and progressive and new and beautiful' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 170).

Eggers' existence during this period was very much a part of the media culture – exemplified by *Wired* and *Fast Company* – that initially disseminated the early discourse of self-branding. This is likely one of the reasons why the novel's form reflects many of the qualities personal brand discourse demands of workers, of which a number of homologies are here worth considering. The earliest iteration of such discourse is found in an article for *Fast Company* written during the early years of the dot-com bubble by Tom Peters, a New Economy management guru, who asserts that a personal brand is a 'promise' which must be expressed concisely in '15-words-or-less'. Montoya and Vandehey (5) in *The Brand Called You* similarly assert that a 'Personal Brand is a promise', comparing it to 'Apple's brand promise', which creates 'expectations in the minds of others'. A self-brand, then, need not represent a particular line of work, a fixed and stable use for the worker, but instead must comprise a promissory image – concise and easily read by the employer or client that the worker hopes to attract. Returning to Eggers' interview for a place on MTV's *Real World,* we see how both reality TV and the novel itself embody these demands:

> Can you not see what I represent? I am both a) martyred moralizer and b) amoral omnivore born of the suburban vacuum + idleness + television + Catholicism + alcoholism + violence: I am a freak in secondhand velour, a leper who uses L'Oreal Anti-sticky Mega Gel. I am rootless, ripped from all foundations (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 236-237).

We might first note the claim of being 'rootless, ripped from all foundations', a claim that suggests how during the interview Eggers' capacity as a human has become unmoored from actual use and has thus entered the free-floating realm of the fictitious and promissory. To this effect, Eggers renders his personality as a series of suggestive claims which, much as the advice offered by personal-brand advocates, reduces the self to a concise set of semantically and affectively dense terms. Merely suggestive of who

Eggers' is, these terms make no direct claim to a 'real' personality. Instead, the experiences of parental 'alcoholism' and 'violence' invoked by Eggers promise an authentic struggle at the centre of his being, an illusory real that he wagers will appeal to the show's producers. There is the usual jokiness – a satirical wink to the audience – that one cannot ignore in these passages. Gratuitously listing his qualities as if they were commodities the interviewer or indeed reader might choose from, Eggers accentuates the often-farcical levels of self-alienation required to promote oneself, all the while continuing to happily promote himself. The joke – like in passages earlier analysed – might be seen as a kind of hedging strategy against an excessive degree of sincerity that threatens to tip into something that looks suspiciously like commitment to a dubious ideology, an obsequious following of the maxim to promote oneself. One might say the joke's function is unambiguously economic. It helps Eggers to seem self-aware as opposed to naïve, to assure the sceptical reader that he is not someone who would adopt a form of sincerity that simply expresses the status quo of self-promotion found in the literature of many of his memoirist peers. If anything, these acts of self-irony balance the overwhelming emotional weight of Eggers' performance, and only serve to bolster his appeal to sincere communication.

The instrumental sincerity that Eggers' text relies on reflects the code of conduct advocated by self-brand advocates, who emphasise the need to honestly represent oneself as a means to advancing one's interests. In the introductory pages to the self-help book, *Me 2.0,* Dan Schawbel tells the reader that acting sincerely is key to crafting a trustworthy and successful self-brand (6-7). Schawbel claims that 'transparency', 'authenticity' and 'credibility' are key to 'garnering customer attention and loyalty', qualities that are standardly regarded as necessary conditions for sincere communication (6-7).

By the lights of its advocates, then, a good self-brand should offer an honest narrative of the self. In this fundamental respect, it begins to resemble to a significant degree what we tend to call memoirist writing. Memoir, as it is traditionally regarded, takes the form of "a book understood by its author, its publisher, and its readers to be a factual account of the author's life" (Yagoda 1). But this offers only a partial understanding of memoir in a world where narratives of the self flourish in a great many arenas beyond literature. Memoir is not simply a literary form but a socioeconomic one, too, and one which

under the rule of neoliberal ideology becomes, in the words of Yagoda (28), 'the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged'. Similarly taking the autobiographical as social activity, Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson (4) use 'life narrative' to term 'autobiographical acts of any sort', including the 'written, performative, visual, filmic or digital'. I would further add that in a moment when the abstract promise of the worker – their experiences, personality, attitudes and values – are often elevated above concrete use, labour itself has become increasingly autobiographical, with the labourer expected to craft a 'life narrative' for their personal brand.

As *AHBWOSG* continually reminds the reader, the central promise of memoir is that of authenticity. The public scandal of James Frey's 2003 memoir *A Million Little Pieces* which turned out to be a fiction masquerading as memoir reveals the exile from public life that faces an author who dares dissemble "fiction" as autobiographical "fact". Similarly, according to the writers of books like *Me 2.0* and *the Brand Called You,* a self-brand that represents someone as something they are not is destined to fail (Schawbel; 6-7, Montoya and Vandehey 5). The demand of both memoir and brand culture is to portray as honestly as possible the truth of one's personality, and in *AHBWOSG,* we see how this singular demand coheres into a single written form. We can venture that Eggers imagines the *work* of literature as work on one's personality, and the product, the *lifework,* a vessel from which this personality can be marketed as potential labour power. *AHBWOSG* thus offers a cultural form where the lines between employability, art and the author's personal life have effectively vanished, where the difference between CV, self-help, brand and novel is increasingly difficult to identify.

Yet, as Leigh Gilmore suggests, Eggers was not the first to recognise the memoir's potential to establish an author as brand. Analysing the bestseller, Oprah Winfrey-endorsed memoirs published by Elizabeth Wurtzel, Augusten Burroughs, Dave Peltzer and James Frey, Gilmore (658) notes how:

> writers with little or no previously established claim
> on public attention have become an identifiable
> neoconfessional brand by reviving key elements of
> American autobiographical narrative for new

audiences, reawakening national fantasies of individualism, and promoting new normativities in life narrative that displace histories of racial and gendered violence with tales of individual hardship and redemption.

Eggers is often spared this lens of critique due to his putatively literary status. But could not the same be said of *AHBWOSG*? The novel at times seems to bask in the elision of political questions, instead focussing on the apparently individual hardships of the author. Even the author's social experience of downward mobility is coded in a language of individual trauma and personal duty, as we saw in the previous section. When assessing the rental options available to him and his brother after their parents' deaths, he notes 'some of the places we saw didn't even have doors on the bedrooms. I felt terrible, felt personally responsible' (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 72). Significantly, a large proportion of their income available for renting and putting down a deposit arrives from Toph's Social Security (Eggers *Heartbreaking* 72). That their inability to afford better accommodation undoubtedly relates to the reforms to social security introduced by the Bush and Clinton administrations, namely to push a new employability policy regime, only appears in the sublimated form of Eggers' efforts to brand himself. Eggers is not curious as to why he feels 'personally responsible' for the financial downfall sparked by the traumatic experience of sudden parental death. He is not attuned to the material reality of his situation, which is the result of the state's reordering of capital accumulation for an increasingly financialized economy.

The ascendancy of memoir in the late 1990s as a cultural hegemon, a rise referred to by Julie Rak as the 'memoir boom', might be regarded as an expression of the excessive work on the self and endless self-promotion that a new political regime of employability demands (Rak passim). Yet, the convergence of memoir and market that one is tempted to directly relate to the worst excesses of neoliberal ideology is not itself new. Though her genealogy of memoir focuses mostly on the present, Rak (6) does briefly acknowledge that by making 'the private life of the self… go public' memoir has remained a crucial 'part of discourses about identity that appear in… American public life' and 'in capitalism' more generally. The memoir, Rak (44) indicates, has always been a form that offers itself to entrepreneurial and commercial interests. The autobiographical writing of Benjamin Franklin, written in 1791, was similarly produced

during a period of ascendant financialization, whereby cheap credit came to act as the motor of a nascent form of US capital. The rhetorical thrust of Franklin's autobiography is squarely aimed at exploiting his public persona for the financial interests of an American nation developing its credit system, whereby the author comes to act as, in the words of Jennifer Baker (72), 'a voucher for national credibility'. Baker (72) argues that the *Autobiography,* staging Franklin's 'extraordinary' personality – his inimical achievements, character and reputation, 'represents as an advocate might… the new nation and its promise'. As a cipher for market credibility, his autobiography translates the entrepreneur into a promissory image of national prosperity. A self-made man making himself through writing, Franklin writes his life to read like a portfolio of entrepreneurial achievements, a set of achievements that come to stand in for the credibility of the nation itself. One important cultural aspect of these writings was the imperative to self-help. His autobiography operated as a didactic injunction to readers to be self-responsible and, in this way, they sought to craft the kinds of subjectivity necessary for an American capitalism on the rise (Baker 72).

Eggers, of course, does not stand in for the US nation. But nonetheless plays his part in a new regime of accumulation by making the new discursive strategies of employability appear credible. Like Franklin's autobiographical writing, *AHBWOSG* maintains a didactic function, often hidden behind the book's postmodern playfulness. This, I argue, represents the memoir boom's wider cultural and ideological value as it ascended during the late 1990s: to encourage the forms of subjectivity required to drive a state-market nexus ever-less willing to prop up middle-class security via state welfare programmes. Many of the memoirs and autofictions that have emerged during this period – of which *AHBWOSG* is exemplary – effectively teach self-redemption, or more fundamentally, individual responsibility, as a moral good. One might go so far as to say that *AHBWOSG* incessantly promotes the ideal of a self-responsible, entrepreneurial self whose employment both present and prospective should be entirely of their own making.

As we can see, marketing, branding and indeed self-branding have historically required, and often resembled in their promissory form, the aesthetics of memoir. But where today's culture differs most significantly from previous periods is that memoir now increasingly looks like branding. Rak (44) notes that 'Memoir is a creative product, but

it is still a product and… can even be regarded as a brand produced by the publishing and book retailing industries'. The persona of the author, connected to a number of titles, a particular style and a unique life story, gives a familiar face to corporate anonymity and, in so doing, serves to humanise marketing and promotional strategies that might otherwise appear suspect. The memoir naturally allies with marketing, a 1997 article Vanity Fair stated, because 'You can send the 'I' out on tour' (Yagoda 239). Better suited to promotion than a regular novel, then, the memoir features a protagonist that can appear in person in a public setting such as a chat show, interview or even advertisement. The commercial potential of such promotional activities stretches beyond the interests of the publishing house as Yagoda (239) notes of the author of *Prozac Nation*: 'Elizabeth Wurtzel could talk about how Prozac helped her manic depression'. Lending the anonymous and unfamiliar product the identifiable and potentially likeable personality of a literary character, the memoirist cum protagonist becomes brand advocate.

AHBWOSG typifies this phenomenon whereby literary success gravitates towards the likeability of the author. What comes across in the passages analysed above, perhaps more than anything else, is a desperation to please, to not offend or challenge the reader, but to be liked. This claim goes against the grain of much Eggers' scholarship. Others have remarked that the novel – and Eggers' work more generally – demonstrate a peculiar contempt for its audience. Melvin Jules Bukiet writes of Eggers' work that '[m]aybe I'm taking literally what's meant to be sarcastic, but beneath sarcasm lays real disdain'. Assessing the motives of such claims, Hamilton (5) notes that '[i]t is difficult to pinpoint precisely what provokes these reactions, but the answer lies in part in the fact that, as many critics have observed, Eggers's work betrays an unusual, passive aggressive dislike for his public'.

Disdain for the reader and a desperation to please, however, are not mutually exclusive, particularly if one regards their audience as little more than vessels for economic transactions. There is a sense that each reader represents to Eggers – at least in *AHBWOSG* – the possibility of his career being made or going awry. For this reason, they must continually be placated and, more fundamentally, condescended to, yet at the same time Eggers cannot hide the fact that he resents the position the audience has supposedly placed him in. This is not due to some personal insecurity on Eggers' part,

as Bukiet's review suggests, but rather the wider social insecurity of an increasingly volatile labour market, precariously propping up an ever-more rampant form of finance-driven consumer capitalism, and its impacts on publishing and the working lives of writers. Eggers is not only a writer but a worker, and one who must make promises to attract an audience. In the neoliberal moment, the reader, like the mythical consumer or tyrannical employer, is always right. Writing of a 'mysterious activity' in the 'private domain' of 1950s US society, which we might now term 'employability', Adorno (*Minima* 23) notes, 'All these nervous people, from the unemployed to the public figure liable at any moment to incur the wrath of those whose investment he represents, believe that only by empathy, assiduity, serviceability, arts and dodges, by tradesman's qualities, can they ingratiate themselves with the executive they imagine omnipresent'. As employability culture intensifies as work becomes more insecure and less certain, the employer starts to seem omnipresent, a threat or promise that perhaps best describes not only Eggers' eagerness to please, but the whole point of *AHBWOSG* as an effort to placate the reader.

The intertextual self

In some respects, Eggers' achievements stand testament to the vast catalogue of self-branding boosterism one can find online. In the publishing world, personal brand advice is now ten a penny. Thousands of articles with titles like 'How to build your brand as an author' and 'Your guide to branding yourself as an author' promise authors the secrets to literary brand success. Eggers is, in no small part, the progenitor of this culture, what Mark McGurl (48) describes as the production of 'the Man of Letters as a Man of E-Commerce'. As McGurl (49) notes in *Everything and Less: the novel in the age of Amazon*, in the economic environment of digital capitalism:

> At the outset of their career, the writer makes investments and absorbs losses… They do so in hopes of future profits, yes, but also toward the realization of a state of autonomous capitalist being. If you *are* the business, you can probably also be considered its founder, controlling shareholder, main publicist, and CEO – the Jeff Bezos, as it were – of the independent content-provider that is you.

The above account could easily be a description of Eggers' career trajectory, from struggling writer to CEO of a successful publishing company and a number of NGOs. Perhaps more so than any other contemporary writer, Eggers has successfully leveraged the culture of literary entrepreneurship toward capitalist autonomy.

Key to Eggers' success has been his efforts to continually link his business projects to his fiction. As already noted, throughout *AHBWOSG* are references to his editorial role at *Might* magazine. This entrepreneurial intertextuality means the reader is never far from Eggers' other ongoing projects and past achievements. Some years later, Eggers' developed Voices of Witness, a project in which the author spearheaded a form some have described as 'autobiography-by-proxy' with the self-professed aim of helping marginalised people tell their stories, which began with the novel *What is the What,* inspired by the first-person testimony of one of Sudan's 'lost boys' (Hamilton 91). This then lead to a further novel *Zeitoun,* which documents the lives of victims of Katrina in New Orleans. As Hamilton suggests, these novels set the ground for Egger's further move into the world of international development and helped to extend his work with NGOs (Hamilton 91).

Hamilton, however, is not explicitly interested in how Eggers uses fiction to link his various entrepreneurial pursuits, hence why she does not read *AHBWOSG* alongside these later texts. But *AHBWOSG* popularised, if not pioneered, this particular use of autobiographical fiction for economic ends, offering an early masterclass in entrepreneurial intertextuality. It brings together across its pages the whole portfolio of Eggers' previous literary endeavours, including his early forays into publishing with *Might Magazine,* which set both the tone and style for his later more successful ventures McSweeneys and 826 Valencia.

In this regard, Eggers is something of a trailblazer. There are now many other writers such as Tao Lin, Ben Lerner and Sheila Heti who have used the autofictional form to negotiate their public image as a means to gain a following and have often achieved this, at least in part, via a savvy deployment of intertextuality. In the early 2010s, when many of these writers came to prominence, employability had been naturalised to the point of disappearing into the fabric of social reality, so that negotiating one's image across multiple platforms was no longer considered strange and novel but simply part of

what a writer does. Like linking one's social media profiles, intertextuality is now a key part of an author's efforts to enhance their "employability" via literary form. In Lerner's second novel *10:04,* we find the novelist's past poems and even his *New Yorker* short story ('The Golden Vanity', which appears in the *New Yorker's* summer 2012 issue), on the merit of which Lerner was awarded a deal for the novel. The author-protagonist Ben continually gestures toward the author's use of the novel for economic ends with statements like: 'Having monetised the future of my fiction, I turned my back on it, albeit to compose verse underwritten by a millionaire's foundation (Lerner *10:04* 170). On the following page, Lerner (*10:04* 171) then includes a poem from a previously published collection, which we can assume its inclusion in this passage forms part of his future monetization strategy. In other words, it becomes a kind of covert marketing, in ways that reflect the ambient advertising strategies of online influencers, who subtly intersperse their content with segments about their own or others' products.

Perhaps the most obvious legacy of Eggers' entrepreneurial fiction is the 'alt-lit' writer Tao Lin, who like Eggers in *AHBWOSG* has dealt with financial precarity through carefully crafted acts of self-promotion only in an online setting. Lin is known for marketing himself over digital media, most notably with an entrepreneurial venture which saw the author crowdfund one of his early novels *Richard Yates* by selling six shares, each costing $2000, which would provide the investors with 10 per cent each of the novel's royalties. The initial advert for prospective investors was posted on Lin's former blog which provided links to the author's other social media profiles such as Twitter (treated by Lin as an artistic medium) and a number of Ezines featuring Lin's poetry and short stories, which offered investors an opportunity to peruse the author's 'portfolio' before they committed funds.

We find this lived intertextuality reflected in Lin's artistic output. In his novel *Taipei,* the character Paul is a thinly veiled cipher for Lin and the novel often reads like a portfolio of Lin's previous literary achievements, frequently linking itself back to the author's earlier publications. Indeed, the novel's most striking feature is Lin's use of the text to draw in other forms of media to promote his wider oeuvre. Of particular salience is a scene in which Paul pitches one of Lin's actual poems to a publisher as a potential children's book, including a full marketing spiel, which one can speculate is aimed as much at the reader as the fictional publisher:

> Maybe a different artist could illustrate each page to create a sort of anthology. As a children's book, due to the content, it would appeal to college students and teenagers and be a popular gift choice. It could become "one of those things", said Paul, who considered, at one point, while talking, if his behaviour, might be a little tactless and easily concluded it might be to "normal people" but not the owner of Drawn & Quarterly, which had published many books, among Paul's favourites, sympathetic to socially dysfunctional characters (Lin *Taipei* 121).

There are a number of points worth taking forward here. On the one hand, Lin undoubtedly uses Paul as a cipher for exposing his wider oeuvre. Notably, featured in full above this passage is Lin's poem 'when i was five i went fishing with my family', directing the reader away from the narrative and toward Lin's previously published poetry, much in the way that Paul points the publisher toward his wider oeuvre. One way to understand this passage is via what Max Haiven (126) calls the artist as portfolio manager, a subject position that he argues has been made possible by the financialization of the US economy, a transformation that really takes hold at the turn of the twenty-first century. Haiven (126) invokes the Foucauldian "'entrepreneur of the self'" to argue that the contemporary artist is encouraged to mime the financier, in as much as they manage a 'portfolio' – a 'dossier' that offers 'an understanding of the "investments" the artist has made in his or her skills, education, experience, and connections, as well as a window into the soul itself, implying access to the time and labour of its submitter and to the raw core of "human capital" itself'. Lin uses the text as an opportunity to display his portfolio, to reveal his previous 'work', to show his 'skills' as a poet as well as a novelist, and to demonstrate his 'connections' with the publishing world (the real bookseller, 'Drawn and Quarterly'). At the same time, Paul's attempt to market the poem doubles as an attempt on the part of Lin to dredge further profits from his past works in the present, a process that David Watson (96) describes as a kind of financial arbitrage at the level of creative production. Yet, much in keeping with the logic of the financial portfolio, Lin hedges the risks of appearing vulgar to the reader by acknowledging that using fiction as a vehicle for self-marketing 'might be a little tactless'. Much as portfolios protect investors through balancing the risk of exposure, Lin seeks to balance the aesthetic risks of self-exposure.

This is a useful way of understanding the formal expression of employability as in some sense incorporating the ideological pressures of financialization. But financialization does not quite capture the material dynamics that underpin the artist's or writer's need to represent themselves in such a manner. Like Eggers, Lin's cipher Paul had a middle-class upbringing but now has no secure work and often relies on precarious odd jobs to sustain himself financially, be it selling drugs or hawking goods illegally: 'They sat facing South at Bedford and North 1st with thirty to forty books on a rollout carpet and, in a few hours, sold around $25 of books and $60 of Paul's adderall' (Lin *Taipei* 85). What is striking about the passage is the flat tone that normalises what is a somewhat unusual scene, in which a middle-class writer is forced to sell his possessions to financially sustain himself and his friend. Indeed, many of Paul's friends are also struggling financially, which means that Paul is often forced to stretch his own finances to support his friend's drug habits. One of these friends, Daniel, Paul describes as 'unemployed and in debt to like five people. He has a seventy-dollar tab with me. I think he needs six hundred dollars in one week for overdue rent' (Lin *Taipei* 78).

In other novels, the impulse to manage one's image is less obviously bound up with financial pressures, but instead overtly mingles with complex philosophical questions about the stability of self. Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* is one such autofiction that, like *AHBWOSG,* is preoccupied with the problem of how to manage self-exposure. The book asks a series of interlinked questions that are not entirely distant from those we noted above in self-branding literature: Should art always be an extension of a person's authentic moral position? Can it ever be separated from a person's self-worth? Should art seek to make its author more beautiful too? And can it answer the question: how should a person be? Though more meditative in tone than either *AHBWOSG* or *Taipei,* the novel nonetheless remains committed to presenting the author's repertoire of achievements and talents, though in ways that feel less obviously like reading a CV. Sheila, the protagonist evidently based on Heti, at one point describes herself as one of those people who is 'destined to expose every part of themselves', in a line that manages to conceal the novel's tendency not to reveal everything but to carefully manage the revealed details (Heti 60). Throughout the novel such management has very specific aims, which Heti attempts to present as purely aesthetic rather than in any way financial: 'I had spent so much time trying to make the play I was writing—and my life, and my self—into an object of beauty' (Heti 13). The

play, which by a metareferential twist turns into the novel we are reading, is less an autonomous object beyond the author, more a substitute for her life in nuce, which presumably, we, the reader, are meant to find attractive. We are, in a sense, supposed to buy into the author's life as much as the writing. Like self-branding discourse, writing becomes a project of cultivating a coherent, unproblematic and, I would add, impossible form of self-authenticity. Discussing this problem during therapy, her therapist poses a question in a way that allows Heti to hedge what she undoubtedly imagines the reader suspects: 'Did you imagine writing the play would get you somewhere higher and better…?' (82).

In ways not dissimilar to *AHBWOSG,* writers often use the novel to curate an image of themselves under the cover of a trauma narrative. Carmen Maria Machado's 2019 *In the Dream House,* a genre warping blend of memoir, critical theory and fiction, tells the story of her same-sex abusive relationship over the course of a year. The abusive partner, who lives in the eponymous 'dream house' is the focus of the author's critical investigation, composed of short chapters, each examining the relationship through a different lens, which are often named after literary genres such as '*Dream House as* American Gothic' and '*Dream House as* Stoner Comedy' (59, 86). As Machado attempts to unpack her trauma, she makes frequent digressions into gender theory and poststructuralism to illuminate the social components of her suffering. These sections might be defined as 'auto-theory', the conscious exploration of theory through autobiographical account, understood by Lauren Fournier as an 'impulse…characteristic of feminism's histories broadly understood' (Fournier 3). Fournier also recognises auto-theory's limitations in a moment of 'pervasive postconfessional technologies' such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (3). In this spirit, the book also doubles as a profile of the author's opinions, beliefs, achievements, projects and plans, steadily building up an image of the author through her pain and grief, in ways that are not dissimilar to Eggers' strategies in *AHBWOSG.* Like in Eggers' text, in the '*Dream House as* Choose Your Own Adventure' chapter, a supposedly more experimental section of the text gives the reader a false sense of agency wherein the emotional weight of the chapter ultimately forecloses such agency. The chapter dramatises the claustrophobia of having few options in an abusive relationship but, in doing so, only furthers the reader's sense of the author's trauma in ways that arguably become gratuitous:

When you turn over, she is staring at you. The luminous innocence of the light curdles in your stomach. You don't remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly.

"You were moving all night", she says. "Your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake."

If you apologise profusely, go to page 190.

If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep, go to page 191.

If you tell her to calm down, go to page 193 (Machado 189).

As the reader "chooses their own adventure" over the following pages, they are repeatedly told by Machado's partner 'You're such a fucking cunt' and 'Fuck you', in what is evidently an effort to communicate to the reader the lack of options available in an abusive relationship. Though formally inventive, the problem, of course, is that the real object of violence is the author herself, which the reader cannot help but be aware of while reading the chapter. What the reader actually experiences in these passages is the emotionally absorptive manner that has become synonymous with what some critics call 'misery lit', a genre that focuses on the suffering of the author usually at the hands of an unambiguously evil abuser. It is hard not to conclude that part of the point of such books is that the reader ends up emotionally cathected to the author.

Thus, the theoretical digressions, the bulk of the intellectual content in the book, is overwhelmed by the strong sense of empathy the reader is encouraged to feel for the author. This emotional didacticism reflects the book's more politically didactic statements about the author's opinions and beliefs, which like Eggers' book are supposed to be attractive to the reader. There are many knowing nods to the reader's expected political positions. For instance, there is one chapter titled '*Dream House as Thanks Obama*', which unironically details her gratitude to the president for supporting marriage equality (Machado 239). In the next chapter about her 'really Republican uncle, Nick' she states 'He might represent everything you loathe, politically speaking, but he's a giant teddy bear and he always calls you his "favourite democrat" even though you haven't identified that way since college.' (Machado 239). The reader builds up an image of the author as, to paraphrase Eggers, 'just like me'.

The reader of these texts is continually encouraged to trust the convictions of the author, to identify with their opinions and beliefs, and, perhaps most fundamentally, to like them. They are interpellated into the text in a way that somewhat curiously places them in a role not entirely distinct from that of an employer, contractor or manager. We, the reader, are continually supposed to assess the writer's credentials, as if their personal image, their reputation, were as important as their writing.

Conclusion

This use of fiction to arrive in Heti's (82) words 'somewhere higher and better' is undoubtedly a silent part of many entries into the history of the novel. Yet, in a moment when so many writers are feeling the social and financial pressures of downward mobility it becomes a central feature of the text's aesthetic. Just as importantly, these novels demonstrate the eminently discursive quality of employability, which beyond the parameters of literary fiction often relies on the white-collar or creative worker cultivating a carefully crafted image of self, linked and leveraged across multiple platforms. *AHBWOSG* exemplifies the links between autobiographical writing and the pressures of self-branding, which both rose to cultural prominence at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, the 'self-branding novel' is a uniquely US phenomenon, which draws on a longer cultural history of self-help and boosterish entrepreneurialism. More importantly, as *AHBWOSG* shows, the emergence of the form also depends on a very specific set of conditions that converge in the mid to late 1990s, when a revamped Democratic Party continues the Reagan administration's policy programme of dismantling the welfare state, propping up finance and deregulating the labour market, and, in doing so, simultaneously reimagining the ideological contours of the middle-class. Just as self-branding discourse serves to hide the new insecurities and challenges that make employability a pressure for the middle-class, these novels in certain respects have an obfuscatory function. Indeed, 'self-branding fiction' has done important ideological work for a neoliberal project – particularly as its hegemonic position has been brought into question throughout the 2010s and beyond – helping to translate the new insecurities of the Global North's middle-class into a seemingly coherent, attractive aesthetic form, a form which offers, at best, a very subdued critique of this new class-based consensus.

Chapter Two: Labour Trauma in Heike Geissler's *Seasonal Associate*

Heike Geissler's 2018 *Seasonal Associate* follows an unnamed freelance writer and translator who, due to financial struggles, decides to take a temporary position at an Amazon warehouse in Liepzig during the Christmas period. Based on the author's own experience working at the warehouse, the novel blends together autobiographical detail with formal experimentation, creating an unstable sense of class position, self and reality – instabilities that, I will argue, mark the author-protagonist's struggle to represent her traumatic fall from the middle class into the miserable, often brutal, world of the warehouse worker. Neither wholly committed to an autobiographical tradition wedded to veracity nor a postmodern project that has abandoned any attempt to imagine a unified reality, the novel straddles the gap by seeking to represent a middle-class reality devastated and made increasingly unreal by the forces of capital. Dividing the protagonist's identity across a variety of voices, the novel formalises the process of proletarianization that carries the protagonist away from her relatively privileged working life as a writer. Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy (18-19) argue that following the crisis of the 1970s, profitability was re-established by the destruction of social welfare and the financialization of the global economy, making credit cheap and widely available, a strategy that temporarily restored middle class faith in the capitalist system.[7] Yet, in the wake of 2008, the middle class has found itself stripped of the wage increases, working conditions and financial assets that once made a certain standard of living possible, a historical situation that we find the protagonist of *Seasonal Associate* struggling to resolve with her sense that she still belongs to the middle-class.

Opening by ambiguously stating that 'From now on, you are me', the narrator speaks from the perspective of a dissociated second-person, split from a first-person 'I' that repeatedly enters the text to interrupt 'you' (Geissler 11). Over the course of this chapter, I argue that the multiplicity of fragmented voices, tonally and temporally

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[7] Over the course of *The Crisis of Neoliberalism,* Duménil and Lévy demonstrate that since the latter part of the twentieth-century the ubiquity of capitalist crises has formed an increasingly volatile 'professional' 'managerial', middle-class. While the protagonist of *Seasonal Associate* is not a 'manager', she is a 'professional' writer and translator and thus should be seen to share in the many benefits and losses that Duménil and Lévy attribute to this volatile class position. However, I find Duménil and Lévy's account of the middle-class too restrictive, so in this chapter I also consider other Marxian theories of the 'petite bourgeoisie' and the 'intermediate class'.

divided from each other, convey a trauma or, more precisely, a labour trauma. More precisely, still, the trauma is that of proletarianization and the experience of downward mobility that ensues. This trauma, negotiated through the author-protagonist's narration of her time at the warehouse, permeates the formal and stylistic techniques of the novel, capturing the ways that proletarianization disfigures the protagonist's identity.

First used with wholly different connotations from my own, the term 'labour trauma' appears in Richard Godden's 1990 study of William Faulkner, *Fictions of Labour.* Godden (1-7) locates across Faulkner's work a 'generative trauma constituting its formal core' which centres around the sharecropper's debilitating realisation that their world has been built by black labour, a realisation that is previously repressed so as to preserve the illusion of the master's independence. As Godden's (1) epigraphic use of Jameson's famous quote '[h]istory is what hurts' suggests, labour is the source of trauma for an ignorant capitalist class made painfully cognizant.

Sharing in such ignorance through the benefits and illusions they derive from capital, the middle-class is also ripe for traumatic realisation, if not to the same degree as capital. Though in so many ways distinct from that of Godden's sharecropper, the trauma of *Seasonal Associate's* author-protagonist similarly centres around a realisation that disfigures her world: that the middle-class at all times threatens to become proletariat. Fragile and prone to unravelling, the middle-class status once enjoyed by the protagonist turns out to be, in so many ways, imaginary. As such, the chapter explores the various ways in which the protagonist's middle-class life lives on as fantasy after its traumatic death.

The novel is set in post-2008 financial crisis Liepzig, a post-industrial city that has attracted writers and artists due to cheap rent but whose job market has been damaged by the many factory closures that have taken place since the 1980s, hence why Geissler, led by narrow job opportunities, seeks work at the Amazon Warehouse. While Godden's trauma devastates the class that owns production, the trauma in *Seasonal Associate* belongs to the worker. Inevitably, such a trauma is not merely a devastating realisation but is also experienced in the unbearable brutality of warehouse labour. In this sense, I look at the ways in which the autofictional form mediates a labour-based trauma that meets at the intersection of class and gender.

Writing about this from a Marxian perspective poses a few barriers. While Marx's philosophy might be said to contain an implicit phenomenology of trauma, not least in his unwavering description of the violence done to workers by the capitalist mode of production, it does not, in any sense, theorise labour trauma. For this reason, the chapter must negotiate a theoretical canon that has precious little to say about trauma but also, surprisingly, the proletarianization of the middle-class, a category which, as previous chapters have already demonstrated, does not sit entirely comfortably between the poles of capital and labour. To think trauma and proletarianization together, I suggest, necessitates a brief excursion away from such problematic concepts to more familiar conceptual terrain.

In *Capital Vol. I,* Marx often uses language that intimates the traumatic experience of proletarianization. In the chapter, 'The Secret of Primitive Accumulation', which deals with the original proletarianization of colonised countries, Marx (*Capital* 876) describes the 'great masses of men… suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence and hurled into the labour market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians'. For those who have been proletarianized in the only somewhat less violent climate of Victorian Europe, they face a fate of factories as 'slaughter houses', spaces where both body and mind are grievously wounded (Marx *Capital* 592-593). In each case, the trauma, as described by Marx (*Capital* 875), involves 'divorcing [the population] from the means of production' a phenomenon that equally applies to a middle-class who experiences their working life with a significant degree of autonomy, particularly in the case of a writer such as the protagonist, who for all intents and purposes owns their means of production.

Over the course of this chapter, I will show that the language Marx uses in these passages carries to the middle-class experience of proletarianization. As we will see, the protagonist of *Seasonal Associate* is 'hurled' from her life as a writer into the 'slaughter house' of the Amazon Warehouse, where the prospect of death seems to lurk in every labour activity. The novel, I argue, reveals the traumatic core at the centre of middle-class life: that the protagonist is still a worker, and a worker that at all times remains on the brink of becoming proletariat. The novel reveals that this potential trauma is realised under conditions of downward mobility, when the middle-class faces their grizzly fate in

the most visceral sense, suddenly robbed of the material reality that once offered relative wealth and security, and instead forced to endure the physical and psychological violence of gruelling labour, low wages and poor conditions.

In the first part of the chapter, I consider how *Seasonal Associate* offers a sensitive and vivid depiction of how the volatility at the centre of the middle-class is intensified under conditions of downward mobility, with the associated anxieties violently exaggerated. In the second section, I consider how the novel blends autobiography and fiction, and the first- and second-person, to reveal the dissociative and disorienting experience of downward mobility as a kind of trauma. Using the work of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, I consider how the descriptions of her pain and loss offer a kind of poetics of proletarianization. In the final two sections, I show that the protagonist's loss of middle-class status not only entails the traumatic realisation that she truly belongs to the proletariat – but one increasingly rendered surplus to capital's needs – a realisation repressed, buried and shaped as fictional form.

Locating the Volatile Middle

Before analysing the trauma of proletarianization experienced by the protagonist over the course of the narrative, as well as the techniques used to formalize this phenomenon, it is worth first exploring the novel's complex treatment of the 'middle-class' as an unstable and indeterminate category and the ways in which the protagonist attempts to locate herself within it. To contradict Barbara Ehrenreich's (passim) account of middle-class anxiety in *Fear of Falling,* it is not merely the 'fear' of downward mobility that provokes the protagonist's awareness of her status as a member of the middle-class, but the 'falling' itself.

Somewhat ironically, it is her actual loss of 'career' status, sudden financial precarity, and suffering at the warehouse – that is, her traumatic exit from the middle class and entrance into the realms of the worker – that accentuates, incites and lays bare the tensions that characterise the 'middle-class' as an ambiguous, essentially split class position. These ongoing conflicts, I wish to argue, are formalised in the author-protagonist's unstable identity, which oscillates between the first- and second-person voice, reflecting the two poles of the capital and labour binary, which, as writers such as

C Wright Mills, Harry Braverman and Nicos Poulantzas have shown, present themselves simultaneously in the middle-class position.

Interestingly, the novel suggests that this contradiction remains concealed by the comforts and securities of middle-class life, no matter how precarious they may be. It is precisely the protagonist's relatively privileged condition that has sheltered her from identifying this contradiction: the fact that middle-class comfort hangs perilously over the edge of proletarianization. This material truth is not something she has had to encounter until she first visits the warehouse:

> even this trip to Amazon, which you're not yet sure will bring success – that is, a short-term employment contract – might seem to you like the beginning or the evidence of a slide down the social ladder. You'll try over and over to view it differently, but even from the start, the experience forces you to your knees and down a social stratum, and that's the way it will stay. Yes, you'll start to see strata in society, if you don't already. You'll see the strata before your eyes as clearly as geologists see the structure of the ground where they've dug a deep pit. When you think about it, you sometimes come to the conclusion that the term "downward social mobility" is only a makeshift description for something that is in fact closer to a solidified lack of options and farsightedness (Geissler 13).

The trip to Amazon provides the protagonist with solid evidence of 'downward social mobility', a process that she is only able to see now that circumstances have forced her to. Her attempt to 'view it differently', a desperate attempt to hold onto the illusion of a stable middle-class existence, fails in view of the 'social strata' she will now see everywhere as solid and as natural seeming as 'the structure of the ground'. Until now, the passage suggests, she had never been forced to 'see' her middle-class status or the possibility that such status could so readily vanish. Once made invisible by her stake in the system. The material determinants of her middle-class status appear all the more clearly now that they have started to disappear. As material conditions vanish, meanings change. Now that simply finding any job, as opposed to decent work, has become her priority, 'success' has shifted meaning to what would have once meant 'a lack of options'.

Which options, then, are no longer available to the protagonist? We are led to believe that her sole source of income was once earned from freelance writing and translation. 'You don't normally have a boss', the protagonist anxiously states when considering the many ways in which her life will change as an employee for Amazon (13). In his 1974 *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism,* Braverman (281) argues that in the advanced capitalist economies of the post-war period, the middle-class 'occupies its intermediate position not because it is outside the process of increasing capital but because, as part of this process, it takes its characteristics from *both sides.* Not only does it take its petty share in the prerogatives and rewards of capital, but it also bears the mark of the proletarian condition'. On the one hand, the protagonist has undoubtedly experienced the financial insecurity and low income associated with the economic situation of the worker – why else would she have sought out work with Amazon? On the other hand, her career as a writer and translator not only involves what Braverman refers to as 'execution', the crude fulfilment of an already defined task, but also 'conception', the creative aspect that retains relative autonomy from managerial oversight - a privilege that Braverman argues is unavailable to the working class, instead saved for the agents of capital (35, 86, 281-282).

What we find, then, in the above passage is the protagonist's realisation that the middle-class is not a secure position, but an intermediate one, rife with tension and volatility. Subsequently, we find a series of antagonisms in the protagonist's political, economic and ideological commitments. Travelling to her first shift at the Amazon warehouse, she is taken far outside of her comfort zone – 'the city centre', where:

> [. . .] many of the buildings lining the tracks are empty. After a while, as you approach the city's functional regions, grassy areas and industrial plots prevail: gas stations, car rentals, crane rentals, brothels, vacant office complexes, prefabricated housing projects at some distance from the street. You're nervous; it hasn't died down yet. You cast about for an appropriate mental position, a way of thinking that prevents the thought that no one must see you on this trip out of town (Geissler 15).

Travelling through the hinterlands of outer Leipzig, the spaces in which the city's status as a post-industrial centre of the former GDR are most evident, the protagonist begins to associate her own decline with that of the city's working-class neighbourhoods. Throughout the novel, these moments of travel from home to the warehouse might be taken as symbols of the protagonist's travel between class positions. She experiences a discomfort in seeing herself in this landscape, in regarding the vacant buildings as symbols of the world she is falling into. To a certain degree, such discomfort suggests empathy toward the city's discarded workers, which arrives in the form of what might best be called 'middle-class guilt': the struggle to locate an 'appropriate mental position' that does not simply prioritise her own anxieties surrounding disturbed class status over the suffering of those she senses in the rundown urban environment. Ultimately, the former wins out as she focuses on mentally listing reasons for working at Amazon that support her sense of middle-class status: 'You're sitting on the tram on your way to the test day because you're interested in the company. You're a book person and you're perfectly within your rights to be interested in the company for research purposes' (Geissler 15). The list may be a reassurance to self, to protect her perceived middle-class identity from the unbearable truth, replacing the real financial reasons with a narrative of literary curiosity; or it may be in preparation for a chance encounter with a middle-class friend. '[N]o one must see you on this trip out of town', she tells herself, as if such an encounter would shatter the illusion of middle-class belonging currently preserving her already unsettled sense of class identity.

The above passage expresses what Nicos Poulantzas (*Reader* 326) refers to as the 'very dubious class specificity' of the middle-class, precariously surviving between the polarizing opposition of capital and labour. Not a class unto itself, the fragile middle exists only as a negative relation to what it is not: capital or labour. The commitments that guide this ambiguous class position are as much ideological and political as they are economic – commitments that, Poulantzas (*Classes* 204) emphasises, retain a significant degree of autonomy from base material interests. Certainly, the above passage reveals a series of antagonisms in the protagonist's sympathies that bring into tension the ideological and the economic; on the one hand, she sees the uncanny reflection of her own potentially voided economic position in the city's empty buildings - markers of a disposable working class suggestive of what is yet to come for the precarious middle. We can perhaps sense in such sympathies the raising of class consciousness and the

intimations of a psychological alliance with the working class. On the other hand, however, her fear of being seen 'on this trip out of town', of being identified as, somehow, no longer part of the 'middle-class', articulates an ideological commitment to the status and social milieu that she once more comfortably inhabited.

The novel represents the middle-class as a volatile condensation of the tensions and conflicts that characterise the fundamental antagonism between capital and labour, ever ready to adapt its affiliations according to where it perceives itself in relation to this antagonism. Only a few lines down from the previous passage, the protagonist says, 'You'll surprise even yourself when you abandon all heroic narratives of success, ideas of getting somewhere with hard work, and instead begin to praise idleness and oppose the eternal commandment of competition and growth' (Geissler 15). Here, she openly decries the meritocratic myth that Poulantzas (*Reader* 199) regards as a central ideological pillar holding together middle-class life. The myth once provided not only a sense of identity as a 'hard worker', but the illusion of impending upward mobility that separated her from those lacking the diligence to succeed. Her time at Amazon acts as a kind of pivot in her sense of class identity, forcing her to reconsider meritocracy as a lie sustaining the market axioms of 'competition and growth' that came to act as the discursive mantras of the neoliberal regime, suggesting that, to some degree, she has been politicised as a worker against the system.

Yet, the novel seems to suggest that even if today's European middle-class represents a political position in decline, its lifestyle remains the hegemonic culture that one should morally aspire to. In a particularly telling scene, the protagonist runs into some old friends who invite her up to their 'gigantic apartment' for mulled wine, leading the protagonist to perform her middle-class status in an excruciating attempt to hide from the couple – and perhaps herself – the reality of her present situation. While looking around the couple's apartment, the narrator tells the reader 'You know gigantic apartments, and you know good furniture too – you haven't known them all your life, but you've got to know good furniture and you can distinguish furniture that wants to look like good furniture from furniture that really is good' (Geissler 77). The protagonist attempts to reassure herself that she partakes in the same middle-class tastes as the friends she is visiting, that she occupies the same cultural milieu as she did in years gone by. Then sensing in the couple a 'reflexive need to show off', an atmosphere of

'competition', which after a further glass of mulled wine she regards as 'a challenge to a duel', the protagonist chooses to 'turn down the medium priced chocolates placed on the table' and proclaims that 'I only eat Pierre Marcloni Belgian Chocolates, they're the best. They cost 30 euros a box, but they're worth it' (Geissler 77). The narrator then informs us that 'You don't normally lie, but you could go on lying now. You could fill a whole evening with lies' (Geissler 77).

In striking fashion, the scene depicts a contradiction central to the experience of downward mobility: the ongoing magnetism of middle-class affiliation, which sits tensely alongside the resentment felt toward the class one is falling away from. More secure in their class status, the couple represent an economic position now unavailable to the protagonist, a position that, as the scene demonstrates, remains desirable to her, but a position that she also feels for reasons of humiliation and resentment increasingly antagonistic toward.

Detailing the décor, style and taste of the protagonist's friends, the passage also suggests the novel's ambiguous relationship with the bourgeois novel itself, the great literary representative of the middle-class. In his study of the bourgeois as an eminently literary phenomenon, Moretti locates the ascendancy of this class in the fabrications of the novel form, particularly passages like those above which attend to the inane, everyday details of middle-class life. These 'fillers', sections of the novel that keep the narrative 'alive' and full of 'possibility', 'enrich and give nuance to the story', often defining the pace, rhythm and focus of the plot (Moretti 71, 75). Most important for our purposes, Moretti (72) notes that 'fillers function very much like the good manners so dear to nineteenth-century novelists; they are a mechanism designed to keep the 'narrativity' of life under control; to give it a regularity, a 'style'. Certainly, the scene featured in the above passage contains all the markers of a filler. Describing the trivial rivalries that characterise everyday middle-class life, the passage briefly diverts away from the main narrative while furthering our sense of the possible directions the protagonist may take within it. But the filler here does not describe what exists, but what no longer exists for the protagonist: the reassurances of a middle-class life. The filler here describes a lack, something missing from the protagonist's experience, which is expressed as a lie: ''I only eat Pierre Marcloni Belgian Chocolates'. Rather than describe the sensuous properties of the chocolates, she moves straight to the price tag '30 euros a box' in a

desperate effort to impress that presumably appears to her hosts as gauche rather than sophisticated.

This is one of the few scenes in the novel that reads like bourgeois realism, where middle-class characters joust over their knowledge of commodities. But it is telling that this one scene is absent of the kinds of rich description of commodities that one would expect in bourgeois realism. It emphasises the author-protagonists's inability to convincingly map the bourgeois world beyond the superficial world of price tags, offering further evidence to both the other characters and the reader of her insecure class status.

At the same time, by representing the filler of middle-class life as a lie, the passage refuses to grant such banalities the privilege they so often receive in the bourgeois novel. One might reasonably argue that the protagonist enters the game of middle-class manners in bad faith, i.e., she dissembles her class status as opposed to 'honestly' expressing her tastes, habits and style. The subversive content of this act is then reflected at the level of form. After lying about her penchant for expensive chocolates, she states, 'You could fill an entire evening with lies, just like that, and only stop once the couple had filled a sheet of A4 paper with notes and brand names' (Geissler 77). On the one hand, the comment registers the protagonist's struggle to negotiate her drift from the bourgeois ideal, while at the same time acting as a metareferential critique of bourgeois fiction. She knowingly 'fills' the evening with the sort of fabrications that have traditionally filled the pages of bourgeois fiction, with the couple imagined as the readers, or notetakers, of her fantastical lifestyle tips. A 'paper' 'filled' with banal economic signifiers might be read as a literary text similarly laden with the 'lies' or distorted truths of everyday bourgeois life. Somewhat like Moretti's reading of the bourgeois author, the author-protagonist implies her own role in fabricating the fiction of the 'everyday', a notion that is less representative, more performative, bringing into being the very thing it claims to describe.

But unlike the realist novel that solidified the image of middle-class life through the creation of a bourgeois everyday, the author-protagonist here suggests that such a life is precariously held together by 'lies'. Here, I am less interested in whether the everyday of middle-class life constitutes a lie, more the fact that the author-protagonist regards it in

these terms. One of few scenes set in an unambiguously middle-class milieu, the passage reveals her friend's class status through furniture and manners, with the scene depicting interior décor just as it might be displayed in an Edith Wharton or Henry James novel. Yet, the novel is at pains to suggest that 'showing' - of which James was famously a great advocate, may itself be a bourgeois illusion (Jameson *Antinomies* 21) . As showing is replaced by fabricating, however, the everyday of middle-class life suddenly appears as something wholly less stable and solid, a perspective that certainly chimes with the uncertain experience of downward class mobility; that is to say, one is more likely to see middle-class life as a series of fantasies, fictions and lies if one no longer comfortably identifies with this life. What once appeared as a truth may start to seem like a lie; what was once shown as self-evident, now seems treacherous, little more than empty signifiers.

At the same time, these passages demonstrate that the novel does not do away with descriptions of everyday middle-class life in any real sense. Though, as I will later show, the day-to-day life of the author-protagonist is formalized in ways that suggest fantasy and illusion, the above passage depicts the everyday through a straightforwardly 'filler' scene. Part of the reason for this, I would suggest, can be found in Moretti's (75-76) argument that by elevating the aesthetics of everyday life, fillers widen the scope of narrative 'possibility'. It is this inclusion of the trivial and banal, for Moretti, that heightens our sense of possible plot developments, a sense that the narrative will move on to more exciting and interesting events. I would add to this that latency giving way to narrative motion is not merely a trope of bourgeois fiction, but also the trope of a typically middle-class ideological notion: meritocracy, the sense that there is always something better on the horizon to aim toward; or more specifically, the faith that the capitalist system is essentially open to upward mobility. Fillers create the narrative space from which such a system might be imagined by accentuating the development from everyday banalities to the possibility of new narrative directions. The novel's commitment to bourgeois 'filler' implies the protagonist's ongoing – if somewhat unsettled – commitment to meritocracy and the middle-class lifestyle that it ideologically sustains.

Upholding the tropes of the bourgeois novel while simultaneously subverting them, then, the novel's relationship to the form might best be described as ambiguous.

Formalised in this ambiguity is the author-protagonist's own contradictory relationship to the various class positions that fall under the banner of the 'middle-class'. Again, the novel's denouement offers a complex picture of these volatile positions, alliances and interests. Days after finishing her seasonal job at Amazon after finding more work as a writer, she receives a phone call from a company employee asking her to give feedback on her time working at the warehouse. Following the phone call, she tells the reader:

> You don't know what exactly that just was. You walk around your study then go back to translating. You'll end up working on the translation until the early hours of the morning; its due in three days' time. You feel free; you say it loud over and over. With your slowly rising fees and your sprawling work hours that clutch at all times and all other activities, you haven't yet come to the following conclusion: *The present performance subject is identical to the Hegelian slave apart from the circumstance that it does not work for the master, but exploits itself voluntarily. As an entrepreneur of itself, it is both master and slave simultaneously* (Geissler, 211, italics added).

In the first part of the passage, it is as if the experience of the warehouse, the fall proper into the proletariat, has been entirely erased. 'You don't know what exactly that just was' may refer to the phone call or, more likely, it suggests the protagonist's inability to fully remember or cognize her entire experience at the warehouse. It is as if her memory has been wiped and she is now once again following the meritocratic myth she earlier decried. Yet, now she does so with the added political awareness that her work as a writer constitutes her as '*an entrepreneur*' that '*exploits itself voluntarily*'. Significantly, Geissler has taken these italicised sections from the work of the contemporary critical theorist, Byung Chul Han (6), who regards the contemporary worker as the subject of 'classless self-exploitation' – a subject position that erases the antagonism between labour and capital by acting as both simultaneously. This seems a somewhat peculiar theorist to cite, considering that much of the novel has dealt with exploitation through the prism of class, unless, that is, we take her attraction to the argument as the unconscious expression of her precarious middle-class psyche. While the idea that 'self-exploitation' forms the ontological basis of contemporary capitalism *does not* harmonise with the novel's wider treatment of class, the idea that labour and capital are enacted simultaneously in the ideological formation of the subject *does* speak to the material

position of a middle-class precariously straddling the worker and the capitalist. Indeed, the notion of 'self-exploitation' does not describe, in any sense, the class position of, say, a sweatshop worker, cockle picker or even an Amazon warehouse worker; but rather the ideological *experience* of a middle class trapped between a variety of conflicting class interests and alliances. Thus, the reason this theory resonates with the protagonist is because, in so many ways, she simultaneously occupies the ideological terrain of both capital and labour. Her decision to cite this theory at the end of the novel reveals that the termination of her contract at Amazon and, perhaps more importantly, her return to work as a writer, resurrects her identification as a member of the middle-class, albeit a member now aware of its unstable membership. The reason she *identifies* with this ambiguous subject position is because even after finishing her work at Amazon she still feels exploited but no longer *identifies* precisely as a worker.

In the passage following the excerpt from Han, the protagonist, as if provoked back into 'action' by the call from Amazon, informs the reader that:

> I wrote: We won't be leaving this book before
> you've taken action.
> I'm not sure: Have you taken action or not?
> Yes you have.
> We'll see.
> Let's stay in touch (Geissler 211).

What precisely 'action' might consist of remains unclear, but it undoubtedly suggests a political motivation gained from her work at the warehouse. More importantly, for our current purposes, such 'action' is being contested by the singular first- and second-person voices that repeatedly come into conflict throughout the novel, here also joined by the arrival of a new first-person plural. The first person 'I' speaks as the author-narrator, questioning the past actions of the protagonist 'you' as if each were distinct individuals. Thus, the passage articulates the split subjectivity of the narrator, attempting to reconcile the various parts of herself as she decides whether her narration constitutes political 'action'. It dramatises the class-based split in her sense of subjectivity through a combined 'we' that remains apprehensive and essentially undecided.

The autofictional form is particularly amenable to capturing these divergences in the alliances and interests of the middle-class subjectivity as they become accentuated and

intensified during periods of downward mobility. A key reason, as Marjorie Worthington (9) notes in her reading of Serge Doubrovsky's famous critique of the form, is that 'autobiography retraces a *life*, while autofiction presents a *self*', a self that is 'not logical or orderly' but 'always incomplete, fragmented and coalesced by memory'. Blurring the textual and the extratextual as it moves between fictional narrative and factual reference, autofiction undermines any sense of a unified, stable 'protagonist', continually drawing the reader's attention to questions of representation surrounding selfhood. Worthington (3) argues that the narratives of autofictional novels centre around an 'onomastic connection' between the author and the protagonist, creating the lifeworld of an author-protagonist, which in the case of *Seasonal Associate* is highly suggestive of the author's actual existence. Cultivated through specific references to the author's life, the cohesion of protagonist and author as an autobiographical unity develops even as it is placed under pressure by the novel's formal and stylistic techniques. For instance, over the course of its narrative *Seasonal Associate* fosters a unified sense of the protagonist as author by incorporating certain autobiographical details from Geissler's life: her residency in Liepzig; her work as a freelance writer; and her temporary job at the Amazon warehouse, to name but a few. At the same time, the formal mechanisms that split the author-protagonist into a multiplicity of voices invites the reader to approach the text as a literary fiction; thus, producing a tension that prohibits the author-protagonist from being read as either decisively fictional or autobiographical.

Far beyond the standard instabilities attending the onomastic relation between author and protagonist, *Seasonal Associate* refashions this trope to formalise the volatility of the middle-class as it undergoes an acute shock. The novel performs the unification of author and protagonist while simultaneously undermining this process by introducing ruptures and inconsistencies into the author-protagonist's voice. Returning to the above passage, the 'I' seems to speak as the author, as if from an extratextual 'real' position beyond and after the events that form the narrative, which determines the 'action' of the fictional author-protagonist 'you'. The authorial 'I' seems to speak *as* the narrator, from the experience of a worker, as a subject position that *wants* to take political action, but is being suppressed, in some sense, by the side of her still drawn to the relative privileges of freelance writing and the cultural milieu of middle-class life. The self here seems to occupy an intermediate position not only between its reference to an extratextual 'real'

and its fictional elaboration, but, more specifically, between the 'real' of working-class labour and the 'fiction' of middle-class status.

If we accept Marx's (*Communist* 228) basic argument that the intermediate classes will ultimately fall into the proletariat, one might tentatively map the split between the real and fictional onto the middle-class itself – torn between its ultimately 'real' position as a worker and the ideological fabrications of capital that continually postpone this realisation. Understood so, the novel's autofictional form might be said to capture the tension between the material reality and ideological suppositions that upholds the precarious notion of a secure 'middle-class position'. Yet, such an analysis falls short of the complex relations and positions the various voices occupy in the text. Most importantly, they do not readily apply to discreet class positions, so that the 'you' might be identified readily as 'middle-class' or the 'I' as the 'worker, at least in part because the middle-class is not itself a discreet class position, but mainly because the roles that the voices take throughout the text are continually being renegotiated.

Primarily, the authorial 'I' that speaks from beyond the text is divided from the protagonist 'you' by a temporal split that positions the 'I' outside of present events, as if omnisciently reflecting on the actions of the 'you'. 'I was always glad, at any rate, to stand beside the gigantic book boxes and enter the books in the system' is followed by 'You, though are now waiting at the meeting place by the shelf full of boxes in the dispatch hall, clutching your box of work tools' (Geissler 61). The present 'I' is submerged in past events, while the past 'you' is narrated in the present tense. Effectively, the past comes to act as the present and the present as the past, with each voice dissociated from their temporal location. In one sense, we might read this collapse of past into present as indicative of the protagonist's move from the flexible working hours of freelance writing to the repetitive, standardised abstract-labour time of the warehouse.

Again, in the above passage the temporal positions of the 'I' and 'you' do not consistently cohere with the class alliances and interests as they have unfolded throughout the text, so that the former securely retains its earlier status as 'the worker' and the latter 'the bourgeoisie'. Rather, inconsistency and disunity act as the central features of the author-protagonist's split sense of selfhood, determined by a class

position seemingly under continual negotiation. Another overt function of this split is the *role* that the protagonist 'you' performs for the authorial 'I' as a device through which the author can safely return to, retrospectively narrate and piece together her experience working for Amazon. In a particularly telling passage, as the protagonist attempts to socialise with her colleagues during a work break, the narrator tells us that 'You join them, stand next to them, and there's something very old inside you, something that comes from me, which I hereby hand over to you so that you can deal with it, give it the full treatment and get it over and done with once and for all' (Geissler 62). While the first part of this passage seems to suggest that the wisdom of a near omniscient narrator is already part of the protagonist's character, helping her to cope as she fails to relate to her colleagues, the second part is somewhat less clear, appearing to suggest that the experience of the warehouse remains a psychic burden that the narrator has now outsourced to a fictional cipher so that she, in the present, can be 'done with [it] once and for all'. More generally, 'you can deal with it' suggests that the narrator has herself not yet come to terms with the experience of downward mobility, a possibility suggested earlier in the text when the narrator tells us that 'Something inside you is essentially unsettled and will never calm down again… From this point on, you are beside yourself with worry' (Geissler 14).

What, then, precisely, about the experience of downward mobility exaggerates the symptoms of middle-class life into such a brutal realisation? Anxiety, fragmented selfhood and temporal dislocation: these are the some of the general symptoms that arise following a traumatic event. What I want to suggest in the following section is that the novel represents the proletarianization and downward mobility of the protagonist as a trauma and one that brings to the fore the very core of middle-class existence. I read the ongoing inconsistencies and instabilities that characterise the various voices of the author-protagonist as the disunified fragments of a middle-class torn asunder by the shock of proletariat labour and associated loss of privilege to enjoy the pleasures and pretensions of bourgeois privilege.

The Trauma of Downward Mobility

A traumatic event is generally regarded as so devastating to the life of the sufferer that a unified narrative of self is no longer possible after its occurrence. Trauma narratives

represent an attempt by the survivor to reinstate a sense of order through a written account of the rupture and its aftermath. Always *after* the event, narrative is given the paradoxical task of retrospectively bringing order to what is essentially disordered, fragmented and forgotten. The referent is, in part, temporally lost, meaning that the event cannot be represented in any straightforwardly mimetic manner, but must be made to appear through an effort to grasp the full force of the rupture. For this reason, Worthington (125) asserts that 'trauma narratives tend to eschew traditional realism in favour of experimental strategies and structures that better convey the horror and confusion indicative of a traumatic experience'. Thus, the formal strategies employed in *Seasonal Associate* should be read as an effort to make the shock of proletarianization (i.e., the realisation of owning nothing, of having no stake and security) comprehensible to the author. She attempts to do so, I argue, by tracing the ways in which this seemingly personal trauma is in fact a more general social trauma, the scope of which is manifold, incorporating her financial precarity and subsequent loss of status, as well as her gendered experience of the warehouse, and the shock of proletariat work itself. It is the combined weight of these factors that constitutes the trauma of the protagonist's fall from the middle-class.

In a way that reflects the disintegrating effect of the traumatic event itself, references to trauma appear throughout *Seasonal Associate* as fragmentary allusions to death. The novel opens with the narrator wondering:

> Is all this a matter of life and death? I'll say no for
> the moment and come back to the question later. At
> that point, I'll say: Not directly, but in a way yes. It's
> a matter of how far death is allowed into our lives.
> Or the fatal, that which kills us. To be precise:
> compared to that which kills us, death is nothing but
> an innocent waif. Or: death, compared to that which
> kills us, is a gentleman with good manners and a shy
> look in his eye… From now on that which kills us is
> your constant companion (Geissler 11).

The narrator sets the scene of the novel with her own death - a figurative death, but a death nonetheless, suggesting at the outset that her work at the warehouse has, in some sense, killed her. And yet, she is here to tell the tale. What, then, might constitute a death in life? Such is the experience of a trauma. From the Freudian 'death drive' that compels

the sufferer to repeat the traumatic event in sublimated forms to Lacan's (*XI* 53) understanding of the traumatic event as a glimpse into the deathly void of the 'real', the subject of trauma is said, in some sense, to have witnessed and continued beyond their own demise (Freud *Pleasure* passim). Indeed, in the above passage, the trauma of having to live beyond 'that which kills us' is, paradoxically, more unbearable than death itself. Wondering whether 'the trauma is the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it', Cathy Caruth (7) notes that the trauma narrative is 'a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*'. In the words of the narrator, the survival of her own death becomes a 'constant companion'. Accompanied by her own death, Geissler's onomastic author-protagonist lives inside a crisis, voiced by the separation between the protagonist 'you' undergoing her own demise and the narrator 'I' that voices her life after death.

Toward the end of the novel, we are offered a clearer sense of what such a death in life entails: 'You're not dead, that much is for sure. You're alive in the physiological sense, and also alive in the figurative sense, but your potential lies deeper than usual, buried beneath your fatigue' (Geissler 161). The trauma of the warehouse might have killed part of her and 'buried' it, but the death is by no means total. So, what exactly has died and been 'buried'? '[P]otential', which on the surface might appear innocent enough, but when analysed reveals the protagonist's wider meritocratic sense of self. As earlier shown, she identifies her 'potential' most explicitly in the lavish furniture of bourgeois friends, expensive chocolates and the occupational status gained from full-time, freelance writing. On first glance, then, 'potential' seems to signify the burial of her lost middle-class status. Yet, the term connotes a deeper meaning buried beneath this surface loss: productive potential. Marx (*Capital* 277) argues that labour-power is a 'capacity', a 'potential' that, if unemployed, precludes the worker from attaining the means to survive. To be working class is to be dependent on finding employment, a precarious situation worsened in our post-Fordist moment by economic stagnation, the erosion of collective bargaining, financialization, and the subsequent turn to flexible labour markets – the latter of which is exemplified by Amazon's 'seasonal' contracts. It also very often entails not insignificant bodily trauma, like the protagonist experiences in the warehouse:

> During your break, you peel the Band-Aids off your
> hands to apply new ones. You examine your hands
> for a moment. They're chapped and dirty; you'd like
> to go easier on them. You think of my father's hands,
> which were always dirty and rough… Stinging cuts
> would open up on his workingman's hands. They
> had pink spots some of which were raw-flesh… You
> see now you're getting workingwoman's hands (88).

Like the urban poverty she witnesses on her commute to the warehouse, her hands offer a grim cartography of the new brutal conditions she daily faces. Sculpted by physical graft in the way her father's hands were on the job, they afford the realisation that her experience of upward mobility beyond her parent's status has reversed and regressed. Her 'workingwoman's hands' present bodily wounds that open out onto the more unsettling psychological realisation that she is part of the proletariat.

Abraham and Torok argue that traumatic events often cause the sufferer to incorporate and subsequently bury an associated loss, denying its meaning and impact in an attempt to preserve it (Abraham and Torok 131). As opposed to 'introjection', a process that allows the sufferer to fully claim the lost object and refashion themselves accordingly, 'incorporation' 'erects a secret tomb', establishing a partition that separates the subject from their loss (Abraham and Torok 130-131). This crypt, sheltering the loss from death, keeps it alive and present, but in a pathological form. Present yet inexpressible, the crypt establishes a silence – an unsayable 'secret' that is neither fully felt nor properly cognized, only able to emerge as compulsive symptoms (Abraham and Torok 130-131). Note, the narrator not once speaks of her lost class status, becoming a silence voiced through the symptoms earlier discussed: dissociation, amnesia and pathological lying – symptoms that encompass the protagonist's experience of downward mobility; each of which, I would suggest, acts to preserve her middle-class status as a crypt.

A risk to the preservation of her buried middle-class status, the conditions of the warehouse continually threaten to unearth the loss, requiring of the protagonist 'defensive' symptoms that keep such threats at bay. During a shift at the warehouse, the protagonist loses her 'temper' with a male colleague after he refuses to put his tote bag away safely (Geissler 102). The dispute is minor but the protagonist becomes increasingly irate as she takes the bag back over to her colleague, only for said colleague

to dismiss her actions as overreactions. After she does this a few times, her colleague becomes exasperated, eventually telling her 'You must have a screw loose', leading her to 'yell at him: Get out of here, get out of my face' (Geissler 104). While yelling at her colleague, she thinks to herself, 'He's on your turf; you're taking possession of a zone for yourself because you need one right now. For this moment, this workplace in the darker quieter part of the dispatch hall belongs to you' (Geissler 104). The safe storage of the tote bag, which after the clash the protagonist herself admits was not the real issue, signifies the sense of insecurity she feels at Amazon; the wider sense that things are misplaced; or, more obviously, that her presence in the warehouse is out-of-place. A feeling of placelessness is suggested by her need to 'take possession of a zone' for herself – a feeling that she does not 'belong' in the warehouse. Yet, in terms of class position, the very fact that to avoid penury she must work at Amazon proves that she does *belong*; a tension thus emerges between the material reality of the capitalist system, that anyone who must sell their labour to survive essentially 'belongs' in such a brutal work environment, and the exceptionalism that pervades a middle-class believing itself to exist outside of this reality. Material conditions dictate that the protagonist is now part of the working class proper, but the fantasy of exceptionalism remains intact, protected by outbursts of anger that ward off any threats to its preservation.

The threat in the above passage is a heavily gendered one, with the protagonist's class territory invaded by a male colleague who coerces her into performing what Arlie Russell Hochschild (7) terms 'emotional labour'. The insult 'You must have a screw loose' disciplines the protagonist by suggesting that she should better manage her feelings in the workplace. After the conflict is over, the narrator tells us that 'your hands are trembling; your ashamed of yourself' and that 'You take a walk and hide in the bathroom' (Geissler 103). Part of her labour, in the words of Arlie Hochschild (7), is to 'suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'. As if on cue, the protagonist apologises in an attempt to save the feelings of her colleague, who again proceeds to shame her by asserting, 'You caused total chaos' (Geissler 105). Again, her colleague's decision to use the term 'chaos' infers uncontrolled emotional responses and a lack of reason.

Meted out on a daily basis, gendered discipline is part and parcel of warehouse life: a worker tells a female colleague 'You women always love going to IKEA'; the

protagonist must endure 'Little Miss Professor' after questioning her manager; and a 'lead worker' condescendingly identifies the protagonist by her red headband as the sexually connotative '*girl with the cherries',* later telling her 'you'd look much better without your thick glasses' (Geissler 38, 53, 70). A workplace culture evidently designed and cultivated to privilege patriarchal interests, the warehouse symbolizes the loss of middle-class status bound up with the simultaneous loss of distance from overt encounters with male aggression. Centred around freelance writing and the independence associated with working from home, her previous experience of work presumably permitted a significant degree of distance from the violence of the male-oriented workplace. Thus, her fall from the middle-class entails a fall into forms of gendered oppression more overt, direct and frequent than experienced previously. Such scenes suggest that it is not just her political assumptions about class that are challenged by warehouse life but her assumptions about gender, too.

For the protagonist, downward mobility entails a fall into a place where she is casually objectified and thus identified by her reproductive capacity, a 'potential' that promises the exploitation of the proletarian woman as reproducer as well as producer. Sylvia Federici's (88) landmark *Caliban and the Witch* traces the proletarianization of women to the 'war' launched by sixteenth century European state power 'aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction'. As such, the state made the female body a mechanism for the reproduction and expansion of the workforce, taking the body 'outside of woman's control' and submitting it to the dictates of the capitalist system (Federici 91) The tendency to see the female body as a passive receptor of male sexual advances, Federici suggests, is a direct result of state policy that has continued to frame women as 'breeding machines' (Federici 91). In the sixteenth century, termination, celibacy and contraception were outlawed or state controlled as wombs became the sole territory of the emerging capitalist economy – a set of controls that have survived in a variety of modern state policies (Federici 89). Considering that reproductive exploitation is essential to the proletarianization of women, it should come as no surprise that in the above passage the protagonist is ridiculed for her apparently girlish, virginal qualities. Prolonged virginity, implied in the epithet '*girl with the cherries*', is something that the system is unable to bear, for it must reproduce a workforce, an imperative here conveyed by the warehouse manager, an agent for the interests of capital, as he attempts to shame the protagonist into accepting her status as a

'breeding machine'. Thus, the protagonist is made starkly aware of her double role as proletariat woman, not simply forced to sell her labour to capital but disciplined to remember her fundamental 'procreative' role in the reproduction of the system. Each encounter with a male colleague simultaneously acts as an encounter with her alienated reproductive capacity – a realisation intimately bound to proletarianization and thus a threat to the buried corpse of lost middle-class life.

She is forced to ward off such a threat when a male colleague sexually harasses her during a shift: 'He puts his hand on yours and you pull away. He leans over the keyboard, looks at you from below, stands bent down like at an aquarium so he can look at you closely, puts on a grin and says: Give us a smile'; the narrator then interjects 'Not being me, you don't take a step back. You tell him to stop it straight away' (Geissler 70). Tellingly, the decision to resist her colleague's advances is voiced through the narrator 'me' (elsewhere 'I'), forcing the reader to question whether the protagonist actually challenged her colleague or whether such action simply represents a dissociative fantasy – one that temporarily reinstates the distance from male violence that she had in her previous line of work. As if to stop herself from entering the scene fully, a split occurs in the onomastic author-protagonist that diverts the action away from the male colleague's aggressive sexual advances toward the distant reflections of the first-person 'I' – a sudden dissociation that not only takes the protagonist out of the moment but, in doing so, protects her from experiencing her status as an exploitable reproductive resource.

The slippage between the various voices of the onomastic author-protagonist provides a formal mechanism through which the novel creates a dissociative form of narration. The novel slips into this dissociative voice whenever the author-protagonist's traumatic crypt is under acute threat - dissociation here being a way of postponing, perhaps interminably, the uncovering of the buried object guiding her behaviour. As the novel continues, these dissociative fantasies come to take on a life of their own. Much as Abraham and Torok's (130) theory suggests, the fantasy world of the crypt starts to exist in increasingly elaborate ways:

> While you're working toward the end of your shift
> and you're tired and hungry and you count and count
> again all the time, and then count what you've
> counted all over again, I'm sitting in town with a

> friend. We're chatting and drinking white wine
> spritzers; we haven't seen each other for a while. A
> very tall woman approaches our table, holding fliers
> fanned out in her hand, and asks whether we want to
> come along to a reading… We shake our heads… As
> we pay our bill we spot the book that's about to be
> read from: *Monday at Last! The New Joy of Work
> Performance* (Geissler 89).

Tired at the end of her shift, the protagonist voiced in the second person suffers the peculiar rhythms of the warehouse as the task of counting stock obeys the repetitious motion of the machine, while simultaneously the protagonist voiced in the first person appears to be enjoying the typically 'middle-class' activity of drinks with a friend during working hours. How can she exist in two divergent realities at once? I suggest that the first person 'I' is a fantastical figure through which the second person 'you' contrives the middle-class life she once enjoyed as a freelance writer – a scene that, significantly, culminates with the two friends avoiding a reading from a self-help book dedicated to the 'joys of work performance'. Abraham and Torok (130) note that '[r]econstituted from the memories, words, scenes and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography'. A fantastical double thus emerges, they continue, 'one that leads its own separate and concealed existence' (Abraham and Torok 130). The double of the loss not only returns, but returns as a separate entity; here, the protagonist's middle-class life, preserved with its own fantastical bourgeois 'topography' of early evening spritzers and bad book readings. As if then to remind us that the protagonist is still at work in the warehouse, tired and counting stock, the fantasy is disturbed by the bleakly ironic appearance of *Monday at Last! The New Joy of Work Performance,* a title indicative of the managerial self-help texts the protagonist packages later in the novel (Geissler 183).

Over the following pages, however, the fantasy proceeds to overtake what we can only assume is the unbearable reality of day-to-day life at the warehouse, as the narrative diverges from the previous description of the second-person protagonist to instead focus on her fantastical first-person counterpart. Walking the friend with whom she shared drinks back to her hotel, the fantasy protagonist briefly becomes the central figure of the narrative. For this reason, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell whether these passages bear any resemblance to the life of the author, whether they represent the merging of

memories from different periods, or whether the largely autobiographical account of the author has now slipped more decisively into a fictional register. Thus, as the loss returns in illusory form, entirely overwhelming any sense of boundaries between fantasy and reality, the 'crisis of life' earlier described by Caruth becomes a crisis of generic limits that collapses the distance between fiction, autobiography and essay:

> We do reach the hotel in the end, and you disembark from the tram at the station, exhausted. I come to collect you, still in a talking mood. I talk away at you, telling you about Hannah Arendt and how people come into the world as a beginning and that people have the ability for beginnings. Over and over again. You don't really listen to me but I go on talking and repeat what René Pollesch once said, that there has to be an end to these false activities "with which we pretend to treat each other humanely and as fellow human beings", that we've chosen the wrong activity. "Then it has to stop, then we have to start something else that has a chance of changing something (Geissler 90-91).

After the fantastical first-person protagonist drops her friend at the hotel, she somehow intercepts the second-person walking home from the tram station. There is a sense proceeding from the previous passage that this fantastical figure has a life of its own – an immaculate bourgeois life untainted by its own death; that is, a corpse preserved and speaking from the depths of the second-person protagonist. The second person, however, does not 'really listen', or in words closer to those of Abraham and Torok, the sufferer is unable to properly hear because the traumatic truth remains silent, dulled by symptoms, in this case, specifically, 'exhaustion'. Yet, as the scene develops, the role of the first-person becomes increasingly unstable, no longer simply figuring as the protagonist's fantasy, but also seeming to transmit the values and beliefs of the author. References to Hannah Arendt and René Pollesch have both a narrative and extratextual role, acting simultaneously as markers of the protagonist's previous occupation as a freelance writer, while also hinting at the actual life of the author. What starts two pages earlier as a fantasy fades into the extratextual details that have so far acted as the novel's primary techniques of the real.

Significantly, this passage marks the particular fictional form taken by middle-class downward mobility in the twenty-first century, which differs significantly from the realism that occasioned another period of middle-class financial uncertainty. Lawson (3-4) argues that the US bourgeois realist novel emerged as a response to a number of financial crises in the mid-late nineteenth century. By focussing on what was 'legible, tangible, enduring and real' the novel sought to solidify 'a dematerializing reality' and return bourgeois life to what properly matters (Lawson 4).

Seasonal Associate instead suggests that there is no real return to "normality" for today's middle-class, but instead an ongoing crisis. Unlike the bourgeois novel which sought to make existence more 'realistic', I would suggest that the above passage establishes a generically complex fictional form, one that resembles the crisis of genre and the subsequent 'genre of crisis' that Lauren Berlant defines in *Cruel Optimism*. In the book's introductory passages, Berlant (7) sets out to 'track the waning of genre, and in particular older realist genres… whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life'. Discreet genres, Berlant (6-7) argues, offer the reader a set of consistent affective markers that create and sustain certain expectations about how something will unfold. Through these familiar conventions, she continues, 'all genres are distinguished by the affective contract they promise' (Berlant 66). In the present moment, these generic promises of 'the good life' are breaking much in the way that 'conventions of reciprocity that ground how to live and imagine life are becoming undone' (Berlant 7).

Yet, 'the good life' is not a general, homogenous affective ideal, as Berlant seems to suggest, but is always already inflected with a specifically class-based set of assumptions, later implied in the critic's reading of the film *Rosetta*. She argues that 'uninteresting labour is for Rosetta nearly utopian; it makes possible imagining living the *proper* life that capitalism offers as a route to the *good life'* (Berlant 164). Implied here is the belief that proletariat labour represents a proper life, undoubtedly that of hard work and drudgery, but not the good life itself. The good life always stands beyond and above the grasp of the proletariat, who, with enough hard work, might eventually reach its promissory wonders. It is aspirational, a mirage of middle-class existence, defined vaguely by fantasies of stability, certainty and relative prosperity, rarely born out materially.

Returning to *Seasonal Associate,* we can say, then, that the erosion of the middle-class good life once enjoyed by the protagonist is formalised by a concurrent breakdown in the novel's generic boundaries. The conventions that sustained this 'good life' are not only disrupted in the events comprising the narrative, but also at the level of form by removing the predictable tropes that come with the promise of a discreet genre – for example, bourgeois realism. The above passage moves between fiction, autobiography and, for this reason, might best be termed 'auto-theory', a genre in which theoretical and artistic references blend with narrative events to become essential parts of the plot (Fournier 2-3). One important role such references take in the novel, as the earlier reference to Han suggests, is to reassure the author-protagonist's sense of her status as a freelance writer and, more fundamentally, a secure member of the middle-class. Yet, the first-person here refutes such assurances, responding to Pollesch's humanistic claims with a pessimistic 'That wouldn't work' (Geissler 91). Her flat refusal suggests that it is not just Pollesch that does not 'work' but humanistic ideals more generally. Yet, the novel itself takes a broadly humanistic position against capitalism, at one point explicitly contrasting the human against the repetitions of the Amazon 'machine' (88). This inconsistency again reflects the splits and instabilities within the protagonist's volatile class identity. The second-person finds comfort in reeling off references to theorists and dramatists, while the first-person evidently derives no such reassurance. I would suggest, then, that the second-person's discomfort is not so much with humanistic philosophy as intellectual endeavours per se, and, by extension, one of the key signifiers of her once relatively leisured existence. A formal crisis emerges as the protagonist attempts to deny the spectre of her middle-class life and, in the process, refuses the world of the very author that gives her an existence. Thus, Berlant's 'crisis of genre' – the complex, intersecting array of generic signifiers that never quite add up to the 'promise' of more traditional genres – here allows the author to construct a formal crisis between the various textual and extra textual iterations of herself, which express the 'crisis of life' encrypted in the traumatic loss. The promise of a middle-class good life, represented by theoretical and artistic references, appears to have been broken, as the fantasy stretching over the previous three pages culminates with 'That wouldn't work'.

Labour Trauma

So far, we have seen the ways in which the author-protagonist's traumatic loss expresses itself as a distinct symptomatology of fantasy and dissociation. Over the course of this section, I will show how the symptomatology of downward mobility found in the novel relates more generally to the traumatic 'truth' at the core of the capitalist totality. In the age of Amazon, the downwardly mobile middle-class is threatened not only with the world of the proletariat but with the world of absolute or relative redundancy. This takes the form of low wages and reduced or insecure hours but also excessive levels of technological mediation, so that the worker is increasingly marginalised from the work process. These are, the novel suggests, the grizzly potential outcomes awaiting those who fall from a position of relative privilege. Consider a reverie during a shift at the warehouse:

> So a bed comes about in your mind, a bed you'll
> seek out during the day not long from now, while
> clearly and visibly standing and working in the
> dispatch hall. It happens automatically, you don't
> even notice it. In the end, when its time to stop being
> a seasonal associate before the end of your contract,
> you'll have filled this bed up with trash – there'll be
> crumpled paper, vodka bottles, condoms, cigarette
> butts and a small, absolutely unfamiliar toy dog
> gathered around its edges. Your mental bed will look
> a lot like Tracy Emin's bed, in which the artist spent
> a long period of depression… You'll be
> embarrassed; the bed will seem to you like a
> deathbed. (Geissler 80).

A fantastical 'bed' arises 'automatically', as if spontaneously appearing in the protagonist's vision like a mirage. An expression of her increasingly exhausted state, this 'mental bed' comprises an assortment of distressed and surreal material – 'condoms', 'vodka bottles' and 'cigarette butts', watched over by an 'absolutely unfamiliar toy dog' – undoubtedly a reference to the deathly life of the commodity itself - a receptacle of 'dead labour' in Marx's term, elsewhere described in the text as 'garish ghosts' and 'retired former workers' (Marx *Capital* 342) (Geissler 43, 85). What the protagonist describes here as a 'death bed' might more precisely be termed a 'crypt' – the deathly secret loss preserved by the sufferer's pathological behaviour (Abraham &

Torok 19). Such symptoms materialize as the 'trash' in the protagonist's bed, which accumulates over the course of her time working at the warehouse, an accumulation that is more fundamentally a decline, suggesting the protagonist's fall into a European working-class made 'trash' by an economy that through outsourcing and automation has swelled the ranks of the global north's 'industrial reserve army' (Marx *Capital* 781).

Marx argues that as capitalism develops the composition of capital disproportionately favours technology over labour (*Capital* 783). Because technology intensifies labour's productivity, less workers can be squeezed for more work. Increasingly superfluous, a majority of the workforce is left 'partially employed or wholly unemployed' (*Capital* 794). As Marx (*Capital* 608) notes, this 'industrial reserve force…ready at a moment's notice' are employed intermittently: 'overwork prevails periodically during what is called the season, as a result of sudden orders'. Amazon's temporary, insecure 'seasonal' contract continues the legacy of catering to an underemployed mass of which our protagonist, a 'seasonal associate', is exemplary. It comes as no surprise, then, that 'trash' forms the basis of the symptomatic fantasy of temporary work; hence, the longer she stays at the company, the more 'trash' accumulates, as her 'death bed' is buried ever-deeper under the traumatic debris of warehouse life.

As capital shifts the axis of production away from labour to machines so it comes to destroy the grounds on which it produces value, which can only be produced in the absolute sense by labour. The result is the gradual withering of profits, a slowdown in the system and, ultimately, economic stagnation, a recalcitrant condition that has beset the US economy arguably since the 1970s.[8] Thus, the warehouse stands testament to the decline of production in the global north and the economic torpor that has followed. A semantic strand in the above passage stretches from warehouse to stagnation via the 'deathbed', a stagnant space filled with undesirable detritus. Emin's bed here might better be read less as an expression of personal depression, more fundamentally as an expression of the economic torpor at the root of the protagonist's suffering.

[8] See Robert Brenner's *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy* for a more comprehensive theory of post-1970 US economic stagnation.

But stagnation does not mean immediate and acute redundancy, as some theorists have predicted, but rather a desperate push on the part of capital for productivity gains which has led to the steady decline of wages, security and decent conditions.[9] This is no better expressed than in the protagonist's experience of algorithmic technology as a process of becoming more machine-like, an exemplary feature of attempts to intensify productivity levels. In the above passage, her cognition becomes compulsive, or in her words 'happens automatically' as if composed by a machine. It is worth, therefore, pursuing the machinic logic central to the symptomatology of our suffering protagonist, a logic of repetition that follows the technological repetitions that disguises the traumatic truth at the system's core. Consider a scene in which she undertakes the monotonous task of processing novelty mugs:

> You scan the barcode as usual and the computer reports the product has to go to the Sample Centre because it hasn't yet been subjected to the drop test. So you take the mug in its cardboard packaging to the Sample Centre. The associate there examines the box, stands up, and drops it on the floor from a height of a meter. He picks up the box and turns it so that a different corner will hit the floor first… the man repeats the test. There's no clink of broken porcelain until the last drop… You carry the mug back to your workplace… You log the other mugs into the system and wonder who'll buy them, who'll buy all the other things. Surrounded by products your preparing for sale, you don't get curious, you grow immune to them (Geissler 96-97).

Representing the fulfilment of tasks organised by Amazon's algorithmic system, the passage suggests the repetitive nature of the associated labour through the monotonous reiteration of the term 'Sample Centre'. Emptied of the tonal inflections and varied timbres suggestive of a rich phenomenology, the narrator's voice, as if bound to the algorithm, appears less a subject, more the object of machinic function, reflecting Marx's (*Capital* 544) contention that as a veneer for capital 'the automaton itself is the subject, and the workers are merely conscious organs' of its processes. Amazon is

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[9] See Jason E. Smith's *Smart Machines and Service Work* for a more comprehensive treatment of this theory. J. Smith (72-76) argues that failed attempts to improve productivity are not the result of automation per se, but rather automation's tendency to push workers out of production into a service sector where productivity gains are more difficult to generate via technological development.

renowned for algorithmically perfecting the movement of the worker in relation to the machine. Struna and Reese describe the 'brutal ballet' originating in the consumer's click, moving through the warehouse and ending with delivery (*Cost of Free Shipping* 90). In similar terms, *Seasonal Associate* represents the automation of the worker as a kind of robotic ballet: bodies undergo the 'well-practised choreography' of a 'box-counting dance'; 'mind[s]' become 'counting machine[s]; and during an orientation day a veteran worker demonstrates with algorithmic finesse the successful completion of a routine task, appearing 'to use the exact same amount of time for each activity, everything… subordinated to his sense of time' (Geissler 26, 69, 88) Forced to mime an algorithmically determined temporality, the worker here perfectly absorbs the rhythms and sequences of the machine. Beyond work hours, the protagonist's activities continue to obey this standard motion: 'it's time to put your locker key around your neck and fill your water bottle before your shift. You now do that routinely' (Geissler 94).

More importantly, the passage registers a distinct symptomatology of the worker turned machine. As the protagonist notes, the standardization of task and product means that 'you don't get curious, you grow immune to them'. Immunity, or no longer being *affected,* might be better read as a total lack of affect so that, in the protagonist's words, '[n]othing feels real', culminating in the sense '[t]hat you might disappear' (Geissler 68, 84). Such sensations, or lack thereof, are the result of what Walter Benjamin in his essay 'Some Motifs on Baudelaire' terms 'the shocks' that 'the worker 'experiences' at his machine', who, rather than fully registering their impact, deflects their full force in an effort to protect herself from excessive stimuli (157-158, 173). Such stimuli, Benjamin seems to suggest, wounds the worker's cognitive and affective faculties precisely through the automatic response it commands; the experience of which not only traumatizes the worker but through its repetitive processes forces her to ceaselessly undergo the originary traumatic event. In a perverse rendition of the Freudian sufferer's repetition of the event as symptom, the machine compels the worker to repeatedly return to the site of their suffering without fully perceiving it as such, not least because, much as a traumatic event, 'the drill of the machine' erodes the worker's memory (Benjamin 'Motifs' 172). As Susan Buck Morss (18) notes in regard to this section of the essay, 'Perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense memories of the past'. Memory, Benjamin ('Motifs' 172) suggests, is dependent on practise, a process of developmental learning entirely destroyed by the 'simplified speciality' of the worker as

an appendage to the machine. Rendered anaemic and thin, memory only allows for the most stunted form of perception 'sealed off from experience' (Benjamin 'Motifs' 172). Under such conditions, Buck Morss argues (18), the sensory system's 'goal is to numb the system, to deaden the senses; to repress memory'; perception is no longer synesthetic but anaesthetic.

Following Benjamin, we might locate the cessation of the protagonist's capacity to feel in the 'shock' she experiences and her subsequent repeat of this shock in her daily activity. Yet, technology itself is not the shock, only a further expression of the capitalist totality's traumatic core: that of value production itself and its eventual decline. As earlier noted, the drive to convert less labour into more abstract labour-time pushes the system toward ever-greater levels of technological automation. It is, then, the ongoing need to further exploit this abstract unit of labour, to intensify and expand the valorization process, that generates the 'shock' described above by Benjamin (Marx *Capital* 548). Noting the arrival of large-scale machinery in the valorization process during the nineteenth century, Marx (*Capital* 548) notes:

> Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity.[6] Even the lightening of the labour becomes an instrument of torture, since the machine does not free the worker from the work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content. Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour process but also capital's process of valorization, has this in common.

Marx here undoubtedly seeks to evoke the trauma of capitalist labour – a trauma that finds its origin in the valorization process. Dictated by the maxims of expansion and acceleration, the valorisation process is continually 'revolutionised' so as to produce more product with less labour (Marx *Capital* 319). To condense more labour-power into the abstract unit of necessary labour time involves standardizing it to the motions of a machine, which empties the labourer's work of any meaning or sense of purpose – a process so intense and torturous that it entirely 'exhausts the nervous system'. This deprivation 'of all content', the translation of concrete work into abstract labour-time is the generative trauma at the core of the capitalist mode of production. It is *the* universal

trauma of the working class, forming the basis of their exploitation both as productive and reproductive capacity, their subsequent exhaustion and their eventual erasure from the system.

Universal suffering

In a passage that perhaps offers the most explicit sense of the protagonist's trauma, we are presented with what appears to be a universal form of 'suffering':

> You'll spend a lot of time thinking about what work
> is, why work ought not to be imposed on anyone.
> You'll misunderstand things and muddle things up
> and your sensitivity will be processed and challenged
> by the very first instance of the fatal, so it will take
> you a while to find out what's really troubling you,
> and to realize that your troubling and suffering are by
> no means specific to you, but astonishingly generic.
> Yes, you are generic; I intend to regard you as
> generic and introduce you to your most generic traits
> (Geissler 14).

All of the clues that have so far led us toward the protagonist's trauma are here present. Again, she regards the warehouse as the 'first instance of the fatal', a shock event that generates confusion and suffering, perhaps better described as a crisis, which compels her to identify the source of her misery: 'work' itself. It is, however, a very specific kind of work, distinct from freelance writing, later brought into question by the protagonist who can not decide whether such 'work is *labor,* whether I want to call it that' (Geissler 115). Rather, this work *is* labour in Marx's (*Capital* 126) sense of work that is remunerated, organised and managed according to an abstract measure of time. The trauma that emerges from it is generic because abstract labour gives rise to a mode of production underwritten by this equivalent measure of time, standardizing the experience of the worker as homogenous labour (Marx *Capital* 126). In a moment when most production-based labour has been outsourced overseas, the German proletariat now experiences their 'most generic traits' in distribution centres, the new home to those who suffer most deeply the standardised traumas of technological enhancement and the division of labour.

Again, the onomastic relation between author and protagonist, between first- and second-person, becomes split along class lines, with the middle-class 'I' claiming to 'introduce you to your most generic traits'. Suggested here is a sense that the traumatic remainder of her once relatively privileged existence, expressed in the first-person, accentuates the descent into the 'generic' 'suffering' of the second-person proletariat. The term 'introduce' frames the temporal and spatial quality of leaving the middle-class, implying the passage from one boundary to another. The first-person 'introduces' the second-person to this suffering because the suffering associated with downward mobility expresses, in some sense, a spatial transition from one class position to another. More importantly, perhaps, it also expresses a temporal or narrative transition, as the fortunes of the middle-class change over historical time. During the long interregnum period that has followed the 2008 crisis, job losses, asset stripping and ever-greater levels of financial precarity have introduced some of the middle-class to the 'generic traits' of the proletariat. This passage suggests, then, that the relationship between the first- and second-person not only formalises the symptoms of trauma – split identity, dissociation and fantasy – but also captures the revelatory experience of trauma, the devastating fall from the middle-class into the proletariat, from first- to second-person, exposing the social core of capital: value production.

By causing her to realise her generic role in the system, the proletarianization of the author-protagonist entails a further appalling insight: that she is not a unique 'individual', *the* ideological supposition that, as earlier noted, Poulantzas argues coheres the middle-class experience. In this sense, she has lost her identity imparted by bourgeois individualism, the sense of being a unique, autonomous self, which once seemed to separate her from the great mass of the worker who moves with the jolts of the machine and the hands on the clock. Having moved from the relative creativity and autonomy of freelance writing to the standardised labour of the warehouse, the protagonist now realises that she shares the 'generic' traits of abstract labour. Yet, in the above passage, 'what's really troubling' her about her role as proletariat is not specifically mentioned. This specific 'generic' trait, I would argue, is highlighted by the author's decision to forgo giving the protagonist a name, which, alongside the use of first- and second-person narration, expresses the anonymous experience of low-skill work at a company such as Amazon. Indeed, anonymity goes with the territory of 'abstract labour', an abstraction not only framing the socially-necessary labour-time

inherent to capitalist production but, in doing so, providing a whole phenomenology for the working class, which in Marx's (*Capital* 126) words 'can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour'.

Much in this manner, our protagonist enters the narrative without concrete specifics, addressed on the first page in a letter from Amazon as 'Dear Ms…,' (Geissler 9). Moreover, we are given few details about the protagonist's life outside of the warehouse. We know that she has a boyfriend, children and has previously worked as a translator and writer, but the specifics associated with these aspects of her life are barely detailed. Without unique or distinguishing features, her life might be said to index 'Dear Ms…', a gap which fills the place of a proper noun, or indeed proper life, which could be filled by any other worker. Significantly, the novel ends much in the way it begins. Following another letter from Amazon to the protagonist which again addresses itself to 'Ms…', the novel concludes with 'Enough time appears to have passed… for the company to start using your surname again' (Geissler 213). On the one hand, the final sentence references the protagonist's earlier expressed aversion to Amazon's use of employee first-names as a managerial strategy, an approach that, judging by her later remark, epitomises the most insidious attempts of a faceless company to make itself seem friendly and personable (Geissler 35). More importantly, it brings the narrative full circle, suggesting that while the reader is still not given the protagonist's name, the protagonist herself has at least been given the name she prefers, made possible by her return to the less anonymous, less homogenous and less replaceable occupation of freelance writing. Yet, the fact that the reader is not given her name is suggestive: the protagonist may have escaped Amazon, but she cannot escape the position of substitutability the precarious capitalist worker forever occupies.

Considering, then, that the novel both begins and concludes with the protagonist regarding her replaceable position in the economy, it is perhaps worth pursuing the theory that this represents the aspect of labour that is 'really troubling' her; that is, the core of both her trauma and the capitalist totality more generally. I would argue, then, that anonymity suggests the potential replacement of any given worker with any other and, more pertinently, of any worker with technology, so that the 'generic' that 'troubles' the protagonist can be found in the fantasy with which the previous section's analysis began: the 'trash' that expresses the superfluous workforce of late capitalism.

As earlier shown, the present moment might be said to represent the culmination of capital's fundamental contradiction whereby the search for ever-greater productivity pushes absolute value production aside, thus expanding the surplus population of workers (Marx *Capital* 781-783; Postone 356). The technological thrust behind productivity gains has been central to Amazon's business model, which since the writing of *Seasonal Associate* has been steadily automating a variety of tasks once fulfilled by workers.

Yet, Amazon is not only at the forefront of the technologically driven expansion of the surplus pool; it is also one of its main beneficiaries, enjoying the cheap labour that emerges from increased competition, sometimes taking the form of unpaid 'workfare' labour provided by government work programs. As the author-protagonist notices during her first shift at the warehouse, the majority of those contracted by Amazon for 'seasonal' work are the long-term unemployed: 'What you know now is, for example, that you're surrounded by people who are simply looking for a job, who don't care where they work… All the applicants can be divided into those sent by the employment office and those not sent by the employment office; the latter is a very small group' (Geissler 22). One might suggest that the novel not only reveals the author-protagonist's status as a member of this superfluous workforce in the present, but also in the past, even when she worked as a freelance writer. In a section that considers the period leading up to her decision to work for Amazon, we learn that 'You refuse to claim welfare for certain reasons that I'll explain later' – reasons that are never forthcoming, but that we can only assume relate to her denial of the unbearable truth. Admitting that she requires jobseeker benefits would further concede her status as surplus to the system's requirements.

Throughout the narrative, the protagonist repeatedly represses the reality of unemployment (Geissler 132, 206). In a particularly telling example, she runs into her neighbour on the way into her apartment, who during their brief meeting reveals that she is 'unemployed' and has to regularly attend the 'welfare office', where 'You just have to put up with it, you have to swallow everything, there's nothing else you can do, otherwise they take away the last of your money' (Geissler 132-133). After disclosing this information, the neighbour 'starts crying', an event that 'five minutes later and three floors higher' the protagonist has 'already forgotten' (Geissler 133). Despite the

potentially disturbing quality of the event, the protagonist quickly forgets it, or, more specifically, represses it. Her neighbour has just revealed the reality of absolute dependence on a draconian state that potentially awaits the protagonist once she finishes her contract at Amazon, a reality that is evidently too devastating to even briefly entertain.

Such dependence can mean working for free or very low wages. Since 2005, the German government has operated a 'One-Euro Job' scheme, which as the title suggests pay welfare recipients very little to undertake often gruelling work. In a later scene, the protagonist again meets her neighbour, who this time reveals that she has been placed on one such 'work program', which involves unpaid housecleaning in the homes of the wealthy, who, her neighbour claims, 'are never satisfied' (Geissler 206). The protagonist responds, 'Maybe… you're getting paid not so much for the housework and more so that someone has you to be dissatisfied with' (Geissler 207). Almost immediately forgetting that the work program is unpaid, the protagonist demonstrates her inability to fully accept unpaid labour as the material reality of the contemporary surplus worker. As earlier noted, most of the workers at the Leipzig warehouse have been sent by the welfare office, further suggesting that a majority of seasonal contracts are fulfilled by those pushed into the unpaid work program.

The scene closes with the protagonist's thoughts returning to money: 'Your outstanding invoices do get paid, incidentally, and your account even expands a little, for a while' (Geissler 209) Striking in these scenes is the protagonist's wilful and immediate forgetting of the realities of labour despite her own current circumstances. Such realities, one can assume, are too much to bear, realities that a certain amount of fetishism allows the protagonist to avoid. The commodity fetish – for Marx (*Capital* 164-166), the ontological reality of capital – involves a transfiguration of labour into the produced thing, hence labour readily vanishes from view. This is precisely the dynamic at work when the protagonist's focus so easily shifts from the distant world of her neighbour's labour back into the present reality of things: money, bank accounts and invoices. For Adorno (*Correspondence* 321), the fetish relies on forgetting: 'objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten'. It is this very forgetting that

prevents the worker in their day-to-day existence from discovering the system's traumatic core.

Conclusion

At the end of the novel, the author-protagonist returns to her writing job and, as we have just seen, appears to forget her experience at the warehouse. She has repressed the experience, a personal trauma that stands in for the traumatic core at the centre of capital, what Fredric Jameson (*Capital* 147) calls the 'unity of capitalist production and unemployment'. But the novel does not offer the false resolution of the author-protagonist simply returning to her middle-class life unscathed. At the end of the novel, we see the degree to which she has been marked by this trauma and, consequently, struggles to negotiate her sense of class belonging in its aftermath. On the final page, she notes that in her further correspondence with Amazon following her employment they have again started to use her surname rather than her forename (Geissler 213). The overly personal use of her forename represents a violation of her sense of self and an unwillingness on the part of the company to adopt the middle-class code of manners that the author-protagonist expects. The return to this code signifies that, on some level, she has returned to her previous life and sense of self. But the fact that we, the reader, are still not offered her forename, that she remains nameless right to the end of the novel, suggests the ambiguity that persists in terms of her class position.

Perhaps more significantly, the split between 'I' and 'you' is never fully resolved. To some degree, the proletariat 'you' has become a part of her new, more complex class identity. As noted in the first section, a few pages before the book ends, the 'I' writes to the 'you': 'Let's stay in touch'. This parting sentiment hardly resolves her destabilised sense of class position, and may be read as at least partly dismissive – the polite kind of thing someone says when they really wish to put distance between themselves and the addressee. Nonetheless, it does show that this side of her subjectivity cannot be fully denied contact. This unsettling remainder of her time at the warehouse leaves open the question of whether the novel depicts a pivot in middle-class alliances that Duménil and Lévy suggest has remained a characteristic feature of crises across capitalist history. Such passages suggest some kind of journey over the course of the novel toward a greater identification with the proletariat. At the very least, it suggests that the

experience of the warehouse has provoked a shift in class consciousness. In the context of the wider novel, though, this is not so straightforward. Even after the lengthy struggle of coming to recognise her drift out of the middle-class, the author-protagonist does not ever truly identify with her colleagues in the sense of recognising shared interests or, indeed, with the wider working class beyond the warehouse.

Toward the start of the novel, she realises that 'You simply need money regardless of the time of year, you're just like anyone else in that respect, and, as you'd like, this can be a comforting truth or a starting point for trying a different way at some point, and not considering the truth incontrovertible' (Geissler, 23) At the end of the novel, after undergoing the 'generic suffering' of the proletariat earlier described, the author-protagonist does not find her new sense of class belonging to be a 'comforting truth', but rather a reality to be escaped at all costs. The novel suggests that even as the middle class seems an increasingly illusory position, its promises of autonomy, relative security and, perhaps most importantly, distinction remain seductive and continue to make a true reckoning with its material destruction if not impossible then at least improbable.

Chapter Three: Stagnation and Surrealism in Megan Boyle's *Liveblog*

Megan Boyle's 2018 autobiographical text *Liveblog: a novel* represents the disrupted life course of the US millennial middle-class following the 2008 financial crisis. The author presents to the reader in excruciatingly detailed and honest prose her experience of unemployment and living at home with her parents while in her late twenties. In this chapter, I argue that the novel indexes the experience of arrested development to economic stagnancy, which appears throughout the text as a glut of autobiographical detail that arrests narrative motion. This sense of narrative stagnancy is often rendered nostalgically in ways that are surreal, unsettling and grotesque. In this respect, the novel displays affective qualities attending downward mobility that have not yet been documented in scholarship on the subject.

Between 17th March and 1st September of 2013, Boyle used Tumblr to painstakingly narrate the minutiae of her life. The project is published in book form as *Liveblog: a novel* - the subtitle evidently meant as an ironic gesture toward the limits of what can reasonably count as literary fiction. Unlike the novel form, which consciously selects events required to tell a narrative, no bit of autobiographical information is too trivial for Boyle's project. The book's pages are filled with confessions, Gchat logs, meticulous lists of drugs, and all manner of other psychic ephemera. To offer one emblematic passage:

> **8.57PM:** buying envelopes for packages now. then feed cats/get dad to sign lease. 24 hour fedex again. assembling packages. exercise. eating shitty food today. i just ate pringles dipped in baba ganoush then two little cookie things. ultimate shit eating. if i take aderall now will i need to take more, because of food? goddamnit. have really letting myself eat the worst shit the past few days. smoothie was a small improvement. okay. Eating 7.5mg Adderall (Boyle 200).

Such experiential excess often reads more like a dispassionate list than literary prose. The rapid movement from one activity to the next creates a sense of chronic immediacy, a sense that the present moment is all that matters. The effect, as a review in the *New Yorker* suggests, is that *Liveblog* ends up pushing autofiction to its limit: 'The result could be called a fiction of the Internet—a representation of an infinitely extending and seemingly available world' (Wallace). For this reason, Alois Sieben (192) argues,

'*Liveblog* problematizes the fiction of autofiction'. That is because *Liveblog* is not a novel in any straightforward sense. Its formal and stylistic techniques do not conform to those of the traditional genres of literary fiction. *Liveblog* actively antagonises the etymology of fiction, which emerges from the latin root *fingere* - to fashion or form - by refusing to give narrative shape to an excess of trivial detail (Sieben 193).

If such a thing as a narrative can be found across the pages of *Liveblog,* it goes something like this: The book starts with Megan living with her parents, clearing out an old apartment that she rented with her ex-boyfriend. She then leaves to live in New York, struggles to find work and starts a new relationship which ends soon after. These events are given no more significance in the text than her daily ingestion of bad food and Adderall.

The text's excess of autobiographical trivia, which ultimately undoes any sense of meaningful event, could be said to dramatise the exhaustion of narrative that Walter Benjamin first notes in his essay 'The Storyteller' and Fredric Jameson finds as the chronic condition of our late capitalist present (Benjamin 'Storyteller' 88) (Jameson *Postmodernism* passim). As Benjamin ('Storyteller' 89) tells us: 'The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment'. Benjamin ('Storyteller' 90-91) counters his description of information with the extensive act of storytelling which, he argues, echoes throughout time. There is something vacuous about information for Benjamin, further suggested in his description of time told through the clock and the calendar as 'homogenous, empty time' ('Theses' 252). Throughout *Liveblog*, time is marked by a continuous stream of informational updates: '5.51am: ate bagel' (Boyle 57). Once events register solely as information, not only does time itself become equivalent, as Benjamin argues, but it has the effect of making events appear as equivalent. In the above passage, 'exercise', 'eating shitty food' and 'assembling packages' are all flattened into substitutable events. It should also be emphasised that the writing of these events takes place on Tumblr, a social media site that like other platforms fosters a particular style of writing characterised by brevity and the first-person singular that allows for the deep commodification of everyday ephemera via the transfiguration of data into profit.

Suggested in Benjamin's ('Storyteller' 88-89) account of the expansion of information at the expense of "storytelling" is the logic of the commodity. But it is Fredric Jameson

who argues that the breakdown of narrative is the characteristic feature of our age. The data-driven world in which Boyle exists intensifies the state of chronic present bereft of past or future that Jameson (*Postmodernism* 18) locates in our late capitalist world of relentless commodification. Temporal continuity has given way, Jameson (*Postmodernism* 18) argues, to the spatial logic of the spectacle - 'a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum' without a discernible temporality. *Liveblog's* glut of detail, giving the book a feeling of spatial expanse rather than temporal movement formalises the excess of information social media sites collect on their users, as well as the felt experience of this temporality. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (1) calls this feeling 'updating to remain (close to) the same; bored, overwhelmed and anxious all at once. A few weeks into the Liveblog project, Boyle (287) tells us that 'several people have asked what I've been up to and I've said 'nothing' grinning, they ask 'no really what've you been doing,' I say 'nothing, living at my dad's, doing the liveblog''. These passages suggest the banality and, ultimately, paralysis of empty time spent online, what Sieben (194) calls the 'affect of dull stasis'.

The only scholarly article on the novel so far focusses on Boyle's engagements with social media and the ways in which the logics of social media permeate the project's form, in particular Boyle's tone and mode of address (Sieben, passim). As we see in the above passages, her register is denotative, rather than connotative. Between showing and telling, Boyle's narration evidently favours the latter: a flat, affectless mode of narration that communicates information as if automatically. The automatic is, by its very nature, not discursive, but follows a programmed route digitally coded in advance, arguably registered in the narrator's compulsive tendency to figure reality numerically. Avoiding connotative language and descriptive digressions and by instead focussing on numeric details, Boyle's automatic telling might be regarded as a narrative analogue to the software code that undergirds the social media sites on which the project was written. Representation is pared down to discreet segments of data that do not readily permit the hermeneutic possibilities of tangible and sensuous description.

This flat, denotative mode of address features heavily among the Alt Lit scene of "internet writers" with whom Boyle is closely associated. Writers such as Mira Gonzalez, Sam Pink and Tao Lin (with whom Boyle was in a relationship before the writing of *Liveblog*) regularly feature in Boyle's posts, offering a sense of the extent to

which Boyle circulates in the community. Lin's novel *Taipei*, in particular, adopts a similar mode of address to Boyle's *Liveblog*. The protagonist of *Taipei,* Paul, an autofictional cipher for Lin, who, like the author, is Taiwanese, lives in Brooklyn, and uses digital platforms both as a creative medium and a space to promote his literary work, experiences reality with little of the sensuous description often associated with literary fiction. Sensuous reality thus appears 'less substantial than expected' (Lin *Taipei* 244). Sex with his girlfriend Erin, the character based on Boyle, is described with affectless precision: 'They were sweating, and their heads were on the opposite side of the mattress from before, when they finished, after around fifty minutes' (Lin *Taipei* 133). Eating in a restaurant with friends appears as a series of literal statements: 'Fran and Daniel returned and ordered enchiladas, nachos. Paul ordered tequila, a salad, waffles with ice cream on top' (Lin *Taipei* 67, 244). Lacking any sensuous properties, the meal is 'shapeless, almost invisible' (Lin *Taipei* 67). This lack of sensuous differentiation is the characteristic feature of Lin's (*Taipei* 20) style of narration:

> They decided to leave in three minutes, at 9.01. This was Paul's second or third social situation involving more than one person, excluding himself, since returning from Taiwan, two months ago. His only regular communication since his relationship with Michelle ended three and a half months ago was emails and Gmail chats with Charles, 25, who lived in Seattle with his girlfriend.

The lack of any differentiation in the descriptions of eating a meal and having sex, taking adderall, meeting a friend and buying envelopes is precisely what Chun (1) means by 'updating to remain the same', a kind of affectless, online stagnancy, whereby events change in a superficial way, while in a more fundamental sense everything stays the same. This is the chronically vacated temporality of *Taipei* and, as we will see, *Liveblog*.

But I wish to pull away from accounts of Boyle's project that understand this peculiar temporality as fundamentally the result of social media. One serious problem with an interpretation that focuses solely on social media as *the* shaping force behind the text's temporality is that technology is ultimately torn from its wider historical context. There is a tendency to treat online time as discreet and essentially separate from other social temporalities within which it is embedded. In this particular context, this tendency reifies social media as its own self-contained time. I would argue instead that the blog –

and as a result the novel into which it was made – registers the wider socioeconomic context in which Boyle and the millennial generation have come of age: a post-2008 crisis economy in which decent jobs are hard to come by and rent is often so high that young people are forced to continue living with their parents into their thirties.

Returning to the analysis that introduces this thesis, we find in both *Liveblog* and *Taipei* examples of a middle-class no longer confident in mapping its reality. Neither novel contains what Moretti calls '*the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the… regularity of bourgeois life'* (81). In *Liveblog,* there is a decisive shift away from the luxurious filler of bourgeois realism, the optimistic and proprietorial enthusiasm of rich description, to thin, dispassionate lists of a reality that seems to contain nothing of the observer. If *Liveblog* still represents a continuation of the realist form, then it trades maximalism for what Mark McGurl (205) calls *'monumental minimalism*'. This often amounts to a glut of affectless description that arrests narrative motion and inhibits the kinds of pleasures so often associated with bourgeois fiction, that is, the kinds of satisfaction that characterise middle-class life. As McGurl (247) notes, 'Far from a litany of pleasures taken, as the more defiantly countercultural version of the project might have been, the novel's catalog of casual transgression and wasteful slackers are tinged with a pre-professional masochism'. The prefix 'pre', however, suggests that a professional life is somewhere on the horizon. Rather, the lack of narrative motion would suggest that Boyle is trapped in an eternal adolescence. In this regard, *Liveblog* formalises the typical downwardly mobile figure of the millennial middle-class, which experiences time as a peculiar mixture of deferrals, delays and dissatisfaction. The ultimate result, as the final section of this chapter will show, is a text that wallows in floating cultural referents that do not add up to a discernible narrative. It is a text more often surrealist than realist.

Stagnant economies

Before showing how the temporal structure of *Liveblog* indexes the wider temporal contradictions of downwardly mobile millennials, I will first explore the tensions between chronic economic stagnancy and the social impulse to be productive that determines the life course of Boyle, as well as her wider generational cohort. The few critical articles and essays written on *Liveblog* have made little of Boyle's precarious socioeconomic status in the text. The reader enters Boyle's life at a moment when she is

'two-years-jobless', moving between rental properties and her parents' respective homes and is generally struggling to stay afloat financially (Boyle 106). At one point, she attempts to buy e-cigarette refills to find that her debit card is not working: 'checked ATM. nothing in savings account, $12 remain in checking account. ate 1mg xanax' (Boyle 681). Both Boyle and her friends continually experience money problems throughout the course of the blog and often respond to these stresses by consuming pharmaceutical products. At one point, she agrees to 'moneygram' her friend Jordan what seems to be her last $300 of savings because 'jordan's hell sounds worse than mine. he has a job at least… at least… shit' (Boyle 639).

'Shit' might well describe the cycle of financial precarity, anxiety and drug use that characterises the lives of both Boyle and her friends. They are, in this regard, typical of a generation that has disproportionately suffered the negative economic impacts of the post-2008 settlement. Many of her friends are unemployed or else stuck in jobs they hate, and a sense of anomic emptiness hovers over the project's cast of characters. In one scene, Boyle describes her peers motivations as coming 'from some place of egoless nihilistic boredom' (Boyle 55) This is perhaps understandable considering that, as Malcolm Harris (passim) argues in his 2017 book *Kids These Days: The Making of Millennials,* they represent a generation that has ended up with worse housing, wages and jobs than their parents or grandparents. They are, for this reason, more anxious, depressed and medicated than previous generations, too (Harris 166-173). Rather than being recognised as socially determined, the responsibility for this crisis has been made the fault of a generational character, regularly described as profligate, irresponsible and selfish.

This generational narrative is part of what structures Boyle's relationship with her mother, who often worries about the public nature of the project and her daughter's refusal to treat her personal life with greater discretion: 'mom called to say she was worried about potential employers googling me, and seeing i've written about doing drugs, reporting me to police' (Boyle 417). Boyle's mum is essentially worried about Boyle's employability being damaged by her online reputation. In ways that reflect the ideological pressures of 'self-branding' considered in Chapter One, Boyle's mother repeats the common idea that circulates online that maintaining an attractive self-brand is necessary for career success. As is always the case with employability discourse, the

emphasis here is on Boyle to be responsible for herself, rather than the wider social world in which she is situated. Boyle consequently responds, 'i could just say all of this is fiction' (Boyle 417).

The passage shows the way in which employability itself places pressure on literary form. In ways that are strikingly different to Eggers' *AHBWOSG*, Boyle attempts to evade the pressures of employability by turning to the sanctuary of 'fiction' as a space beyond market responsibility, where one's self-image can supposedly circulate free of consequence.

But the passage sits uncomfortably in a book in which the author evidently places great emphasis on literature's potential to optimise the self. For Boyle, documentation offers a way to track and surveil herself. This takes the form of Boyle chiding herself throughout the blog for not being 'productive' enough and not succeeding at adulthood, suggesting the degree to which she has accepted the narrative about her generation being lazy and feckless (Boyle 5, 9, 54). Just as Boyle continually consumes Monster energy drinks, performance enhancing drugs such as Adderall and smoothies to try and remain alert and make herself more efficient, she treats the blog itself as a technology of self-enhancement. It opens with Boyle explaining the project in optimistic terms to the audience as 'A FUNCTIONAL THING THAT WILL HOPEFULLY HELP ME FEEL MORE LIKE IMPROVING MYSELF' (Boyle 5). Capital letters are one of the few grammatical features in *Liveblog* that draw certain passages out of the informational morass and point the reader toward details that should be treated as significant. Before highlighting the function of the blog, she suggests that improvement means resolving feelings of detachment and stagnancy:

> the only person 'keeping tabs' on my life is me. as
> time has been passing, i have been feeling an equally
> uncontrollable sensation of my life not belonging to
> me or something. like its just this event i don't seem
> to be participating in much, and so could be
> attending by mistake. maybe i wasn't invited. clerical
> error. i witness myself wilfully allowing
> opportunities to fade away, because sometimes, for
> whatever reason, it is hard for me to do things that i
> know will make me happy (Boyle 5).

The passage exemplifies Boyle's tendency to identify her circumstances as entirely of her own making. A feeling of lacking control is understood simply as having not made

the right decisions, of having not made the best of the opportunities available. She scoulds herself for not being more present in her own life and seeing the opportunities available to her. But at no point does Boyle consciously recognise the narrowness of opportunity for both her and her friends, even though those surrounding her are similarly alienated from and paralyzed by their circumstances, whether working as cashiers in Walgreens or looking for poorly paid work in nursing homes (Boyle 638-639, 268). Boyle's attitude reflects what Wendy Brown (134) has described as the neoliberal ideology of 'responsibilization', the making by government and institutions of once social problems into individual problems. The individual is encouraged to think that the problem is 'me', not the wider social context that reduces agency to a narrow set of often bleak decisions. As Brown (134) notes, 'responsibilized individuals are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so'.

During *Liveblog*, the social 'powers and contingencies' Brown mentions restrict Boyle's project of self-improvement to a meticulous inventory of everything she is doing, choosing and consuming, which ultimately engulfs the broader social context in the minutiae of trivial personal choices. As a good neoliberal subject, she is not supposed to identify her subjective experience as existing within larger social and political structures but as the sole result of her own personal decisions. Instead, she understands her subjectivity, to use the word of Michel Foucault (224-225), as a 'machine'. Like Foucault's 'human capital' machine, she treats her subjectivity as a series of inputs and outputs. That is to say, she does not see her problems as social in origin but ultimately technical, as the result of badly chosen inputs. Throughout the novel, Boyle continually worries about eating the correct diet and taking the right kind and amount of commestibles and drugs. Bad moods and unwanted emotions are to be modulated with pharmaceuticals and smoothies (Boyle 10-11).

Yet, Brown's and Foucault's theories of neoliberalism only offer a limited analysis of *Liveblog*. What the text metaphorically poses in Boyle's behaviour is a contradiction between endless technical fixes and stagnancy. In these ways, I argue, Boyle's life might be said to stand in for the US economy at large. She, like the US economy, is stagnant – stuck living at home with her parents and without work – yet continually seeking productivity with superficial – ultimately unsuccessful – technical fixes such as

performance enhancing drugs. In his 2020 study *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation,* J. Smith argues (87-91) that technical fixes to the US economy's chronic stagnation problem have, despite all the boosterish talk of a second machine age and the wonders of AI, not only failed to revitalise productivity but have compounded the problem. As high productivity sectors – such as manufacturing, heavy industry etc. – have been mechanised, workers have been pushed into sluggish service jobs, which remain recalcitrant to productivity gains via technical enhancement (J. Smith 73-74). As such, service jobs require that workers push themselves ever-harder to eke out the petty gains available.

It is perhaps no surprise that Boyle – and the culture more generally – is obsessed with "productivity" – loosely understood by her, in the same way as economists do, as doing more with less time. When working her way through a list of things-to-do, Boyle rewards herself for 'being so productive' with an energy drink (Boyle 9). When Boyle perceives herself to be doing less with her time, the cruel super-egoic critic appears. For spending the evening watching Downton Abbey she refers to herself as 'a complete unproductive shithead' (Boyle 54). Later in the text she says: 'I'm going to mom's to take a bath or watch a movie or something. Treating myself to shithead special tonight' (Boyle 243). Time away from productive activity is a treat and relaxation is a forbidden pleasure which must be justified to herself and the reader: 'baby's nasty night of treating is not counterproductive. A night of treating will increase 'life enjoyment' and incentive to complete more tasks, because I'll want to be alive more' (Boyle 243). Relaxation via the illicit pleasure of trash TV is redeemed by absorption into the sadistically ascetic calculus of personal productivity enhancement. After the first of these 'shithead' evenings, to assuage the guilt she makes a promise to her mother and herself that 'i'm going to be healthy tomorrow, i'm going to go to yoga and fedex my application and mail packages' (Boyle 54).

As McGurl (247) notes of the project, 'What's interesting about [Boyle's] particular waste of time is how it registers, as on a photographic negative, the "real job" this writer does not have'. The blog has the eerie feel of a professional schedule, with entries time stamped like upcoming meetings, continually peppered with to do lists and reminders, even though Boyle readily admits that the project is 'getting in the way of other ways you could be being productive' (Boyle 642). Boyle's guilt results from feelings of

unproductiveness, even though she admits that her particular kind of productivity is itself deeply unproductive.

Feeling guilty for not working hard enough can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and what Max Weber calls the 'protestant ethic', whereby postponing one's pleasures and instead working hard, rather than satisfying them immediately, allows the individual to save, invest and make profits for their own sake, the characteristic feature of 'the spirit of capitalism' (Weber). But *Liveblog* suggests that the impulse to work hard has now fully overwhelmed the realm of labour and has slid into all areas of life. This omnipresent ideology of 'productive gains', I would argue, is a distinctly responsibilized response to an economy that has shifted its centre of gravity from industry to services. As mentioned earlier, all of the jobs that Boyle and her friends either do or interview for are in the service sector. These jobs are resistant to technologically-induced productivity gains, so the responsibility to produce more in less time comes to lie squarely with workers, whether it be on the job or in their own time—think here of Boyle's ''flushing green stuff through me' smoothie' (Boyle 10). Labour is forced to take on the role of fixed capital and treat itself as a source of machinic productivity. It is no coincidence that alongside this economic order has emerged a widespread social impulse to push oneself ever harder, exemplified in gastronomic culture as health food obsession, and fashion culture as 'athleisure' clothing (Tolentino).

Productivity is a common theme among the 'Alt-Lit' scene of internet writers with which Boyle is associated. Like Boyle, many of these writers are millennials who entered adulthood in the years surrounding the financial crisis and will, for this reason, have been subjected to the disciplinary discourse of 'productivity'. For instance, Lin's aforementioned *Taipei* is entirely preoccupied with 'productivity' which throughout the novel becomes almost synonymous with happiness. At one point, the protagonist Paul describes 'being productive' as being 'in service of feeling good' (Lin *Taipei* 127). After Paul feels rejected by Laura, someone he has been dating on and off for a few weeks, he takes to his bed, 'entirely beneath his blanket, aware that Michelle was the last person who'd affected him this cripplingly – to zero productivity' (Lin *Taipei* 52). It is interesting here that Paul decides to use the term 'zero productivity' instead of 'sad', 'miserable' or 'depressed', terms one would usually associate with the end of a long-

term relationship. Paul's choice of this term indicates the degree to which the current woes of the US economy have permeated his view of himself and the wider world. Like Boyle, when Paul is not working – that is, writing online – he admonishes himself for being unproductive.

These texts express the same productivity fetish that has dominated discourse on the US economy since the 2008 crash. The decade following has seen an endless stream of op-eds, policy papers and reports interrogating the 'productivity gap' or 'productivity puzzle' apparently wracking the US economy (Harding; Cowen). Like in this discourse, both Boyle and Lin regard productivity enhancement as a simple panacea to stagnation. Annie McClanahan (365) argues that the discourse of economic stagnation often 'depends on a fetish of economic productivity'. McClanahan (365) notes that contemporary theorists of economic stagnation fixate on life expectancy, in particular mortality rates, which has become a kind of metaphor for the deathly state of the economy as a whole. Among other things, rising mortality rates come to suggest a decline of productive capacity.

This is not only the case in the context of economic theory. In fiction, stagnancy leaves a distinct set of metaphorical traces, even in a text as literal as *Liveblog*. Stagnancy takes place at the level of the body, and occurs as abject symptoms such as bodily odours, which disturb Boyle and act as a continual source of distress throughout the text. One such anxiety for Boyle is the smell of her breath: 'My breath smells a way I've smelled on others and avoided saying 'your breath smells'. Musty-basement-y' (Boyle 11-12) The use of a musty basement as a description demonstrates that what unsettles Boyle about her breath is that it evokes stagnancy. On the one hand, in the ideological constraints of an economy that pushes workers to be responsible for their own productivity, it suggests that an individual is not properly looking after their health and, ultimately, their labouring body, which is regarded as both morally and aesthetically dubious. As Boyle jokes a few lines later, 'felt like i was performing the humanitarian tasks of flossing in front of a large and interested audience' (Boyle 12). Improving one's breath is regarded as good for society at large because under contemporary conditions of capital it signifies looking after one's productive capacity.

At a deeper level, Boyle's breath unsettles her because it signifies something ultimately outside of her control: her personal torpor as a result of a stagnant capitalist system. She

is disgusted by bad breath because it presents itself as a morbid symptom. In *Powers of Horror,* Julia Kristeva (4) argues that the abject signifies death, that which must be repelled for life to continue. Bad breath, understood so, brings into proximity an experience that troubles one's survival efforts by bringing death too close for comfort. But while Kristeva primarily means literal death, I mean death in a wider sense, not only at the personal, corporeal level, but also at the systemic level. 'Musty' here substitutes for 'stagnancy' which denotes the possibility of systemic death. Bad breath upsets Boyle because it denotes unproductiveness, and continual productivity is an essential ideological pressure in a moment when US capitalism appears increasingly morbid.

Drugs in the novel take on a role exemplary of the tension between productivity and stagnancy, between the life and death of capital. When Boyle needs to be 'productive' she takes a cocktail of legal and illicit substances but they only serve to presage the bad feelings of stagnancy to come. Before she attends a "board meeting" at a housing project which will decide whether she can rent a cheap apartment, she takes '20mg adderall, drank coffee from yesterday, showered, ate zeolite eyedropper supplement, b-vitamin, 60mg noopept' (Boyle 232). But she does this after a sleepless, anxious night, picking at spots and scabs on her body while trying to decide which drugs would currently comfort her:

> why are you doing this, you know you don't want to
> be doing this, this will make you feel bad tomorrow,
> what drug do you want (not adderall anymore,
> xanax? no, just drinking? maybe. molly? molly
> would change your thoughts but you'd feel depleted
> tomorrow, you mostly just want your thoughts to be
> changed. pot would make you feel even more
> dissociated or something, than this, don't do the pot,
> you're doing devious skin destruction things, the pot
> will make you paranoid. drink more green juice so
> your skin is better and you're not afraid of cancer,
> the gyno is going to find cancer in you tomorrow
> maybe, maybe if you squeeze stuff out… (Boyle
> 232).

The paragraph exemplifies the perverse pleasure Boyle derives from drugs: that they can change her mental state and make her feel more alive, that is, ward off feelings of stagnation and death. But ironically they also bring Boyle closer to morbid feelings, promising to make her feel 'depleted' and 'bad tomorrow'. They inhibit her

productivity, which in the above passages is her ability to perform well in an interview for cheap rental accommodation. This is a contradictory tangle that cannot be fully understood through Kristeva's theory of abjection as a repulsion to death, for Boyle's drug use also suggests that her compulsive pleasures draw her toward the deathly. To supplement Kristeva, we can include Jacques Lacan's notion of 'jouissance', a kind of transgressive pleasure that brings the subject close to the deathly realm of 'the real' and is, in this respect, traumatic (*XVII* 17). Her enjoyment of drugs invites this pleasure via the experience of poor mood the day after consuming them, which ultimately bring the superegoic guilt, to use her earlier words, of being 'a complete unproductive shithead'. Unproductivity and, more fundamentally, stagnancy reveal the traumatic realisation that capitalism and thus its associated patterns of consumption will not last forever, and that behind this realisation lies the deathly real of history itself, the chaotic void that Boyle seeks to escape through drug use, which offers the perverse enjoyment of being productive but eventually only brings her back to the very void she seeks to escape. The enjoyment, however, is not properly transgressive but rather supports the capitalist system. To quote Zizek (*Lacan* 85), in many situations, 'unintended perverse by-products, far from genuinely threatening the system of symbolic domination, are its built in transgressions, its unacknowledged obscene support'. It only drives Boyle's desire for pharmaceutical pleasure, and drives her yearning to consume ever-more commodities, in an endless and doomed attempt to escape an essentially inescapable real. For Boyle the addictive quality of drugs is that it upholds her fantasy – which is ultimately the capitalist system's fantasy – that stagnation can, somehow, be ameliorated through ever-increasing consumption.

Non-Stop Nostalgia

In the previous section, I showed how an endless tussle between stagnation and productivity characterises Boyle's documented existence. What I want to do in this section is show how this dynamic tension also generates *Liveblog's* formal components. More specifically, the strange mixture of being socially torpid alongside ceaseless efforts to enhance productivity registers a temporality peculiar to our present moment. Ivor Southwood (7) describes this temporality as 'non-stop inertia', whereby continual insecurity is leveraged by capitalism toward securitizing the present. Southwood (7-8) is mostly interested in how the ceaseless cycle of work and consumption disguises an

immobile system. Endless activity essentially hovers in historical limbo. The affect is one of frenzied torpor, in which one is always on the go, constantly active or prepared for activity, but with no prospect of this activity changing anything in a meaningful sense.

Other writers have voiced this as 'the slow cancellation of the future' and life 'after the future' (Fisher *Ghosts* 8, Berardi 163). The present comes to be understood as a claustrophobic place, inhibited by its own frenetic logic, as opposed to a dynamic propelled forward by historical motion. Boyle's life can be read as a symptom of this arrested temporality. A surface reading appears to depict an extended adolescence of living at home, depending on one's parents financially, having no job responsibilities and experimenting with illegal substances. This is mirrored in the lack of temporal motion and the glut of immediate detail which replaces any sense of narrative future. The reader, like Boyle, experiences her life as essentially futureless. As the project goes on, Boyle spends less time updating her blog (Boyle 702-703). But when she does update, the posts are essentially the same as those featured 700 pages earlier. Boyle is still popping xanax, drinking green smoothies and still meditating on the meaninglessness of her cohort's working lives (698, 699, 701). It would be easy to conclude that Boyle's life has been arrested by the social media logic earlier described as 'updating to remain (close to) the same' (Chun 1)

There is a more robust political economic explanation for the temporality of *Liveblog,* which I wish to pursue here. Part of what has emerged under the stagnant capitalist system is an asset economy that has deepened the sense of torpor that characterises the lives of younger generations. In *The Asset Economy,* Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper and Martin Konings argue that millennials have come of age at a time when the capitalist economy is increasingly one of low wage work and inflated asset prices, which effectively prevents any meaningful engagement with the capitalist economy and inhibits the possibility of arriving at the normative life stages of home ownership and child-rearing associated with Fordist accumulation (Adkins et al. 69). It is worth quoting them at length:

> The notion of the life course suggests an ordered
> sequence of irreversible life stages that was attuned
> to the organisation of life in the post-war era. But the
> suspensions, delays, deferrals and discontinuities

> characteristic of asset-based lives mean that they are
> often not lived as a sequence of chronologically
> ordered events (Adkins et al. 69).

This arrested life course is not only experienced by younger generations, but it has affected those generations to a more significant degree than older ones, in part because they came of age in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. As the lives of Boyle and her cohort suggest, millennials in the Global North have been trapped in the churn of poorly paid service work, expensive rental accommodation and debt (Adkins et al. 62-63).

As a result, the life course starts to be experienced as chronic time, pathological and riven with anxiety:

> there is this good feeling you have when you're
> younger, like a teenager to maybe 25 years old, that
> the world is ready for the possibility you have to
> offer it. there are schools giving you tours, meeting
> with little committees, loans from people investing in
> what they think you will bring to the world. people
> are depending on you, sort of. passively monitoring
> you, in hopes that the good thing they thought would
> happen to them will happen to you instead… you
> have all these ideas about what you want to do with
> 'your life' which is hard to imagine because it seems
> so far away. it feels like you can do anything ...i
> dont know. you think 'there is still time, i will take a
> break. after the break the bad thing will feel over
> (Boyle 44).

Boyle's nostalgic yearning for her middle-class adolescence here contends with feelings of disappointment of not achieving what she and others expected of her. There is a clear generational pressure to be individually successful and, thus, to be responsible for one's own actions and the consequences of those actions. The pressure produces a particular anxiety around time. She is anxious that time is running out on the possibility of achieving something in her life, that all of the investments in her in terms of time and money have amounted to very little – a further suggestion that she feels strongly the ideological weight of neoliberal responsibilization. She perceives in her current circumstances a failure to truly realise her human capital. Despite the evidently neoliberal ideological underpinnings of her perspective, she still expects the linear time of the Keynesian life course, which centres around development, as opposed to a neoliberal one of deferrals and suspensions. The 'bad thing' she vaguely evokes is the

sensation of an arrested life course, which she believes is the result of her own poor decisions. Boyle wants a 'break' away from her own life to give herself "time" to make better decisions.

But in a context of non-stop inertia there is no time to take a break. This, I argue, is the affective force that her project successfully captures: the relentlessness of activity while very little changes in a meaningful sense. The one critical article on *Liveblog* zones in on digital technology as the determining force behind Boyle's anxious musings about her failure at adulthood and, by extension, her nostalgia for adolescence (Sieben 192). But this interpretation abstracts the internet from the multifarious temporalities that determine Boyle's experience of time. Instead, I argue that the blog registers a wider historical temporality of capitalist stagnation, which is mediated in the breakdown of the millennial life course.

Liveblog's nostalgic yearnings might on the surface seem to exemplify the aesthetic dilemma at the heart of Jameson's (*Postmodernism* 16-17) theory of contemporary culture that unique authorial styles are no longer possible and all that remains is the pastiche mode of blank references to previous forms. Rather, over the course of this section, I wish to demonstrate that what appears to be the chronically nostalgic culture referred to as 'postmodernism' has a more specific set of economic determinants than the overused and increasingly vague term 'late capitalism'. The term is now as ubiquitous as the term 'postmodernism' was in the 1990s and has come to act as a general signifier for the farcical and often undignified aspects of modern capitalism for the contemporary middle-class. As an article in *The Atlantic* reflected, 'This publication has used "late capitalism" roughly two dozen times in recent years, describing everything from freakishly oversized turkeys to double-decker armrests for steerage-class plane seats.' (Lowrey). The term has entirely lost the meaning ascribed to it by its creator Ernst Mandel (passim), who was interested in how, against the odds, capital had rejuvenated itself in the post-war period into a system even more monolithic, abstract and violent than its early twentieth century predecessor. In a remarkably clear-sighted forecast, Mandel (570) predicts that capitalist dynamism was about to fade and foresees the economic torpor that would affect the advanced capitalist economies of the global north at the end of the twentieth century. But this idea is only implicitly present in Jameson's (*Postmodernism* 19) analysis of cultural stasis and endless nostalgia that has

since become synonymous with 'postmodernism'. In ways not yet fully developed in scholarship on the subject, *Liveblog* shows how stagnancy has now become a way of life for a millennial generation that, robbed of a future, continually turns to the false sanctuary of a romantic yesterday.

The novel tends to formalise stagnancy as glut, whether it be an excess of emotions, lists of consumables or experiential detail. Boyle's ceaseless activity, in particular in the digital sphere, captures the experience of "everything, all the time, everywhere" that Stuart Jeffries (passim) describes as the postmodern condition. The reader experiences this as exhaustive minute by minute updates, but also via the glut of cultural references that circulate throughout the text. At times like a pastiche of everything postmodern, the project is congested with films, TV shows, memes, celebrities, pop music and brands, which overwhelm nearly every page of the text. Within the first five pages of the novel, Boyle has already referenced Don Hertzfelt, Google, the Hollywood films 'napoleon dynamite' and 'silence of the lambs', the bands 'Why?' and 'R.E.M', and the shop 'whole foods' (Boyle 5, 8, 9, 10). These texts first circulated through Boyle's Tumblr blog from which the novel was developed. As such, the "novel" represents – in a quite literal fashion – the ceaseless spiralling of cultural references that circulate via digital platforms and inhibit narrative motion.

A surface reading might argue that it simply shows how social media – and digital platforms more generally – intensifies a condition of chronic culture, allowing the past to follow an endless loop, driven by the impulse to ceaselessly create content. But, as earlier noted, there is a particular structure of feeling to non-stop inertia, determined by the breakdown of the life course, which Boyle's project acutely captures. Boyle seems to find neither joy nor mercy in the culture in which she exists. She references films and TV shows with the affectless manner of someone who is entirely exhausted and without hope: 'felt like matthew broderick at the end of 'glory', when he's about to lead denzel and the rest of the troop into a battle they'll clearly lose and have been preparing to fight for the entire movie' (Boyle 12). Such hopeless inevitability stems from Boyle's torpor which finds expression in a culture that can offer nothing new. Yet, this homogeneity also represents culture's redemptive quality in the text. As the above reference to the film *Glory* suggests, if culture offers a positive affective experience it is the familiarity of nostalgia, a kind of safe, knowable space, but one that simultaneously locks Boyle

into the never ending cycle of sameness and hopelessness that she is trying to escape. In *Liveblog,* the present moment experiences itself as self-identical with past and present, yet at the same time seems to be in ceaseless motion. As such, *Liveblog* shows how digital technologies serve to exacerbate economic torpor by putting cultural exhaustion itself into the endless feedback loop of online content.

The above passage is exemplary of how *Liveblog* shows what might be referred to as the linguistic form of cultural exhaustion: the simile that pivots on 'felt like'. As Boyle's repeated use of the term 'felt like' demonstrates, feelings are not experienced as authentically one's own, but belong to past referents. This may have something to do with the pervasiveness of marketing and advertising, which, as I have already mentioned, appear to have imbued the cultural consciousness in which Boyle takes part. But as the above passage about the film Glory suggests, it also indexes the disorienting alienation of downward mobility and the sense that disappointment is always around the corner: the sense that the promises of a decent career and family home made by advertising and media have not been met by material reality. There is little in the present that feels like one's own and the future holds no prospect of one's feelings properly changing anything. 'Felt like' is a backward facing address to the reader. It tends to look to the past for a referent, and in the case of *Liveblog* these past references nearly always entail some nostalgia for the 1980s, 1990s or early 2000s, a time we can assume when, for Boyle, life was easier and she could enjoy herself without the anxiety of having failed at adulthood:

> now would be a good time for things to start
> happening that launch my life into a 'pineapple
> express'-like coming-of-age buddy comedy where i
> have huge ragers at both dad's AND mom's
> apartments tonight (a.k.a. the last night i have two
> hot single-lady pads all to myself, a.k.a. the last night
> before my parent's come home, a.k.a. 'THE LAST
> NIGHT:' DIRECTED BY JUDD APATOW) (Boyle
> 240).

Though the passage is evidently a joke, it reveals the degree to which nostalgia has permeated Boyle's worldview. It is telling that Boyle invokes the Hollywood American teen comedy *Pineapple Express,* a film that depicts the exploits of three adolescent males as they leave high school and attempt, in various lewd and failed ways, to attract their female classmates. They inhabit a world of irresponsible partying and the trials and

tribulations of choosing a college. As we have already seen, Boyle often worries that her life, which might be described as an ongoing series of drug- and alcohol-fuelled 'ragers', is stuck in a period of extended adolescence. But it is in no way the naive world depicted in films such as those of Judd Apatow. Trapped living with her parents' by unemployment and high rent prices and increasingly spiralling into drug addiction, Boyle's existence is one of extended adolescence but with all of the expected responsibilities and tribulations of "adult life".

The melancholic significance of the passage, however, does not entirely detract from its silliness. The fabrication of a pastiche but entirely plausible Judd Apatow film 'THE LAST NIGHT', alongside the ironic use of the college campus term 'rager', suggests a knowingness in Boyle's nostalgia, a degree of critical distance that allows her to joke about the absurdity of continuing to live the life of a teenager in her late twenties. Indeed, the passage exemplifies how nostalgic references to the pre-recession period are the driving force behind Boyle's humour, which she tends to craft into an ironically innocent rendition of her personal struggles. In *The Circle of the Snake,* Grafton Tanner (60) argues that US culture is increasingly governed by 'instant' and immediate nostalgia. For millennials like Boyle, immediate nostalgia is nearly always "Pre-Recession nostalgia", "a particular strain of nostalgia that recycles mass media from the years leading up to the first decade of the twenty-first century in order to present a simplistic version of history" (Tanner 56). For Tanner (57), the mainstream cultural products of what appears to be the relatively utopic 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s have held sway over the cultural psyche during the last decade, but in recent years have become near ubiquitous. As the reference to the relatively minor Hollywood film *Glory* suggests, most of Boyle's cultural reference points are from this period, including the film *The Breakfast Club,* Tina Turner and the song 'Drinking in LA' by Bran Van 3000, itself a pastiche of 1960s and 1970s guitar sounds (Boyle 109). This is, at least in part, because Boyle spends the majority of her time online, where nostalgia products are ubiquitous and readily available. As Boyle's humorous riff on the hollywood film *Pineapple Express* suggests, past cultural referents are often the raw material of millennial humour which has, in no small part, been generated in an online setting. It reflects Tanner's (62) argument that the internet has not only made users into chronic consumers of nostalgia, but also producers. Not only are films, music and advertisements specifically designed by their creators to look like they were made

decades before, but digital tools have been created that allow individuals to turn their own lives into nostalgia products. As Tanner notes, new images can be given a nostalgic gloss using, for instance, Instagram filters, which make images shot on smart phones look as if they were taken by a 1950s polaroid. Subsequently, "[a]nything - any event, any moment - can become an instant memory once its edited and shared on the app" (Tanner 62).

Boyle's creativity is largely mediated by nostalgic forms, which she then recycles into further nostalgic products. Her humour expresses a culture that continually and collectively restages the immediate past in superficially new forms. The act of blog writing arguably has a nostalgic function, like writing a diary. But beyond the form itself, the content of Boyle's project is driven by yearnings for a better past, one that via references to cultural products continually harks back to her childhood. The main way the "nostalgia industry" functions today, Tanner argues, is by promising each individual a return to their youth. As Svetlana Boym (xiii) notes in her influential study on the subject, 'Nostalgia (from nostos-return home, and algia-longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'. It faces toward adolescence, childhood and, ultimately, the womb. This perhaps explains why the 1980s and 1990s hold such appeal to a generation that were born during those decades but came of age during a time of crisis, and continues to hold the social and cultural expectations fostered by products created during those decades. Boyle's motivations for writing the blog centre around an effort to return to her youth, a time when she still felt optimistic, which she clarifies on the book's first page:

> I used to like documenting my daily activities. That
> seemed to help me remember more. Lately the things
> i've been doing haven't felt worth remembering, but
> i feel like that could just be a mind trick, and if i start
> writing more again, i'll convince myself everything
> is basically the same as however many years ago it
> was when i felt more satisfied or hopeful or whatever
> it is i don't feel now (Boyle 5).

The blog, Boyle believes, will help return her to a previous, preferable version of herself. This younger self had not yet faced the struggles of joblessness, debt and insecure housing. These problems represent a void, left open by unmet middle-class expectations, a present lack that might be filled by an imaginary, better past. Boyle makes direct reference to her childhood, so often the centripetal point of nostalgic

yearning: 'MEGAN YOU ARE NOT HAPPY LIVING THIS WAY YOU USED TO FEEL BETTER YOU ARE NOT MAKING THIS UP OR ROMANTICIZING THE PAST YOU IDIOT YOU ARE NOT GOING TO BE ALIVE MUCH LONGER IF YOU CONTINUE ON LIKE THIS…' (Boyle 241). Despite her protests to the contrary, Boyle continually treats the past as a sanctuary and imagines the future as a reflection of the present but worse. For this reason, the blog is fraught with tension. On the one hand, it represents the unhappiness she feels in a present that only seems to offer stasis, a moment that does not seem 'worth remembering'. All activities and events blend into a homogenous temporal mulch of drug use, bad food and failed job interviews, redeemed only briefly by recollections of films and music enjoyed during her childhood. This is the function that Boyle seems to take pleasure in: the blog becomes a kind of sanctuary, a space to curate a nostalgic version of the past from romanticised memories.

Nostalgia can, of course, be a reassuring experience. It can inspire feelings of comfort, boost self-esteem and prevent feelings of loneliness as well as offer a sense of meaning. nostalgia is a deeply seductive affective experience. But as beguiling as nostalgia may be it can also correlate with a dangerous tendency toward stagnation. It is evidently nostalgia's charms that prevent Boyle from identifying the feeling as a symptom of the social problems that have inhibited her life course. As well as reminding Boyle of a past that may provide redemption, part of the blog's inadvertent function is to trap Boyle in the present. Like the culture in which she exists, as Boyle recedes further into documenting every moment of existence, rather than critically interpreting her existence, she recedes further into a cycle of frustrating and seemingly endless repetition: 'I'm repeating myself, I'm repeating myself, I'm repeating myself, I'm repeating myself' (Boyle 188). The four repetitions of the assertion expresses the endless activity that only serves to further trap her in the immediate present. It captures in temporal form the act of listing everything that happens in her day to then look back upon it wistfully but with little to no critical reflection. The act is both symptomatic of a life in stasis and also generative of that very stasis.

Though the sole focus of scholarship on *Liveblog's* temporality has focussed on the internet, the novel takes the prison as a key metaphor for the temporal experience of the middle-class in the United States. In a conversation with her mum about the MSNBC

TV show 'locked up', the reader is given a clear sense of how Boyle imagines this temporality:

> told her about a woman in a prison documentary
> using three stacks of cards to walk back and forth in
> her cell because 'that's how I know I walked a mile,
> it's so I know I'm not just going nowhere.' mom said
> 'please tell me this isn't something you're
> considering for your life' in a joke warning voice. i
> said 'i wouldn't be happy doing that. it doesn't seem
> that bad though'. she said 'i know, you're right'. i
> said you're like. just, real life is like prison, kind of'.
> she said 'yeah, well. yeah, you're right (Boyle 248).

The scene in 'locked up' that Boyle describes resonates with her own experience of historical time. She links the experience of inmates trapped inside the prison industrial complex, an economic model that has become hegemonic under conditions of capitalist stagnancy, to her own feelings of imprisonment by a system that has no need for her. Somewhat glibly perhaps, she suggests that middle-class existence is not really so different from that of prisoners. Nonetheless, the show's content evidently speaks to Boyle's experience of arrested development. Repeatedly walking back and forth in a cell offers perhaps the clearest metaphor in the novel for the experience of non-stop inertia as seemingly inescapable and futile. The pacing of the incarcerated, which ultimately generates profits for both the prison and TV industries, registers the temporal experience of being a millennial in an economy that increasingly treats their labour as superfluous but still relies on their activity to generate spectacular content on social media. Importantly, the resonances not only apply to the show's content but also its form. It is telling that Boyle finds her own temporal dilemma dramatised in the trashy, recycled TV form of the prison documentary, a programme that operates via the nostalgia mode

The Nostalgic Surreal

Nostalgia, however, is not merely a dangerous form of comfort for Boyle. Rather, the novel reveals nostalgia's deeply strange and unsettling quality in a moment when it overwhelms all areas of life. Structured around stasis and turmoil, Boyle's world is trapped in the volatile antechamber of a life without motion. Unable to identify the details of her life that might add up to a coherent narrative, the future has collapsed, the past is omnipresent and the everyday has become semantically (as well as

economically) precarious, evacuated of order and meaning. This accounts for one of the project's other key aesthetic qualities: Boyle fixates on the nonsensical and esoteric. Surreal images of 'balding men who pop up from behind cardboard trees and say 'hey I smell okay' and 'a chuckling Obama', appear throughout *Liveblog* as non-sequiturs, flickering through the morass of everyday ephemera like unsettling dreams (Boyle 17).

In one scene, Boyle tells us that she 'woke in mostly empty bathtub. flopped around trying to always be covered in hot water, thinking 'sexy seal' and 'sprinkle princess' and pictured someone tossing me a fish and this is what would get me into the maxim top 100 hottest women or whatever. because enough seals voted me in' (Boyle 41). A seal being voted into Maxim magazine's 'top 100 hottest women' by other seals - what to make of this? The obscure, slightly off-brand reference to adolescent culture, 'sprinkle princess', and the men's magazine, Maxim, suggest something of Jameson's postmodern deluge of pop cultural symbology (*Postmodernism*). But the strange dream-like image that emerges from this condensation of tenuously linked referents might best be described as surrealist, an aesthetic that in the broadest sense seeks to upend standard notions of the world as ordered and rational. Certainly, Boyle's method in *Liveblog* resembles in certain respects André Breton's (26) description of surrealism in the 'Surrealist Manifesto' as: 'Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.' As earlier noted, Boyle's voice emerges as a kind of automatic telling, whereby she registers her thoughts in words as a kind of uncensored flow – though, counter Breton's demand – with the ethical aim of improving herself. Nonetheless, in passages such as the one above, her writing reveals what Breton calls the 'neglected associations' of the dream.

The dream-like worlds offered by the early Surrealists had a peculiar relationship with time. To take one example: the paintings of Salvador Dali offer neither clear markers of historical moment nor of temporal motion, instead hovering in an unsettled yet total present. A coherent set of aesthetic referents that might orient a viewer's sense of historical time are entirely absent. In Dali's 'The Persistence of Memory', clocks flop and bend on a desolate landscape, save for a dead tree and an eyelid seemingly torn from the face of an absent figure. Unsettling visions, neither wholly from past nor

future, emerge as convulsions, pervading an endless present like dreams from another time. Emerging at a time of historical crisis, the early surrealists were preoccupied with decay and degeneracy. For the artists, writers and poets who formed the original Paris Surrealist group in the early 1920s, Enlightenment ideas of reason and progress had been rendered nonsensical by the barbarity of World War 1. They emerged during what Eric Hobsbawm (21) has called 'the age of total war', where the major capitalist powers descended into violent conflict for over three decades, after the gilded age and before the post-war consensus would organise a new regime of capital accumulation.

There is a clear sense in which surrealist art has something to do with stagnation and its deathly signs. Its peculiar time might be said to offer something of an aesthetic adjunct to that time period described by Antonio Gramsci (276) as the "interregnum". During his years in Turin prison, Gramsci (276) wrote in his notebook the now famous words: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'. The extant regime and its norms and institutions are fading but what comes next has not yet formed into something substantive, coherent and legitimate, but remains unfamiliar and strange. Twenty-first century capitalism, drifting from one crisis to the next, appears to have entered something like a chronic interregnum, where no one global power can return the system to a state even resembling economic health. Instead, the system remains in a stubborn state of steady deterioration, chronically on the verge of birthing the new that cannot be born.

It makes sense that surrealism has enjoyed something of a renaissance in an age of ceaseless crisis, where the past continues zombie-like, and the future appears in premonitory flashes. The bizarre, often disturbing, imagery in *Liveblog* is of a piece with the deranged humour of popular TV shows such as Rick and Morty, Bojack Horseman, Broad City and The Eric Andre Show, which have been praised for their revitalization of the surreal as a hegemonic cultural norm (Aroesti). One reason why these shows are popular among Millennials and Gen Z is that they often centre around the realisation that one is essentially disposable in an uncaring world, reflecting the audience's own sense of having been left on the scrapheap of history. In the episode of *Rick and Morty* titled 'Close Rick-counters of the Rick Kind', Morty finds out that there are multiple universes and infinite versions of his own life, but that common to each

version is his expendability to his uncle Rick. The episode dramatises the horror younger generations have experienced at finding themselves ever-more surplus to the requirements of a stagnant economy.

Bojack Horseman, as Thurschwell and Belloli note 'is a series full of characters with no need to work, but who nevertheless feel compelled to pretend to: putting in hours at "the business factory," or becoming a nanny who thinks of children as his colleagues.' (Thurschwell and Belloli). Many of the laughs in the show, like *Liveblog,* are generated by the strangeness and absurdity of work in a world where there is an unsettling sense that workers are increasingly redundant, though this is never explicitly mentioned. Like *Liveblog,* the absurdity of the present simultaneously leads to and is the result of longing for a past that seemed better, in ways that are humorous due to their paradoxical nature. One commentator on the show argues that these yearnings are better described as 'hauntings', in Mark Fisher's sense of lost futures that have become the dominant animating force of the present to the point that imagining a new future becomes impossible (Fisher *Ghosts* passim) (Stark and O'Rourke). The strange mixing of these lost futures, I would add, following Fisher, is what makes the show at times so unsettling.

Returning our attention to Boyle's reverie about entering Maxim's hottest women contest as a seal, we can see that in a similar way the passage combines referents associated with separate part of the life course to make a disorienting image. Sparkling princesses and cute seals merge with a men's magazine, so that the seemingly innocent, cartoonish referents of adolescence meet the ostensibly 'adult' pressures of a patriarchal society, in ways that suggest that Boyle's imagination occupies these two life stages simultaneously. The surreal humour of the reverie emerges from the dislocation and clash of referents that index the two supposedly separate cultural worlds of childhood and adulthood, so that these worlds can no longer retain relative autonomy in the reader's imagination. In cartoons, this may more overtly take place at the level of form. The humour of *Rick and Morty* or *Bojack Horseman,* for instance, may on first glance appear aesthetically distinct from these passages in *Liveblog,* but in fact similarly emerge from a clash between the supposedly innocent world of cartoons and adult humour.

In a more precisely economic sense, the experience of downward mobility, specifically the associated unsettling of the life course, and the aesthetic principles of surreal art share a common idiom. Sociologists have described downward mobility as a kind of 'social disorientation' or 'dissociation', an inability to properly situate oneself within the alien territory of a diminished material situation and, I would add for the contemporary moment, the alien situation of the arrested lifecourse. Estrangement and disorientation have figured as the central aesthetic tenets of surrealist art from the paintings and poems of its 1920's pioneers to its postmodern exemplars such as the films and TV shows of David Lynch and Adult Swim. Downward mobility is undoubtedly a surreal experience, in that the reality anticipated does not arrive, and instead runs up against the shocks, disappointments and frustration of present reality.

But this does not quite capture the precise contours of the surreal in *Liveblog,* which is often the result of the dislocation associated with the eternally deferred life course of a generation born into interregnum. Essentially periods of arrested transition, moments of interregnum are marred by yearnings for the old and anxiety about the new, often giving rise to forms of ugly, sometimes reactionary nostalgia. Such ugliness is central to the aesthetic of *Liveblog.* In Boyle's obscure daydream about being a seal in Maxim's league of hottest women, one finds the compression of life stages into an uncanny symbology that brings together sparkling princesses and men's magazines. Perhaps more obviously than shows like *Bojack Horseman,* this flattening of the softly pornographic and the infantile invokes the surreal online aesthetic of the meme, an aesthetic common to movements as distinct in their cultural politics as alt-lit and the alt-right (a contemporary US far-right movement). Both of these movements began in the relatively rarified community of the online forum 4Chan, with the alt-right later moving to the forum's more extreme counterpart, 8Chan. In both cases, the forum has generated an aesthetic that self-consciously intermingles cutesy, twee or cartoonish imagery with overtly violent or pornographic references, in ways that are intentionally – though often inanely – transgressive (Nagle 28-39). The result is a kind of violated nostalgia, much in keeping with Boyle's imaginary princess seal winning a Maxim magazine contest.

But tautologous comparisons of Boyle's internet style to other online aesthetics can only bring our analysis so far, and only serve to beg the question: what precisely is this new surreal mode and why has it sprung from the millennial generation? I call this style

the 'nostalgic surreal', a phantasmagoria of references that hark back to a time before adulthood, either surrounded or permeated by disturbing or unsettling references, which act as constant reminders of adult life stages, but stages that are essentially unrealised. The most surreal imagery in *Liveblog* is generated by the ceaseless torpor of job hunting, precarious work and renting. After a bad job interview with a portable toilet company called Callahead, before which she decides to take the narcotic MDMA, Boyle realises that 'I fucked up big maybe', leading to a strange daydream about the interviewer, Charlie:

> He is like Lou grant yeah, from the mary tyler moore
> show, Mary's boss. Oh no. Best thing about me
> seemed to be my car, from his reactions. Oof. My
> interviewee persona (maximum grin, wide eyes,
> occasional spasms from the uncontrollably spasming
> body) seems like Ren from 'Ren and Stimpy'.
> Charlie said 'I'm interviewing twenty girls after you,
> how do you stick out?' I said 'how....' and he said
> 'how'. I made jazz hands and he sighed (Boyle 354).

Boyle's surreal imagery accentuates the grotesque character of the job interview. Boyle must dissemble an outward appearance of deference: a 'maximum grin' to show that she is happy and comfortable in the presence of the interviewer; and wide eyes to show that she is interested, alert and ready for work. But her nervous spasms suggest that she is far from enjoying herself, that the interview is actually producing a pathological bodily response. For this reason, she compares herself to the character 'Ren', an emaciated, sociopathic cartoon asthma hound from the 'Ren and Stimpy Show', whose eyes pop out of his sockets when he feels excited and whose grin stretches manically across his gaunt face. Ren has a queasily desperate quality. Life has worn him down into an affectless, manipulative mercenary. Similarly, the job market – and particularly interviews – are designed in such a way that the interviewee *is* often desperate, driven to grasping, often duplicitous behaviour under pains of survival. As we saw in the earlier chapter on Eggers and downward mobility, the pressures associated with employability force the individual to exaggerate their supposedly "best qualities", that is, those most attractive to employers.

Boyle's treatment of employability as an essentially absurd notion comes up again when she attempts to write a draft of a cover letter for a care assistant role in a nursing home (Boyle 105). She wants to explain her deeper existential reasons for wanting the role: 'i

want to help old people dress themselves and eat because they are close to death as me and i understand feeling that and wanting help' (Boyle 105). But she realises that this is inappropriate in a context where vague bromides are what land a job: 'i have to like prove myself...by vaguely… just writing vaguely' (Boyle 106). Again, she considers taking a dose of MDMA while writing the letter to make the experience more interesting.

If being an interviewee is grotesque, then to Boyle the interviewer is even more so. Her interviewer at Callahad toilets recalls Lou Grant, Mary's tough, masculine boss on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. When he first gives Mary her job, he offers it to her because she's got 'spunk', the kind of Hollywood kitsch that we have seen Boyle enjoy ironically in other parts of the text too. Lou is not a particularly sympathetic character; he is angry and has a violent streak, often threatening his subordinates for their incompetence on the job. The fact that Boyle imagines her potential boss in this mould demonstrates the masculine violence she associates with management. She emphasises his masculinity by drawing attention to his use of unnecessarily gendered language: 'I'm interviewing twenty girls after you, how do you stick out?' At the same time, the emphasis on the number of 'girls' shows that Boyle is just another homogenous item to the interviewer, a realisation that evidently unsettles her. Her feelings of ambivalence are already obvious before she begins the interview, demonstrating that the abstract form of the interview – or indeed the job market more generally – repels her more than the actual experience of this specific event. That she considers taking the drug MDMA before the interview, and also before writing the cover letter for the care assistant role, demonstrates that Boyle may need a job yet refuses to take seriously the game of employability that one must play to actually get one. Her decision to self-sabotage is realised in her failure to get either job. This tension plays out in equal measures as desperation and revulsion, which are the guiding feelings behind her surreal reverie.

The job interview scene offers a clear example of the 'nostalgic surreal'. The unsettling imagery is composed of a series of nostalgic references to TV shows from the 1970s and 1990s, which we can assume Boyle watched with her parents as a child. But the nostalgia intermingled with sinister intimations of violence and sleaze is not particularly reassuring or even familiar, but mostly unsettling and weird. Boyle is haunted by these obscure references, here engulfing the present, because her life, connected to the fate of

the US economy at large, is essentially futureless. The absent future is emblematized by the fact that she does not get a low-paid job for which she is overqualified, and so remains financially unable to move out of her mother's house. Her 'occasional spasms' during the interview – or 'morbid symptoms' of her unemployability – are like distress signals sent from a stagnant US economy.

One way to understand the weirdness of nostalgia in these passages is through the earlier mentioned idea of 'lost futures'. In both this passage and the Maxim magazine reverie, Boyle is haunted by worlds that could have been but never were. There was a time, one can presume from our earlier analysis, when Boyle could as a member of the middle-class take for granted the prospect of a decent job, an assumption undoubtedly created at least in part by media representations of the job market. The inclusion of nostalgic references to TV shows that perhaps ingrained this belief in Boyle at a young age reveals the unrealised promises from childhood that continue to haunt her imagination. These futures, of course, were promised in the 1990s in TV shows like Friends to a wide and varied audience, often serving to consolidate the ideological triumph of capitalism at the end of the twentieth century. Now, however, these futures have gone sour and serve only to unsettle Boyle. They figure as melancholic remnants that offer reminders of what never was and what may never be.

Yet, the nostalgic surreal is not only haunted by lost futures but also terrifying futures that might yet be. The present is wracked by the possibility of unexpected events that carry traumatic potential but in an entirely banal way. After the interview, Boyle describes the ambience of her bedroom as 'like mulholland drive dumpster man', a reference to an infamously shocking scene in David Lynch's 2001 surrealist classic *Mulholland Drive* (Boyle 354). The scene is particularly strange, in the way Lynch scenes often are, for its lack of narrative coherence, emerging apparently randomly and seemingly having no bearing on the rest of the plot. It features two characters that the audience only encounters in this one scene and has only just been introduced to. Seated at a booth, one character tells the other about a nightmare he recently had, which takes place at the very diner in which they are currently seated. He describes a feeling of overwhelming dread generated by a man lurking in a dumpster outside. When the two decide to go and check behind the diner, a hideously deformed - presumably homeless - man leaps out, shocking both characters and audience. Boyle does not describe the scene

in any detail, or with any of the perverse enjoyment usually attending horror, but blankly intimates it in a way that suggests the total normality of crisis in her life, a present imbued with horrors, which are now to be expected.

We should ask, why this specific scene? It is interesting that the horror of homelessness occurs on the same page as Boyle realises 'I am unemployable… no one wants me' (Boyle 354). This also partly illuminates the horror of Lynch's classic scene. The characters and audience see in the homeless man the grotesque potential of existence under capital. One can reasonably speculate that the figure of the homeless man terrifies the audience, in part, because the prospect of being made superfluous lurks behind every life in the capitalist system. This dreadful prospect is particularly salient for Boyle who is unemployed, regularly consuming drugs and living at home with increasingly frustrated parents. Homelessness is a prospect not too far away for Boyle. Her recall of the scene foretells of a horrific future that might yet be, a trauma in waiting. The scene suggests that the horrors of downward mobility are not only limited to what has been lost but the dread of what might still be.

But horror does not dominate the book's surreal quality. Indeed, the surreal in *Liveblog* often marries the horrific and the humorous, usually in scenes where Boyle suggests her feelings of powerlessness in a system that rewards individual power. Part of the immediate horror of the post-2008 period was the sense of powerlessness that pervaded the sphere of social struggle. As Joshua Clover (28-31) tells us, this period intensified an already generalised state of insecurity and disorganisation, leaving few options for antagonism beyond spontaneous moments of violence, most obviously expressed in the wave of riots that took place across the globe in the early 2010s. After the Occupy movement entered its terminal decline in 2012, few options remained for a growing number of dispossessed to express their antagonism against the system. Boyle is not particularly interested in protest or, for that matter, politics of any kind. Her sensations of worthlessness never overtly translate into criticisms of capital and are frequently sublimated into surreal fantasies of individual power:

> someone should bring a 'baja style' entourage to a
> high school reunion. like, 200 people in sexy outfits,
> and a DJ. like that club in level two of 'max payne
> 3.' brazilian, not baja. baja would be funny though,
> what is baja? It would be good to call your brazilian
> entourage 'baja style'. people would be like 'what've

> you been up to for the last ten years' and your eyes
> would roll back and become money signs and you
> would yell 'BAJA STYLE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!'
> and your entourage would lift you and carry you
> away (Boyle 193).

The fantasy hinges on the floating signifier 'baja', which one might assume references the peninsula and its particular "style". But over the course of the passage the term takes on a peculiar set of connotations, as disparate as a high school reunion and the ultra-violent video game *Max Payne 3*. What a "baja style' entourage' might be remains unclear, due to Boyle's loose and impressionistic prose style, but in the most general sense it seems to reference a kind of flamboyant Brazilian "vibe", undoubtedly xenophobic in its implications. It is thus difficult to gather any precise meaning for the term from the context. But this is perhaps the point. As already noted, Boyle's humour indexes the surreal, inane, frequently absurd quality of online 'meme culture'. Her description in the above passage almost conjures the image of a meme. The face with dollar sign eyes, surrounded by a badly superimposed entourage, perhaps composed of celebrities that have starred in films about High School, with the words 'BAJA STYLE!!!' written below in garishly coloured capital letters.

But what kind of humour is this precisely? There is undoubtedly something humorous about the imagery, at least in the Freudian sense of dredging up unconscious detritus that unsettle in pleasurable ways (Freud *Jokes* 154-155). There is perhaps also a sense of satire here, but without a clear object of derision. At a stretch, we might argue that the joke is on culture itself, or, more specifically, the superficial meta-referential slurry of late capitalist culture. Boyle's imagery is an obscure pastiche of a pastiche, which pushes it away from the familiarity of consumer nostalgia to the realms of the esoteric, to the degree that it becomes hard to pinpoint what, if anything, is being satirized. The humour here works not only at the limits of satire but also irony. There is little of the necessary contradiction or double speak that Valentin Voloshinov (113) ascribes to irony in his definition 'speaking by contraries'. There are only seemingly random cultural referents that intersect via their very tension with each other.

Though satirical impulse or ironic wit are not immediately evident, Boyle's humour is not without its serious content. Memes often transform standard economic and cultural anxieties into obscure humour, a process that Jay Owens (100) argues references the hidden 'ironic truth' very often at the core of the meme. Memes often tap into the darker

zones of what Doug Haynes (26) names the '*social* unconscious', the murky netherworld of repressed social and historical conflict. In this way, the fantasy depicted in the above passage brings to light Boyle's anxieties about money, status and power. The cartoonish dollar eyes reference the demented naivete of a children's TV show like *Ren and Stimpy.* It is, again, nostalgic, but in a way that is clearly supposed to unsettle the reader. Money is revealed as a kind of unquenchable desire behind Boyle's eyes, here the windows to the soul of the social reality she inhabits. Not only does she tap into the social desire for money but status; she is flanked by a Brazilian entourage who lift and carry her out of her high school reunion.

But, as is often the case with fantasies, these passages are about what is absent from Boyle's life. Fantasies of money and status are the inverse of Boyle's economically and socially disempowered existence. But such fantasies do not lead to generative tension that has the power to antagonise the system that creates such disempowerment. Rather, it indexes an ideological status quo that encourages individuals to seek out power to better their own situation at the expense of others. This is a common feature of what I have so far begrudgingly referred to as 'meme culture', which is only the cultural sediment of a more general situation of capitalism in decline. The subversive content of memes often finds solace in the false sanctuary of esotericism, itself arguably an expression of a system that pushes its participants toward ever-more individualized and responsibilized responses. To push this further, efforts by meme creators to liberate themselves from normative discursive modes very often end up creating the basis for new kinds of normativity. Even if the esoteric meme does not form culture but, as with Boyle, simply reflects or, at a push, performatively renders it real, this does not change the fact that so often in the online context weirdness is ultimately at the behest of normativity.

In this regard, the nostalgic surreal appears to invoke Fisher's (*Capitalist* 2-3) notion of "capitalist realism", a present pervaded by past references, unable to give birth to anything new. Fisher (*Capitalist* 2) quotes the phrase often attributed to Fredric Jameson, "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism". The term capitalist realism describes a social formation in which all political and cultural activity is determined by economic limits. The point of Fisher's book is that capitalism has become seemingly unshakeable; it has arrived at a point where, to quote Margaret Thatcher, 'there is no alternative' (Fisher *Capitalist* 8). It is

worth noting in the context of this chapter that, somewhat ironically, this universal condition of abject sameness has given rise to new expressions of literary realism (La Berge & Shonkwiler 13). Realism has long been understood as going hand in hand with capitalist triumph. For many scholars, realism has always been driven by the needs of a capitalist economy. Terry Eagleton (16) stresses the role of the realist novel as giving form to an ascendant liberal capitalism. Character interiority fleshes out the ethic of individualism in such a way that "liberalism and the realist novel are spiritual twins." (Eagleton 164). *Reading Capitalist Realism* offers an assessment of these new forms, which in some ways help to bolster an economy supposedly without alternative by giving it form, while in other ways destabilizing it by either failing to capture its contours or offering an outright critique of its modalities, conjoining 'both conservative and critical impulses' (La Berge & Shonkwiler 13).

Yet, the representational strategies covered in *Reading Capitalist Realism* are a far cry from Boyle's project. *Liveblog* offers a rebuttal to the realist novel, in that it barely gives form to an excess of detail, disavowing every vestige of narrative or characterisation. If it maintains anything of realism, it is the "fillers" described in the previous chapter, those descriptions that pad out the world of the novel (Moretti 72). But it includes filler to such an excessive and overwhelming degree that it ultimately expands into a kind of parody, a joke on the novel form itself. This filler, as we have seen, is often obscure references to psychic and cultural ephemera - typically senseless and oblique - and that taken together, form an unsettling, unfamiliar world; that is, a surrealist rather than a realist one. What might in lesser quantities offer familiarity here in excess creates the repulsive effects of alienation. Better defined, the novel displays how realism readily drifts into surrealism in a moment of extended interregnum, where present, past and future collapse and reality becomes a claustrophobic experience of non-stop-inertia. The present thus comes to feel like an accumulation of reified, disconnected moments without temporal motion. The bourgeois liberal subject of the world represented by realist fiction is not entirely transcended but simply overwhelmed and dragged down by the sheer weight of its own cultural detritus.

One might call this mode 'capitalist surrealism', the aesthetic expression of a moment when capital stews in its own lost futures that merge into a homogenous mass of empty references, with little obvious significance. An exemplary moment of this aesthetic is

when Boyle for the second time in the project spontaneously decides to play a word association game:

> Going to do words I think of as I think of them thing again: suburban banshee, baby, baobab tree, homophones, Bose, licking a grilled cheese, January, hair pattern bald spilling looseage, three ring binder, zooming canopy monkey, tres little blind mice, condominium, mortgage, a fleece seat, debbiderra, Derrida, debbie Harry, three blind mice again, horticulture, speed lasso, Tasmanian devil, bronco sleeves, a tourist attraction, blind mice (not three), twelve step dildo instruction, big ship mathematics, snorlax, bison, person saying 'it smells like… a bra' after smelling my bra, I'll never forget that I don't think, it was the person whose pictures I'm not as attracted to anymore but wish I we were in his basement sniffing my bra right now, just like the olden days (Boyle 159).

The passage presents a postmodern pastiche of Breton's (26) 'psychic automatism', where the mind is allowed to roam free, 'exempt from any moral or aesthetic concern', in a way that unveils the unconscious dreamworld that lurks below. But what appears consciously spontaneous reveals an automatic unconscious ventriloquized by the commodity spectacle. Predictably, Boyle's delivery feels automated, taking her usual flat, denotative tone. It continues the register that consistently throughout *Liveblog* gives the text the eerily reified mood of online life. Equally unsurprising, for this reason, is the sheer number of references to commodities, mediated images and the kind of ephemera one might find in online GIFs, which circulate around Boyle's imagination much in the way they do social media platforms. The paragraph suggests what we perhaps already know: that Boyle's unconscious has been permeated by past cultural referents, so that even the depths of the imagination have essentially become shallow reflections of an eternal present vacated of little but spectacular images.

But the content of Boyle's word association is hardly the most fascinating part of the passage. The passage offers the perfect instantiation of the psychic torrent that characterises the form of the text, a kind of attention-less writing, which flits from phenomena to phenomena without offering any clear sense of what is significant in a narrative sense. It formally encapsulates the essence of Boyle's project, which drifts from event to thought to memory, where the unexpected and spontaneous are

semantically bound to nostalgic yearning, and the new and the unfamiliar revert back to the old and the known. It should not surprise the reader that the paragraph ends with Boyle furnishing the section with a memory of what appears to be a past romantic connection sniffing her bra and the words 'just like in the olden days' (Boyle 159). Throughout *Liveblog,* the surreal not only pivots on nostalgia, but is always pulled back toward its familiar centre.

Yet, as we have seen, the picture is somewhat more complicated than this passage suggests, which taken alone might lead us to the conclusion that the nostalgic surreal is essentially a further iteration of what Jameson (*Postmodernism* 67) terms 'surrealism without the unconscious'. Jameson (*Postmodernism* 76-77) describes a postmodern world of 'total flow', where the subject – and thus the unconscious – has disappeared in spectacular images that elevated to the state of materiality circulate without reference to actual referents. Because there is no longer a subject to speak of, there is by extension no longer unique authorial style, only the nostalgic repetitions that constitute the 'universal practise' of 'pastiche' (Jameson *Postmodernism* 16). Contra Jameson, what *Liveblog* demonstrates in its own limited and frustrating ways is that there are certain unique, often enigmatic, stylistic quirks to artworks composed almost entirely of nostalgic references. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Boyle brings to an excess of blank nostalgia an unsettling humour that at all times threatens to tip into the weird and unfamiliar, creating, if only in a limited sense, the posthumous critique of a liberal bourgeois subject steadily vanishing. Amid the familiar feed of social media updates, the reader begins to undergo something like Bertolt Brecht's (91) 'alienation effect'. Much as Brecht wrote of Chinese acting, Boyle's use of an aesthetic device prevents the audience from 'identifying itself' with her writing (Brecht 91). The unsettling and surreal imagery that nestles among the everyday minutiae of Boyle's life makes the commodified world of social media suddenly appear deeply strange. In a somewhat contradictory manner, the project repels the reader from the capitalist system just as it absorbs them in its most pervasive logics.

Familiarity itself becomes strange in ways, I would argue, that stylistically constitute something tantamount to an aesthetic of millennial middle-class life. The passage exemplifies the growing alienation of the middle-class from the reality that surrounds them, as described at the beginning of this chapter. Boyle does not seem in control of

her material – certainly not in the ways that the bourgeois novelist would preen, craft and curate language into lavish descriptions of reality. There is little of the sense of ownership that characterises the masterful use of language in bourgeois realism. It seems now to circulate of its own accord as if autonomous of the subject. The relationship between the word and referent has broken down, as per Jameson, but not simply due to the totalizing force of commodification. Boyle does not have the political language available to her to represent the unexpected reality resulting from downward mobility. What she has is a lexicon built from the morass of pop cultural referents of her youth which have very little purchase on the reality she now finds herself in. Language, like the material world it registers, feels increasingly alien, uncontrollable and out of grasp for Boyle, whose expectations have been continually confounded by material decline. It is the discourse of a class who has lost control of its language but is hanging on with some humour to a fragmented iteration of its once relatively solid culture.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth returning to the material determinants of *Liveblog's* surreal nostalgia. Economic stagnation lurks behind the queasily strange images that circulate throughout the project's pages. The section of Boyle's life captured across *Liveblog's* pages is an expression of the US economy's stagnant status. The present is experienced as unsettled, a disorienting spiral of unemployment, high rent prices, drug addiction, depression alongside nostalgic yearnings for a time of safety before the future held little promise. In a temporal contradiction that characterises the project, nostalgia is not a comforting experience but eminently strange, often taking the form of harbingers of further disappointments in a future that cannot be born. These surreal images might otherwise be described as an accumulation of morbid symptoms, seemingly out of step with the stagnant system they nonetheless emerge from. It is this sense of the present being out of time with itself that characterises the new surreal mode that has come to prominence among many of the novels, TV shows and films written by millenials. It is an expression of unmet expectations, of the present not containing what the past promised and the future holding no promise at all. *Liveblog* is such a striking example of the form because it is a text where the present is burdened with too much, an excess of detail, yet also too little, a paucity of rich description. It does not represent a middle class at home in material reality, confident in mapping the world that surrounds it with

rich description, a world that seems crafted to reflect back its own interests. Rather, it is a strange place of unexpected disappointments and mounting threats, which the project ultimately suggests is difficult to formally capture.

It is perhaps in this limited sense that the novel offers something like a political critique of the present. Absent of plot, consistent characters (aside from Boyle as author-protagonist) and rich description, the "novel" seems to purposefully deny the kinds of pleasure expected by readers of bourgeois fiction, so as to reveal the broken promises of the bourgeois 'good life'. The *Liveblog* project describes itself on the cover as a 'novel'. But it is in no way a 'good novel'. The text's failure to be a "good" bourgeois novel expresses a generation's failure to be "good" bourgeois subjects. It breaks the generic promises literary fiction tends to make to readers. To put it crudely, it is more 'auto' than 'fiction', relying on uncensored streams of consciousness to fill the page. It uses the autofictional form with far less commitment to fiction than the other writers in this thesis. For instance, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* continues many of the same promises that bourgeois fiction has made since the nineteenth century, i.e., rich characterization, elegant prose and clear narrative form. *Liveblog*, on the other hand, seems to say that the decline of the middle-class also must mean the decline of fiction itself.

Yet, this forecast of decline also represents a new kind of aesthetic gesture that is capable of catalysing critical distance. The absorption of the reader into the minutiae of an almost entirely commodified landscape ultimately has a repellent effect. The denial of the readerly pleasures associate with bourgeois fiction forces the reader to take a critical stance from outside the text. In its own curious way, *Liveblog* might be said to represent a postmodern take on the modernist project, becoming over its pages a strange and difficult object about the downwardly mobile middle. Like Boyle, the reader is never able to fully grasp a reality that conforms to the logic of non-stop inertia. This sense of constant activity but trapped in one place entirely estranges the reader from the familiar coordinates of late capitalist culture, whereby the text becomes, finally, an escape to a place of critical distance.

Chapter Four: Trolls, Lies and Conspiracy in Lauren Oyler's Post-Bourgeois Fiction

> Among today's adept practitioners, the lie has long since lost its honest function of misrepresenting reality. Nobody believes anybody, everyone is in the know. Lies are told only to convey to someone that one has no need either of him or his good opinion. The lie, once a liberal means of communication, has today become one of the techniques of insolence enabling each individual to spread around him the glacial atmosphere in whose shelter he can thrive (Adorno *Minima* 30).

Lauren Oyler's autofiction novel *Fake Accounts* uses the form's unique capacities as a mediator between notions of truth and fiction to problematize bourgeois principles of honesty, sincerity and authenticity, and the ways they have supposedly come under attack in the age of social media. The narrative takes place in the wake of former President Donald Trump's inauguration, and follows the exploits – mostly online – of an unnamed female narrator, an autobiographical cipher for the author, who has just found out that her boyfriend is an online conspiracy theorist. Soon after the narrator finds out this information, her boyfriend Felix appears to die in a road accident, which later turns out be an elaborate prank. This event becomes a pivot in the narrator's own attitude to truth-telling. After she is lead to believe Felix has died, the protagonist moves to Berlin, the place where she met him, and the rest of the novel is largely dedicated to her brief encounters with men she meets via dating apps, mediated through the various "fake accounts" she gives of herself both on- and offline.

The fact that the narrative takes place in the historical milieu of President Trump's first year in the White House, a period which troubled many middle-class Americans for its betrayal of a neoliberal age that had, at least at the level of appearances, remained

committed to bourgeois notions of sincerity, credibility and trust is itself telling. However, the novel offers a more refined understanding of mistruth and lies under contemporary conditions of capitalism than standard liberal accounts of post-truth. It suggests that sincerity and truth-telling are not under attack due to any one individual or event, but the growth of social media platforms that beyond previous models of capitalist business cultivate seductivity and sensationalism as a mode of sociality. As instantiations of the seductive lie, "post-truth", conspiracy and disinformation come to signal a threat to the stable bourgeois sense of self.

In this respect, the book expresses Ehrenreich's (passim) 'fear of falling', an unsettled sense of class position that emerges not as a clear anxiety about downward mobility but as a series of sublimated anxieties that if traced sufficiently reveal a middle-class that perceives itself under threat. Unlike the other novels that feature in this thesis, *Fake Accounts* is less about an author-protagonist that is, in a material sense, experiencing downward mobility, but one who senses that the ideological tenets of bourgeois subjectivity are being stripped away by a system in crisis. The novel continually dramatises the challenge social media poses to bourgeois truth-telling by making it impossible for the reader to judge which parts of the narrative are lies – told both to other characters and the reader – and which parts genuinely relate to the author's life, in ways that often figure the challenges of deciphering information online.

Yet, the novel is not a straightforward exercise in mourning some apparently lost moment when sincerity was more than a performance and truth represented a harmonious consensus. In the final part of this chapter, I consider how the novel – by playing with the kinds of epistemological nihilism that the book elsewhere regards as ugly symptoms of social media – also toys with the idea that lies open out onto truths unsanctioned by the increasingly threadbare ideological regime of bourgeois, middle-class existence. In the final section, I consider how the novel develops an account of lying as an expression of true desire. But, the novel suggests, if the kinds of deceit cultivated on social media *promise* richer, more wonderful pleasures than those promised by middle-class society, then they are of a dangerous, narcissistic sort, which continually seek to extinguish the other in ways that harmonise with the kinds of subjectivity we might associate with fascism. In the final section, I consider the novel's

pessimistic understanding of platform capitalism as a force that destroys bourgeois subjectivity and replaces it with an incipiently fascist one.

Markets of truth

One anxiety in the novel is what happens when one is expected to be a bourgeois subject but in a moment when social media threatens to destroy the consensus truth regimes on which such a subject relies. This is, as I will later show, a fundamentally class-based concern. On first glance, however, Oyler's anxieties appear to share much in common with liberal commentators who have found the most worrying strand of the return of far-right populism to be a decisive turn away from "truth" to "post-truth", whatever the terms here might mean.[10] After finding out that her boyfriend Felix is using social media to promote conspiracy theories, she tells the reader:

> On the morning after our last date I woke up with an overpowering desire to make Felix pancakes. He didn't really like pancakes, but that didn't matter. The knowledge that he had been lying to me and, in a slightly different way, to the rest of the good innocent people of the internet continued to be a source of cruel pleasure; I kept it locked up in a little cage in my mind, feeding it sad meals on a tray in the mornings and evenings. Curiosity about his motives occasionally threatened, but I was able to fend it off by arguing that his motives were fundamentally inscrutable. There was nothing to be curious about. He was beyond the pale (Oyler 53).

What is not mentioned in this passage or, indeed, throughout the rest of the novel is what interests me here. There is no mention of precisely what Felix was lying about, which the author-protagonist only mentions briefly at the beginning of the novel: 'doctored gatherings of Barack Obama with George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jacob Rothschild… The government at fault somehow. The Jews at fault somehow' (Oyler 13). The fact that this is only mentioned in the first few pages and never again, while the protagonist continually mentions her sense of being deceived throughout the text, suggests that the act of the lie, rather than its specific far-right political content, is what

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[10] For examples of popular studies on the subject of 'post-truth', see Matthew d'Ancona's 2017 *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* and Lee McIntyre's *Post Truth*.

really aggrieves her. There is no need to be curious about the content of the lie. Following the bourgeois tradition of sincerity as a moral necessity, the protagonist regards the act of lying as so bad as to render Felix's motives 'fundamentally inscrutable'.

Felix here becomes a surrogate for the populist bogeyman: dishonest, unintelligible and seemingly motiveless save for the cruel joy that comes from tricking others. As a liar, he does not even deserve the analysis that might illuminate his motives. He is 'beyond the pale' of good, bourgeois social behaviour. More interestingly perhaps, the protagonist finds pleasure in knowing that Felix is a liar. She seeks the moral high ground as one of the 'good people' who has been duped, despite the fact that she only knows about Felix's online life as a conspiracist because she broke his trust by logging into his phone. The smug duplicitousness of the protagonist's response seems to satirise the responses of any number of commentators that believe something called 'post-truth' began in 2016 with the emergence of President Trump as an attack on the honest credentials of liberal democracy. 'Post-truth' is understood by those who use the term as a loss of consensus truth, mostly due to the malicious intent of devious populists (McIntyre). Its advocates rarely question the grounds of truth-making in a liberal system nor how such truth-making relates to ideology (D'Ancona). The protagonist's response captures the hypocrisy of liberal post-truth discourse, which necessarily ignores its own deceits and mistruths.

But this is the point: a kind of satire of 'post-truth', whereby eventually deceit becomes the driving impulse behind the author-protagonist's behaviour. Beyond easy stabs at liberal hypocrisy, the novel contains a shrewd criticism of truth-telling in an age of ubiquitous social media. What Felix's conspiratorial posts suggest is that under the auspices of social media all claims, information and interactions are flattened, so that it is no longer readily possible to parse their various differences. *Fake Account* is acutely aware of the impact this homogenization has on the online user, who repeatedly encounters a variety of seemingly disparate realities that are flattened to the point of appearing equivalent. The more time we spend in a social context that renders everything as "content", that gives equal value to conspiracy, disinformation and clickbait as it does properly assessed, peer-reviewed and expert information, the less important notions of truth come to seem. Feeling bored with swiping through men on

dating apps, who all come to appear as essentially the same, the protagonist finds herself lazily surfing a number of social media platforms:

> When I inevitably became disheartened with the men on offer, I tabbed back to social media, where I clicked on articles to open more tabs that remained there to jilt my attention for weeks, developing an even more peripatetic style of reading than i had before. One morning: Marine Le Pen's niece said France, with its Greco-Roman and Christian roots, was facing a choice between globalism and survival. A Man with a Koala on his shoulder would love to talk to you about Hannah Arendt. An account with twenty-six followers whose photo was just a bright orange circle liked one of my lazy posts mocking a poorly phrased headline… Some huge percentage of Americans couldn't find Syria on a map; an unfamiliar account I didn't remember following said, "it's surprising there aren't more climate deniers among the Hillary fans, as they've all been frigid for the last twenty years; a familiar account I thought I'd unfollowed said "stop trying to make Brexit happen"; a review of *The Idiot* (the one by Elif Batuman) (Oyler 154-155).

Streaming down the page of the novel as a continuous list, in a way not dissimilar to the user's experience of looking through a social media timeline, the passage demonstrates the effects wrought on an informational ecology driven by the interests of large tech companies. To capture the attention and accelerate the clicks that generate data, social media intensifies the already existing drive of news media to make information sensational and entertaining. Under such conditions, information undergoes a peculiar flattening, whereby a video of a man with a koala on his shoulder carries the same informational weight as an ugly joke about Hilary Clinton, which in turn carries the same weight as a user posting their opinions about Brexit or an online review of a novel. As the above passage shows, the user can surf a seemingly undifferentiated mass of opinions, feelings, ideas, musings and rants, as if all carry the same epistemological value.

The novel suggests that this dynamic of equivalence is the problem with ascertaining what ranks as good information, who is to be believed and whether someone is being

sincere, and may better explain the waning of honesty in public life than vague notions of 'fake news' and 'post-truth'.

To take a short but necessary theoretical detour, the roots of this dynamic can be found in Marx's preliminary notes on the commodity in the first section to *Capital Vol.1*. In the world of exchange value, which social media expands to contain most online activities, 'sensuous characteristics are extinguished', that is, the various use values of information are largely erased; all that matters is their capacity to generate more data and, ultimately, profit (Marx *Capital* 128). In the place of concrete properties and processes, Marx (*Capital* 128) continues, is 'the same phantom like objectivity'. Equivalence, as a 'phantom', extinguishes the concrete world of which the commodity takes part. It creates what Alfred Sohn Rethel refers to as 'real abstraction' (20 italics removed). For Sohn-Rethel (19-20), the act of exchange, prior to the associated consciousness of the traders, is where the commodity abstraction lies, creating an equivalence that necessarily refutes the sensuous qualities that otherwise differentiate the objects. Thus, the abstraction 'is purely social in character, arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations. It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions' (Sohn Rethel 20).

Robert W. Gehl (102-103) elaborates this notion of 'capital qua substance [becomes] subject' to propose that the architectures of platforms that extract such data constitute 'real software abstractions' – 'real because they are actions' and 'abstractions because they become part of the immaterial constitution of a whole way of life'. Gehl (107, 112) asserts that in the participatory culture of Web 2.0, user generated content – their "likes", content and posts – 'become reduced to commensurable data sets'. One might reasonably argue that with the ascendancy of software algorithms few phenomena now evade the real abstraction of exchange, as each instant – tracked, extracted, refined and commodified as data – can, in principle, be exchanged with anything else as undifferentiated phenomena. Whether it be a conversation tracked in someone's home by a virtual assistant, a user profile, or a reactionary post about Hilary Clinton's fans being frigid.

The above passage demonstrates that this generates a specific phenomenology of information. Conspiracy, the novel suggests, may in fact be the result of truth

fundamentalism. Richard Seymour (152) describes it as 'a kind of epistemological absolutism, admitting of only one kind of truth; the clickbait kind of truth, the kind that says 'This One Weird Thing about the World Trade Centre will Shock You''. When an increasing amount of information is simply valued as undifferentiated seductive, commodified 'content' to generate attention, then it becomes more difficult to discern disinformation. These conditions allow it to become widespread, offering it a political potency unprecedented under other regimes of accumulation. As such, in the world of social media, dubious conspiratorial and far right content is just another thing to choose like one might a particular brand over another.

This is demonstrated most clearly in the actions of the protagonist-author's boyfriend Felix, to whom conspiracy is merely another set of beliefs and ideas to choose from in the marketplace of ideas. He is not wholly committed to the far-right in the way one might associate with true far-right zealotry. What the reader can never really glean from Felix's experience is precisely why he chooses to deceive other online users. As the author-protagonist notes, having a popular conspiracy theory account 'meant he was no mere betrayer of trust or casual manipulator, but rather a person of impossible complexity whose motivations I was now liberated from trying to untangle' (Oyler 14). One explanation that the author-protagonist immediately denies is the possibility that Felix may actually believe the conspiracies he is disseminating online. She notes: 'Im pretty sure he was Jewish, so it would have been strange for him to be authentically propagating anti-Semitic conspiracies - possible, but strange' (Oyler 14). Other potential motives include the popularity of his account and the in-jokes he shares with other users of Instagram (Oyler 15). But the protagonist is at pains to point out that neither of these things have ever seemed important to Felix and that his motives are mostly mysterious. The novel suggests that he chooses to manipulate and trick others for the sheer joy of the experience and the associated adulation he receives online from those who want their economic and political reality explained by far-flung theories rather than experts. It further suggests that conspiracy theory is merely another thing to choose from in the vast market of consumer experience.

Bourgeois sincerity and the fear of falling

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I consider how the novel explores what happens to truth telling in a moment when the capitalist drive to turn attention into data and eventually profit creates a social context in which expertise, self-promotion, advertising, news and cultural ephemera are flattened and blurred to the point of becoming indistinguishable. The bourgeois understanding of sincere truth-telling, the novel suggests, is under threat by the growth of platforms that privilege exaggerated, manipulated or otherwise doctored versions of events, facts, objects and the self. The novel's anxiety about a fading middle-class is expressed as a series of anxieties about the possibility of being a good, bourgeois subject under these conditions. As the previous section showed, truth-telling under such conditions appears as a consumer choice like any other.

Bourgeois accounts of sincerity that depend on a stable core of selfhood remain largely consistent throughout the modern period, and can be traced back to St Augustine's mediaeval account of lying as a false doubling up: expressing one thing in speech externally and saying another internally (Forrester 12). Lionel Trilling's (2) famous account of sincerity as "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" summarises the bourgeois understanding of 'truth-telling' that begins in this period and continues into the contemporary moment. This rendering of truth telling which I will from hereon refer to as 'bourgeois truth-telling' requires of self-expression a steadfast adherence to one's inner world. In this regard, it necessarily requires a commitment to the personal and the private, over the public and the communal. What remains consistent from St Augustine right up to Trilling is the idea that sincerity entails harmony between some kind of internal truth and the external expression of it.

This ethical understanding of truth-telling was particularly popular among early political economists. Adam Smith (128) argues that, for the middle classes who rely on their reputation to stay afloat financially, success 'almost always depends upon the favor and good opinion of their neighbors and equals; and without a tolerable regular conduct, these can very seldom be obtained. The good old proverb, therefore, that honesty is the best policy, holds, in such situations, almost always perfectly true'. One's inner world should be treated as a kind of property to be used honestly in the market. More generally, at the time of A. Smith's writing sincerity was taken to be a prerequisite of a subject that buys, loans and barters. When the lender decides to make a

loan, for instance, all they would have is the good word and reputation of the borrower. This applied to the duties of industry as much as personal debt. Describing the emerging capitalist world and the growing bonds of duty that were coming to hold together the social fabric, W.E.H. Lecky (138) contends that: 'Veracity is usually the special virtue of an industrial nation, for although industrial enterprise affords great temptations to deception, mutual confidence, and therefore strict truthfulness, are in these occupations so transcendently important that they acquire in the minds of men a value they had never before possessed'.

Sincerity is, for such writers, the cultural motor behind capitalist economic relations. But its cultural importance emerged a few centuries before the arrival of capitalism. The early bourgeois fixation with 'strict truthfulness' found aesthetic counterparts in a range of new artistic forms. 'The unmediated exhibition of the self... with the intention of being true to it' Trilling (9) notes, became over the seventeenth century a cultural hegemon, leading to a blossoming of culture such as memoir writing and portrait painting.

But in the second half of the twentieth century, this strict adherence to an unmediated self truly expressed came under pressure by TV, advertising and ubiquitous media, the postmodern condition that Kelly ('David' 136) argues forms the preeminent antagonist to what he calls the 'new sincerity'. In previous chapters, I have noted the scholarly prevalence of a 'new sincerity' in contemporary fiction and film, which has a somewhat more ambivalent relationship with inner truth than, say, Trilling's congruence of expression and feeling. As Kelly ('Dialectic') notes in his critique of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest,* sincerity is no longer a matter of stating honestly one's feelings, but stating truths emanating from a community or institution. By this account, truth is no longer found in one's soul but in communal bonds and norms. This notion of sincerity takes as its explicit aim the attempt to salvage something of the bourgeois self in a postmodern moment when marketing and advertising have permeated the self so thoroughly that very little that could be called a core remains (Kelly 'Dialectic'). New media have essentially done away with Trilling's 'unmediated exhibition of the self', so there is no longer a stable core left to express.

Social media, *Fake Accounts* suggests, intensifies this problem, not only by further hollowing out the core of selfhood, but also the core of communal and institutional consensus on which something like a 'new sincerity' necessarily relies (Kelly 'Dialectic'). At the novel's core is a question: how does the bourgeois subject survive in a moment when platform capitalism, to paraphrase Seymour (135), makes liars of us all?

The novel does not so much answer this question as pose it as a problematic. It is not interested in constructing a wholly new form of sincerity to prop up or else reinvent bourgeois subjectivity, in the ways we find in the novels of Wallace or Eggers, where constructing a new sincere discourse against the prevalence of so-called postmodern irony becomes a kind of ethical project. Rather, the novel instead indexes anxieties about "post-truth" and sincerity to more fundamental deceptions about one's material existence, which in a society driven by the image world of social media have become excessively exaggerated. In one scene, the author-protagonist jokingly asks the intern at her place of work to do twenty push-ups for subordination, and tells us that:

> When she dropped in the middle of the aisle between our desks only a couple of people noticed; they watched bemused for a few seconds before silently spinning back to their computers. If it had happened in the afternoon the entire floor would have come over and cheered her on, phones in hand, live tweeting the event to trick themselves into thinking that because our office was cool, not like other offices, we were not really working, and that being at work was in some ways more fun than being at home, alone, streaming a TV show we pretend is good while eating delivery we pretend to afford. In the process we would be advertising our website (Oyler 65).

The passage embodies the novel's wider concern that ubiquitous social media has intensified the degree to which the social world misrepresents itself. For members of the middle-class, this entails a very specific set of deceptions. One must present a consistent image of bourgeois success in an economy in which middle-class life is increasingly impossible, ruined by jobs that offer fake autonomy and wages so low they cannot afford takeaway food. On Instagram, for instance, one must still pretend that despite this

grim material reality one still enjoys one's job and has enough income to consume frivolously – if for nothing else but to advertise one's personality, as the above passage notes.

Yet, such self-deceptions have always been part of the middle-class psyche. As we have seen elsewhere in this project, the middle-class exists somewhere between ideal and material reality, whether it be the white-collar worker who counts themselves as a homeowner but works 60 hours a week in a miserable job, or the young graduate with high cultural capital but low employability. A certain amount of self-deception is necessary to identify as middle-class. The passage dramatizes the way in which capitalist ideology makes certain kinds of self- and social deception necessary to sustaining one's class position, a dynamic that is often forgotten in accounts of 'post-truth' politics. In a capitalist system that forces individuals to sell their labour to survive, there is an ideological impulse to continually demonstrate specific qualities so as to compete with others, to keep up appearances, and demonstrate that one is a good capitalist subject: disciplined, positive and successful. But as the above passage suggests, this ideological impulse necessarily means on an individual level that one must deceive their friends and colleagues that they have all these qualities in check. Lying to those around you becomes essential to succeeding as a good bourgeois subject.

In other sections of the novel, the author-protagonist contradicts her previous concerns about middle-class millennials struggling to financially sustain themselves under contemporary economic conditions, and seems to be in denial about her own flailing middle-class status. In one passage, she ironically repeats to the reader a conversation she has had with a friend about why she is leaving New York for Berlin: 'What is the point of being middle-class in the twentieth century if you can't do things whimsically? I asked, and they shook their heads. Millennials aren't middle-class, they replied, ordering another thirteen-dollar cocktail' (Oyler 103) The evidently snarky tone of this passage suggests that the author-protagonist disagrees with her friends. She reveals that her understanding of the middle-class is determined by consumer taste, cultural experiences and spending habits. She captures what seems to be a contradiction in the millennial experience of being middle-class: that, for many, the old markers of financial stability and decent career progression no longer hold, but that it's still possible to indulge in luxury consumer goods and new kinds of leisure and thus maintain the image

of a middle-class existence. Or rather, what she conveniently chooses to deny is that a middle-class evacuated of the financial stability, autonomous work and assets that once gave it some semblance of distinction from the proletariat lives on but as a simulacrum of thirteen-dollar cocktails and opportunities to humiliate interns.

A certain kind of ideological impulse is required to sustain this understanding of class, what Zizek (25) understands as 'cynical reason', the hegemonic form of late capitalist ideology. To return to Zizek's (25) phrase discussed in Chapter One, 'they know very well what they are doing, but, still, they do it. The protagonist knows very well that the system is failing her but continues to act as if she is doing fine, continuing to act as if she is middle-class, when in fact her material conditions suggest otherwise. In what sense does this properly differ from the bourgeois definition of the lie, of inwardly believing something to be true but uttering something to the contrary? Late ideology, by Zizek's definition, essentially entails a lie, at least by bourgeois standards, writ large across society. To further clarify the contradiction, to remain bourgeois, one must do the very un-bourgeois thing of lying.

The novel is eager to precisely index the intensification of this phenomenon to social media. Somewhat interestingly, Felix's attempt to fake his own death is explicitly rendered in the novel as an effort to boost his status through an act of cynical reason; the author protagonist offers little room for the reader to interpret his performance as symbolising something else. She explains to the reader that "He had rejected the techno-utopian vision of paranoid collectivity, for which we'd sold our souls and privacy, through the ultimate act of opting out" (Oyler 255). What appears to be a critical artistic project against capital – a way of distancing oneself from the 'paranoid collectivity' – is in fact an attempt to enhance his online reputation and create a semblance of personal security in a system that offers little in the way of security:

> The cynical way he'd revealed his project was
> entirely self-promotional, a sure means to inflate the
> follower count on his new Instagram and drive
> people to his website, but the strategy could easily be
> folded into the entire statement as a criticism of the
> inescapable narcissism of social media. Or as a
> criticism of the appetite for passive destruction the
> internet promoted in place of engaged enquiry.

> Regardless, the more popular he got after the stunt,
> the more right his project would be (Oyler 256).

At the most general level, the passage suggests a well-worn theoretical trope, one that Zizek (*Lacan* 85) has made most forcefully: that neoliberal capitalism readily absorbs its criticisms and antagonisms. Under platform capitalism, the potency of a criticism can be measured and brought under control by the metrics designed by large corporate companies. In the case of Felix's staged death, what appears to be a knowing critique of online platforms is in fact merely a way of more efficiently gaming social media and boosting his metrics and thus social standing in the digital realm. Felix is no Nietzschean dyonisiac, turning his life into beautiful art, but a postmodern confidence man, using digital technology to dissemble his way to power, no matter how paltry such power is in the grand scheme of social media. Part of the ideological role of social media is to absorb all activity into neoliberalism's competitive logic of quantification. What is perhaps most interesting here is that once cynical calculation is expected, it breeds a deep paranoia about the actions of others, a suspicion that all activities or interactions communicated on social media – and indeed outside of its parameters – are necessarily untrustworthy.

Bourgeois truth, Oyler seems to say, has an increasingly strange relationship to the ideological pressures of a sociality characterised by the interests of large social media platforms, particularly in a moment when many individuals are experiencing class insecurity. This is staged at the level of the novel's form. The novel's continual blurring of the lines between fact and fiction embodies the way in which social media encourages its users to exaggerate, dissemble and sensationalise or, otherwise, outright lie. As Seymour notes (141) "Facebook automatically selects for information what is impressive and seductive, rather than accurate or even meaningful. It degrades the ecology of information, while inflating it and adding a new volatility to it.". On platforms such as Instagram, this tends toward users attempting to display an optimised version of self, by using the site's formal components airbrushing and filters to manipulate their content in ways that seduce other users and, ultimately, to gain 'likes' and 'followers'.

Yet, the above passage is interesting in that Oyler not only admits that such manipulations are central to a life mediated by social media companies but also uses the novel form to encourage feelings of revulsion and anger in the reader. The constant slippage between autobiography and fabrication, fact and fiction allows Oyler to continually weave in seemingly legitimate details about her own life and imply the uglier aspects of herself in the form of her author-protagonist. This version of self is one that forces the office intern to do push-ups in a kind of grim spectacle that few social media users would wish to publish on their own timeline. In some respects, the novel's tendency to declare the author-protagonist's worst behaviour might be regarded as a kind of resistance to a world that encourages continual acts of deceit to game one's online reputation.

Understood so, this could be read as an act of performed sincerity, similar to that which I criticise in Eggers' *AHBWOSG* in Chapter One. Yet, sincerity as a performance is not only an unresolvable contradiction in terms, but is essentially a bourgeois deceit itself, which tends to lapse into cynical reason. Performed sincerity might actually be regarded as a reactionary response to the destruction of bourgeois norms, ideological tenets and institutions, an attempt to recover some better past, however fictional it may be. Unlike Eggers' novel, *Fake Accounts* is in no straightforward sense making a case for sincerity as a social good, or attempting to return to a mythical time when sincerity existed in an entirely coherent and unproblematic form. Aside from anything else, Oyler maintains throughout an ambiguity as to whether events such as the one featured above are based on real events or are entirely the product of the author's imagination. She continually prompts the reader to question whether the kinds of congruence between feelings and expression so central to bourgeois philosophies of truth-telling are possible in a moment when the presentation of self is automatically suspicious. Social media, as Seymour suggests (152), has introduced a new logic of paranoia into public life, which the novel explores through the author-protagonist's increasingly outlandish confessions. The autofictional form leaves the reader unsure as to whether the protagonist on which Oyler appears to loosely base her own life is an honest representation.

It is not surprising that the autofictional novel has come to prominence in a moment of ubiquitous social media, when the distinctions between fact and fiction, the real and the

imaginary, and sincerity and deceit are ever-less clear. The form problematizes the bourgeois realist novel in ways which reveal *Fake Account's* anxiety about the loss of the stable bourgeois subject in general. One way in which the realist novel created a sense of people and place is through what Mary Poovey (363) calls the text's '*gestural aesthetic',* which she finds in eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction as a technique that 'gestures toward extratextual events but so carefully manages these allusions that the reader is invited back into the text instead of encouraged to go outside its pages'. This process of intimating details of historical events or peoples without explicitly naming them, is a strategy for defining the borders of the "real", what is solid, factual and ultimately true, and what is purely the fabrication of the author's imagination. Poovey (361) shows that in the novels of Jane Austen, aesthetic gestures serve to 'draw distinct boundaries *around* her fictional worlds' to delimit literary writing from its economic and scientific counterparts. The burgeoning liberal capitalist economy of which Poovey (354) writes sought to maintain a degree of distinction between the market and culture, a distinction repeated in the formal tendency to 'police the boundaries of the text', and one which increasingly wavered throughout the twentieth century and has now all but disappeared.

The reality represented in *Fake Accounts* is one of total mediation, whereby the reader is given no clear sense of if there even exists a boundary between the text and the wider world, or which of the events or people, if any, relate to the wider world, in a way that formalises social media's collapse of various distinctions between facts and feelings, deceit and honesty and personal opinion and consensus truth. As the novel continues, the author-protagonist's decision to present herself in an honest manner is regarded ever-more as an individual choice rather than a social obligation. After Felix's death, she 'decides to go on a series of dates assuming personalities based on the twelve signs of the zodiac' (Oyler 169). Each date is given the name of the star sign and with each successive date, the reader is increasingly uncertain about whether they are reading autobiographical detail or complete figments of the author's imagination:

> Taurus: My father abandoned my mother when I was
> five years old, taking much of her collection of
> Royal Family memorabilia with him. The British DJ
> expressed his apologies. My father had wanted to
> sell it for drug money, she'd said, and I had to

> believe her, because I never saw him again, though I
> also couldn't remember the Royal Family
> memorabilia, which I later learned were basically
> worthless. I only remember that he smelled like
> cigarette smoke and spent his days in the basement.
> (Oyler 175).

The passage dramatises the experience of having to negotiate the fragments of information that compose online life. It puts the reader in the unsettling position of not knowing what is true. Many of the details seem too elaborate to be actual references to events that took place in the author-protagonist's life. While other more mundane details seem perfectly credible. Again, to return to Poovey (6), part of the social function of early novelistic writing was to help readers practise distinguishing credible information from cynical fabrication in an economy ever-more driven by the trust games that characterise monetary credit. *Fake Accounts,* however, seems instead to suggest that social media flattens these distinct registers and introduces a volatility into writing that makes the kinds of trust Poovey has in mind impossible. For Poovey, the novel was, for better or worse, successful in providing the basis for the expansion of capital in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It helped the reader to read and, more importantly, trust character in the ways demanded by a market ever-more woven into the fabric of everyday life (Poovey 114-115). Literature allowed readers to encounter an unfamiliar yet realistic character— "that is, a plausible because recognizable, concretely detailed, lifelike, and self-consistent individual"—which helped readers learn to trust strangers in ways an economy driven by promissory notes required (Poovey 115). The point for Poovey is that the character remains contained within the fictional world of the novel and thus belongs categorically in a specific register of reality, one ontologically separate from extratextual reality.

In *Fake Accounts*, on the other hand, the author-protagonist no longer is a straightforwardly plausible character who exists in the fictional realm, but an uncertain amalgamation of various registers, not quite fictional or factual, instrumental or ludic, real or imaginative. Like the author-protagonist scrolling through social media and experiencing its flattening effects as disorienting, the reader in the above passage experiences the author-protagonist's character profile as a volatile mixture of facts, fantasy, fabrication and reality. In certain respects, the reader is put in the difficult position of having to choose what is information or disinformation.

For this reason, one might argue that *Fake Accounts* merely updates the social role Poovey ascribes to fiction under industrial capitalism, only now for an age of corporate platforms. Understood so, the novel serves to help readers navigate categorical distinctions between various epistemological and economic registers. But *Fake Accounts* has no investment in typically bourgeois consensus-making. The novel repeatedly satirises the fact that in a moment of ubiquitous social media, when all are forced to compete in a reputation economy, Oyler, the author, cannot help but exploit the possibilities of the further collapse of fact into fiction and the textual into the extratextual, and mediate her life outside of the text, in ways that sometimes appear as cynical efforts to manage her reputation and soothe her fears of losing class status. As the next section will show, *Fake Accounts* is, in fact, less interested in bolstering Oyler's reputation than in offering a critique of what is expected of individuals in a society driven by the need to be likeable and protect one's reputation at every turn.

Reputational fiction

A London Review of Books review of the book noted the novel's tendency to attract feelings of revulsion to the author-protagonist's behaviour (Orr). Yet, many of the character's worst manipulations and deceits are not merely revolting but also familiar. Her lies and mistruths are supposed to reflect the reader's own everyday deceptions necessary to retain their membership in the middle-class in a crisis economy that creates an omnipresent ambience of competition and paranoia. She hides her true feelings of disdain for her white-collar colleagues, feelings of jealousy around her friends and frequently exaggerates her qualities on dates with strange men. The novel seems to suggest that cynicism is itself almost a full-time job under contemporary capitalism, where every activity holds out the possibility of appreciating or depreciating one's worth, of enhancing or ruining one's reputation and climbing or descending the social ladder. Sex with her boyfriend becomes a 'competition' which she must dissemble her way through to win (Oyler 175). At one stage, this involves pretending to be in the mood to fellate her boyfriend Felix:

> Felix's penis felt inert and unalive, like a small
> squash. I tried to get all of it in my mouth and

> gagged: I had never and would never be able to, but I
> always had to try. My eyes watered and I pressed on,
> varying my rhythm when I remembered to do so,
> licking his balls when I remembered they existed,
> keeping my fingers and thumb in a firm but banana-
> safe hold. Although I have no way to understand the
> passing of time during sex it felt like it would never
> end, like he was withholding his orgasm to
> demonstrate not only that he had won this battle but
> that I had been immature to conceive of a casual
> evening together as a competition in the first place -
> that if I continued to I would lose (Oyler 175).

Evident in the paragraph and those preceding is the author-protagonist's sense of the pressure for women to perform sexually to a standard set by patriarchal norms. The author-protagonist reflects on the reasons why she feels she must have sex even when she's not in the mood. In previous paragraphs, she cites two intersecting pressures of fear and "pornography". But in the above passage, a clearer sense is given as to the quality of her fear – what precisely is at stake: namely, losing a competition. The decision to not perform fellatio on one's boyfriend or simply to perform it to an unsatisfactory standard contains the threat of social marginalisation. In large part, a woman's value in the capitalist economy (which is always also a libidinal economy) is measured by their willingness to reproduce and subordinate themselves to the gratification of men (Federici 12). One's failure to do so contains the possibility of falling down the social ladder.

Though this is a general feature of capitalist economy, rather than one specific to its contemporary iteration, her fear of falling does take a peculiar form specific to the contemporary moment. Through the ideological lens of neoliberalism, it is rendered through the lens of "competition". This competition is increasingly "pornified" on social media sites such as Instagram, where many of the most popular female influencers gain attention and followers by conforming to the aesthetic modes of online pornography (Drenten et al. 42-43). Pornography offers something like an ideal type or Platonic model of how sex is done in the contemporary moment. The centrality of the blowjob to this culture should not be underestimated, which as we see in the above message offers a coercive mechanism by which the satisfaction of men's desires is culturally prioritised and, more fundamentally, women are subjugated to the directives of a system that relies on their sexual capacities. Drenten et al. (42-43) regard this as the

pornografication of daily life, whereby a kind of pornographic labour becomes omnipresent in the lives of many women.

The novel demonstrates a certain kind of deceit, of dissembling one's sexual interest, is entirely necessary to function as a bourgeois female subject, to compete but also to assuage the possibility of being marginalised either violently or otherwise. As such, what could in the above passage be a collaborative sexual act registers a profound alienation, an act that, as the reference to pornography suggests, has been comprehensively reified. This is not merely a gendered concern, but a class one too. The scene is one among many in which Oyler worries whether the bourgeois notion of being true to oneself is possible in a society where every act, desire, moment and thing is open to competition and commodification, where instead of self-truth we are continually encouraged into acts of self-deception to get ahead. The novel suggests that this contradiction, though at the core of capitalist society, has been aggravated by social media to a chronic degree.

The passage shows that to engage in undesirable or unlikeable activity, even in one's seemingly most intimate relationships, represents under platform capitalism an omnipresent risk to one's reputation. In this regard, the novel offers a vivid and complex depiction of the social and personal consequences of living in what might be called a 'reputation economy'. William Davies (92) argues that in this key respect a public sphere that takes place primarily on platforms differs in quality from that of earlier regimes of accumulation. The point of sincerity for industrialists such as A. Smith and Lecky, as the quotes in an earlier section suggest, is to bind together a public sphere from which consensus can emerge. For Davies, this has gone awry. Most importantly for our present purposes, he argues that opinions, judgements, valuations are no longer in any context separate from the participants who express or hold them; they are no longer part of a more abstract, autonomous public sphere, but are entirely individualised – 'truth' finds its postmodern pinnacle in social media as self-truth, so often compromised by the pressure of self-branding (Davis 93-94). And our brands – that accumulated mass of opinions, judgements and valuations – has always already been quantifiably measured. Online we only ever meet each other as these measures, as the author-protagonist suggests while scanning Twitter: 'I watched someone with sixty-four followers who was studying for an undergraduate degree in literature accuse a

prominent television critic of classism and go unacknowledged' (Oyler 216). Without the clout of a high metric reputation, one's "truth" will remain unacknowledged. 'On a cultural and psychological level', Davies (94) claims, 'this has the effect of making all users of platforms conscious of what impression they are making, and how this might benefit them in future'. In this regard, it threatens some basic myths of bourgeois civil society. As Davies argues (95), 'the normative idea of bourgeois civil society is that of the liberal marketplace, where strangers encounter one another as equals.' But, as *Fake Accounts* repeatedly shows, in the author-protagonist's experience of dating apps, social media has created a situation in which we rarely meet as strangers first in physical space and, when we do, we already know via metrics in advance that we are not equals. Our authentic truth, as such, becomes something to calculate and strategise in each separate scenario to game a reputation economy that rewards deceit:

> The getting to know you process is fabricated by the exchanging of profiles, and each person gets to foreground what they want you to know, which is usually banal information about preferences that would not necessarily be frontloaded because in spontaneous interactions people respond to the environment and/or build on what has been said before. In meetings arranged on dating apps, both parties possess information from the get-go that would ordinarily trickle in as it was relevant, making the date more like a job interview (Oyler 185).

The point here is that social media introduces a logic into social reality whereby each of us is encouraged continually to shape our reality into something that benefits our reputation. The analogy with a job interview is apt. It is as if under platform capitalism each encounter contains the logic of the job interview, whereby those meeting have already shared their CVs in advance and are now being cross-examined to see whether they meet the requirement of friend or partner. CVs are, by their very nature, dishonest representations of the interviewee, omitting so much that they paint a necessarily sanitised version of a messier, more complex life. This passage suggests why the author-protagonist feels comfortable constructing a largely phoney identity when she meets men from dating apps. As the philosopher Byung Chul Han (35) says of social media, 'Publicizing a persona takes the place of the public sphere'. The men who she

meets online are not quite real, but remain mediations even when they meet in the flesh.

Presenting oneself artfully becomes the only act of real social validity within such an economy. When reflecting on her feelings for Felix, she tells the reader:

> Felix was very responsive to others, seemingly
> authentically so. His voice didn't shift into a faker
> register when he gave a compliment. He looked you
> in the eye. He seemed like someone who had certain
> things he didn't want to talk about, which might have
> been true for a number of reasons, and so he seemed
> to have all the facets of his life story under control.
> He was especially good at concealing the possibility
> that one of those reasons was insecurity (183).

The author-protagonist values Felix not for actual authenticity but for performing authenticity to a high standard. By this account, Felix has mastered the art of seeming real. He looks people in the eye, appears to offer genuine compliments and is seemingly responsive to other people. But the passage suggests that Felix is not doing any of these things with the kind of truth in his heart that advocates of sincerity argue for, but rather that he is constructing a masterful theatre of authenticity in which every aspect of his 'life story' appears to be under control. The cultural pressure to control one's own 'life story' is dramatised at the end of the narrative when it is revealed to the author-protagonist that Felix has faked his own death as an artistic act. Here, "faking" appears to become the ultimate spectacular act of control: appearing to die and return from the grave.

But is control as central to the spectacle as the author-protagonist supposes? Rather, in these passages, we find literalized Jameson's (*Postmodernism* 77) idea of the disappearance of the bourgeois subject, which takes place under postmodernism. In his chapter on experimental video in *Postmodernism,* Jameson (77) argues that in the flow of images that constitute the media spectacle of late capitalism everything is flattened into the language of the 'text'. When everything becomes a text, from 'daily life' to 'the body' and 'political representations', the 'work of art' no longer exists as a monad but is absorbed by the 'immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or…

sheer process' (Jameson *Postmodernism* 77). Under such conditions, 'the old autonomous subject or ego… seems to have vanished' (Jameson *Postmodernism* 77). This offers one way of reading Felix's fakery and the ways in which it ultimately enhances his reputation on social media. Once the stable subject is dead and becomes pure spectacle, in place of anything like a stable subjective core one finds a kind of blank space onto which the spectacle is projected. As Guy Debord (8-9) argues, the spectacle is, ultimately, manipulative, seductive and trains the subjects attention on an event or object at the expense of seeing the wider social reality in which they take part. Felix may seem in control but in a more fundamental sense his actions have been mechanised by the online spectacle. Even as a dubious form of criticism, 'the more popular he got after the stunt, the more right his project would be', which in turn will likely lead to gaining more followers (Oyler 256). As earlier noted, Felix's promotion of his own death on social media was largely a cynical attempt to gain more followers and game a system in which accumulating followers means accruing reputational merit.

What is missing from accounts of the reputation economy is how online users are, in a Jamesonian sense, entirely absorbed into the spectacle's logic. I would add to this that they are placed in both the position of spectacle and audience, manipulator and manipulated. Throughout the novel, we see how the author-protagonist uses social media apps to deceive potential dates, but, in the context of Felix's faked death, we also see how she becomes the manipulated audience and, in a perverse way, enjoys it. In an essay on postmodern contemporary art and the spectacle, Hal Foster (82) writes of commodities that 'they fascinate us because they exclude us, place us in the passive position of the dreamer, spectator, consumer'. On social media, this logic applies to profiles of users. Her fascination with Felix is, in this sense, not so different from her fascination with social media. To push a series of contradictions, her fascination with Felix's ability to seem authentic is really her fascination with the spectacle itself, the sense of being audience to a particularly masterful performance, one that ultimately repels her in a fascinating way. At the end of the novel, she receives an email from Felix stating: 'I'm not going to apologise, but I will say this: I assumed yo', an unfinished statement which, a few sentences later, concludes with Felix explaining that he had assumed she had known about his faked death all along (Oyler 258). She responds by telling the reader, 'It wasn't much, but the message was impressively calculated, so much that I was almost jealous.' (Oyler 258). The author-protagonist is impressed by

Felix's artful fakery and how well he has managed to seemingly manipulate the spectacle to his own ends. In the competition that she regards as their relationship, she almost admires Felix for so roundly beating her.

But while in some regards the novel seems to invite a Jamesonian reading, it also offers a less essentialist, more sensitive representation of how the apparently dead categories that Jameson perhaps prematurely mourns live on but in less distinct forms. Somewhat challenging Jameson's excessively negative view of the postmodern subject as essentially an empty shell of the modern bourgeois subject, the novel offers a more contradictory reckoning with these dying categories. One of the consequences of social media, the novel suggests, is that the categories of the subject, artistic production and the spectacle persist but no longer fully hold as distinctive ontological markers. That is not to say that they have vanished, like in Jameson's account, but rather that they have broken down and merged to the point that their boundaries are increasingly difficult to distinguish. Like Felix's autofictional artistic act, the novel's autofictional form, which, as we have seen, integrates the spectacular pressures of the reputation economy at the level of style and technique, also gives the author-protagonist the illusory control of constructing her own spectacle of selfhood. In this regard, the novel asks: is narrative in the age of social media anything more than promotional material for the writer's brand? Can there any longer be art forms or kinds of writing that are not dictated solely by the cultural pressure to preserve the author's own image?

As if to gently antagonise Jameson's death of the subject and, simultaneously, Roland Barthes' (142) 'death of the author', the novel seems to answer that in the age of social media, there can be no writer or work that exists beyond the spectacular image of the author. All one can do is try to manipulate the spectacle as best as one can. On the novel's final page, considering the humiliation she has experienced at the hands of Felix, the author-protagonist tells the reader: 'It occurred to me that I might do a lengthy, searching interview with him and pitch it as an article to the website. "A Chat with My Ex-Boyfriend, the Anonymous Online Conspiracy Theorist Who Faked his Death. It would get good traffic' (Oyler 265). This article title could feasibly be the name of the novel. The fact that this passage forms part of the novel's denouement demonstrates that the novel might itself be read as a piece of writing that 'would get good traffic'. The whole point of this book, the author-protagonist seems to admit, is above anything else

to enhance my own reputation. It is the final meta-referential trick played on the reader, again forcing them to consider the manipulative efforts – though often satirically so – of the author-protagonist to frame herself as desirable and interesting.

As Chapter One shows, this logic had already had a profound effect on narrative fiction well before the platform economy began and can be traced at least as far back as the new media and reality TV culture of the 1990s. When all aspects of oneself are mediated via reputational metrics – the version of oneself that others encounter prior to a physical meeting – then it makes sense that even one's artistic production is geared toward this imperative – hence why in Eggers' *AHBWOSG* the author so studiously cultivates his self-brand.

Unlike Eggers' novel, *Fake Accounts* is set in a moment when these ideological imperatives have been totally normalised and now represent a culture that is no longer novel and exciting, but rather the hegemonic model. Like Felix in *Fake Accounts*, the character of Eggers in *AHOWSG* often harmonises with this culture, even though the novel purports to have a critical view of it. The novel relies on a performative sincerity that assumes the function of advancing the author's own evidently cynical interests and ultimately becomes a dishonest representation of self, i.e., a self-brand. *Fake Accounts* is evidently aware and critical of this problem: how in a reputation economy all acts are laced with a certain amount of dishonesty. The fact that the author-protagonist takes on both roles of audience and spectacle, manipulator and manipulated and predator and prey demonstrates a sensitive understanding of how this economy operates. On a date with someone she met first in person rather than online, the author-protagonist cannot help but bring the culture of social media into a physical encounter:

> When the man who asked me out in person walked
> into the bar, I thought that if he was interesting and
> we got along I would just tell him the facts, that after
> spending a few years in New York working for a
> popular but negligible website I had come to Berlin
> because a boyfriend I was about to break up with
> died and I had felt so strangely empty that when the
> idea to go to Berlin appeared I latched onto it,
> relieved to return to inclination… If it went really
> well I might even confess to having lied to pretty
> much everyone I'd met so far in Berlin, a guilty and

distraught look on my face as I did so, admitting that
it was an obviously psychological coping
mechanism that I could nevertheless not overcome…
until now. It would be whimsical, pitiable and direct,
a strong introduction that would balance
vulnerability with originality and self-awareness
(Oyler 200-201).

The passage begins with the author-protagonist considering the prospect of sincerely expressing her thoughts and feelings to a man she met offline. She regards it as an opportunity to redeem her past deceits and find some solace in the honest company of another. There is a sense, at least initially, that she may extricate herself from the social logics of online sociality, by admitting that the sudden death of her boyfriend after realising he was a conspiracy theorist had been traumatic, 'that my situation was strange and my response to it selfish, but I would assure him that I had undergone significant reflection and now felt "over it"' (Oyler 201). In a somewhat strange twist of character, the reader is initially led to think that the author-protagonist believes that relationships that originate in physical encounters require a kind of sincerity that relies on a commitment to face-to face honesty. People she meets via social media, however, are by extension less real and therefore deserve less sincere communication, hence why she treats her dates arranged via online apps as opportunities to lie and dissemble. But this distinction rapidly breaks down over the course of the passage. What starts out as the author-protagonist seemingly inclined to provide an honest representation of her feelings soon returns to the logics of the reputation economy, in which the participants are supposed to in advance of social interactions craft the image of a personality that might attract others. Sincerity becomes a performance of good, socially rewarded qualities – 'vulnerability', 'self-awareness' and openness. Ultimately, she does not even offer her date the vestige of truth she briefly considers in the above passage. Despite the date going relatively well, she still lies her way through their conversation, before leaving unannounced when he goes to the toilet: 'I picked up my jacket and left' (Oyler 206).

The section expresses something of Han's (35) contention that on social media, the other is effectively erased: 'Social media and personalized search engines set up, in the internet, a space of absolute closeness [*Nahraum*]; here the outside has been eliminated. One encounters only oneself and one's own life". Though a perhaps somewhat

absolutist assertion – given that, as the author-protagonist's behaviour suggests, individuals still require others to rank themselves against and compete with – Han's words nonetheless help to understand her actions on the date featured in the passage above. The lie, for Oyler, offers a way of extending the online extinction of the other into physical encounters. Only her fabricated truth matters; the other does not have authentic feelings or even a life separate from the protagonist's. As Han suggests, the other no longer compels honesty because, for all intents and purposes, they are experienced as a character in the protagonist's carefully constructed narrative. She can leave the bar without saying goodbye to a date who she has enjoyed the company of because he exists only in the weakest sense.

The scene is indicative of how the protagonist's narcissistic solipsism means she struggles to find value in her social relationships. During the date, she describes looking at her date's face across the table as 'dumb locking of eyes' (Oyler 205). Significantly, 'dumb' etymologically relates to mute or uncommunicative. His eyes do not express anything; they are essentially empty of content, but for the feelings of the author protagonist. Richard Sennett (325) writes of the narcissist that '[l]ooking for an expression or reflection of himself in Experience, he devalues each particular interaction or scene'. *Fake Accounts* suggests that narcissism is central to the subjectivity cultivated by social media. All interactions are "devalued" except for their potential to boost one's own standing, so that physical encounters command no social duty to the mute other.

This is clearest in the author-protagonist's relationship with those who are more than merely passing acquaintances or one-off dates. While speaking to one of the few friends she has made in Berlin, a woman called Nell, the author-protagonist thinks to herself "I was almost positive I hated her" (Oyler 242). Despite the author-protagonist's disinterest in having an honest relationship, Nell is still curious to know more about her life and says: "Wait. I don't think you ever told me why you came here". (Oyler 242) The protagonist "looked away and laughed like a weary woman scorned", thinking to herself "Maybe it wasn't sympathy but contempt that would bring out the truth?" (Oyler 242). She then goes on to lie to Nell about how her boyfriend "Frank" of five years suddenly proposed and the experience was too intense for her to cope with, a lie that becomes increasingly elaborate, and includes the boyfriend giving her an inappropriate gift of a 'bright pink Furby' toy (242-243).

What is clear in this section is that the reader is supposed to interpret the protagonist's enjoyment of lying as the enjoyment of contempt. This passage is also suggestive of Felix's motivations. As earlier mentioned, his motivations are not explicitly clear throughout the novel and are only indicated in the actions of the author-protagonist, which offer insight into the potential joys that also motivate Felix's dissemination of conspiratorial theories. Perhaps more importantly, this passage suggests how such enjoyment relates to the platforms selection of content that is exaggerated and sensational. There is the personal pay off of pleasure for the user and the spectacle of sensational material for the platform, which generates attention, data and profit. This is the dark message of the novel: platform capitalism encourages the enjoyment of dehumanising the other and treating them as a source of contempt. Unlike novelists such as Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, who – in their efforts to redeem sincerity in ways that implicitly reflect the arguments of bourgeois economists – seem to regard a commitment to sincerity in one's relations with the other as a prerequisite for a successful public sphere, *Fake Accounts* paints an altogether more violent image of contemporary capitalist relations. Under platform capitalism, it suggests, sincere expression of one's true feelings matters increasingly little because the other no longer compels an ethical commitment.

The enjoyment of deceiving the other

As we have already seen, after the shock of Felix's sudden death, the author-protagonist spends her time exploring the joy of deceiving others, as if on some level to investigate Felix's motives. The author-protagonist dissembles a variety of identities on casual meetings with men arranged through dating apps. During these dates, it quickly becomes apparent that the author-protagonist enjoys lying in the transgressive sense that Lacan (*XVII* 17) attributes to the experience of "jouissance".

After a date with a "Relationship Anarchist", who believes in a form of total openness that the protagonist-author cannot commit to, she is eager to prove to the reader "that wilful deceit was a surer route to precarious happiness than wilful transparency" (Oyler 154). What can we make of this assertion? What kind of happiness is she referring to? On face value, it certainly seems to be a transgressive kind of happiness, considering

that in a culture that is still ideologically committed to bourgeois notions of sincerity the lie is forbidden. That is to say, the quote perhaps suggests that even though social media inadvertently makes liars of us all, the malicious lie still has a transgressive power. In another sense, as the quote suggests, the intentional lie goes against platform capitalism's ideological holy cow: transparency, a refraction of the bourgeois rule of truth telling, which, as the various liberal pundits criticizing "post-truth" suggest, still carries ideological weight even as the conditions of its possibility fade. The "precarious happiness" that the author protagonist here describes is, by all bourgeois standards, perverse.

To put it another way, truth-telling is a bourgeois law and, as Lacan (*VII* 67) suggests, the desire to transgress the law is the very basis of the law. The superego sets the parameters of acceptable behaviour and, in doing so, contains the impulse to go outside of those parameters, acting at once as the law and the law's destruction. Jouissance is the enjoyment that traumatically breaks with the law.

After telling one of her many dates a lie about her job as a tour guide in Berlin, he asks whether her job has become boring due to having to tell the same stories to tourists and repeat the same personal information all the time, to which she responds:

> ...no because I make up a different story every time. Last night, for example, I was a burlesque dancer. He looked at my breasts with exaggerated scepticism, which I appreciated. "People will believe anything" I said, "especially if it's a little unbelievable. He said "Oh, will they?" and asked me why he should think that I was who I said I was if I was such a practised fabulist. I smiled naughtily and said he shouldn't (Oyler 204).

The passage evidently expresses a sexual thrill to breaking the bourgeois law of truth telling and the consequence of potentially being caught in the act of lying. Indeed, the author-protagonist overtly flirts with her date by flirting with the possibility of revealing her deceit. In a perverse double bluff, she tells the truth about her fabrication of stories on dates but in the context of a lie about what she does for work. She does so in a way that suggests that she might now be lying, teasingly stating that people will believe any old lie 'especially if it's a little unbelievable'. This intermingling of truth and lies

creates a form of total opacity that might, to requote the Adorno (*Minima* 30) passage that begins this chapter, be called a 'dishonest lie'. This is where she experiences transgressive enjoyment: in the possibility that she might be found out, even as she blurs reality and fabrication to such a degree that there is no longer any obvious truth to be found. By playing this trick on her date, she pushes her pleasure to a point of tension, a point in the engagement with her date whereby the risk of her transgression being brought to light generates an almost unbearable delight.

But, as Zizek (*Lacan* 80) notes, pushing one's pleasure to such unlawful extremes generates the 'excessive feeling of guilt' associated with the superego, 'the cruel and insatiable agency that bombards me with impossible demands and then mocks my botched attempts to meet them', a feeling with which the author-protagonist is familiar. Like on other dates in the novel, at the end of the scene, she finds herself being mocked by the imagined voices of past sexual partners: 'The ex-boyfriends mean this in the most loving way, but they're feeling like they really dodged a bullet here' (Oyler 206). Ex-boyfriends appear throughout the novel as voices that castigate the protagonist in sarcastically generous tones, in ways which express how the superego shames the subject yet takes the appearance of righteous judgement. The use of the gendered term "boyfriends" as a surrogate for this function of the unconscious has evidently been selected to show that the author-protagonist's guilt originates in the patriarchal relations of the family – "boyfriends" might also be read as "fathers". Part of what makes these instances enjoyable for the protagonist are there fantastic potential to upset those who make the law and in the past, it would seem, have shamed her for not obeying it.

On the one hand, the author-protagonist's actions might be simply read as an attempt to break the bourgeois, patriarchal law. This is undoubtedly part of the motivation but as the previous section showed, another significant part of the author-protagonist's motive is her sublimated effort to erase the other in ways that are not wholly transgressive in the realm of social media.

In an earlier scene, we are given a better sense of where precisely the enjoyment of deceit might lie. After she has decided to go on a series of dates dissembling personalities based on the character traits associated with astrological signs, the "boyfriends" censure her decision as wrong because astrological signs are 'fake' (Oyler

170). The author protagonist responds 'Yes, I know astrology is fake. It's not real. But as I've said to them before, who cares? It's real enough to influence how real people think.' (Oyler 170). This short passage contains a great deal. On the one hand, it again suggests the author-protagonist's refusal to accept a patriarchal definition of what counts as real, and that there is a perverse enjoyment in simply going against such notions even if she does not believe in them herself. Importantly, though, she also suggests that her fabrication of identities based on astrological signs reflects the impulse behind her fakery throughout the rest of the novel, that is, her attempt to influence others via lying.

The transgression here is not so different to that which fills the concerns of those who worry about 'post-truth'; specifically, that deceit can be used by populists to gain power. In this sense, we might want to ask: does this constitute a real transgression or rather a simulacrum of transgression? As we have already seen, the populist's cynical attempts to wield truth to gain power only magnify the kinds of actions encouraged of users by platform capitalism to game the online spectacle. Understood so, the author protagonist's enjoyment in fact sits very comfortably in a new regime of capitalism which metabolises the unforeseen byproducts of "untruth" as seductive forms of attention-grabbing content. As Zizek contends (*Lacan* 85), transgressions that appear to disturb the system very often serve to bolster its ideological consensus.

One of these by-products is the online "troll", a subjective mode that through cruelty, malice and lies seeks to injure or mock the other for the 'lolz'. They are in the words of Seymour (111) "gleefully sociopathic', delighting in deceiving, taunting and playing games with their foils'. Often seeking out vulnerabilities in others for her own cruel pleasure, the author-protagonist's behaviour at times might best be described as trolling. On a date where she has ironically constructed her identity around the Cancer sign, she meets a vulnerable man with financial difficulties who genuinely believes in astrology:

> I asked him if he'd ever had any psychic
> experiences, saying that he seemed like he had, and
> he said "Wow, yes, how did you know that?" I said I
> was very intuitive. All his visible ligaments
> suggested clairvoyant energy. I asked him what the
> biggest problem in his life was and he said finances.

> I asked him why and he said he didn't have a job
> (Oyler 178).

The passage evidently demonstrates the sadistic pleasure the author-protagonist takes from deceiving the other and toying with their vulnerabilities. There is what Seymour (110) refers to as an 'affective gap' between the seriousness of what the man is expressing and its treatment by the protagonist. One can see here how this gap is produced by the aforementioned logic of equivalence that determines the user's experience of social media. Just as ten-second videos of beheadings nestle among reams of puerile jokes and videos of funny dogs, a man's financial difficulties can be sandwiched into an ongoing in-joke about astrology to which that man is, in no small part, the punchline. Though this is perhaps a more obvious example of how she cruelly mocks others for her own pleasure, the author-protagonist throughout the narrative enjoys the trolling of others as an everyday activity, in particular, on dates with those met via dating apps. As earlier argued, because she does not see the feelings of the other as quite real, she can readily treat them as toys for her sadistic enjoyment.

This reading also offers another way to interpret Felix's "artistic" prank death, who, as we have already seen, has a certain penchant for affectless mocking of others. At the end of the novel, as if to mock the author-protagonist's late realisation that his death was a prank, he reposts one of her tweets that makes a joke about her tardiness. While out for coffee, she challenges Felix ""'I'm a pretty girl and I'm always late!' is something I tweeted,"' (Oyler 264). The novel ends with his response, as he pays the bill:

> "Yes", he said, maybe pittyingly, maybe
> exasperatedly, maybe patronizingly, maybe guiltily,
> maybe shamefully maybe ruefully, maybe matter-of-
> factly, maybe absolutely, totally, completely devoid
> of any feeling at all. He lifted my saucer and coffee
> cup, ignoring the wasps, which dispersed into chaos,
> and slipped the note under it. "That's part of the
> point" (Oyler 265).

The last line, delivered with affectless glee, is the final trick played on the protagonist. The posting of her tweet - 'I'm always late' - seems to be part of his plan to humiliate her. But because his motives are so opaque, his feelings so totally devoid of sincere

expression, both the author-protagonist and reader are left to wonder precisely whether Felix means his cruelty as anything more than a joke. This is the enigma of the troll, as the above passage suggests. Their affectless delivery of cruel, unsettling or uninterpretable content to a hapless victim remains inherently undecidable at the level of its sincerity. As the above passage shows, one can never quite gauge the tone or motive of the troll, who may be acting on guilt, fear, shame, exasperation or may be 'completely devoid of any feeling at all'.

It is telling that this passage concludes the novel. Like Felix's prank death, the novel itself might be regarded as an elaborate act of trolling, the audience the foil. The troll keeps its audience uncertain as to whether its fakery and mockery is meant to be taken in seriousness or in humour. *Fake Accounts,* with its endless toying with fact and fiction, truth and lies, sincerity and irony has a certain troll-ish quality. At times, the book betrays an unnerving, passive aggressive relationship to its audience and the canon of literature itself. Large sections of the book are spent rehashing tweets or making self-conscious jokes about how she aims to bore the reader: 'What can we learn from literature? Sometimes things may feel like they've been going on forever, but really it's only been about forty pages' (Oyler 206). This remark features after the lengthiest section in the plot, in which the author-protagonist goes on dates dissembling identities based on star signs and appears to use these dates as opportunities to mix autobiographical and fictional detail to further obscure reality from both her dates and her reader. The section, composed of multiple short vignettes antagonises the bourgeois novel, offering little in the way of characterisation or plot development, and might, as the author-protagonist suggests, be written as a kind of troll-ish joke to antagonise the reader. The above passage shows a distinct disdain for the reader and their expectations of what literature can and should do.

It is hardly surprising that fiction might have absorbed such a logic. As Seymour (111) notes, the troll is only the logical conclusion of other media in which pranking and duping members of the public is seen as good sport. It is, by his lights, a form of 'popular entertainment', in part, I would add, because it appears to break the parameters of acceptable bourgeois behaviour; it offers a simulacrum of transgression in the relatively safe space of an online forum or social media site accessed from the comfort of one's home (Seymour 111).

But, if trolling truly represents a genuine transgression, then it is something akin to the pleasure of 'triggering the libs', to use a common alt-right term that denotes antagonising those with liberal and progressive attitudes. Indeed, by making this kind of humour an obvious source of pleasure for Felix, an alt-right conspiracist, the novel seems to suggest that the pleasure of the troll is not so many steps away from the pleasure of that great reactionary affront to bourgeois values: the fascist. Trolling represents a violent side of online sociality that undoubtedly appeals most to those who would otherwise harm the vulnerable. The troll does not care about the feelings of the other. It violently tramples on them. In short, as the author-protagonist's deceitful and malicious actions demonstrate, it ultimately seeks to erase the other entirely.

Trolling may represent a joke to the antagonist, but the joke is far from innocent, expressing the perverse humour of a fascist strain of late capitalist subjectivity. It is worth recalling Freud's (*Joke* 154-156) argument that jokes satisfy some unconscious desire. If the various tricks played on others by Felix and the author-protagonist can be called jokes, the desire here satisfied seems to be for a form of domination that does not admit itself as such. As the above passage demonstrates, the point of Felix's "joke" is to dominate the author-protagonist without committing himself entirely to such domination. Similarly, as earlier passages show, the point of the jokes played on hapless men by the author-protagonist is to dominate the other but without their knowing. Jokiness permits a form of dominance that is difficult to challenge.

It is a curiously non-committal form of domination, but one which segues with the modalities of contemporary fascism. As Nagle argues (28-29), the alt right's transgressions assume the hegemonic online register of ironic fun. Flirtations with genocidal ideation, and the online trolling of 'jews' and 'blacks' continue, like older iterations of fascism, to violate and abuse the other but now within the bounds of plausible deniability. What might be regarded as postmodern fascism involves little overt commitment to an ideology as such: there is no grand narrative, no unshakable truths and no obvious leaders. But, as Alberto Toscano argues, 'late fascism operates through a performance of fanaticism devoid of inner conviction, though its "phoniness" does nothing to lessen its violence'. Felix exemplifies a form of fascism that appears to ridicule, mock, abuse and spread disinformation about Jews and liberal conspiracies

purely for the "lolz". But, as Toscano notes, this does not take away from its capacity to injure others.

What Toscano and Nagle miss, and *Fake Accounts* captures so clearly, is that the kinds of cruel deceit and mockery that form the sociality of 'late fascism' are deeply woven into the economy of social media. As we have already seen, Felix's trollish prank is ultimately an effort to enhance his reputation and gain followers, that is, to boost his opportunities to monetise the spectacle of himself in an increasingly precarious economy. At the same time, platforms encourage spectacular acts of cruelty and violence against vulnerable others because they magnetise user attention and, ultimately, produce profitable data. It is this, rather than 'post-truth', that the novel suggests is the real driving force behind the further degradation of the bourgeois subject.

Conclusion

Fake Accounts suggests that the sociality that social media generates provides particularly fertile ground for incipient forms of fascist subjectivity to emerge. The fact that cruelty against those more vulnerable than oneself has become an economic maxim is a problem that *Fake Accounts* explores as a problem for bourgeois subjectivity. While deceit and malicious lies have always been encouraged as part of social life in a system that transforms all sociality into competition, these qualities are now expanded to become central to capital's profit motive, in a regime of accumulation which increasingly exploits sensational acts of humiliation and pain to generate profitable data.

This is the novel's primary worry: that the economic incitement to deceive, to troll, and to manipulate makes a bourgeois culture that thrives on sincerity and truth-telling effectively impossible. While a certain amount of deceit has always been necessary to operate as a good bourgeois subject, now the centrality of deceit to a neoliberal subject that regards each moment as an opportunity to enhance their reputation means that sincerity is rarely anything more than a performance. If the realist novel that so carefully separated fact and fiction, and sincerity and irony in an effort to uphold consensus truth represents the aesthetic expression of a thriving bourgeois culture, then *Fake Accounts* exemplifies what the novel looks like when such separations are no

longer privileged by a system that increasingly relies on everyday interpersonal violence.

Like Boyle's *Liveblog, Fake Accounts* subverts the bourgeois novel form – and the reader's expectations about it – to capture a bourgeois culture fading along with its middle-class propagator. The author-protagonist's effort via lying to erase or, indeed, overtly violate the other is reflected in the novel's form. The trollish joke of *Fake Accounts* is that it appears to have been written with the precise aim of frustrating the reader. As the author-protagonist meta-referentially notes at various points throughout the text, passages drag on, there is little narrative tension, and one could be forgiven for thinking the book assiduously boring. At the same time, this experiment is *for* an audience. The reader is a cipher for the social media user, who at once does not exist to the author but whose judgement and good opinion also hovers over her omnisciently to an almost farcical degree. This is the contradictory logic of a neoliberal world in which competition becomes the dominant source of social meaning, in which the subject is supposed to compete with and eventually erase the other while at the same time remaining entirely dependent on them as a source of meaning. The other who becomes at once essential to the subject's experience of sociality and experience of self must at the same time be entirely denied. *Fake Accounts* is the aesthetic result of a literature born out of this contradiction.

Conclusion

A guiding premise of this thesis is that economic relations register in aesthetic forms. It is through these forms that specific kinds of economic experience become narratable and, therefore, meaningful. As the novels in this thesis demonstrate, the worsening fortunes of the middle-class represent an experience that autofiction is uniquely capable of capturing, not least because in its contemporary form it tends to focus on the instabilities of subjectivity. Though, as we have seen, most scholarship on these texts argues that such instabilities relate to other social and psychological transformations relating to selfhood, be it the rise of social media or personal trauma, these issues are always inflected by the wider instabilities associated with downward mobility. This pervasive sensitivity, in autofiction, to these new and growing class-based insecurities demonstrates the degree to which the material shifts that began in the early 1980s have impacted the writing process itself. Eggers, Geissler and Boyle all write about how challenging the experience of writing can be under conditions such as precarious work, unemployment or a lack of sufficient welfare support. It is hardly surprising that many of these texts offer rich personal portraits of suffering author-protagonists and, in this regard, represent a continuation of a certain kind of psychological description that begins with the bourgeois realist novel. What differs is that these writers – exemplified by authors such as Lin and Boyle – no longer feel sufficiently at home among the middle-class to map the bourgeois world of objects in the rich detail we associate with realism.

Throughout the project, I have returned to the term 'filler' to understand the ways in which literary fiction, in particular bourgeois realism, often relies on lengthy descriptive digressions away from the main plot to bring the everyday world of the characters to life. The stagnant worlds depicted in *Liveblog* and *Taipei* might well be described as purely filler, in that in place of discernible narratives they narrowly focus on the psychological worlds of their author-protagonists. They luxuriate in the beliefs, ideas, opinions, experiences and achievements of their author-protagonists, rather than offer rich illustrations of the worlds that the characters inhabit, as we might find in the works of authors such as Zola and Flaubert, who charted the rise of the middle-class to cultural dominance in the mid-nineteenth century. A chief argument of this thesis is that human

capital theory is the ideological lens through which these writers – and individuals more generally – understand their downwardly mobile status. As such, one's accumulation of achievements, opinions and experiences offer a kind of illusory security, once found in the tangible world of property and assets that is now increasingly unavailable to a middle-class in decline. Writers such as Eggers and Lin are acutely aware that these qualities count as a kind of CV and that fiction can be used to make promises about the author to their audience. Others such as Boyle highlight the humiliation involved in this process and reveal that where once the middle-class accumulated property they now accumulate the indignities associated with employability.

In Chapters Three and Four, I consider whether autofiction warns of bourgeois culture's final end at the hands of a system that no longer appears to require it. Whether the novel form can survive this economic transformation is dramatised most clearly in Boyle's *Liveblog,* which entirely refuses the formal and stylistic codes of "good" literary fiction while still insisting that it is a "novel", as if to claim that literary fiction persists, if only in name, seemingly after the conditions of its possibility have disappeared. Jameson famously argues that as postmodernism dismantles the bourgeois subject there can no longer be such a thing as stylistic innovation. One might be tempted to add to Jameson's claim a further provocation: that there is no longer such a thing as the novel. The most fundamental reason may not be, as Jameson argues, that the commodity form has compromised the possibility of bourgeois subjectivity, but rather that the material conditions of those who might once have belonged to the bourgeoisie – those once with the time and resources to write novels – now reflect the conditions of the proletariat.

Clearly, though, the middle-class and bourgeois culture have not yet been entirely carried away on the headwinds of crisis. But this anxiety is a hidden core to many of the texts I have analysed in this thesis. In *Seasonal Associate,* the author-protagonist finds that her need to take temporary work at an Amazon warehouse leaves little time or energy for writing. Geissler's suffering at the warehouse is no doubt a significant part of why she chooses to represent this period of her life via life-writing, a form that beyond straightforward literary fiction promises the therapeutic potential of confession. Perhaps even more so than other autofiction novels, *Seasonal Associate* provokes concerns about whether the imagination required for fiction can be sustained when writers are given so little time or space to imagine. A question that this thesis finds across all of the

featured novels, to varying degrees, is whether the novel can continue if the class that has traditionally written it is submerged under the same social reproductive pressures as the proletariat.

But the decline of the middle class is not merely economic but also cultural. The problem posed to the novel form by the end of bourgeois culture is taken up most obviously in Oyler's *Fake Accounts.* The novel suggests that in a moment when bourgeois truth regimes – the traditional news press, and academic and expert knowledge – are increasingly under threat by a capitalism in permanent crisis, the established boundaries of fact and fiction that were so central to the growth of the novel also become ever-less clear. *Fake Accounts* is a novel about lies, mistruth and cruelty and the centrality of these qualities to a bourgeois culture in decline. Like the social media context that has both sprung from and partly generated this culture, *Fake Accounts* is a volatile textual terrain, on which the reader can never quite tell where they stand in terms of what content is fictional or factual, what is serious or a joke, and whether the author is who they purport to be. Its narrative form embodies the sociality of the troll, a brutal exemplar of late capitalist cynicism which spits in the face of bourgeois manners such as sincerity and credibility. In this regard, the novel itself at times appears to display a deep distaste for its readership.

In another sense, it might well be argued that these new experiments simply demonstrate the durability of the novel form and the opportunities that crisis continually creates for literary experimentation. Even works that seem to worry about the novel's decline offer significant evidence in their stylistic and formal experiments that literary fiction is still a vital form of aesthetic expression. Indeed, while contemporary autofiction, on the one hand, appears to spell the decline of the novel, it may also signal the beginning of a new kind of literary genre, one which relates to the rise of social media and its all-pervasive culture of employability. In an interesting dialectical twist, the apparent decline of the novel generates the conditions for new kinds of formal experimentation that use the pressures of social media to create something akin to a self-branding novel. Literary fiction's capacity to offer an aesthetic space for authors to fashion their own image is, of course, not entirely new—one only need look to the early autobiographical fictions of Jack London or Charles Dickens. But the author's tendency to directly express their opinions, beliefs, achievements and other qualities, primarily to

curate a portfolio by way of literary writing, has become hegemonic in contemporary literary culture. Even though, as critics such as Poovey tell us, literary and economic writing had to be artificially separated and were never truly distinct, their boundaries today have become increasingly porous as fiction and the CV, the novel and personal branding, become ever closer in terms of form and style. The trend might be said to begin at the turn of the twenty-first century with Eggers' *AHBWOSG,* but it seems that an ever-growing number of fiction writers have realised that autobiographical writing can be used to manage one's employability. Though writers are not precisely wage labourers, they exist under the wage relation and its contemporary pressures, and many still rely on their artistic capacities being employed by a publishing house. Cathecting an audience to an author's life rather than a single book, it would seem, is a more economically fruitful strategy for all involved. As with so many other professions, the author, once broadly understood under the rubric of 'producer', is now increasingly modelled as an entrepreneur, juggling multiple roles of writing, designing and marketing.

These changing conditions are as much to do with distribution as production, whereby the work of marketing is increasingly outsourced by publishing houses to their authors. All of the twenty-first century novels featured in this thesis bear the trace of a growing online marketplace of social media and shopping platforms such as Amazon. Novels such as Boyle's *Liveblog,* Lin's *Taipei* and Lerner's *10:04* reveal a deepening of existent tensions between the novel as sacrosanct aesthetic object and everyday commodity, and between the author as artist and salesman.

What, then, does this mean for the reading experience? The reader of autofiction is interpellated no longer simply as an audience, or even customer, but, somewhat ambiguously, as something between an investor and employer, who is supposed to assess the writer's reputation as much as the writing itself. Though I have mostly focussed on Eggers' efforts via fiction to create for himself a kind of brand community, a growing number of twenty-first century authors also use literary writing for this purpose. In the novels of Lerner, Heti and Lin, a striking quality of the work is that the reader is evidently supposed to like the author-protagonist as much as the writing itself. Again, we find in various sublimated forms the metrics of social media branding – 'likes', 'follows' etc. – entering the novel form.

This apparent capitulation to the stylistic and formal qualities of social media, however, is not straightforward. Many of these writers are keenly aware of the problems involved in treating the novel form as an extension of one's self-brand. In this sense, literary culture has already started to spawn a kind of anti-branding novel. In Chapter Four, I have shown how *Fake Accounts* entirely refuses a model of autofiction based on author likeability. The author-protagonist is consciously written as a deeply flawed and, sometimes, overtly unlikable character. On one level, Oyler explicitly challenges the use of the novel form as a means to enhance employability. But *Fake Accounts* also seems to ask whether the novel can escape the pressures of an online reputation economy that compels its participants to engage in the spectacle of branding. Just like the online troll, the novel seems to suggest that an eminently successful personal brand can be generated by aggressive and cruel behaviour.

Oyler's apparent refusal to play the game of employability is one of the few examples – aside from those in *Seasonal Associate* – of a literary strategy that might be read as a kind of critique of capital. But, even in *Seasonal Associate*, a novel that at many points seems to portray the traumatic realisations of proletarianisation, there is no sense that by the end of the text the author-protagonist understands her class status as anything more than precariously middle-class. Clearly, despite her realisation that the continuation of her career as a writer is anything but assured, and her evident fear that the future may hold more seasonal work at the warehouse, she experiences no solidarity with those who continue to work at Amazon. As is so often the case with autofiction, by the end of the novel, the text's political interests are subsumed in the writer's more immediate emotional needs – in this case, the feelings of security and autonomy achieved by reinstating herself among the professional middle-class.

This resolution of political struggle in emotional consolation – a phenomenon that begins with Eggers and continues throughout the autofiction novel in the twenty-first century – represents a key cultural logic of neoliberalism. Given that the younger generations have developed a transformative politics befitting a moment of capitalist crisis – what some have termed 'generation left' – it is perhaps surprising that today's hegemonic literary form so readily accommodates individual feeling but refuses almost

entirely the possibility of political didacticism (Milburn). In fear of labouring the point, autofiction is neither the proletariat novel nor working class fiction.

But if autofiction has not produced a stridently political novel it is certainly a form attuned to the narrative instabilities of a capitalism that no longer seems to privilege the interests of the Global North's middle classes. The works of Boyle, Oyler, Lin and Geissler reveal the suspended and disjointed temporalities of a younger generation increasingly divorced from the certainties of the life course associated with the post-war consensus. The consecutive life stages of career development, buying property and starting a family now represent a disrupted fantasy. This life course lives on in contemporary autofiction as a spectral dreamworld of desires, aspirations and respectability that persist even though evidence of this "good life" ever returning is short in supply. It is this dream, so central to the autofiction novel, that prevents the precarious middle from looking upon the working-class with solidarity rather than despair. Until then, it remains to be seen whether autofiction can be turned to political effect.

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