(Dis)attending to the Other: Contemporary Fictions of Empathy

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I, Viktoria Herold, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis considers how contemporary novels in English, French and German respond to recent discourses on narrative empathy as an antidote to a distracted mind. As the author Leslie Jamison puts it, 'empathy isn't just something that happens to us – a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain – it's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves.' If figured as a uniquely human way of 'making a choice', empathy turns into a strategy used to filter an overwhelming influx of information in a time of ubiquitous connectivity hyperbolically called The Age of Distraction. I argue that empathy's instrumental appeal lies in the way it mediates the relationship between self and other in alternating movements of attentional contraction and expansion, thereby facilitating acts of care as well as (self-)mastery. By reading novels by Lionel Shriver, Emma Donoghue, Zadie Smith, Katharina Hacker, Patrick Modiano, Teju Cole, Camille Laurens, and Patricia Lockwood alongside theories of empathy taken from the fields of affect theory, cognitive science, media studies, philosophy, psychology, and trauma theory, I aim to explore how contemporary fiction interrogates narrative empathy's status as an attentional corrective. Through a focus on themes of failed or blocked empathy, as well as the narrative techniques used to manipulate the reader's flow of attention, I analyse how the texts reflect rather than dispel anxieties surrounding the novel's ethical value as an 'attention technology'. It is my contention that the texts do not tame attention, but instead provide examples of literary meta-empathy, that is a self-reflexive mode that foregrounds empathy's relationship to disattendability, distraction and indifference.

Contents

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Impact Statement

This thesis contributes to the field of empathy studies by putting recent scholarship on literary attention and affect theoretical critiques of empathy into dialogue. It argues that contemporary novels in English, French and German locate empathy's ethical value in its complex relationship with distraction and indifference. It furthermore proposes the analytical category of meta-empathy, which describes a mode of reader engagement that is alert to empathy's dependence on partial, blocked, or diverted attention. In so doing, it responds to a public discourse on crises of attention in the early twenty-first century, thereby offering insights that are valuable both inside and outside of academia.

Because it focuses on the social nature of attention, my thesis is of particular interest to feminist scholars of affect. The findings of my thesis also lend themselves to potential dissemination in other disciplines, in particular psychology and cognitive science. While I argue against the instrumentalisation of narrative empathy, I nevertheless foreground its capacity to induce states of heightened self-awareness; my findings could therefore inform qualitative as well as quantitative studies.

As the interest in recent popular titles such as Johan Hari's *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention* (2022) show, there is intense public interest in a contemporary crisis of attention and the ways in which literature and literary studies might address it. My thesis speaks directly to this nexus. Furthermore, in light of the Coronavirus pandemic, the threat of diminished attention spans due to the digitalisation of education becomes an even more pressing issue. My thesis offers a nuanced take on the perceived threat of distraction and its findings are therefore of interest to the broader public. Because of its frequent focus on the voices of cultural commentators and journalists, my thesis furthermore lends itself to dissemination in the form of magazine articles, blog posts and talks.

Introduction

In an essay published by the *New Yorker* in early 2019, the late neuroscientist Oliver Sacks examines the influence of smartphones on our attention, taking as a starting point his observation of people 'walking blithely in the path of moving traffic, totally out of touch with their surroundings'.[1] He launches into a well-rehearsed argument about the dangers of people 'peering into little boxes', joining the ranks of commentators that express anxiety surrounding a widespread erosion of attention in contemporary society: 'I am most alarmed by such distraction and inattention when I see young parents staring at their cell phones and ignoring their own babies as they walk or wheel them along,' he writes; 'such children, unable to attract their parents' attention, must feel neglected, and they will surely show the effects of this in the years to come'.[2] Not attending to somebody equates to emotional neglect that has potentially severe implications; not paying attention amounts to a denial of humanity. Participating in a public discourse epitomised in titles such as Robert Hassan's *The Age of Distraction: Reading, Writing and Politics in a High-Speed Networked Economy* (2012) or Johann Hari's *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention* (2022),[3] Sacks positions himself as a by now highly recognisable critical type, namely that of the techno-sceptical 'lament maker'[4] who highlights the loss of an attentive reading public.

Recounting 'a panel discussion about information and communication in the twenty-first century', Sacks invokes an 'Internet pioneer' whose 'young daughter surfed the Web twelve hours a day and had access to a breadth and range of information that no one from a

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[1] Oliver Sacks, 'The Machine Stops'. *The New Yorker*, vol. 94, no. 48, 11 Feb. 2019, p. 28.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Robert Hassan, *The Age of Distraction: Reading, Writing and Politics in a High-Speed Networked Economy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017); Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

[4] Alice Bennett, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 4.

previous generation could have imagined'.[5] Faced with such habits of attention, Sacks feels compelled to ask the panellist whether his daughter 'had read any of Jane Austen's novels, or any classic novel.'[6] Predictably, the young woman has not, which causes Sacks to 'wonder[] aloud whether she would then have a solid understanding of human nature or of society'.[7] Sacks here understands the technology-addled mind as a profound challenge because it is a mind that turns away from morally ennobling activities, including the reading of novels, leading to a 'pervasive draining out of meaning, of intimate contact, from our society and our culture'[8] This professedly old-fashioned position – Sacks himself concedes that the title of his essay, 'The Machine Stops', is taken from a story by E.M. Forster published in 1909– forms the discursive background to the contemporary fictions of empathy analysed in this thesis.[9] Expressed in the proliferation of titles such as Maggie Jackson's *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (2008) or Anne-Francoise Rutkowski and Carol Saunders's *Emotional and Cognitive Overload: The Dark Side of Information Technology* (2019), the current moment is characterised by a pervasive pessimism regarding our attentive capacities, or more specifically our ability to focus on another person long (or well) enough to establish the 'intimate contact' of empathetic understanding.[10]

The journalist Sigal Samuel sums up the problems associated with technology that drastically shortens our attention spans, asking 'what if it's making us less empathetic, less prone to ethical action? What if it's degrading our capacity for moral attention — the

[5] Sacks, p. 28

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Maggie Jackson, *The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age.* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2008). Anne-Francoise Rutkowski and Carol Saunders, *Emotional and Cognitive Overload: The Dark Side of Information Technology* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

capacity to notice the morally salient features of a given situation so that we can respond appropriately?'[11] Distraction, then, is figured as a threat to the ultimate expression of moral attention: empathy. By this same logic, empathy conversely turns into distraction's most potent antidote. This thesis interrogates the idea that empathy, especially in its narrative form, stands in such marked opposition to distraction. It does so by analysing contemporary novels in English, French, and German, novels which offer nuanced reflections on narrative empathy's relationship to focused attention.

My argument seeks to highlight how authors often explicitly respond to the rhetoric of popular titles such as *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (2014) by the philosopher Roman Krznaric, which suggest that novels can be easily mobilised to act against distraction. Krznaric disseminates the idea of an empathy canon which consists of titles such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Ursula Le Guin's *Vaster Than Empire and More Slow*; similarly Krznaric's 'Empathy Museum' includes a long-term project called *1001 Books*, which is made of up of titles donated by celebrities and members of the general public.[12] The journalist Johann Hari finds an apt summary for such an instrumentalisation of literature for the purpose of fostering empathy, writing that '[p]erhaps fiction is a kind of empathy gym, boosting your ability to empathise with other people – which is one of the most rich and

[11]Sigal Samuel, 'It's hard to be a moral person. Technology is making it harder', *Vox*, 3 August 2021, at <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22585287/technology-smartphones-gmail-attention-morality> [accessed 2 May 2022]. Samuel here writes for Vox Media, whose founders describe their mission as follows: 'We live in a world of too much information and too little context. Too much noise and too little insight. And so Vox's journalists candidly shepherd audiences through politics and policy, business and pop culture, food, science, and everything else that matters.' Josh Ariza, 'About Us', *Vox*, at <https://www.vox.com/pages/about-us> [accessed 2 May 2022]. As I will argue throughout my thesis, empathy is often mobilised anytime there is a fear that 'what matters' is buried by 'too much noise'.

[12] Further attesting to the inseparability of the literary and the face-to-face encounter in Krznaric's understanding of empathy, the *Empathy Museum* project also encompasses a 'Human Library': instead of borrowing a book, members of the public are encouraged spend time with a changing group of volunteers that share their life stories in conversation. Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*. (London: Rider Books, 2014), pp. 207-8; 210.

precious forms of focus we have'.[13] To liken the act of reading to an attentional exercise points to a valuation of effort, repetition, as well as self-mastery. Indeed, the contemporary empathy defence of fiction hinges on the idea that to develop empathy is an effective antidote to the problem of *individual* susceptibility to distraction.

Thus, Ann Jurecic testifies to the uses of empathy to the literary critic by concluding that '[l]iterature matters because the practice of reading literature slows thought down. In a hurried age, and with the constant distractions provided by instantly available entertainment, a book provides a rare opportunity for sustained focus, contemplation, and introspection'.[14] Following this line of argumentation, then, the contemporary phenomenon of a dispersal of attention, of a passive focus directed outwards, towards the ephemeral spectacles of technology, seems to find its antithesis in empathy, 'a storyteller's art', as the author Rebecca Solnit calls it. 'Empathy is a journey you travel, if you pay attention, if you care, if you desire to do so', Solnit claims.[15] When empathy is figured as a conscious decision to become imaginatively invested in somebody else's story over prolonged periods of time, it turns into a potentially subversive act within the framework of a contemporary attention economy.

Yet contemporary novels by Lionel Shriver, Emma Donoghue, Zadie Smith, Katharina Hacker, Patrick Modiano, Teju Cole, Camille Laurens and Patricia Lockwood foreground that empathy is as much about distraction as it is about focused attention**.** In demonstrating that the 'morally salient' qualities of an empathetic encounter in both fictional and real-life contexts are just as much subject to contemplative attention as they are to mechanisms of distraction, my chosen novels stand in direct conversation with several different theories of empathy. To provide this theoretical background, this introduction first

[13] Hari, p. 82.

[14] Ann Jurecic, 'Empathy and the Critic'. *College English*, 74.1 (2011), 10-27 (p. 24).

[15] Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (New York: Viking, 2013). p. 3; p. 195

engages with definitions of empathy that highlight its attentional flexibility. Aside from focusing on the two subtypes of focused attention associated with empathy, that of expansive double-mindedness and that of the narrow spotlight focus, I highlight empathy's essential similarities with distraction by returning to the contemporary term's conceptual origins in nineteenth-century aesthetic ideas of *Einfühlung*.

By considering early twentieth century critics and cultural commentators who associate *Einfühlung* with distraction, a nuanced picture of empathy emerges. My contention that distraction is crucial to an understanding of narrative empathy furthermore teases out the attentional implications of more contemporary scholarship that understands narrative empathy as a complex interplay of proximity and distance, such as the historian Dominick LaCapra's model of empathetic unsettlement and the literary critic Anna Veprinska's model of empathetic dissonance. The literary scholar and cognitive scientist Fritz Breithaupt's understanding of empathy as a narrative filter of attention furthermore points to the importance of *dis*attending in the process of empathy.

In the four chapters of this thesis, I will focus on texts that either explicitly comment on the status of empathy during an (imagined) crisis of attention, or texts that self-consciously illustrate to what extent the process of reading, the establishment of empathy, or indeed the development of an ethical stance towards the other depend on the absence of distraction in the first place.[16] The first two chapters look at empathy's relationship to proximity, and engage with texts that illustrate how we pay attention to family and neighbours, that is individuals who are emotionally and physically close to us. The last two consider texts that look at empathy's relationship to temporal and geographic distance, asking us how we might empathise with dead and virtual others.

[16] Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking About This* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2021); Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1997).

As I will argue, the novels are representative of an aesthetics of *meta-empathy* in that they encourage a heightened awareness of the numerous types of focused as well as dispersed attention which are characteristic of empathy – as and when they occur on a diegetic level as well as on the part of the reader. Meta-empathy is a useful analytical category to examine my chosen texts, which I understand as fictions *of* empathy. By that, I mean texts that not only straightforwardly represent empathetic encounters, but that also offer insight into *cultural narratives of empathy*; texts which, through the formal qualities unique to prose, foreground certain assumptions about the relationship between attention, reading, and empathy as fictions in their own right. In particular, it is my aim to interrogate the 'fiction' that literature can easily turn into an extension of human focus, acting, as the psychologist and author Stephen Pinker puts it, as a particular 'technology for perspective-taking'.[17] As I will argue, to understand empathy as a highly prized form of focused contemplation that can be trained through reading fiction not only poses conceptual but ethical problems. I locate narrative empathy's ethical value not in its single-minded focus, but in the creation of self-aware, yet often elusive states of meta-attention; states that many contemporary texts encourage in their readers.

In this context, my analysis of contemporary fiction frequently turns to the political implications of the 'empathy gym' model. It takes into consideration that the 'empathetic turn' of the last few decades may ultimately express anxieties surrounding the continued relevance of the humanities in society.[18] As Laura Martin, a lecturer for comparative literature, writes with regards to the uses of studying fiction that encourages readerly empathy, 'if we want to survive, we need to defend rigorously our task to search out other

[17] Pinker, Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. (New York: Viking, 2011), p. 237.

[18] See Michael Fischer, 'Literature and Empathy', *Philosophy and Literature 41.2* (2017), pp. 431-464, (p. 444).

times, other peoples and places and "tell their stories" (…) in our teaching and academic work, though governments and university management teams tell us we are worse than useless.'[19] To establish that narrative empathy is indeed 'useful' because it provides tangible cognitive and social benefits might not be an act of resistance against but rather a reflection of the pressures of neoliberal economies on the higher education sector and society at large. The instrumentalisation of narrative empathy thus partakes in what scholars of the politics of emotion such as Sara Ahmed have called the 're-presentation' of emotions as 'a form of intelligence, as "tools" that can be used by subjects in the project of life and career enhancement'[20]. Yet empathy is simultaneously more resistant to notions of self-improvement and much more closely aligned with distraction than the empathy gym model of fiction would have us believe. To see fiction as 'a form of practice' for the cognitive processes that are desirable in real-world situations [21] belies both the complexity of empathy and the reading experience.

'Humean casualties' – Empathy and the threat of contemporary media

The absence or mastery of distraction is one of several assumptions that underlie the model of novel reading which commentators such as Hari and Sacks see as antithetical to the habits of the average internet user. Firstly, this model assumes that certain kinds of texts, exemplified in Sacks' 'Jane Austen novel' argument, act as vehicles of universal knowledge and 'meaning'. Secondly, it posits that this knowledge is only accessible through sustained and focused attention – a kind of attention that needs to transcend omnipresent and highly seductive sources of distraction. Thirdly, this kind of attention is particularly valuable and

[19] Laura Martin, 'Reading the Individual: The Ethics of Narration in the Works of W. G. Sebald as an Example for Comparative Literature', *Comparative Criticial Studies II.I* (2014), pp. 29-47 (p. 45).

[20] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 3.

[21] See Raymond Mar, interviewed by Johann Hari. Hari, p. 83.

worth defending because it serves as a model for social relations, or the way we should envision 'intimate contact'. Sacks pits the mindful acquisition of literary knowledge against the mindless consumption of information, ultimately understanding a loss of the former as a loss of a humanist way of life. Reflecting on the attitude of today's teenagers, Sacks writes, '[t]hey have given up, to a great extent, the amenities and achievements of civilization: solitude and leisure, the sanction to be oneself, truly absorbed, whether in contemplating a work of art, a scientific theory, a sunset, or the face of one's beloved.'[22] Sacks's observation goes to show that in the context of a global economy that relies on large-scale communicative networks in which consumers' behaviours are manipulated to an unprecedented extent,[23] humanist ideas such as the primacy of the man-made – including the work of art – and the emancipatory potential of individual choice and attention– 'to be oneself, truly absorbed' in an object of one's choosing – have been losing their purchase.[24]

This line of argumentation is heavily influenced by the idea that attention is a scarce resource that is now seldomly allocated to the pursuit of the 'achievements' of modernity. Such a commodification of our attentive faculties is central to the idea of an economy of attention, which has most recently been explored by the likes of German city planner Georg Franck in his *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit: Ein Entwurf* (2007) and French philosopher Bernard Stiegler's *Prendre soin de la jeunesse et des generations* (2008).[25] In an Anglo-American context, Thomas Davenport and John Beck's *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (2001) highlights how modern 'attention

[22] Sacks, p. 28.

[23] See Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Duke University Press, 2009). I focus on her ideas in Chapter 4.

[24] See Edward Said. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 1-30.

[25] Georg Franck, *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit: Ein Entwurf* (München: Dtv, 2007); Bernard Stiegler, *Prendre soin, de la jeunesse et des générations* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008).

merchants' must contend with what they call the problem of 'human bandwidth'. As they write, we

> live in an attention economy. In this new economy, capital, labor, information, and knowledge are all in plentiful supply. It's easy to start a business, to get access to customers and markets, to develop a strategy, to put up a Web site, to design ads and commercials. What's in short supply is human attention. Telecommunications bandwidth is not a problem, but human bandwidth is.[26]

To claim that human attention can only handle a specific amount of information at any given time is neither a radical nor new idea, yet to liken attention to the bandwidth of a network connection presupposes a particularly close, analogous relationship between human bodies and the systems designed to act upon them. Crucially, the idea of an attention economy also implies that this relationship is ultimately harmful for its human participants. As Herbert Simon, who originally coined the term, writes, the plentiful supply of information is the thing that 'consumes the attention of its recipients'; he sums up that 'a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention'.[27] Contemporary distraction, then, primarily refers to the 'consumption' of human attention by electronic media.

Consequently, to worry about distraction in a literary context means to worry about the continued existence of a model of reading as deep absorption. As Namwali Serpell highlights, it is often given the 'somewhat reductive' label of reading as *empathy.*[28] 'This reading,' as Alice Bennett explains, 'its interiority, its duration, its emotional responsiveness,

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[26]Thomas Davenport and John Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

[27] Herbert Simon, 'Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World.', in *Computers, Communications and the Public Interest*, ed. by Martin Greenberger. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 38-72 (pp. 40-1).

[28] C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*. (Boston: Harvard UP, 2014), p. 72.

its immersion – is perceived to be under threat from television and from the internet and the things they have done to our attention.'[29] As such, it comes as no surprise that the Age of Distraction inaugurs another discursive age, namely that of the *Age of Empathy*. Since the year 2010, when the evolutionary psychologist Frans de Waal published a book of the same title, there has been a veritable explosion of academic and popular scientific literature on the topic of empathy, as well as of titles within the genres of self-help and organisational management.[30] As Carolyn Pedwell argues, this recent resurgence of empathy can be summed up as the rise of a 'liberal narrative of empathy', that is a narrative that corresponds to 'the conviction that, in a transnational and multicultural world, social crises, hierarchies and antagonisms can be addressed affectively through practices of empathetic imagination, perspective-taking and engagement.'[31] I furthermore understand this narrative as expressing a belief in interventions on the level of individual attention, a belief which is also reflected in the current popularity of mindfulness-based practices in the Western world.[32] Empathy, it seems, is highly valued precisely because its supposed basis – unbroken attention, as epitomised by the act of absorbed reading – has been declared under threat.

In his *Age of Distraction*, Robert Hassan seeks to explain in detail how the digital culture of the first two decades of the twenty-first century actively erodes our ability to concentrate. According to Hassan, reading and writing are old technologies of attention that reflect 'the physical temporalities of our hand and eye movements' whereas contemporary information networks create temporal rhythms that transcend our physical and cognitive

[29] Bennett, p. 4.

[30] Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lesson for a Kinder Society.* (London: Souvenir Press, 2010).

[31] Carolyn Pedwell, *Affective Relations*: *The Transnational Politics of Empathy.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 94

[32] Bennett, p. 124.

capacities.[33] To live in a digital age entails the dramatic acceleration of the just about manageable speed characteristic of the production and consumption of print media. As a result, he argues, we are continually confronted with 'our pathetic efforts to synchronize with the new pace of life'.[34] Hassan sees distraction as a reaction to being overwhelmed at the sheer scale of rapidly changing information, as well as to the realisation that we have very little control over the things we read on a daily basis.[35] Most importantly, distraction also functions as the opposite of the 'traction' required to turn information into knowledge. As he explains, 'digital representations of meaning have begun to pulse and flow at an ever-quickening pace that militates against the pause and the traction and concentration and the reflection that meaning-construction demands.'[36] Accounts such as Hassan's inform debates on the importance of empathy because they attest to the destruction of the very cognitive processes (such as the 'slow' thinking required for meaning-making) that are often seen as indispensable to imaginative perspective-taking.

Hassan maintains that the demands of a networked society fill our time and shrink 'its phenomenological textures down to the flat temporal horizon of the now', leading to an inability to situate ourselves and others in time.[37]As Sacks puts it, '[w]hat we are seeing—and bringing on ourselves—resembles a neurological catastrophe on a gigantic scale.'[38] Echoing Hassan, Sacks argues that the gravest consequence of this neurological catastrophe is a radically changed relationship to time and space. He compares the consumers of contemporary media to his amnesic patients, who 'having lost any sense of a past or a future

[33] Hassan, p. 9.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Hassan, pp. xiv-xv.

[37] Ibid., p. xiv.

[38] Sacks, p. 28.

and being caught in a flutter of ephemeral, ever-changing sensations, have in some way been reduced from human beings to Humean ones.'[39] Sacks goes as far as calling them 'Humean casualties':

> When I was eighteen, I read Hume for the first time, and I was horrified by the vision he expressed in his eighteenth-century work "A Treatise of Human Nature," in which he wrote that mankind is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."[40]

What is interesting about Sacks's invocation of idiosyncratically 'Humean casualties' is the fact that David Hume's ideas about sympathy, as described in *A Treatise of Human Nature,* are a precursor to modern definitions of empathy, especially those that see empathy as an automatic mechanism rather than a conscious exercise in imaginative perspective-taking. Hume assumed that human minds are structured in a way that allows for direct and embodied communication of what he called 'affections', or what we might call 'affect' or 'feeling'. To explain the workings of sympathy, he uses the analogy of 'violin strings', noting that they 'have the same tension, the vibration of one communicates itself to the others; and in the same way all the affections easily pass from one person to another, and create corresponding movements of mind and body.'[41] This definition maps onto modern understandings of empathy, which, in its most basic form, is 'a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading.'[42] The conceptualisation of empathy

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888), pp. 575-6.

[42] Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5

as 'coming to feel as another person feels'[43] with a Humean 'inconceivable rapidity' closely relates to the idea of emotional contagion, that is, the synchronization of affective states via an automatic process of 'matching and catching'.[44] Ostensibly confirming Hume's dictum that 'the minds of men are mirrors to one another,'[45] contemporary neuroscientific research has found some neural correlates, called 'mirror neurons', for these spontaneous processes.[46]

In most contemporary models, emotional contagion is a type of lower-level empathy that precedes other, more complex forms of empathy – to argue with Sacks, forms more befitting of 'human beings' rather than 'Humean' ones. At this point, empathy becomes about context, about being able to situate another individual in time and space. For example, the 'Russian doll' model of empathy suggests that our empathetic abilities become more complex with age, undergoing stages of development 'from direct affective emotional contagion, to cognitive emotion recognition, to affective empathic concern for the misfortunes of others, and – finally – voluntary cognitive perspective-taking'.[47] In cognitive science empathetic perspective-taking is often, though not exclusively, approached from the angle of the Theory of Mind model, that is, from theories that explain how humans come to know other minds. While theory theorists suggest that we have lay theories about the mind that can be used to infer the internal states of others, simulation theorists 'suggest that we imagine ourselves in others' situations and read their internal states from our own.'[48] Empathetic simulation draws

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[43] C. Daniel Batson, 'These things called empathy: Eight related but distinct phenomena', *The social neuroscience of empathy*, ed. by Jean Decety and William Ickes (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), pp. 3–16 (p. 5).

[44] Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers (eds.) *Empathy and its Limits*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 5

[45] Hume, p. 365.

[46] See Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect With Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); Tania Singer and Claus Lamm. 'The Social Neuroscience of Empathy'. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences,* 1156 (2009), 81-96.

[47] Caspar J. van Lissa et al. 'Difficult Empathy: The Effect of Narrative Perspective on Reader's Engagement with a First-Person Narrator', *Diegesis,* 5.1 (2016): 43-63 (p. 45).

[48] Batson, p. 3

on an individual's imaginative capacities, which for the philosopher Amy Coplan are indispensable to the process that can be called empathy proper. She posits that 'empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation.'[49] In the process of such 'other-oriented perspective-taking,' Coplan explains, it is not enough to imagine *ourselves* in the other's situation, but we need to represent the other's experiences from *their* point of view.[50] To empathise with somebody is more than a spontaneous 'catching' of feelings upon observation, it is, to use one of Fritz Breithaupt's definitions, an active co-experiencing of a situation.[51]

It is important to point out that most definitions of empathy, then, incorporate processes that rely on both involuntary and voluntary attention.[52] On the one hand, empathy entails an involuntary, automatic awareness of and affective susceptibility to the embodied experiences of others. This aspect of empathy finds resonances in contemporary affect theory, such as in Ahmed's contention that emotions involve readings of 'openness', 'of spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other'.[53] On the other hand, empathy is a deliberate process that draws on higher-level cognitive processes that may be influenced through (literary) education. As Ann Jurecic has already pointed out, it is tempting to simplify this conceptual 'split' and boil it down to a political stand-off between left-wing

[49] Amy Coplan, 'Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects', in *Empathy: Philosophical and psychological perspectives*, ed. by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 4-18 (p. 5).

[50] Ibid, p. 6.

[51] Fritz Breithaupt, *Die Dunklen Seiten der Empathie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), p. 16.

[52] See Joseph B. Hopfinger, and Emily L Parks. 'Involuntary Attention.' *The Neuroscience of Attention: Attentional Control and Selection*, ed. by George R. Mangun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 30-53.

[53] Ahmed, p. 69.

affect theorists and liberal humanist educators.[54] While I agree with Jurecic's perceptive assessment that such a split is ultimately simplistic and does not account for the complex ways in which authors and readers engage with empathy, it is nevertheless a crucial polarity to consider when it comes to contemporary commentators' adamant defence of empathy as an antidote to distraction. Humanist writers like Sacks, who are aligned with the idea that the contemporary 'flutter of ephemeral, ever-changing sensations'[55] associated with information and communication technologies needs to be tempered with the focused absorption of reading, are worried about the impact of the Age of Distraction on *voluntary* attention because they associate it with interference at the level of ethical thought.

Empathy as expansive attention

This fact becomes even more relevant if we consider that definitions of empathy often directly touch on questions of ethics. For example, the autism researcher Simon Baron-Cohen defines empathy as 'the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts, and to respond to them with an appropriate emotion'.[56] Analysing this definition, Jurecic explains, '[t]he word "drive" suggests that empathy is automatic, spontaneous, beyond one's control,' but the word 'appropriate' also 'suggests that culture is present, too, shaping what it means to respond in a suitable or proper way.'[57] As the author Leslie Jamison puts it in her volume of essays on the topic of empathy, *The Empathy Exams* (2015), 'empathy isn't just something that happens to us – a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain – it's also a choice

[54] Ann Jurecic, 'Empathy and the Critic'. *College English*, 74.1 (2011), 10-27 (p. 12).

[55] Sacks, p. 28.

[56] Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: The Truth about the Male and Female Brain*. (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 2.

[57] Jurecic, p. 12.

we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves.'[58] 'Extending oneself' is an apt description of empathy as voluntary other-oriented perspective taking, because it connotes both the conscious mental effort required of the individual as well as the fact that it is a process of expansion that often also carries an ethical charge; it is an act of opening up towards the other, of extending a hand towards her. It explains how attention relates to the empathetic process, highlighting that attention's Latin root, *attendere*, also means 'to stretch towards.'[59] Elsewhere, Baron-Cohen defines empathy as stretched attention in the sense that it requires a doubling of minds:

> *Empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention, and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention.*
>
> 'Single-minded' attention means we are thinking only about our own mind, our current thoughts or perceptions. 'Double-minded' attention means we are keeping in mind *someone else*'s mind, *at the very same time*.[60]

Baron-Cohen clarifies that '[d]ouble-mindedness can be used not just to think about how others feel or what they might be thinking, but also to think about how you may be perceived by others'.[61] He likens the double-minded nature of empathy to a 'reverse periscope', that is an apparatus an individual can use to 'look inwards at themselves'.[62]

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[58] Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams* (London: Granta, 2015), p. 23.

[59] See also Bennett, p. 8; Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

[60] Simon Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*: *A new theory of human cruelty*. (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 10, original emphasis. While I remain sceptical of Baron-Cohen's claims with regards to (the absence of) empathy in people on the autism spectrum as well as his explicit linking of empathy and morality, 'double-minded focus of attention' is a succinct summary of a central quality of empathy. I engage with his problematic conflation of empathy and 'goodness' in the context of my analysis of *Room* in chapter one.

[61] Ibid, p. 15.

[62] Ibid.

Ideally, then, empathy leads to mind-expanding self-reflection. Here, Baron-Cohen echoes certain aspects of Adam Smith's conceptualisation of sympathy. Smith writes,

> As nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs.[63]

In sympathy, the 'person principally concerned' is aware of being watched by an 'attentive spectator' and subsequently mirrors the act of spectatorship. [64] As David Marshall sums up, Smith's sympathy compels us 'to become spectators to our spectators and thereby spectators to ourselves'.[65] In the conceptual development from Smithian sympathy to modern models of empathy as imaginative perspective-taking, we thus find an emphasis not just on an expansion of focus, but also on particular *qualities* of attention. Empathy is associated with a certain kind of meta-attention and an attendant self-consciousness: we become more aware of ourselves through a process of having to pay attention to attention in the empathetic encounter.

This encounter is principally synonymous with a face-to-face encounter. Yet when it comes to the kinds of empathy mobilised in cognitively inflected approaches towards literature, the processes of 'thinking' about the other with whom we are faced are often uncoupled from the embodied encounter and applied to the written word. Crucially, this can be explained by the assumption that the acts of reading and writing induce the very states of

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[63] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon, [1759] 1976), p. 27.

[64] Ibid, p.13.

[65] David Marshall, 'Adam Smith and the Theatricality of Moral Sentiments.' *Critical Inquiry*, 10.4 (1984), 592-613 (p. 597).

expanded and self-conscious attention indispensable for empathy. Coming from the perspective of media studies, Hassan's study of the impact of the current Age of Distraction on the human mind depends on the idea that writing is an ancient technology that functions as an 'extension of language and memory', and that without the development of writing, humans would not have 'developed self-consciousness as we know it today'.[66] Similarly, the psychologist Raymond Mar describes the act of reading as a 'unique form of consciousness' that, in its combination of 'outwardly directed and inwardly directed attention' closely matches Baron-Cohen's idea of double-mindedness:

> While we're reading, we're directing attention outwards towards the world on the page and, at the same time, enormous amounts of attention is going inwards as we imagine and mentally simulate (…) our attention is in a very unique place, fluctuating both out towards the page, towards the words, and then inwards, towards what those words represent.[67]

The 'unique place' of a reader's attention is often conceptualised as an inherently ethical space. More specifically, by making us step outside of ourselves and by widening our focus of attention to include the concerns of ourselves as well as others, narrative empathy seems to have the potential to lead to caring actions. It bears pointing out, though, that empathy is in and of itself a morally neutral act, leading to pro-social as well as outright sadistic actions.[68] As researchers of the 'empathy-altruism hypothesis' such as the social psychologist C. Daniel Batson point out, we often invoke empathy 'to provide an answer to

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[66] Hassan, p. 23; p. 31.

[67] Hassan, p. 83.

[68] See Fritz Breithaupt's *Die Dunklen Seiten der Empathie*, for a comprehensive analysis of the 'dark' phenomena that are facilitated by empathy, especially pp. 149-186. See also Fritz Breithaupt, 'Empathic Sadism: How Readers Get Implicated', in *Oxford Handbook for Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. by Lisa Zusnhine (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 440-462.

two quite different questions: How can one know what another person is thinking and feeling? What leads one person to respond with sensitivity and care to the suffering of another?'[69] The literary scholar Suzanne Keen, whose research has continually served as an antidote not just to the empathy-altruism hypothesis but more pointedly to the still widely accepted *narrative* empathy-altruism hypothesis, welcomes a strict separation of those two questions. She writes that empathy 'may precede and lead to sympathy, but as has been amply demonstrated, mature sympathy, pity, and compassion do not necessarily result from empathy, nor does empathy inevitably lead to helping.'[70] As Keen explains, in our modern understanding, only 'sympathy' entails a (caring) attitude towards the experience of others, particularly their suffering, whereas empathy can be thought of as a neutral co-experiencing of another person's thoughts and feelings.[71]

The desire to harness empathy to simultaneously address the societal ills of diminished attention and a perceived lack of altruistic actions can be partly explained by the fact that empathy is, after all, a notoriously slippery and pliable concept that is often difficult to disentangle from concepts such as care and sympathy, as well as pity, compassion, fellow-feeling, and solidarity, among others.[72] Especially in the context of the medical humanities, slippages of empathy, compassion and care should be highlighted.[73] Here, empathy has been discussed as not just conducive to caring, but as essential to or even constitutive of the act of care itself. Thus, discussing empathy's role in palliative care, Natalia Ruiz-Junco and Daniel

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[69] Batson, p. 3.

[70] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 22.

[71] Ibid. p. 5.

[72] As Anne Whitehead writes, empathy 'currently represents a ubiquitous topic, and its dispersal across a wide variety of disciplines and discourses strains any singular notion or definition, so that we might perhaps more accurately speak of empath*ies'.* Anne Whitehead, *Medicine and Empathy in Contemporary British Fiction: An Intervention in Medical Humanities*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 8.

[73] See Anne Whitehead's *Medicine and Empathy in Contemporary British Fiction* for a comprehensive critique of first-wave medical humanities' conceptualisation of empathy.

R. Morrison argue that 'the ability to take the perspective of the empathy recipient (lover, Earth, child) is essential in relationships of caringness. In this context, empathizers imagine ways in which their "care" makes sense as such from the perspective of the other.'[74] The examples that Ruiz-Junco and Morrison use for their 'empathy recipients' – the lover, the child, as well as the Earth itself – suggest that empathy's focus can indeed be stretched even further than the human dyad of self and other and pertain to a concern for *planetary* wellbeing.

Indeed, empathy as imaginative perspective-taking makes an appearance as a key concept in human rights discourses as well as in discourses of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. As Rosi Braidotti, Bolette Blaagaard and Patrick Hanafin have identified with regards to cosmopolitanism, these discourses rely on a distinctively literary perspective that is not 'accessible through perception, only through imagination, because we cannot see the whole of humanity'.[75] By turning to literary imagination, so the argument goes, we can transcend our individual perception to stretch empathy's focus to its outer limits. For example, the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum visualises 'literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy-makers in measuring the quality of life of people both near and far.'[76] Such conceptualisations of the uses of narrative empathy rely on the idea that fiction can directly influence how many people you voluntarily attend to, and as a result, influence *how much you care about their wellbeing*. However, as Bennett maintains, the 'problem with understanding reading as a way of correcting degraded concentration is that it is difficult to

[74] Ruiz-Junco, Natalia, and Morrison, Daniel R. 'Empathy as Care: The Model of Palliative Medicine.' *Society* 56 (2019): 158-65, (p. 160).

[75] Rosi Braidotti, Bolette Blaagaard, and Patrick Hanafin. 'Introduction.', in *After Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin, and Bolette Blaagaard. (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–7 (p. 5).

[76] Ibid.

justify the idea that literature is a machine for holding and stretching our attention'.[77] Similarly, Keen reminds us that a 'society that insists on receiving immediate ethical and political yields from the recreational reading of its citizens puts too great a burden on both empathy and the novel'.[78] In the following section, I will analyse why a form that has historically been seen as an (immoral) distraction in and of itself[79] might acquire the 'burden' of having to stretch attention while at the same time having to narrow it down to approximate what Paul Bloom calls empathy's 'attentional spotlight'.[80]

Empathy as narrow focus

The definitions of empathy that I have discussed so far have envisioned empathy as a process of cognitive and affective expansion. Empathy, I have argued, tends to be seen as a process that widens our focus of attention to include the feelings, thoughts, and actions of other people. It is seen as having an inverse relation to distraction because it requires large amounts of unoccupied, 'unconsumed' attention. However, empathy is equally, if not more so, dependent on processes of contraction, acting as a filter of attention. As Hari puts it, empathy is a 'most precious form of focus.'[81] Underlying such an understanding is not only the idea that empathy is the most precious form of focus, but that focus, in the sense of *concentration,* is in and of itself precious. This idea is succinctly expressed by William James in his influential *Principles of Psychology* (1890). His famous phrase, 'Everyone knows what attention is' is qualified as follows:

[77] Bennett, p. 13.

[78] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel,* p. 168.

[79] Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7.

[80] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. (London: Bodley Head, 2016), p. 9.

[81] Hari, p. 82.

> It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatter-brained state which in French is called *distraction*, and *Zerstreutheit* in German. [82]

For James, attention is essentially a way to manage consciousness, requiring us to completely withdraw 'from some things in order to deal effectively with others'. As Paul North notes, '[a]ttention's conjunction is "or," not "and."'[83] To engage with the world in an *effective* way, then, our focus of attention needs to be narrow. As Carolin Duttlinger points out, in the Middle Ages the Latin word for attention, *attentio*, was often used interchangeably with *intentio*; this etymology further 'casts attention as a deliberate act of focusing the mind'.[84] In his monograph called *Against Empathy* (2016), Bloom argues that empathy's most salient feature is in fact its ability to induce narrowly focused attention, describing it as an 'attentional spotlight'.[85]

Certain tensions in the conceptualisation of narrative empathy become obvious at this point. Developing empathy through the process of reading is seen as a means of widening the reader's circle of attention – and by extension, her circle of concern. This expansive state of mind is, at first glance, at odds with claims that empathy entails the narrow focus of a spotlight. Yet as Nicholas Dames points out, 'our usual sense of the cultural role of the novel'

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[82] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (Boston: Harvard University Press, [1890] 1981), vol 1. p. 381.

[83] Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

[84] Carolin Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature, Thought & Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022),, p. 2.

[85] Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. (London: Bodley Head, 2016), p. 9.

equates the role of reading with 'withdrawal, retreat … an antidote to the assault of stimuli presented by modern, media-rich existence.'[86] Reading, then, to return to James's definition of attention, is a conscious 'withdrawal from some things'. Narrative empathy subsequently performs the somewhat paradoxical work of stretching our ethical imagination through the process of encouraging attention that is exclusively focused on the literary text. In the context of the 'empathy as antidote to distraction' narrative, the spotlight focus helps the individual recognise what is salient in any given situation, thereby combatting a focus of attention that is indiscriminately divided. As Martha Nussbaum argues, in its capacity to completely occupy our attention, the novel is 'a morally controversial form.' She explains that it expresses 'in its very shape and style, in its modes of interaction with its readers, a normative sense of life. It tells its readers to notice this and not this, to be active in these and not these ways; it leads them into certain postures of the mind and heart and not others.'[87]

In Nussbaum's model, reading is essentially understood as an attentional template that helps readers figure out which individuals are worthy of their attention. As such, narrative empathy turns into an idiosyncratically human filter of attention. It is a filter that is particularly opposed to *digital* distraction because it combats the experiential 'flatness' and shallow 'nowness' of an ever-changing influx of information.[88] By helping the reader adopt certain 'postures' towards the other, reading becomes a key activity in upholding the value of understanding the other in a temporal context, of retrieving her past and projecting her future.[89] By championing the narrativisation of the other, reading is furthermore positioned in opposition to an algorithmic logic, which sorts people into merely 'data-similar neighbours'

[86] Dames, p. 7.

[87] Martha Nussbaum, 'The Literary Imagination in Public Life.' *New Literary History*, 22.4 (1991), 877–910. (p. 879).

[88] Hassan, p. xiv.

[89] Ibid.

and sees them as marketable consumers within an attention economy.[90] Empathy, as conceptualised by Nussbaum, is fundamentally about understanding oneself and others as *citizens* whose complex life stories inform their actions in democratic societies.

To understand these stories, the reader needs to take the time to immerse herself, completely and single-mindedly, in their literary representations. As C. Namwali Serpell points out, this understanding of reading is representative of a strand of literary criticism which 'posits immersion in another's perspective as the pinnacle of ethical relation and the reason for art's ethical relevance'.[91] From the early 1990s onwards, Nussbaum has been championing the immersion model for a contemporary audience, understanding it as integral to developing what she calls 'moral attention'. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), Nussbaum elaborates on the workings of moral attention with reference to Henry James and his novel *The Golden Bowl* (1904) as well as the posthumously published *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (*AN*, 1934):

> [O]ur own attention to [James's] characters will itself, if we read well, be a high case of moral attention. "Participators by a fond attention" (*AN* 62) in the lives and dilemmas of his participants, we engage with them in a loving scrutiny of appearances. We actively care for their particularity, and we strain to be people on whom none of their subtleties are lost, in intellect and feeling. So if James is right about what moral attention is, then he can fairly claim that a novel such as this one not only shows it better than an abstract treatise, it also elicits it.[92]

[90] Fourcade, M., and K. Healy 'Seeing like a Market.' *Socio-Economic Review*, 15.1 (2017): 9–29 (17).

[91] Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, p. 71.

[92] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162.

Moral attention here equates to a 'fond attention', a 'loving scrutiny of appearances', that is an attention to detail, 'particularity' and 'subtlety'. Engaging with fictional characters, especially those from the canon of nineteenth-century social realist novels, is a process that requires 'active care' and a conscious 'strain' to be a reader on whom nothing is lost. Nussbaum equates moral attention with conscious effort, and the realist text is envisioned as not only representing this kind of attention but as actively *modelling* it. Her contention that a novel 'shows it better than an abstract treatise' finds resonances in Gary Saul Morson's account of narrative empathy. Fiction, he argues, is a medium that is more finely tuned than philosophy to grapple with problems of ethics because it can perform more sophisticated 'thought experiments':

> Ethics is a matter of prosaics. [...] Could one not construct a thought experiment showing people in their psychic complexity, their history, the climate of their minds, their values both recognized and unrecognized, their habitual way of perceiving others and the immediate considerations occupying their attention when a decision is being made? [...] In fact, we have such thought experiments. They are called realist novels.[93]

Morson then, sees reading as an active, 'constructive' attention, which corresponds to the cognitive empathy of voluntary perspective-taking. Crucially, Morson, too, sees reading as an act of 'paying attention to attention', requiring the reader to become aware of a fictional character's habitual choices ('their attention when a decision is being made'). Nussbaum points out, however, that the reader's attention also has passive qualities:

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[93] Gary Saul Morson. *Prosaics and Other Provocations: Empathy, Open Time, and the Novel*. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), pp. 203-4.

> [The novel] calls forth our 'active sense of life,' which is our moral faculty. The characters' 'emotions, their stirred intelligence, their moral consciousness, become thus, by sufficiently charmed perusal, our own very adventure' (*AN* 70). By identifying with them and allowing ourselves to be surprised (an attitude of mind that storytelling fosters and develops), we become more responsive to our own life's adventure, more willing to see and to be touched by life.[94]

Reading entails the 'charmed perusal' and the act of 'allowing ourselves to be surprised' characteristic of absorption.[95] Whether it requires the reader to be a focused spectator deliberately directing attention towards the details of the fictional world, or to get swept away by their novel and unexpected qualities, in Nussbaum's model fiction manages to absorb our attention completely, and thereby cultivate our natural 'attitude of mind'. This attitude then leads to a greater capacity to be 'touched by life'. Through a focus on the fictional world, we foster our responsiveness to others, a responsiveness that is *expansively* empathetic because it is, to use Baron-Cohen's definition of empathy again, double-minded: identifying with a character's thoughts and feelings supposedly leads to a greater awareness of 'our own life's adventure'.

Dorothy Hale criticises the logic of Nussbaum's approach, claiming that it is a performance of a 'liberal imagination' that elides the difference 'between life and its fictional representation, between reading as private and individual experience and reading as cultural work', understanding 'both life and the reader as mystified essences, metaphysical objects.'[96]

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[94] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162.

[95] See also Rita duttlski on the aesthetic category of enchantment. Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 62.

[96] Dorothy Hale, 'Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century.' *PMLA*, 124.3 (2009), 896–905 (p. 899).

Indeed, Nussbaum's model has an idealised relation to 'the materiality of social reality,'[97] dependent as it is on the transcendence of the potential reader's socially embedded 'blindness and stupidity'.[98] Nussbaum argues that '[a] novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favourable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life. We find here love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic.'[99] In short, we find a reified attention stripped of negative affect or the heterogenous input of a (distracting) outside world. Keen, too, notes that narrative empathy might be established precisely because the normal rules of 'our life' are suspended, yet she is highly sceptical of equating the attention induced by novel reading as a 'moral position'. [100] As Keen notes, 'linking novel reading to a widely shared moral principle – caring – without demanding that fiction be about caring allows broad claims about the medium to exist without evaluating content. This is a neat trick.'[101]

Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) sheds some light on the workings of her 'neat trick'. Nussbaum understands emotions as intentional, seeing them as value judgments that have a distinctively narrative structure. By reading narratives, then, we acquaint ourselves with the very structure of our own and other people's emotions. Thus Nussbaum writes that the

> understanding of any single emotion is incomplete unless its narrative history is grasped and studied for the light it sheds on the present response. […] certain truths about the human emotions can be best conveyed, in verbal and textual form, only by a narrative work of art: only such a work will accurately and fully show the interrelated

[97] Ibid. p. 899.

[98] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162.

[99] Ibid. p. 162.

[100] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 88.

[101] Ibid., p. 20.

> temporal structure of emotional 'thoughts,' prominently including the heart's intermittences between recognition and denial of neediness.[102]

The 'neediness' that Nussbaum refers to is the neediness encapsulated in the recognition that our individual flourishing depends on objects and people whom we cannot control. Narrative empathy, then, is a process that reveals to us how (fictional) individuals relate to the things that vie for their attention; strong emotional responses connote greater importance.

While Nussbaum's model might, on one level, espouse the value of a reader's deliberate, focused attention, it simultaneously points towards distraction as a fundamental human experience. If we accept the individual's innate vulnerability towards certain stimuli, then we also need to accept her innate distractibility. An understanding of our own and other's emotions as 'upheavals of thought' must entail an acknowledgment of 'upheaval' as something that not only alerts us to importance, but as something that upsets, derails, and diverts. When read in this way, Nusbaum's understanding of the intentionality of emotions reveals that 'attention and distraction are not monolithic notions but umbrella terms encompassing a number of concepts and attendant mental states', states that interact with each other.[103] Rather than existing in rigid opposition, attention and distraction have a dynamic, oscillating relationship. In the following, I will further explore how models of empathy, in particular aesthetic empathy, throw this complex relationship into sharp relief.

By turning to notions of *Einfühlung*, we can assert several things about empathy. Firstly, empathy foregrounds that we are at the mercy of input from the outside world; to feel

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[102] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 236.

[103] Duttlinger, p. 4.

what another feels is often akin to an involuntary intrusion rather than an intentional choice. Secondly, as early critics of *Einfühlung* noted, empathy as a state of sustained immersion can often tip into oblivious and self-indulgent absorption and is therefore often indistinguishable from 'undesirable' forms of distraction. Thirdly, literary fiction and the processes of narrative empathy do not necessarily educate but they *divert*, in the sense that they facilitate 'entertainment without work'.[104] Finally, it bears pointing out that even 'successful' empathy in the sense of a double-minded focus of attention ultimately asks for the individual to *divide* her attention. By returning to the early twentieth century discourses on distraction, I furthermore point out that contemporary commentators are somewhat out of touch with both empathy's and distraction's intellectual and cultural history.

Einfühlung and distraction: At the mercy of stimuli

The problem with today's 'fast-flowing torrents of information', Hassan argues, is that they are causing us to 'regress to our infantile and weak state in terms of how we relate to information'.[105] That is because as a species, we are 'unable to naturally filter out that which is not strictly necessary for our survival'.[106] What a position such as Hassan highlights is that so often, definitions of attention, that 'filtering out' of what is 'strictly necessary', rely on the observation that attention is something that does not come 'naturally' to human beings. In his discussion of the intellectual history of the problem of distraction, Paul North notes that the elusive concept of attention has always relied on an 'internal reference to distraction', thereby highlighting that attention and distraction are part of a fundamental dialectic.[107] In fact, North argues, the Western preoccupation with a 'crisis of attention' can be traced all the

[104] Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 2.

[105] Hassan, p. xii.

[106] Hassan, p. xi.

[107] North, p. 2.

way back to Ancient Roman writers such as Augustine.[108] The idea that our attention is naturally unruly and easily diverted, and that the antidote to this predicament consists in a concerted cultural response spearheaded by artists and educators, is thus decidedly old. As North puts it, '[f]or a hundred years or more (…) the disintegration of attention has been lamented, and every new decade and discipline seems to offer a new explanation and remedy for the loss.'[109] Similarly, William Bogard maintains, '[t]here is no reason to think that print is any less distracting than electronic media, or that modern forms of spectacle distract the masses more than ancient ones. Every society reinvents its own regimes of distraction. Every culture develops its own methods of mobilizing (and immobilizing) the masses.'[110]

In her study of contemporary English language fiction, Alice Bennett attempts to characterise the idiosycncratic 'sites' of modern-day distraction: distraction is firmly tied to 'the experiences and subjectivities engendered by digital technology; the growth of the information economy and the associated "attention economy"; the new diagnosis of attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and the metaphorical associations attached to that diagnosis'.[111] Even so, this distinctively 'contemporary' list can be placed in the context of a more broadly conceived capitalist modernity. Jonathan Crary's research on the history of current patterns and habits of attention, most notably in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (1999) and *24/7: Capitalism and the End of Sleep* (2013), illustrates that the configurations of modern capitalism 'continually push attention and distraction to new limits

[108] North, p. 2.

[109] Ibid. p. 1.

[110] William Bogart, quoted in Peter Matussek, 'Aufmerksamkeitsstörungen. Selbstreflexion unter den Bedingungen digitaler Medien', in *Aufmerksamkeiten*, ed. by Aleida and Jan Assmann. (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), pp. 197-216 (p. 198).

[111] Bennett, p. 15.

and thresholds'.[112]As he argues, the late 19th century saw a full-scale transformation of perception in the form of the arrival of 'subjective vision', the notion that perceptual experience is not primarily about the nature of external stimuli but about the individual's sensory apparatus.[113] The scientific discovery that there was an embodied observer whose perception existed 'in the thickness of the body,' articulated a new kind of subject in a radically transformed capitalist world of spectacle and consumption.[114]As Crary puts it, this subject needs to confront 'an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception'.[115] For Crary, then, the history of modern attention is simultaneously a history of discipline, of continued attempts at manipulating the body to accommodate the technological, social, and economic realities of everyday life.

Crary's account is relevant for my analysis because it contextualises the origin of contemporary anxiety surrounding attention and empathy, namely the dissonant experience that 'the articulation of a subject in terms of attentive capacities simultaneously disclose[s] a subject incapable of conforming to such disciplinary imperatives.'[116] The origins of our contemporary attention economy, then, can be traced back to a late nineteenth-century conceptualisation of attention at the mercy of external stimuli, or to put it differently, to an acknowledgement of distraction as a fundamental perceptual experience of modernity. This experience, as Crary points out, is marked by the 'disintegration of an indisputable distinction between interior and exterior' and leads to a 'dramatic expansion of the possibilities of

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[112] Jonathan Crary, *24:7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013*)* and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001); *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 14.

[113] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 12.

[114] Ibid., p. 13.

[115] Ibid, p. 14.

[116] Ibid.

aesthetic experience'.[117] It is worth considering that at the same time as Victorian commentators worried about an 'industrialised consciousness', that is a consciousness that is irrevocably influenced by the rhythms of modern capitalism,[118] the term 'empathy' first made an appearance in the context of theories that sought to describe those very 'possibilities of aesthetic experiences'. By focusing on the history of the term, a more complicated picture of empathy emerges, one that is intimately bound up with distraction, that 'disintegration' of the distinction between what is 'inside' and what is 'outside'.

As a translation of the concept of *Einfühlung* (or 'aesthetic empathy'; literally 'feeling oneself into' or 'in-feeling'), which was first developed by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps in the 1870s, the term 'empathy' was coined by the psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener in 1909.[119] As Titchener explains with recourse to the description of a reading experience, "[w]e have a natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may, as it were, become the explorer; we feel for ourselves the gloom, the silence, the humidity, the oppression, the sense of lurking danger".[120] Unlike the other-oriented theories of empathy mentioned above, *Einfühlung* primarily pertained to *objects* and the viewer's embodied response to them; in the example above this response consists in actively hearing the fictional forest's 'silence', sensing its 'humidity' and feeling its 'gloom' or 'lurking danger'. Yet as Titchener's description of 'becoming' the explorer depicted in this literary scene suggests, *Einfühlung* also extends to our (mediated) encounters with others. As Batson sums up, *Einfühlung* then entails 'imaginatively projecting oneself

[117] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, pp. 12-13.

[118] Dames, p. 7.

[119] See Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, (eds.) *Rethinking empathy through literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 5.

[120] Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, 14.3 (2006), 207-236 (p. 209).

into another's situation'.[121] A projection into and fusion with the object of aesthetic empathy may, as Wispé argues, always run the risk of 'blur[ring] the distinction between self and object'.[122]As Lipps writes about the process of *Einfühlung* in the sense of developing knowledge of other selves, 'I am also spatially, insofar as there can be question of a spatial extension of the ego, in the place of that figure. I am transported into it. As far as my consciousness is concerned, I am totally identical with it.'[123] This definition of empathy-as-*Einfühlung* highlights a crucial aspect of the attentive state idiosyncratic to aesthetic empathy. It envisions a movement of focus onto the figure of the other with the end goal of *identity* rather than double-mindedness.

In 1912, the literary critic Vernon Lee described *Einfühlung* as 'that inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world, and given to the intermittent and heterogeneous sensations received from without the framework of our constant and highly unified inner experience'.[124] What all these theories of *Einfühlung* have in common, then, is that they envision empathy as a process of integrating the heterogeneous input from the outside world into a unified inner experience. Yet as Juliet Koss elaborates,

> Like abstraction, distraction, and estrangement in its wake, [*Einfühlung*] described a potentially uncomfortable destabilization of identity along the viewer's perceptual borders – a sensation at once physical, psychological, and emotional.[125]

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[121] Batson, p. 6.

[122] Lauren Wispé, 'The Distinction Between Sympathy and Empathy: To Call Forth a Concept, A Word is Needed.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50.2 (1986), 314–21 (p. 316).

[123] Gustav Jahoda, 'Theodor Lipps and the Shift from "Sympathy" to "Empathy."' *Journal of the history of the behavioral sciences* 41.2 (2005), 151–163 (p.155.)

[124] Suzanne Keen, 'Twenty-First-Century Fictional Experiments with Emotion and Cognition.' *New Approaches to The Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel*. Eds. Sybille Baumbach and Birgit Neumann (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 59-77, p. 69.

[125] Juliet Koss, 'On the Limits of Empathy'. *Art Bulletin*, LXXXVII.1 (2006), 139-157 (p. 152).

Even in its tendency to assimilate, empathy confronts us with the experience of 'uncomfortable destabilization of identity' along perceptual borders – and as such, it calls for an understanding of the subject as fundamentally distracted. The contemporary literary scholar and neuroscientist Fritz Breithaupt's work on the cultural politics of empathy is highly attuned to empathy's relationship to distraction, as expressed in the centrality of what he calls 'empathetisches Rauschen', or 'empathetic noise'.[126] In *Kulturen der Empathie* (2009), he writes, 'Narration, so die These dieses Buches, ist die Ausnahmeform, in der Empathie zugelassen wird' ['The thesis of my book is that narrative is the exceptional form in which empathy is allowed' (my translation)].[127] As we are surrounded by objects and subjects that all vie for our emotional attention, we need higher- level cognitive processes of filtering and blocking out empathetic noise:

> Zugespitzt kann man sagen: Empathie, das Verstehen der anderen, kommt nur zustande, weil unsere emotionale Aufmerksamkeit anderen gegenüber gestaut, blockiert und gefiltert wird. Ohne eine derartige (Teil)Blockade würden wir in einer Welt fortwährenden Perspektivenverlusts leben, in der wir unwillkürlich die Perspektiven aller anderen Menschen und darüber hinaus auch der Tiere, der Fabelwesen und Dinge einnehmen müssten. Erst das Filtern des empathischen Rauschens, das Kanalisieren und Blockieren erlaubt uns die Illusion einer Innensicht der anderen.[128]
>
> [To put it bluntly: Empathy, the understanding of others, only comes about because our emotional attention towards others is jammed, blocked and filtered.

[126] Fritz Breithaupt, *Kulturen der Empathie*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), p. 12.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid., p. 12.

> Without such a (partial) blockade we would live in a world of perpetual loss of perspective, a world in which we would involuntarily have to inhabit the perspectives of all other human beings, as well as animals, mythical creatures and things. Only the filtering of empathetic noise, its channelling and blocking, allows us the illusion of some else's inner view. (My translation)]

Narrativising the other is what makes the illusion of fully realised interiority possible. By situating her in time and place and by ascribing intentions to her,[129]we make the other stand out among the people, animals and objects that surrounds us; the other needs to be embedded in a story in order to become affectively salient. As becomes apparent in Breithaupt's definition, empathy is not about a close affective match: empathy is characterised here as an 'illusion', yet one that is necessary in order to prevent a continual loss of perspective, that is, the loss of a stable sense of self through spontaneous, pre-reflexive identification with the perspective of numerous others. In this sense, his position partly resembles Nussbaum's argument that 'stories' make another person emotionally accessible. Yet Breithaupt points out that the mechanisms of blocking out some people but not others are controlled by an individual's consciousness *as well as* 'Kultur-Techniken', cultural techniques that are implicated in the creation of the self as dissimilar to others in the first place.[130] Unlike Nussbaum, Breithaupt does not believe that narrative empathy, in the sense that it immerses us in other people's habits of attention, can change how much (moral) attention we afford them in real life. Engaging with any kind narrativisation, he argues, does not change how we position ourselves towards others, it is only possible *because of* certain positions we already occupy.

[129] Ibid., p. 10

[130] Ibid., p. 9

Breithaupt acknowledges that empathy is fundamentally about the choice to channel our distracted attention in certain ways – it is a kind of choice that precedes the empathetic encounter with the (fictional) other, and as such, it differs from Nussbaum's contention that a novel may influence moral choices. His model of empathy as a blocking of affective attention is not based on a dyad – a relationship between 'I' and 'you' – but a triad. Breithaupt explains that his three-person model of empathy is a process that is not only defined by perspective-taking, but by the 'side-taking' that precedes it, that is, the conscious decision to adopt one person's perspective over another. He argues that empathy *results from* rather than precedes taking sides with somebody who we observe in conflict with somebody else. As he puts it, *'I share feelings with the other* because *I have decided for him*'.[131] Simply put, empathy for one person not only acknowledges our naturally divided attention, but it entails an active *in*attention towards another person.

Breithaupt's model of empathy finds resonances in Lauren Berlant's account of the politics of compassion. While Breithaupt points out that empathy and indifference are inseparable, Berlant argues the same for the seeming opposites of 'compassion' and 'coldness': 'What if it turns out that compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but are two sides of a bargain that the subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality?' she asks. [132] The 'bargain' entails that 'the experience of pain is pre-ideological, the universal sign of membership in humanity, and so we are obligated to be responsible to it; but since some pain is more compelling than some other pain, we must make judgments about which cases deserve attention.'[133]

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[131] Fritz Breithaupt. 'A Three Person Model of Empathy'. *Emotion Review* 4.1 (January 2012), 84-91 (p. 87).

[132] Lauren Berlant, 'Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)', in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. by Lauren Berlant (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-14 (p. 11).

[133] Ibid.

Breithaupt's conceptualisation of empathy and its relation to narrative is pertinent to my argument because it opens up avenues for political critique. The texts I analyse in this thesis often return to the scene of the triad and foreground the ways in which empathy depends on *disattending* rather than attending to the other. By highlighting the social nature of attention, accounts of empathy such as Breithaupt's destabilise any notions of novel reading as an activity that can discipline the individual reader's cognitive responses to the world. As an examination of early twentieth century theories of *Einfühlung* as well as Breithaupt's contemporary model of empathy reveals, empathy is simultaneously an act of attentional expansion, a proof that you care about more than yourself and your immediate concerns *and* an act of attentional contraction and ruthless exclusion, aimed at the mastery of a stimuli-rich, distracting environment. Rather than 'fixing' the problem of distraction, empathy is constitutively and complexly responsive to it.

Here, my understanding of empathy is furthermore influenced by Anna Veprinska's idea of 'empathetic dissonance'. Veprinska argues for a conceptualisation of empathy that is attuned to what she has identified as the central tension at the heart of empathy, namely the 'oscillation between nearness and distance', between the benefits of 'validation, pleasure, identify formation, and connection' and the dangers of 'prejudice, irrationality, fallibility, irreconcilability, and appropriation'.[134] Crucial to her idea of empathetic dissonance is her observation that poetry, especially written as a response to moments of crisis, often amounts to 'the combined invitation and rejection of empathy'.[135] Veprinska is somewhat critical of fiction's ability to adequately represent empathy's dissonance. As she writes, '[i]f stories "move towards the end" while poems actively slow down to listen, then poetry is about

[134] Anna Veprinska, *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis*. (EPub ed., Springer Publishing, 2020), Introduction, par. 2.10; 2.41.

[135] Ibid, par. 2.10

process over product'.[136] Yet as I will argue, long-form fiction is uniquely able to reflect on the 'process' of empathy by representing as well as inducing moments of blocked or redirected attention.

As such, it is my aim to continue the work of theorists like Berlant, who argues that critiques of the 'humanising', traditionally seen as morally ennobling emotions such as 'compassion, sentimentality, empathy, love' should not be concerned with their wholesale destruction, but with understanding the dynamics of their 'optimism and exclusions'.[137] In this respect, I also take up Anne Whitehead's observation that feminist affect theorists such as Berlant have 'taken a leading role in highlighting that social emotions such as empathy and compassion can act as distractions or diversions from social and political change'. As Whitehead adds, 'the drama of affective transformation in the empathising subject can too readily become a goal or an end point.'[138] Following the observation that empathy itself might act as a distraction from societal problems, my thesis engages with texts that see empathy as dependent on or productive of distraction; texts that therefore complicate rather than fix problems of (moral) attention.

Whitehead's observation that empathy entails a kind of 'affective transformation' that might itself become an end point highlights an aspect of empathy that we usually associate with distraction: empathising with somebody, whether in the context of reading, or in a face-to-face encounter, can be an utterly *absorbing* process. To understand (narrative) empathy as absorbing differs from an understanding of it as merely immersive. Empathy becomes absorbing when it is akin to what North describes as 'fundamental distraction', that is, when

[136] Ibid, par. 2.55

[137] Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, p. 5.

[138] Whitehead, p. 11.

it leads to 'an intermittent interruption of cognition.'[139] Empathy, then, in the sense of the subject's complete focus on her affective experience, can be linked to a potentially 'mind-less' consumption of works of art. Writing in the early 1920s, Walter Benjamin linked the forms of concentration present in aesthetic contemplation to a state of oblivion, to a complete 'Abwesenheit des Geistes', or an absence of all mental awareness[140]; in short, he diagnosed the kind of distraction that North calls 'fundamental'. Again, by turning back to the immediate intellectual context of theories of aesthetic empathy, we can establish a firm link to distraction. Rather than constituting an intentional appraisal of another person's mind, forms of contemplation such as *Einfühlung*, as commentators already noted one hundred years ago, may result in an occupation of attention, leaving the subject consumed by the (representation of) the other – and thus incapable of critical reflection.

In its capacity to render us oblivious and 'mindless', empathy can further be linked to yet another facet of distraction that contemporary commentators link to 'new' phenomena such as social media. North points out that we often understand distraction as consisting of 'vices or quasi-vices that produce pleasure without work: amusement, diversion, entertainment.' [141] In its capacity to induce an intense emotional absorption in fictional narratives, *Einfühlung* was figured as central to a 'feminine, passive' consumption of mass entertainment.[142] Writing in the late 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer maintained that films 'drug the populace […] just as hypnotists use glittering objects to put their subjects to sleep'.[143] Turning to the aesthetic experiences of 'kleine Ladenmädchen', or 'little shopgirls' at the

[139] North, p. 6.

[140] Qtd in Duttlinger, 'Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin', *German Studies Review*, 30.1 (2007), pp. 33-54 (p. 45).

[141] North, p. 2.

[142] Qtd in Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature*, p. 146.

[143] Ibid.

cinema, Kracauer saw their private 'diversion' at the cinema as expressive of the same passive kind of attention that was desirable in a workplace that was increasingly automated.[144] Notwithstanding the sexist overtones of his analysis, Kracauer's writing on the role of emotional absorption in facilitating passive, diverting kinds of attention still prove surprisingly topical. As Carolin Duttlinger argues, this is because the early twentieth century, like the present day, was marked by 'fundamental shifts in entertainment and information technology'.[145] Observing the influence of contemporary information and telematic systems, Crary points out that we are now faced with 'an unprecedented mixture of diffuse attentiveness and quasi-automatism, which can be maintained for remarkably long periods of time.'[146]

What becomes obvious by turning to these theorists and historians of distraction is that empathy can very easily be conceptualised as something that fuels what we now understand as the contemporary attention economy. Instead of offering an antidote to distraction, empathy, and its tendency to tip into oblivious absorption, is a process that proceeds as well as interacts with 'undesirable' forms of distraction. This goes to show that 'cognitive categories' like attention 'do not have stable ethical and political meanings over time […] They gain their political meaning from specific intersections of material, social, artistic, and even physical practices, in which hierarchies of status and taste play an often obscured role'.[147] As is evidenced by the stark difference between Kracauer's disdain for a cinema-goer's absorbed investment in the narratives of mass-produced films and Nussbaum's

[144] Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature,* p. 152.

[145] Ibid, p. 33.

[146] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 78.

[147] Dames, p. 20.

praise of a reader's enchanted consumption of nineteenth-century literary classics, what constitutes 'good' and 'moral' ways of paying attention is by no means fixed.

In this context, it is worth considering that distraction, when it comes to mean divided, alert attention, can easily turn from a symptom of political inertia into a means of political critique. Influenced by Benjamin and Kracauer, Bertolt Brecht's development of the concept of *Verfremdung* in the 1930s is testament to distraction's subversive potential.[148] It taps into what North has identified as distraction's capacity to diminish 'strength, quality or purity' and to disperse attention 'across a grid of more and more disparate points'[149] Espousing *Verfremdung* (estrangement or alienation) over empathy in his theoretical essays on theatre, Bertolt Brecht conceptualised the *Verfremdungseffekt* as a set of dramaturgical techniques that functioned as a Marxist repudiation of bourgeois art. Conventional plays, he argued, relied on the establishment of an easy empathy between actor and audience, leading to false notions of the universality of emotions: 'Die Emotionen haben immer eine ganz bestimmte klassenmäßige Grundlage; die Form, in der sie auftreten, ist jeweils historisch, spezifisch, begrenzt und gebunden. Die Emotionen sind keineswegs allgemein menschlich und zeitlos.' ['The emotions always have a quite definite class basis; the form they take at any time is historical, restricted and limited in specific ways. The emotions are in no sense universally human and timeless.'][150] As a playwright, he thus set out disrupt the spectator's habitual responses to the characters on stage through foregrounding the historical context of

[148] Both Benjamin and Kracauer turned, at various points, to the political uses of distraction. For an analysis of their nuanced engagement with the interplay of attention and distraction, see Duttlinger's *Attention and Distraction* as well as her article 'Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin'. *German Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2007), pp. 33-54. See also Vivian Liska, "Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Aufmerksamkeit." *Arcadia*, vol. 35 (2000), pp. 285-295.

[149] North, p. 2.

[150] Bertolt Brecht, 'Über eine nichtaristotelische Dramatik', in *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 15, Schriften zum Theater I, (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), p. 242. Translation: Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willet. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 145.

their emotional experience. As Koss points out, however, to achieve this goal, Brecht did not reject empathy altogether, instead 'seeing it as a useful foil for estrangement, the conceptual tool that was to reinstate spectators' self-control, critical awareness, and political engagement both within the auditorium and, potentially, beyond its walls.'[151] To be momentarily *distracted* from the illusion of empathetic transparency, for example by noticing the actors' deliberately anti-naturalistic performance, means to be able to move attention outwards, towards the various points of historical reference that exist beyond the confines of the stage.

As Aleida and Jan Assmann note, to move the individual beyond the frame of the medium she is consuming remains one of art's main tasks. They note that contemporary information technologies need to be tempered with a different kind of 'Aufmerksamkeitstechnologie', or 'attention technologies' that have the power to disrupt the steady stream of information, moving the individual out of a state of boredom, overwhelm or the overly narrow focus of an instrumental 'mining' for information.[152] As they point out, art is uniquely capable of capturing and redirecting our attention through its various techniques of alienation.[153]

As Suzanne Keen argues, narrative empathy itself can be used as a tool in the service of *Verfremdung*. Narrative empathy, she writes,

> appears simultaneously to invite a kind of empathy with persons and at the same time can also be regarded as an empathy with a thing—a nobody, a code for projection made out of words, a word-mass. Thus experimental writing that draws attention,

[151] Koss, p. 152.

[152] Aleida and Jan Assmann, 'Einleitung'. *Aufmerksamkeiten*. Eds. Aleida and Jan Assmann. (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), pp. 11-23.

[153] Ibid., p. 15.

> through various modes of foregrounding, to words themselves, is especially suited to the estranging evocation of *Einfühlung*.[154]

In its ability to foreground the fact that we are simultaneously empathising with persons *and* an aesthetic object, fiction makes us see narrative empathy as a *doubled* attention, and as such, make us aware of the double-mindedness of empathy itself. Ultimately, the expansive, double-minded focus of empathy is a *split* focus. This brings me to my final point about the relationship between empathy and distraction. Empathy is fundamentally about a division of attention. It asks us to be in two (or more) places at once: it asks us to remain aware of ourselves as well as others at the same time.

Towards meta-empathy

In this context, my interest in meta-empathy and how it might contribute to a multifaceted, politically attuned point of view on the value of both attention and distraction is furthermore influenced by theories of empathy from the discipline of trauma studies. For example, Megan Boler sets out a theory of 'testimonial reading' that is supposed to supplant a conceptualisation of empathy that she calls 'passive'. For Boler, 'accountable knowledge' starts with the recognition of one's implication in social forces that prevent empathy for the distant other:

> What is at stake is not only the ability to empathize with the very distant other, but to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront. ... I suggest that unlike passive empathy, testimonial reading requires a self-reflective participation: an awareness first of myself as a reader,

[154] Suzanne Keen, Suzanne Keen, 'Twenty-First-Century Fictional Experiments with Emotion and Cognition', p. 69.

> positioned in a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance of reading. Second, I recognize that reading potentially involves a task. This task is at minimum an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and world views.[155]

By treating texts that represent traumatic and distressing experiences as testimonies rather than as opportunities for emotional immersion and identification, the reader turns from a passive consumer of literature into an active, 'self-reflective participant'. Boler asks of the reader to understand the 'safe distance of reading' as a 'relative position of power'.[156] My position, like Boler's works with assumption that reading can *potentially* involve a task. Boler's position is one that assumes an orientation towards the text that precedes the act of reading, that disciplines attention before the reader has even laid eyes on the page. I am more interested, however, in the ways in which texts might encourage us to momentarily see ourselves as 'participants' and encourage self-reflective modes of attending to the text as we are reading, induced by the particularities of the narrative form itself.

My approach can here be linked to the historian Dominick LaCapra's idea of 'empathic unsettlement'. For the scholar of traumatic history, empathy is an unsettling process because it simultaneously entails access to the experiences of trauma victims and a recognition of the fundamental otherness of said experiences. As LaCapra writes, empathy must be a 'virtual, not vicarious, experience [...] in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own'.[157] When figured as an 'in-between' position, empathic unsettlement prevents the over-

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[155] Megan Boler, 'The risks of empathy: Interrogating multiculturalism's gaze', *Cultural Studies,* 11.2 (1997), 253-273 (p. 263).

[156] Suzanne Keen, 'Twenty-First-Century Fictional Experiments with Emotion and Cognition.', p. 69.

[157] Dominick LaCapra, LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), p. 40.

identification of 'passive empathy'. Crucially, this is also about recognising that to be 'double-minded' means to remain alert, not single-mindedly focused on the other.

To understand empathy as a process about which we have uncomfortable feelings finds resonances in the work of Sianne Ngai, whose writing about 'meta-feelings' influences my understanding of what is achieved if we analyse those moments in texts that foreground how empathy relies on processes of bias, exlusion, and indifference; an awareness of which might cause precisely the unease or indeed 'unsettlement' that LaCapra models as an ethical way of approaching empathy. Ngai notes that a feeling such as envy, which is an 'ugly' feeling whose 'morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status' produces 'an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form of "I feel ashamed about feeling envious" or "I feel anxious about my enviousness")' finds an analogue in the doubleness of irony, which she defines as 'the evaluative stance hinging on a relationship between the said and the unsaid'.[158]

I am particularly interested in the 'evaluative stance' of (ugly) meta-feelings because it can offer a pointed challenge to the model of fiction as an 'empathy gym'. The empathy gym model takes insights from cognitive science – that reading draws on mental processes indispensable to social cognition – to advocate for an enduring *fantasy* of the ideal reading experience. Not only does it posit a particularly 'fit' and disciplined reader, who repeatedly works out her attentive muscles using the weight of literature's ennobling qualities, but it also posits certain affective experiences: most importantly, the unself-conscious contentment or euphoria of *flow*. As the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who coined this term to describe 'the psychology of optimal experience', points out, flow is 'the state in which people

[158] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 10.

are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.'[159] He writes that when we enter a state of flow,

> (…) instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like.[160]

Yet a model of reading as deep immersion does not, I argue, accurately describe what it *actually* feels like to empathise while reading long-form fiction. As Csikszentmihalyi argues, art allows 'intense concentration to occur by providing a self-contained world with clear limits. Within those limits consciousness can run loose without being challenged or interrupted by information with which it cannot cope.'[161] Yet I would argue that narrative empathy means to feel what a fictional character feels within a self-contained world as well as to have feelings *about* one's narrative empathy; these meta-feelings may interrupt the contentment of flow to point to the world outside of the confines of the book.

Here, I am also taking into consideration what Berlant describes as the difference between an 'affective structure' and its experience.[162] With regards to the affective structure of optimism, Berlant writes,

> [O]ptimism manifests in attachments and the desire to sustain them: emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge. An optimistic attachment is invested in one's own or the world's continuity,

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[159] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 4.

[160] Ibid., p. 3

[161] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2014), p. 218

[162] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.

but might feel any number of ways, from the romantic to the fatalistic to the numb to the nothing.[163]

It is particularly fitting to turn to the concept of optimism to interrogate narrative empathy, given that empathy is mobilised as a near universal remedy to socio-political problems. To (re)learn how to empathise with the help of literature is, after all, as Sacks points out, strongly associated with an optimistic outlook on the 'achievements of civilization' and their ability to facilitate individual as well as collective flourishing.[164] As is evidenced by the title of her monograph, *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant is interested in analysing the ways in which an optimistic attachment to Western ideologies of the 'good life' might be actively harmful. As she explains, 'people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies', even in the face of overwhelming 'evidence of their instability, fragility and dear cost'.[165] To Berlant, the affective structure of optimism thus consists in a persistent attachment to certain objects, ideas, and practices in the often mistaken belief that '*this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way.'[166] The illogical or cruel belief has, as Berlant points out, a particular function. To be attached to the 'good life' amounts to an attachment to identify-affirming fantasy: 'Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world "add up to something"'.[167]

Narrative empathy, I argue, has come to play a central role in sustaining fantasies of individual self-mastery in a world in which evidence of distractibility, and by extension, vulnerability to outside influence abounds. We can think here of the tableau of the ideal

[163] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 13.

[164] Sacks, p. 28.

[165] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid.

reader, sitting by herself, solely focused on the (hardback, non-electronic) book. Her diligent reading sessions 'add up' to something – to argue with Nussbaum, her continued existence as an emancipated, caring citizen of the world. It is a tableau that stands in direct opposition to the image painted by Sacks – that of zombie-like, less than human consumers 'walking blithely in the path of moving traffic, totally out of touch with their surroundings'.[168] By highlighting that an empathetic reading experience produces a number of meta-feelings, we can, however, move towards a different scene: that of the reader who walks towards the 'moving traffic' of the text, only to be hit by feelings that subvert any notions of attentional discipline.

My chapters' explicit engagement with 'ugly' or otherwise 'subversive' feelings – shame in chapter one, disgust in chapter two, melancholy in chapter three, and pleasure in chapter four - thus aims to break the link between focused attention, narrative empathy, and 'useful' feelings. Meta-empathy, I argue, is an awareness of the unwieldy, experientially complex nature of empathy, an awareness which can break the reader's concentration at any point. In thinking of reading as a process in which attention fluctuates in interesting and unpredictable ways, I build on Alice Bennett's study of reading and distraction in contemporary Anglophone fiction. Bennett examines what she calls 'an aesthetic of inward attention – a variety of meta-attention that deflects part of readers' attention back from the book and onto the texture or fluctuation of reading attention itself.'[169] She does so by focusing on both how attention is represented and how narrative features such as 'pace, descriptive detail, characterization, plotting, deixis of place and time, and so on' orchestrate readers' attention. As she explains, 'the formal features of narrative which demand selection or choosing, attention to one thing rather than another, create the climate in which readers'

[168] Sacks, p. 28.

[169] Bennett, p. 8.

inward attention to their own attention can flourish.'[170] Bennett's study highlights that contemporary Anglophone novelists respond to current debates about the erosion of attention in nuanced ways, particularly by encouraging the reader to reflect on the nature of attention itself. Expanding on this line of research, this thesis is devoted to a full-length investigation of how contemporary texts induce various kinds of meta-attention to specifically highlight the complex, unruly nature of empathy.

In order to analyse this 'unruliness', I not only focus on the formal features of my chosen texts, but I occasionally foreground my own experience as a reader. My corpus therefore includes texts that diverted my attention in unexpected ways, making me feel surprised, frustrated, bored, and at times even impatient to stop reading. Unlike critics such as David Letzler, who understands the boredom induced by the genres such as the 'mega-novels' as something that can ultimately be turned into a 'cognitive tool for contemporary readers', I do not primarily seek to uncover the instrumental value of a reader's meta-attention.[171] That is, I do not attempt to analyse how paying attention to a particular rhythm of reading, 'the balance between what we pay close attention to and what we attend more shallowly', may finally lead to 'specific ways to *better* modulate attention to [a] book's needs'.[172] Letzler argues that reading the 'cruft' of mega-novels, that is the large amounts of nonsensical or superfluous information which induce boredom, encourages re-readings of the whole text with the view of being able to discern which passages one can safely disattend.[173]

A meta-empathetic approach towards fiction is similarly attuned to the act of re-reading. However, to realise that one has been distracted, whether through deliberate

[170] Bennett, p. 11.

[171] David Letzler, *The Cruft of Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017)., p. 25.

[172] Ibid, p. 28, p. 29., my emphasis.

[173] Ibid, p. 25.

authorial intervention, or through unpredictable internal and external diversions, and as a result has misunderstood a passage or perhaps even misread a character's inner experience, need not lead to a concerted effort to become a 'better' reader. I do not deny that re-readings *can* result in a more astute understanding of a text than a reading structured around immediate empathetic gratification. More importantly, though, I want to point out that in my definition, the act of re-reading is a by-product of meta-empathy, and acts as a different kind of 'workout' than the one we perform at the 'empathy gym': we do not emerge with improved concentration, or attention that is in any way improved, but with a sense of humility in the face of the limits of our attention, and an attendant awareness of the many socio-political problems empathy is unable to fix. To acknowledge self-consciousness and a feeling of anxiety about one's ability to modulate attention in an appropriate way is thus, I would argue, a valuable counterbalance to the near-neurotic striving for 'precious focus'[174].

In line with my interest in the value of distraction, my comparative approach towards contemporary literature champions a dispersed focus of attention on a methodological level. Firstly, each chapter compares two texts with the explicit intent of using lateral attention rather than a spotlight focus to recognise the broader patterns that underpin fictions of empathy. Secondly, to work comparatively helps me examine empathy as embedded in the 'materiality of social reality'[175] of different national contexts, observing the very 'blindness and stupidity' of people that Nussbaum argues literature should transcend.[176] I therefore turn to texts which represent culturally specific barriers to empathetic attention. Chapters one and four focus on examples of sexism; chapters two and three foreground issues of race. I analyse

[174] Hari, p. 82.

[175] Hale, 'Aesthetics and the New Ethics', p. 899.

[176] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162.

how writers put gendered, racialised templates of attention centre stage, thereby challenging the idea that empathy, and by extension narrative empathy can be unbiased, let alone approaching ideals of unbroken, remedial focus.

The value of this idealised focus is particularly championed in the Anglo-American world. I found it productive to engage with writers who offer dissonant perspectives on empathy from within that cultural sphere, in particular Lionel Shriver and Zadie Smith. However, my own critique is further developed by introducing European intellectual traditions and debates to my analyses of individual texts. In so doing, I show that even within a broadly Western context, empathy emerges as a fraught concept that defies definitions of focused 'attention without bias'.[177] As I have already outlined above, my 'long view' of empathy has its background in German critical theory. In chapter two, I engage with this background in my reading of Katharina Hacker's *Die Habenichtse* (2006) as a text that is preoccupied with a fundamental oscillation of attention and distraction. I am furthermore influenced by French discussions on the remembrance of the Holocaust, which I touch on in my analysis of Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* (1997) in chapter three; chapter four highlights how recent controversies surrounding the work of the French writer Camille Laurens further shed light on what commentators perceive to be the impossibility (and at times immorality) of representing the traumatic experiences of others. These localised debates are useful to my analysis of narrative empathy because they gesture towards a narrative ethics that prioritises that to which one cannot or should not attend.

The subject matter of the texts that make up my corpus furthermore reflects my interest in a reading practise that is sensitive to the value meta-attention. All of the texts focus

[177] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162.

on events that are, in some shape or form, extreme: mass murder in Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003) rape and imprisonment in Emma Dononghues's *Room* (2010), murder and suicidal ideation in Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), child abuse in *Die Habenichtse* (2006), the Holocaust in *Dora Bruder* (1997), a nervous breakdown and its aftermath in Camille Laurens's *Celle Que Vous Croyez* (2016), and finally, Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) is in fact talking about the death of an infant. I could be criticised for focusing on texts that potentially constitute a skewed representation of empathy, texts that only explore its mechanisms in the most extraordinary of circumstances. I would like to argue, however, that these extraordinary circumstances see empathy fail for the same reason that it fails in more ordinary circumstances. Attention habitually wanders to certain places – who or what is worthy of our attention is often crudely delineated even before a moment of crisis arises. I have chosen texts that work with an element of hyperbole because it is integral to what I understand as their shared ethics of meta-empathy; here, meta-empathy is induced by an element of estrangement, of making empathy and its complex workings strange again.

With a view to the feeling of shame in empathetic encounters, Chapter One analyses Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and Emma Donoghue's *Room*. Both novels show that the originary scene of empathy – the mother-child encounter – can be re-read to establish the importance of flexible rather than focused attention. *Kevin* and *Room* point to the fact that intensive mothering and its attendant expectation of focused maternal attention do not necessarily lead to empathy. Furthermore, *Kevin* demonstrates that the valuation of 'intensive' attention is often reflective of highly sexist ideologies. *Room* in particular highlights that a reader's empathetic immersion, especially when it comes to narratives of suffering and trauma, fuels rather than disrupts the mechanisms of a contemporary attention economy. Readers are introduced to the mechanisms of meta-empathy through *Kevin*'s

unsympathetic narrator, who withholds crucial information about herself until the very end of the novel, thereby frustrating the reader's expectation of a reward for her focused close reading. The child narrator of *Room*, who initially prefers his isolated life in captivity to a life in freedom, serves to defamiliarise the normal workings of 'expansive' empathy.

By turning to the figure of the neighbour in chapter two, which compares Katharina Hacker's *Die Habenichtse* and Zadie Smith's *NW* through the lens of disgust, I analyse how novels reflect on the fact that existing social hierarchies rely on strategic non-attention. Both novels show that disgust, and the attendant movement of attentional retreat, is a functional response to an overwhelming social environment. As I will argue, the 'unwilled proximity' of others puts pressure on the imperative to attend to them. The texts' critique of a cosmopolitan attention point to the difficulty of stretching the scope of empathy's attention to include the concerns of neighbours as well as global others. Die *Habenichtse's* narratorial framing of the plot deliberately juxtaposes the focalisers' and the reader's focus of attention, thereby showing that contextual cues beyond our control move the spotlight of empathy. *NW's* language attempts to capture the different focalisers' too-wide or too-narrow focus of attention, pointing to the difficulty of achieving empathy's delicate balance. The multiperspectival narratives enact the tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces, between the focused and dispersed attention that confronts us when we are asked to attend to more than one person.

Chapter three explores how Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* and Teju Cole's *Open City* attend to the past. Problematising or satirising a melancholic kind of attention, the narrators' search for empathy with others through a prolonged focus on their traces in the built environment can turn into a self-indulgent kind of oblivion, a way of contemplating the lost other that actually cuts off awareness of others in the present moment.

Furthermore, the two texts also explore the ethical potential of 'pure' or 'fundamental' distraction, which consists in a paradoxical awareness of absence. In this context, to be melancholy means to embrace the distracted reception of the coincidental and the literary. Through his strategies of layering and diversion, Modiano foreground that attempts at narrative empathy are often close to fantasy and distraction. *Open City* sharpens the critique of melancholic, focused attention as not only bourgeois, but distinctively masculine. The significance of the buried female characters at the centre of the narrative only reveals itself towards the end, encouraging a second reading, a reading that understands the narrator's focused attention as mere surface, and ultimately a diversion from a more conflicted story about loss, anti-black violence and culpability.

Finally, chapter four turns to Camille Laurens *Celle Que Vous Croyez* and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* to argue that fiction is as much about distraction and entertainment as social media; it does not offer an 'empathetic' alternative. As Laurens shows, social media are not unique in their ability to bind users in the pursuit of diversion and pleasurable deception; fiction has historically fulfilled that role. Through their use of the genre of autofiction, both authors also highlight that a novelist might ultimately only be paying attention to herself and her own experiences of sexism, and that a quest to elicit empathy in the reader is often indistinguishable from an exercise of self-absorption. Laurens's complex narrative frames, her propensity towards 'doubling' as well as her intertextuality constantly divert the reader's attention and point to the importance (and pleasure of) dispersed attention. In adopting a mimetic style representative of 'virtual realism', Lockwood encourages us to accept that it is now impossible to return to a state of idealised empathy (as represented by the birth of her niece and her demands on quasi-maternal attention); she represents the internet user's attention as irrevocably fragmented and 'memefied'.

Overall, my chosen texts resolutely oppose the straightforward instrumentalisation of narrative empathy. As I will argue, they are representative of contemporary fiction that critically reflects on discourses of empathy that present empathetic focus as cognitively and morally valuable. The texts critique the 'empathy gym' model by foregrounding that an idealised intensive focus perpetuates sexism and sensationalism, by representing empathetic attention in the urban space as veering between disgusted rejection and multiperspectival dispersion, by satirising melancholic 'dwelling' and championing the 'blind spot', and by turning to the gleeful, masochistic diversion experienced both online and while reading a book. As such, they complicate any notions of literature as a space that is somehow separate from contemporary distraction.

1. Attending to the child: Crises of maternal attention in Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003) and Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2009)

'Why, after all I have borne, am I held accountable for ordering their chaos?' asks Eva Khatchadourian, the narrator of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003).[1] As the mother of the eponymous Kevin, she has been accused of failing to prevent her teenage son from killing nine children and two adults at his high school – ostensibly because she has not attended to him in an appropriate manner. Shriver engages with that facet of distraction that Paul North calls 'a morality of bad choices'[2] by exploring the nexus of individual responsibility, maternal care, and focused attention in relation to the problem of contemporary mass shootings across Northern America. Through a series of letters addressed to Eva's husband, the novel asks the reader to question the conceptualisation of empathy as a form of (maternal) focus that can be used to spot, understand, and prevent psychopathic behaviour. As such, it not only reflects one of the criticisms levelled against popular mindfulness-based interventions aimed at improving focus, namely that they prioritise 'changing minds rather than changing social structures and conditions.'[3] I argue that Shriver's text also radically questions the value of 'paying attention' itself, presenting it as a highly gendered act that cannot be uncoupled from, let alone used as an antidote to the societal problems it is mobilised to address. By discussing the text as an illustration of a crisis of attention in the sense of a deep scepticism towards its instrumentalisation, I aim to foreground one of the main arguments running through this thesis: contemporary novels often

[1] Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. (New York: Counterpoint, 2005), p. 195.

[2] North, p. 2.

[3] Bennett, p. 118.

complicate our narratives of empathy by highlighting their implication in the forces of chaos and distraction we understand as paradigmatic of our time.

I then proceed to read Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010),[4] which Donoghue herself positions as a direct response to Shriver's text.[5] While Shriver modelled the character of Kevin on the two teenage boys that committed the 1999 Columbine high school massacre, Donoghue's text is loosely inspired by the case of Josef Fritzl, who was charged in 2008 with imprisoning and raping his daughter for twenty-five years. Told from the perspective of a five-year old boy called Jack, who grows up in captivity with only his mother, Ma, for company, the novel stages Jack's emotional development once he escapes the eponymous Room, tracing how he turns into an individual capable of attending to an ever-expanding world around him. Donoghue refines Shriver's interrogation of ideologies of intensive mothering and their attendant expectations of maternal focus, understanding them as an adaptive response to trauma rather than a template for empathetic engagement.

Throughout the chapter, I consider how both the highly self-conscious, retrospective epistolary narrative of a mother, as well as the unfiltered 'nowness' of the present tense account of a child narrator create moments of meta-empathy. The novels feature protagonists who are highly attuned readers of their environment and their kin, but who are nevertheless stuck in the process of reading, failing to arrive at the empathetic "Aha!" moments a reader would expect of them given their attentional effort. In *Kevin*, careful scrutiny fails to lead to insights into Kevin's motivation to torture and kill; in *Room*, Jack remains, at least initially, oblivious to his own capture as well as his mother's sexual abuse. I argue that these frustrations of the 'empathy through sustained focus' narrative highlight empathy's

[4] Emma Donoghue, *Room*. (London: Picador, 2010).

[5] Sarah Crown, 'Emma Donoghue: "To say Room is based on the Josef Fritzl case is too strong"'. *The Guardian*, 13 Aug 2010, at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/13/emma-donoghue-room-josef-fritzl> [accessed on 11 April 2022], n.p.

implication in the sensationalist consumption of trauma narratives, showing that empathy fuels rather than disrupts the dynamics of a contemporary attention economy.

We Need to Talk About Eva – The ambivalent work of maternal attention in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

We Need To Talk About Kevin is a text that is framed by a flurry of interest. It was one of the bestselling books of the early 2000s, winning the Orange Prize and inspiring a critically acclaimed film adaptation in 2010, starring Tilda Swinton as Eva Khatchadourian.[6] Both the book and the film engendered discussions that primarily centre on the nature of evil, asking the question whether Kevin is born a psychopath or whether his behaviour is caused by an absence of maternal love and empathy.[7] The text anticipates its reception and the focus on the nature vs. nurture debate through its self-conscious narrator. Eva meets the reader as a narrator weary of the public's morbid curiosity about the gruesome crimes committed by her son:

> I knew what was coming: "You ever figure out what it was drove him to – you ever figure out *why*?"
>
> It's what they all want to ask – my brother, your parents, my coworkers, the documentary makers, Kevin's psychiatric consult, the gladstone_carnage.com web-page designers, though interestingly never my mother. (*Kevin*, 194)

[6] *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Directed by Lynne Ramsay. BBC Film, 2011.

[7] Barbara Almond addresses this debate at length, situating it within a larger conversation about the meaning and impact of ambivalent, unloving mothers. Barbara Almond, *The monster within: The hidden side of motherhood.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Louise Nuttall analyses readers' split responses to the text in her analysis of online reader reviews on the social network Goodreads. Louise Nuttall, "Online Readers Between the Camps: A Text World Theory Analysis of Ethical Positioning in We Need to Talk About Kevin." *Language and literature* 26.2 (2017): 153–171.

'Why?' is a question that a novel might answer on the level of focalisation, characterisation, or plot, ultimately leading to access to a fully-fledged protagonist with credible motives. As the title already indicates, *Kevin* is not interested in such access, but in the way that Eva chooses to narrate her son's story. If the reader fails to understand Kevin's 'why', it is because his mother fails to act as a conduit of empathy. As a narrator, Eva goes through the motions of attentive observation, acting, in the vein of criticism espoused by Nussbaum, as somebody 'on whom none of [the] subtleties are lost'[8] – except, crucially, what Kevin is feeling and thinking. Despite presenting us with a highly detailed reconstruction of events and a plethora of searching analyses of Kevin's antagonistic behaviour from birth, the almost 500-page-long novel does not give any definitive answers as to why Kevin committed his crimes. As we find out, a vocal part of the community of Nyack, New York believes that Eva's lack of insight, alongside a lack of warmth, is not only a moral failing but a criminal offense in its own right, and she has been accused in a civil trial of parental negligence. The novel opens with a scene that illustrates Eva's continued ostracisation – at the local supermarket, the unsuccessful plaintiff, the mother of one of the children murdered by Kevin, smashes a carton of eggs that Eva has left in her shopping cart (*Kevin*, 3). As if to put narrative weight behind the court's verdict of innocence, Eva creates an epistolary persona that is cynical yet defiant in the face of such overt hostility, and she takes pains to point out that at least on a technical level, she cannot be accused of neglecting her son: the reader comes to see she has indeed been paying fastidious attention to her son's life leading up to what she simply calls 'Thursday', the day in 1999 when Kevin commits mass murder.

In a series of letters addressed to her estranged husband Franklin, a form that gives her free reign to present her point of view outside of the public's scrutiny, the reader is asked

[8] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 162.

not so much to attend to *Kevin*– and thereby perpetuate the narrative of the neglected child – but to attend to the neglected *mother*. Interjecting her narrative with accounts of her weekly prison visits to see Kevin, who is now almost 18 years old, Eva's letters tell a story of conflicted motherhood in chronological order. Eva's highly self-reflective account often reads like an extended essay on the ideological work that a mother's attention and empathy are asked to perform in American society at the turn of the twenty-first century. There is an irony to the novel's title that not only lies in its anticipation of the public's reaction to the text, or in its invocation of the futility of 'talking' as a means of addressing complex socio-political problems. Crucially, as we come to realise in the course of reading the text, it carries within it an alternative title, *We Need to Talk About Eva*. The text is, even as it focuses on Kevin and the aftermath of his violence, not only created *by* but *about* Eva. In an article entitled 'We Need to Talk About Gender', Emily Jeremiah similarly picks up on the title's irony, yet her analysis of how Shriver disrupts the intertwined 'ideologies of motherhood and femininity' does not focus on how Eva's performance of mothering relates to notions of empathy.[9] Jane Messer touches on the importance of the novel's representation of emotional labour but she, too, stops short of making an explicit connection between maternal care and empathy.[10] In the following, I will try and make this connection by tracing how Eva's self-centred narrative highlights the ways in which empathy and motherhood are expected to interact, and how this interaction hinges on idealised notions of selfless, sacrificial attention.

As Suzanne Keen has noted, the text deliberately encourages a conflicting set of reader responses, insofar as 'the mother's selfnarration [sic] can be regarded as ultimately

[9] Emily Jeremiah, *We Need to Talk about Gender: Mothering and Masculinity in Lionel Shriver's 'We Need to Talk about Kevin'.* In: Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Mothering in Contemporary Women's Literatures. (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 169-184., p. 170

[10] Jane Messer, 'Reconceptualizing Maternal Work: Dejours, Ruddick and Lionel Shriver's We Need to Talk About Kevin.' *Women's studies international forum* 38 (2013), 11–20.

self-condemning of a chilly neglect that causes her child to become a murderer, rather than an apologia and appeal for sympathy. Readers can and do differ about these interpretations.'[11] Yet whatever the reader's judgment, whether she thinks that Eva is inexcusably neglectful, or that Eva is deserving of sympathy, the text's (failed) apologia functions as a complex interrogation of contemporary templates of empathetic attention. In the first instance, this is realised in the text's use of the second person. Through its address of Franklin, the first letter immediately invokes a scene of listening that centres the mother. As Eva lets Franklin know in the opening lines, 'since we've been separated I may most miss coming home to deliver the narrative curiosities of my day' (*Kevin*, 1). 'You', the implied reader, then, comes to stand in as the recipient of Eva's observations, taking over from Eva's lawyer, who has previously encountered her habit of 'assembling all the tiny inconclusive anecdotes that would fall flat at a dinner table and that seem irrelevant until you collect them in a pile' (*Kevin*, 81). As such, she is positioned against both men, who, as Eva points out, have only been interested in 'the gist' (ibid.). Subsequently, the work of the novel and its reader is to take Eva's perspective seriously, and to turn her 'curiosities' and 'anecdotes' into a coherent whole. It thus asks the reader to attend to the story of a woman who, in her own words, 'recognize[s] that the portrait [she is] painting here is not *attractive*' (*Kevin*, 83, original emphasis).

'You could not say he lacked for attention': The limits of intensive mothering

Starting with the time just before her pregnancy, the letters first outline Eva's early, ostensibly highly 'unattractive' disillusionment with motherhood.

[11] Keen, 'Narrative Empathy and Contemporary Anglophone Novels', p. 69.

It is pertinent to consider some of the critical responses that include an element of 'feeling for' this fictional character that openly admits to being an unsympathetic protagonist, especially when it comes to her own failures as a mother. It seems that when *Kevin*'s idiosyncratic self-consciousness manages to encourage sympathetic reader identification, it is a kind of identification that is particularly conducive to feminist criticism. Messer has characterised the novel as 'a literary text in the form of an epistolary memoir that works as a kind of auto-ethnography'.[12] She justifies her decision to treat the novel like an actual auto-ethnography by referring to the text's 'thick narrative description,' a description she can use to explore 'an imaginary psychodynamics of the work of maternal care'.[13] Similarly, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Barbara Almond discusses the character of Eva alongside case studies of women who feel deeply ambivalent about motherhood.[14] Common to both responses is the willingness to work with the illusion of empathetic transparency, to the extent that the fictional character of Eva can act as a relatively straightforward representation of the subjective experience of real women. To some extent, this could be characterised as a naïve reading of the text,[15] but I would argue that it is a reading that responds to both the novel's 'thick' realist modes of representation as well as its preoccupation with the act of mothering as a socially constructed practice.[16] In this context, to claim the experience of the 'unsympathetic' mother signals an understanding of her systemic oppression.

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[12] Messer, p. 12.

[13] Messer, pp. 11-12.

[14] Almond, pp. 121-129.

[15] As Ann Jurecic reminds us, a 'naïve' reading of a text and/or an appreciation of its emotional effects is not necessarily counterproductive to critical insights. Jurecic, p. 12.

[16] The novel highlights how both race and class impact expectations of mothering, and it is sensitive to the fact that the ideologies of motherhood it depicts are, to some extent, unique to a Northern American context. In general, the text espouses a form of gender nominalism, summed up by Mari Mikkola as the belief that 'although a range of features are associated with women (such as certain social roles, psychological dispositions, experiences, and expectations), there is no single feature of set of features that women (…) have in common that makes them women'. Mari Mikkola. "Elizabeth Spelman, Gender Realism, and Women." *Hypatia*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2006, pp. 77–96, p. 78. Jeremiah, however, detects a certain essentialism in Eva's thinking, which she locates in her uncritical rejection of the inherent 'weakness' of femininity, Jeremiah, p. 174.

For example, this would apply to instances such as Eva's description of her sudden realisation that the moment a woman announces her pregnancy, she 'become[s] social property' (*Kevin*, 62). Eva outlines a visceral sense of resentment at her perceived lack of freedom. Her actions have now been reduced to growing a child inside of her, leaving her 'victimized, like some princess, by an organism the size of a pea' (*Kevin*, 65). The text contrasts the confines of impending motherhood with the freedom of movement associated with Eva's career up until that point. Eva, a self-made woman, has been publishing a highly successful series of travel guides called A Wing and a Prayer (AWAP) for an American audience interested in backpacking or budget holidays. As Jeremiah points out, Eva's career as a successful travel writer and businesswoman can be read as a performance of empowering masculinity for Eva, if masculinity is understood, via Judith Halberstam, as claiming 'the connotations of legitimacy, privilege, and wealth'.[17] This performance is suddenly cut short, both by the distressing corporeality of pregnancy and the social expectations of mothering, expectations which are ruthlessly enforced by Franklin. In a telling vignette, Franklin reacts with excessive anger to Eva's revelation that she has ambivalent feelings about the prospect of motherhood and that she sometimes even 'reconsider[s] the whole business.' (ibid.) Franklin establishes *Kevin*'s central taboo:

> Don't you *ever say that*, you said, your face beet-red. It's too late for second thoughts. *Never*, *ever* tell me that you regret our own kid. That's when I started to cry. When I shared with you my most sordid sexual fantasies, in such disturbing violation of heterosexual norms that, without the assist of your own disgraceful mental smut

[17] Jeremiah, pp. 172-3.

shared in return, I'm too embarrassed to mention them here – since when was there anything that one of us was never, *ever* to say?

Baby what did you expect – Baby what did you expect –

The track had started to skip. (Ibid.)

This key passage, which inaugurs a climate of secrecy and silence, encapsulates the text's interrogation of 'violations of heterosexual norms'. The most 'sordid', 'disturbing' and 'disgraceful' thing a mother can do, it is suggested, is to regret having a child. As Ortal Slobodin has pointed out, *Kevin* foregrounds the way mothers 'operate under a social gaze which expects them to meet the cultural, moral standards of "good" motherhood'.[18] In the context of the text's representation of gendered attention, this passage furthermore establishes the fact that ideologies of the 'good mother' effectively make experiences of maternal ambivalence entirely disattendable. For the remainder of the text, Franklin 'skips' over any thought or emotion he deems in violation of acceptable mothering. Motherhood, then, equates to becoming unavailable as the recipient of empathy; vital aspects of Eva's subjective experience remain blocked from Franklin's view.

This, as Slobodin argues, results in Eva seeing herself through the lens of shame, which 'is developed through a judging gaze, when one turns into the object of observation.'[19] Slobodin's feminist, sociologically inflected analysis sees *Kevin* as a detailed illustration of the workings of maternal shame, and she uses it to argue for more empathy, its 'most powerful antidote'.[20] Slobodin understands empathy as something that 'is developed through connected gazes, each acknowledging the other's autonomous subjectivity' and she refers to

[18] Ortal Slobodin, 'Between the eye and the gaze: Maternal shame in the novel We Need to Talk about Kevin.' *Feminism & Psychology*, 29.2 (2019), 214–230 (p. 217)

[19] Ibid., p. 224.

[20] Ibid.

it in the context of the novel's closing pages, which to her depict the moment in which Kevin finally meets his mother's gaze as an equal.[21] While I agree with the transformative potential of Slobodin's model of empathy, it bears pointing out that it is to a large degree an idealised model that relies on an element of mutuality, the possibility of which *Kevin* decidedly questions even on its final pages. Slobodin's reading of the text is an example of the tendency to turn to empathy as an attentional corrective, to invoke it whenever attention does not flow in a certain direction or towards certain groups of people. What makes *Kevin* a text that resists the idea of empathy as such a straightforward corrective is the way in which it insists on its narrator's positionality and represents her gaze, as well as the gazes that (fail to) meet hers, as irrevocably gendered. Slobodin suggests that empathy might help 'enable mothers to free themselves from the demanding standards of motherhood'.[22] Yet as *Kevin* suggests, a mother's empathy is conditioned to be a unidirectional process of perspective-taking, and as such, it produces rather than dispels shame: Franklin refuses to attend to Eva, yet Eva finds herself anticipating Franklin's every judgment.

The novel encouraged me to consider empathy's relationship to partial and blocked attention – as opposed to focused, mutual attention – by encouraging me to reflect on my own willingness to attend to Eva. As I responded to this fictional character's bids for attention, I came to the troubling realisation that these bids, when they concern real women, might in many cases go unnoticed, or that I might even actively ignore them. The flow of narrative attention – as actively manipulated by the letter-writing Eva – towards the mother thus contrasts with the flow of attention towards father and child in real-life settings. The text thus creates a tension that results in what I call meta-empathy: *Kevin* does not require the reader to

[21] Ibid. pp. 224-5.

[22] Ibid., p. 226.

empathise with Eva, but in its dissection of the workings of maternal shame it asks the reader to consider how empathy's reach is restricted by habitual patterns of attention.

Here, I also take into consideration the objections towards an uncritical readerly empathy espoused by feminist affect theory. As Anne Whitehead points out, such objections focus on the ways in which empathy 'can mask, conceal, and even enact problematic dynamics and histories of power, influence and appropriation.'[23] To refer to Whitehead's discussion of readerly empathy as a 'distraction' from socio-political change, to see empathy as an antidote to maternal shame may obscure empathy's crucial role in establishing shame in the first place. As Whitehead writes, '[i]n analysing empathy, we should therefore remain attentive to the ways in which it maps on to and potentially reinforces hierarchies of privilege that are already in place.'[24] *Kevin* encourages a reader to remain alert to the ways in which empathy is conditioned by patriarchal scripts of attention. In its association of empathy with maternal shame, the novel furthermore supports Carolyn Pedwell's contention that 'empathy may *only* be identifiable or nameable in its constitutive interaction with shame'.[25]

One of the most important examples of the novel's representation of empathy's constitutive interaction with shame is Eva's frequent 'ventriloquising' of her husband's thoughts, as well as those of disapproving strangers. Thus, she writes about herself: 'Look at this sorry specimen' (*Kevin*, 82).[26] With reference to her insistence on passing on her last name to Kevin, she inserts Franklin's voice into her letter, writing that, '[a]t a time that she ought to be learning in her very gut the true meaning of *ours*, she chooses instead to fret about whether the forthcoming baby is *hers*' (*Kevin*, 83). Eva's cognitive empathy cements

[23] Whitehead, *Intervention*, p. 64.

[24] Whitehead, p. 64.

[25] Pedwell, p. 190, my emphasis.

[26] As Elizabeth Spelman writes with regards to 'one-sided' empathy, '[t]here is always the danger that the person claiming to participate in the experience of another is simply a ventriloquist.' Spelman, p. 130.

her place in the social hierarchy, reinforcing that she is expected to surrender her autonomy for the good of the child and family. Eva does not consider the possibility of harmonious, shared parenthood, nor does she envision a mother's selflessness to have many, if any, redeeming qualities. Revoicing Franklin's perspective, Eva judges herself for her transgressive understanding of pregnancy and motherhood as an occupation and ultimately an annihilation of the maternal body: ''[e]ven beyond the point at which she should have learned her lesson, she is still banging on about a movie in which human birth is confused with the explosion of an oversized maggot. And she's a hypocrite who is impossible to please' (83). This is a way of paying attention to herself that takes Adam Smith's idea of sympathy as an awareness of being watched by an attentive spectator[27] or Simon Baron-Cohen's conceptualisation of empathy as a 'reverse periscope'[28] to a dissonant extreme: Eva narrates her experiences, while at the same time undermining them by rendering them in the judgmental third person. While there is a hyperbolic, parodic impulse to Eva's ventriloquism that functions as a distancing mechanism of sorts, it never quite detaches Eva from the messages she relays; instead, it serves to increase a sense of Eva's objectification. The fact that the messages that Eva internalises via a process of empathetic perspective-taking are *ridiculously* oppressive does not lessen the stronghold they have over her.

Here, the act of ventriloquising does not so much equate to appropriation on Eva's part, but it highlights how Eva's maternal identity is 'voiced' by others, ultimately amounting to a complete (and in the case of pregnancy, literal) inhabitation. This is explicitly linked to the genre of horror, with the movie about the 'oversized maggot' referring to 1997s *Mimic*: 'Ever notice how many films portray pregnancy as infestation, as colonisation by stealth? *Rosemary's Baby* was just the beginning. In *Alien* the foul extra-terrestrial claws its way out

[27] Adam Smith, p. 27.

[28] Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, p. 15.

(...) In *Mimic*, a woman gives birth to a two-foot maggot' (*Kevin*, 68–9). Elsewhere, Eva describes how a mother is expected to surrender her subjectivity to another being by likening it to a parasitic invasion: 'In horror and sci-fi, the host is consumed or rent, reduced to husk or residue so that some nightmare creature may survive its shell' (*Kevin*, 70). Indeed, Eva comes to understand her body as 'designed to expel its own replacement' (*Kevin*, 61). As Alyson Miller contends, Shriver makes recourse to the horror narratives of 'monstrous birth' or the 'evil child' because horror is a mode that is 'so effectively invested in portraying the abject terror of boundaries that have been interrupted or dissolved'.[29]

Expanding on this line of argumentation, I would like to suggest that *Kevin* portrays the maternal body as a metaphor of the dangers of fusional empathy. As I have already discussed with reference to *Einfühlung*, empathy is a process that is always perilously close to a subject's complete fusion with an aesthetic object, or by extension another person. As Robert L. Katz writes,

> 'The empathizer tends to abandon his self-consciousness. He does not feel with the other person as if running along on a parallel track. The sense of similarity is so strong that the two become one – his own identity fuses with the identity of the other. Artists speak of the "annihilation of the subject in the object."[30]

Empathy, then, can mean a complete loss of self-consciousness, and as a result a loss of identity. As Anna Veprinska puts it, 'reaching into the affective world of another, thus, harbours the risk of eradicating the self.'[31] Yet the eradication of the self in favour of the

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[29] Alyson Miller, '"Emissaries of Death and Destruction": Reading the Child-as-Killer in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Sharp Objects'*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 60 no. 4 (2019), 487-500, p. 488. I expand on the role of the abject in the context of empathy's interaction with disgust in the following chapter.

[30] Robert L. Katz, *Empathy: Its Nature and Uses*. (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 9.

[31] Veprinska, p. 9

(unborn) child is precisely what is expected of Eva.[32] Here, it becomes obvious that 'the ''imperative of good mothering'' discourse is inextricably tied to a ''child-centered'' discourse'.[33] In *Kevin*, the originary scene of empathy is one of maternal sacrifice. As Slobodin reminds us, the ideology of the good mother, which can also be summed up as 'intensive mothering', 'describe[s] a model of motherhood that asks women to give fully of themselves at all times, physically, emotionally, psychologically and intellectually'.[34]

In short, it is an ideology that is opposed to any kind of maternal distraction. As Eva reminds Franklin (and by extension, the reader), even though she is horrified by the demands of intensive mothering and its implications for her own autonomy, she has still taken every precaution to avoid being distracted: 'His mother had taken six months off from work to spend every day by his side, and I picked him up so often that my arms ached; you could not say he lacked for attention.' (*Kevin*, 106). In this description of 'attention', the focus is on the performance of an action (such as being physically present, 'picking up' the child as a form of repetitive exertion) rather than on a particular quality of perception or emotion. Maternal attention, *Kevin* suggests, is part of a mother's *work,* a notion that is underscored by the fact that Eva consciously conceives of mothering as an activity that replaces her job as a travel writer. What makes Eva guilty of the 'chilly neglect' that Keen mentions above is the fact that while her previous job gives her a sense of intellectual and emotional fulfilment and purpose, Eva's maternal work results in an experience of highly dysphoric affects by both mother and child. Even though Eva enacts the maternal sacrifices required of her – such as

[32] *We Need To Talk About Kevin* is a novel that not only touches on issues of gun control in the United States, but that becomes relevant in the face of the contemporary criminalisation of abortion. As George Lakoff argues, a conservative stance against abortion does not so much hinge on empathy for the child but upholds a morality of the authoritarian traditional family: 'The very idea that a woman can make such a decision – a decision over her own reproduction, over her own body, and over man's progeny – contradicts and represents a threat to the idea of a strict father morality', qtd in Bloom, *Against Empathy*, p. 119.

[33] Slobodin, p. 219.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 218.

the voluntary loss of a professional identity – her attempted fusion with her child does not result in experiences of connection and warmth. In line with the text's apologetic tendencies, Eva self-consciously addresses her husband and asks for his forgiveness:

> Before you condemn me utterly, I beg you to understand just how hard I'd been trying to be a good mother. But trying to be a good mother may be as distant from being a good mother as trying to have a good time is from truly having one. Distrusting my every impulse from the instant he was laid on my breast, I'd follow a devout regime of hugging my little boy. (*Kevin,* 231)

Qualifying what kind of maternal work Eva is engaging in, Messer points out that passages such as this one foreground that Eva performs *affective labour*. By this Messer means that for Eva to be a 'good mother', she not only has to feed, bathe, or indeed 'hug' her child, she has to manage the discrepancy between what she ought to feel and what she is actually experiencing while performing these actions. With reference to Arlie Russell Hochschild's concept of 'emotion work', Messer explains that '[i]n the normal course of living (and working), we try to change or shape the degree or quality of an emotion or feeling to bring it closer in accord to what we normatively wish it to be, or socially know it needs to be, or feel is "healthy". Emotion work is the "effort" — not the outcome, which may or may not be successful.'[35] Indeed, Eva's 'effort' is considerable, since she instinctively distrusts her child and finds herself unable to love him. This is arguably even more digressive and 'unhealthy' an affective experience than her initial regret of her pregnancy. Messer understands *Kevin*'s idiosyncratic dissonance – the gap between Eva's 'regime of hugging' and what Messer identifies as Eva's '"true" feelings of boredom, suspicion, anger, and

[35] Messer, pp. 14-5.

disappointment in herself'[36] - as a comment on the 'constructedness of the maternal'.[37] She remarks that mother and child are entirely 'at odds with their roles and interactions,' and that Eva seeks 'recognition for her mothering from her child, but does not receive it'.[38] I would like to draw out the connection between Messer's analysis of maternal work and my own focus on the text's politics of empathy by exploring the implications of this lack of recognition for Eva's effortful mothering.

By highlighting the effort required to focus on her child, and to focus on him in an 'appropriate' and rewarding way, the text again foregrounds the gendered nature of attention: it implies that maternal focus is not a 'biological destiny'[39] that automatically results in an empathetic connection, let alone love. Thus, Eva recalls a conversation with her now 17-year-old son about her struggles to be a loving parent: '"I couldn't have expected that simply forming an attachment to you," I phrased as diplomatically as I knew how, "would be so much work. I thought –" I took a breath. "I thought that part came for free."' (*Kevin,* 68). As such, Shriver's text does not necessarily contradict the idea that the capacity to pay attention is something that can – and should be – cultivated. As I have already outlined above, it is a text that encourages its readers to reflect on the ways they habitually (dis)attend to narratives of motherhood. What *Kevin* does emphatically challenge, however, is the idea that the conscious 'work' of sustained attention can act as an antidote to the indifference, boredom, and even hatred that characterises the relationship between Kevin and Eva. The fact that Eva's considerable affective labour is not valued by either her child or her husband furthermore ties in with the book's theme of shameful secrets: to acknowledge her effort

[36] Messer, p. 16.

[37] Messer, p. 17.

[38] Messer, ibid. (p. 17)

[39] Messer, ibid. (p.17)

would entail an acknowledgment of the centrality of 'ugly feelings' in all their lives; feelings which can never be entirely managed through acts of disciplined attention. The struggles of Eva's maternal life, then, highlight the difficulty of harnessing attention to meet goals of self-improvement.

'Joy is a job': Empathy and narratives of the good life

Shriver's portrayal of Eva's attentional work as the effort required to hide her ugly feelings forms part of a wider interrogation of narratives of the good life. In this sense, *Kevin* continues to resonate with feminist critiques of gender roles, showing that these narratives materialise in everyday life 'through the repetition of norms', and that 'such norms appear as forms of life only through the concealment of the work of this repetition'.[40] Shriver's engagement with the tyranny of 'concealment' not only hinges on Eva's continued self-disclosure, which unveils her maternal shame and affective labour, but it also depends on Eva's particular representation of the character of Franklin and his relationship to contemporary American capitalism. Through Eva's eyes, he emerges as a man who applies a rigid work ethic to all areas of his life. Her husband, Eva asserts, bases his behaviour on the idea that 'the good life doesn't knock on the door' (*Kevin,* 18). Referencing an outing with friends, Eva sums up her husband's guiding principle: 'Joy is a job. So if you believed with sufficient industry that we had had a good time with Brian and Louise in theory, then we would have had a good time in fact. The only hint that in truth you'd found our afternoon laborious was that your enthusiasm was excessive' (ibid.). These observations closely map onto Lauren Berlant's ideas of 'that moral-intimate-economic thing called "the good" life' and its connection to cruel optimism.[41] Berlant notes that an attachment to the things that

[40] Ahmed, p. 12.

[41] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

represent ‘the good life’ turns into a relation of cruel optimism when those very things are ‘actually an obstacle to your flourishing.’[42] Franklin’s goal of experiencing joy, which he sees represented in ‘having a good time’ with friends, is actively undermined by the ‘laboriousness’ of his striving. Eva’s choice of words thus highlights the performative nature of his flourishing, which consists in an ‘excessive’ repetition of actions that do not actually bring him closer to his ideals of a joyous life. Similarly, Eva represents her husband as possessing a kind of pseudo-empathy that is restricted to repetitive yet ultimately empty bids for connection.

Eva notes that Franklin criticises her ‘coldness’, characterising her mothering as an act of ‘freez[ing] out’ their child (*Kevin*, 247). This, he thinks, is particularly egregious because ‘there’s no substitute for a mother’s love’ (ibid.) Yet Eva harshly criticises the ‘substitute’ of the good life that Franklin himself tries to offer to his child. ‘There was a persistently generic character to your adoration,’ Eva writes. ‘It must be this overarching commitment to what is really an abstraction, to one’s children right or wrong, that can be even more fierce than the commitment to keep them as explicit, difficult people’ (*Kevin*, 103). Resembling his relationship to ‘having a good time’, Franklin’s relationship to his son is described as a commitment to ‘an abstraction’; a commitment so strong that it overrides anything that marks the boy as ‘explicit, difficult’. Eva understands this way of relating, which she elsewhere calls a generous ‘rounding up’, as a way of keeping himself ‘devoted to [children] when as individuals they disappoint’ (Kevin, 93; 103). In short, Eva accuses Franklin of failing to develop any kind of attentive accuracy, given that he routinely overlooks that which makes Kevin ‘explicit’ and an ‘individual’.

[42] Ibid., p. 1.

However, the superficial and inaccurate nature of Franklin's attention only forms one part of Eva's criticism. What she finds most grating is the fact that Franklin claims to develop empathy for his son – something that Eva fails to do despite paying scrupulously close attention to everything that Kevin does. 'Kevin was (and remains) a mystery to me,' Eva writes. 'You regarded a child as a partial creature, a simpler form of life, which evolved into the complexity of adulthood in open view. Most of all, he seemed hidden from me, while your experience was one of sunny, leisurely access' (*Kevin*, 137). Eva wonders why Franklin feels that he can easily and comfortably access Kevin's emotions, while she is left puzzling over the motivation behind actions that she finds increasingly disturbing: the bullying of a classmate, falsely accusing a school teacher of sexual assault and thereby ending her career as an educator, and, as Eva suspects, the killing of the family pet, as well as pouring bleach into his little sister Celia's eyes. Ultimately Eva resigns herself to an explanation for Franklin's continued dismissal of her worries, diagnosing that 'we were dealing with your childhood – an idealization of your childhood – that could prove, like your fantasy United States, an awesome cudgel. There's no more doomed a struggle than a battle with the imaginary' (*Kevin*, 126).

Franklin's 'doomed' struggle can be understood as cruelly optimistic because it is fuelled by an enduring yet unobtainable fantasy. Berlant writes that 'the *affective* structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way.'[43] Tellingly, Franklin works in advertising, acting as both a location scout and a photographer, and exploits the power of fantasies in his professional life. In the context of his private life, the fantasy of an ideal childhood emerges

[43] Ibid., p. 2.

as a potent *distraction* from the realities of his son's violent behaviour. As such, Eva paints Franklin as a neglectful father whose attachment to narratives of easy empathy prove even more devastating than Eva's 'cold' appraisal of her son's actions.

Eva pits her mothering against Franklin's fathering, essentially establishing a conflict between husband and wife that requires the reader to take sides. By positioning Eva's letters as an attempt to be believed, and to be chosen over her husband, *Kevin* acts as a testimony that aims to elicit an empathetic readerly response. The reader turns into a member of a literary jury of sorts, having to evaluate whether Eva is indeed less neglectful than her husband, and whether she is therefore deserving of the fictional court's verdict of innocence. As such, the text illustrates Fritz Breithaupt's three-person model of empathy. To return to Breithaupt's idea of the basic scene of empathy as a triad, to empathise with either Eva or with her husband requires the reader to make a decision first: *'I share feelings with the other* because *I have decided for him*'.[44] Time and again, the text asks the reader to decide *for Eva,* which requires her to be *against Franklin*. To be against Franklin hinges on an acceptance of Eva's evaluation of Franklin's optimism as indeed 'cruel'. Thus, whether a reader empathises with Eva – and perhaps even feels sympathy for her choices as a mother – is to some extent dependent on how convinced she is by the socioeconomic critique that underlies Eva's rejection of her husband's parenting. To attend to Eva's version of events entails an understanding of 'the good life' as a set of narratives that divert attention away from their inherent cruelties. In this instance, the text again encourages a meta-empathetic approach towards its protagonist: the reader becomes aware of the fact that her turning towards Eva entails a rejection of another character; a rejection that is furthermore explicitly based on the character's habits of attention. As Eva points out,

[44] Breithaupt, 'A Three Person Model of Empathy', p. 87

> I could not have anticipated that your compulsion to manhandle your unruly, misshapen experience into a tidy box, like someone trying to cram a wild tangle of driftwood into a hard-shell Samsonite suitcase, as well as this sincere confusion of the is with the ought to be – your heartrending tendency to mistake what you actually had for what you desperately wanted – would produce such devastating consequences. (*Kevin*, 18)

Shriver here finds a simile for the unreliable, socially constructed nature of attention, likening it to a 'box' that fails to accurately contain the 'wild tangle of driftwood' that makes up lived experience. After highlighting the asymmetrical flow of attention in the interaction between mother, father, and child, she here returns to the problem of positionality by highlighting Franklin's point of view as highly gendered. Her choice of words – Franklin's attention is like a 'hardshell Samsonite suitcase' which he uses to 'manhandle' his perception – conveys Eva's scathing evaluation of her husband's distinctively masculine understanding of reality. The question if his perception is indeed responsible for producing the 'devastating consequences' of Kevin's sociopathic behaviour is at the heart of Shriver's appeal to the reader's empathy. It falls to the reader to decide whether Eva's perception of reality is more trustworthy, since the language Eva uses reveals just as much about her own, ultimately equally skewed focus of attention. In a postscript to the novel written in 2005, Shriver notes that 'ordinary' readers of the novel are split into two camps, either understanding the book as a reminder that anyone can be 'saddled with a "bad seed"' or as a cautionary tale that '[p]arents get the children they deserve' (*Kevin*, 473-4). Shriver writes that she has 'found this division gratifying. Mission accomplished.' (*Kevin*, 474). While it is not in my remit to establish whether Shriver's strategic bids for readerly empathy – that is, empathy for either Eva or Franklin, or both – are successful, it bears noticing that the text enacts Shriver's

'mission' of creating 'gratifying' ambiguity in its representation of Eva's (un)trustworthiness. It implies that both husband *and* wife fail to adequately attend to reality's 'wild tangle of driftwood'.

At the mercy of focalisation: *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and readerly attention

It is not only through explicit, metaphorical reflection that Shriver foregrounds the fragility of the 'tidy box' of focused attention, but her deconstruction of 'focus' as a mode of understanding can also be found at other, more implicit levels of the reading experience. The text's idiosyncratic interplay of slow pacing, linear plotting and self-conscious focalisation ultimately confronted me with the unpredictability and unknowability of the very narrator that had been the focus of my reading experience for hundreds of pages. It is only towards the very end of a very detailed recounting of events – on page 454 of the 2005 Counterpoint edition – that I found out that Eva had been withholding the information that Franklin is not merely absent from her life, but that he is *dead*. As such, Eva's epistolary narrative starkly reveals its own subjectivity and constructedness: it spends a lot of time crafting a persona who stands in opposition to somebody who can conveniently no longer defend himself. On top of that, the text's central plot twist, the fact that Kevin also killed Franklin and his sister Celia, suddenly turns Eva into yet another victim of Kevin's violence. Here, Shriver manages to make Eva seem simultaneously less *and* more reliable. Eva is revealed as a skilful manipulator of her narrative and thus deserving of the reader's suspicious attention. Yet she is also presented as a grieving mother and spouse, as somebody who has not been traumatising her son, but who has in fact been traumatised *by him*, and thus as somebody deserving of the reader's sympathetic attention.

As Suzanne Keen notices, as readers of *Kevin* we are '[c]onfronting the possibility of baffling mind-blindness, and the lack of self-awareness that Thomas Hardy called nescience,'

which, as she writes, 'challenge[] many easy assumptions about the capacity of narrative fiction to improve readers' emotional and cognitive capacities.'[45] I would agree with such an assessment, yet I would argue that Keen's identification of Kevin, the 'teenaged school-shooter, whose consciousness cannot be penetrated even by the narrator' as the text's primary 'inscrutable subject' somewhat misses the mark.[46] Kevin's motivations do indeed remind a mystery to the reader, but it is actually the 'mind-blind', 'lacking in self-awareness' character of Eva that works towards unsettling ideas of what fiction can do for the reader. By directing her focused attention at Eva's letters, the reader must inevitably conclude that narratives, rather than helping us understand ourselves and others better, are often used to obscure relationships of culpability and responsibility. Even as she bombards us with facts, and presents us with eloquent accounts of her experiences, Eva is the subject that remains 'inscrutable'. It is indeed Eva that About Whom We Need To Talk – only to fail to come to a definitive conclusion. The frame of readerly attention is at the mercy of her focalisation.

The way that Eva presents Franklin's death further drives home the fundamental ambiguity concerning Eva's reliability (and by extension, her responsibility for Kevin's actions) that cannot be resolved through a close reading of the text. Trying to paint Franklin as deluded about his son's true nature until the very end, Eva imagines Franklin's surprise at realising that his son was about to kill him using a crossbow. 'There was such a thing as a good life,' Eva writes, switching into free indirect discourse and voicing what she imagines to be Franklin's internal monologue:

[45] Suzanne Keen, 'Narrative Empathy and Contemporary Anglophone Novels' in TK ed. By Sibylle Baumbach, p. 60.

[46] Ibid.

> It was possible to be a good dad, to put in the weekends and the picnics and the bedtime stories, and so to raise a decent, stalwart son. This was America. And you had done everything right. Ergo, this could not be happening.
>
> So for a single, deadly moment this overweening conviction – what you wanted to see – fatally interposed itself. It is possible that your cerebrum even managed to reconfigure the image, to remix the sound track [...] This masterful remake may not have lasted more than a second or two before it corrupted, as a frozen frame will blister and crenellate before a hot projection lamp. (*Kevin,* 454-5)

By clinging to the 'ferocious conviction that a happy family cannot be a mere myth' (*Kevin,* 353), Franklin-as-imagined-by-Eva creates a deliberate 'interposition' that prevents him from empathising with his son. Unable to 'reconfigure' the image that he has of his son, he is doomed to watch his framing of reality disintegrate before a 'hot projection lamp'. Yet it is the text's final moment of irony that, of course, we are not reading Franklin's 'masterful remake' of the story; we are reading Eva's. Eva's conjecture that her and Franklin's impeding divorce – a divorce that is crucially instantiated by their fundamental disagreements about their son – leads Kevin to take the drastic action of killing his least favourite parent is convenient for her; yet her assertion that Kevin preferred her own 'cold, suspicious, resentful, accusatory, and aloof' nature over what she calls 'Dad, the Dupe' cannot be verified (*Kevin,* 410). Ultimately, the person whose framing of her own (and the reader's) attention might 'blister and crenellate' once examined from the perspective of 'projection' is Eva. The text does not definitively answer the question whether Eva is merely projecting her own inability to attend to her son onto Franklin.

For example, her use of the image of a 'Samsonite suitcase' to describe Franklin's attention, reveals that Eva is equally influenced by a capitalist logic (the suitcase is branded)

and similarly defined by her professional persona (she travels for a living). Capitalising on habits of attention that she herself describes as a commitment to both the 'far flung and obscenely specific', Eva recognises that she 'so mixed and matched the planet that you sometimes worried I had no commitments to anything or anywhere' (*Kevin,* 104). Eva defines herself against the perspective of Franklin, whose professional eye is decidedly fixed on the local. As Eva puts it, 'I'd gone on an adventure abroad while you were searching suburban New Jersey for a tumbledown garage for Black and Decker.' (*Kevin*, 27) The wide focus of Eva'a aspirational, cosmopolitan attention is juxtaposed with Franklin's much narrower lens of American consumer culture. The camera lens and the act of travelling are pitted against each other, yet ultimately, they both fail: Franklin fails to capture Kevin accurately, and even as she attends to the 'obscenely specific', Eva struggles to imaginatively depart from herself. The text's central romantic couple, then, distorts and thereby critiques ideas of empathetic contraction and expansion. Whether the reader aligns herself with Franklin's focused frame of attention, or with Eva's widely cast net, she is denied insight into the workings of Kevin's mind either way.

'Better than a facelift of valium': Empathy as a failed antidote

While the character of Franklin illustrates how 'narrow' fantasies of childhood and masculine success interfere with his perspective-taking abilities, Eva herself comes to stand in for the commodification of 'mind-expanding' experiences, including empathy. As the author Leslie Jamison highlights, empathy is often conceptualised as an act of travelling:

> Empathy comes from the Greek *empatheia* – *em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling) – a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person's pain as you'd

> enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: *What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?*[47]

Eva introduces herself as an individual that routinely travels as part of her job. However, even this literal border crossing is something she undertakes despite herself, since she confesses that she 'can't recall a single trip abroad that, up against it, I have truly wanted to take, that I haven't in some way dreaded and desperately wanted to get out of' (*Kevin*, 36). In this context, Eva likens herself to her severely agoraphobic mother, suggesting that she ultimately sees herself as somebody who is emotionally shut in and not able to 'enter another person's pain' (*Kevin*, 35-6) .[48] Fittingly, the 'queries' that Eva brings to her travels are much more prosaic and business-minded than Jamison's; Eva does not focus on 'the laws' of the country but spends her time wondering if 'Yorkshire youth hostels provide kitchen facilities' (*Kevin*, 83). Her career as a writer is marked by a pronounced ennui, and Eva understands herself as well as her target audience as jaded individuals who are turning to travel to alleviate boredom. By extension, having to put herself in the shoes of her own child is reconfigured as a form of affective 'travel' that might help her escape the 'monotonous' 'world in my head': '"Motherhood," I condensed in the park. "Now that is a foreign country."' (*Kevin*, 21-2) As Eva recalls at a later point, a family friend

> had commended children as a marvellous antidote for jadedness; he said that you get to reappreciate the world through their awestruck eyes and everything that you were once tired of suddenly looks vibrant and new. Well, the cure-all had sounded terrific, better than a facelift or a prescription for Valium. But I am disheartened to report that

[47] Jamison, p. 6.

[48] The role of the Armenian genocide, as well as the impact of intergenerational trauma on the narrator's ability to attend to other people's pain are compelling lines of analysis that are beyond the scope of this chapter.

> whenever I saw the world through Kevin's eyes, it tended to appear unusually dreary. Through Kevin's eyes the whole world looked like Africa, people milling and scrounging and squatting and lying down to die. (*Kevin*, 138-9)

The 'cure-all' of empathy, of being able to see the world through a child's eyes, is here reconfigured as a mere product in an ever-expanding wellness market, on par with a facelift or anti-anxiety medication. Eva's perspective here offers a biting critique of the commodification of empathy, linking the search for 'vibrant and new' modes of attention to the superficiality and excess of American consumer culture. Empathy becomes part of an endless and futile quest for distraction from an existence that leaves the individual 'spiritually ravenous' (*Kevin*, 302).

Kevin severely disrupts the 'promise' of empathy by describing both its narrator and its subject as 'starved' creatures who are resistant to any kind of attentive intervention. As Eva notes, Kevin's teachers are keen

> to diagnose our little underachiever as one more fashionable victim of attention deficit disorder. They were determined to find something mechanically wrong with him, because broken machines can be fixed. It was easier to minister to passive incapacity than to tackle the more frightening matter of fierce, crackling disinterest. (*Kevin*, 303)

To ask Kevin to fix his 'broken' attention is ignorant of the fact that it is not actually his concentration that is the problem, but his genuine 'disinterest' in the well-being of others. As such, *Kevin* is highly sceptical of espousing 'focus' as a means of combatting sociopathic behaviour. After all, 'Kevin's powers of attention were substantial – witness his painstaking preparations for Thursday' (*Kevin*, 301). The text here shows that solutions at the level of individual attention are unable to address widespread societal problems such as the prevalence of school shootings. Even as it is couched in the narrative of a mother who is

potentially concealing the extent of her culpability from herself as well as others, Eva's criticism here is incisive: there is something ridiculous about the 'now fashionable revenge-of-the-nerds interpretation of these incidents, which were now meant to teach us not stricter gun control but concern for the agonies of the underage outcast' (*Kevin*, 336).

The text's harsh critique of the 'empathy as an antidote' flies in the face of Simon Baron-Cohen's contention that empathy is a means of understanding – and potentially fixing – the problem of human cruelty. As he writes in his monograph *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, 'My main goal is to understand human cruelty, replacing the unscientific term 'evil' with the scientific term 'empathy'.[49] Eva parodies the contemporary antidote of imaginative perspective-taking, describing her 'incredulous smirk' in response to a fellow mother's request to prevent Kevin from bullying by teaching him about empathy:

> "Do you want us to *talk to him*?" […] "Tell him to be *sensitive to the feelings of others* and to *remember the Golden Rule*?" […] "Or maybe my husband could have a *man-to-man chat*, and teach our son that a *real man* isn't cruel and aggressive, but a *real man* is gentle and compassionate?" (*Kevin*, 355, original emphases)

Here, empathy is reduced to a series of empty phrases, which, as Miller notes, reflect the text's nihilistic assertion that 'those boundaries and rules which regulate the contrivances of society, culture, and identity' are 'artifice' that obscure the violence of a partriarchal society.[50]

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[49] Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, p. xi

[50] Miller, p. 488

'I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer': The ethics of attention in Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2009)

In an interview with *The Guardian,* Emma Donoghue highlights her desire to write a novel that does not devote much space to understanding, let alone attempting to build a relationship with the violent representatives of a deeply patriarchal society. As she points out about her novel's villain, the character of Old Nick that is loosely based on Josef Fritzl: '[o]nce he's arrested he disappears, because I refuse to be that interested in him.' She explains that '[a]s a society we've given disproportionate attention to the psychopaths – the average thriller is about a psychopath who wants to rape and chop up a woman. I wanted to focus on how a woman could create normal love in a box.'[51]

In her attempt to represent such love, Donoghue takes the idea of intensive mothering to an extreme. Her name reduced to just one syllable, 'Ma' is trapped in a twelve-by-twelve foot garden shed, and she has had no choice but to give birth to two children, one of whom is stillborn. The surviving child, Jack, is the narrator of the novel. Thus, the eponymous room is a particularly literal metaphor of the subjugation of women at the hand of a violent, patriarchal system – at the same time, it comes to stand for the ways in which the 'room' of the novel manipulates the reader's scope of attention. For more than 200 pages, the plot revolves around Ma and Jack's everyday life in the shed. Jack documents their meticulously regimented daily routine, which includes meals, baths, exercise, games, TV, reading, and conversation. By redirecting attention towards the quotidian, the novel depicts an innocent and childish perception of reality, a perception that is in some ways the opposite of Kevin's nihilism. Like Shriver, Donoghue explores the workings of empathy at the heart of limit

[51] Crown, n.p.

events – yet the reality Donoghue envisions differs quite significantly from Shriver's. As Donoghue herself puts it,

> I found Shriver's book very inspiring (…) Every parent has those moments where they look at their child and think, 'There's a demon in those eyes and no one can see it but me!'. I could see how she extrapolated from that. With *Room*, I was trying to extrapolate from those moments where, as a parent, you think, 'I've been stuck in this room playing with this doll for years!'[52]

Unlike Shriver, then, Donoghue is not primarily interested in the workings of shame – the 'no one can see it but me' – but in the idea of 'stuckness' and how it relates to literary as well as moral attention. As *Room* suggests, to be a 'good' mother entails being able to escape the repetitive routines of intensive mothering and to start *disattending* to the child.

The Good Enough Mother vs The Reader on Whom Nothing Is Lost

I read Donoghue's representation of Jack's perspective as an implicit comment on Martha Nussbaum's conceptualisation of the novelist as an 'object-relations psychoanalyst'.[53] On one level, Donoghue acts in this capacity, facilitating the very 'leisurely access' that Shriver's Franklin erroneously assumes he has to Kevin's mind; Donoghue shows how Jack 'evolves into the complexity of adulthood in open view' (*Kevin*, 137). In Nussbaum's model, the reader grasps this evolution through her focused, 'enchanted' attention. However, *Room*'s engagement with maternal attention on both the level of plot and of focalisation ultimately complicates the role that Nussbaum's model assigns to the reader. Nicholas Dames explains

[52] Crown, n.p.

[53] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 7.

that Nussbaum's understanding of the novel as a training ground for 'ethically valuable cognitive habits depends to a large degree on the separation of novel-reading from other experiences of consumption and other practices of everyday life.'[54] Donoghue's text undermines this artificial separation, highlighting starkly that, somewhat ironically, a reader's ideal attention might be closer to that of the 'good enough' parent so central to the object relations model that animates Nussbaum's account of the emotions.

As Nussbaum writes in *Upheavals of Thought*, reading (canonical) novels can help us understand others' emotions as their 'intense and even obsessive focusing' on the objects to which they are attached, objects in the face of whose uncontrollability they feel intensely vulnerable.[55] This conceptualisation of emotions as value judgments that reveal the importance of others for the individual's well-being is grounded in a particular understanding of childhood development. Basing her account on the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's work, Nussbaum traces how in the course of a normal childhood, a child's initial fusion with the primary caretaker is gradually replaced with a dynamic, interdependent relationship that can tolerate lapses of total responsiveness and attention. That is, the child matures through exposure to a caregiver that demonstrates 'good enough' rather than perfect attention:

> The parents' (or other caregivers') ability to meet the child's omnipotence with suitably responsive and stable care creates a framework within which trust and interdependence may thus gradually grow: the child will gradually relax its

[54] Dames, p. 18.

[55] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 2

omnipotence, its demand to be attended to constantly, once it understands that others can be relied on and it will not be left in a state of utter helplessness.[56]

In *Room*, we meet a child who, both by virtue of his imprisonment and of his stage of cognitive development, has an unusually strong attachment to his mother. This attachment leads to an effacement of the mother's identity. In the most basic sense, the mother's presence in the text is diminished because she is not the focaliser; she can only be narrated through her child's highly ego-centric point of view. Jack's 'omnipotence' and expectation to be 'attended to constantly' dominates the early sections of the novel. *Room* opens on Jack's fifth birthday and zooms in on a present that the mother has made for her child. She gifts him a portrait that she has drawn watching him sleep. Through Jack's rendering of dialogue, we find out that Jack does not enjoy his likeness:

"What's up, Jack? You don't like it?"

"Not – when you're on at the same time I'm off." (*Room*, 5)

Jack cannot appreciate the gesture because it reminds him of his mother's autonomy, of the fact that she can be 'on' while he is 'off'. In short, he is displeased by inklings of an interdependent rather than a fusional relationship with his caregiver. In the first sections of *Room*, then, a sense of unchanging routine and unwavering maternal attention is gradually unsettled by the mother's preoccupation with things other than Jack's immediate wants and needs, leading to what Nussbaum may call the 'upheavals of thought' characteristic of the child's possessive assertion of dependency on the now increasingly more unreliable mother.

[56] Ibid, p. 193.

The first section thus dramatises Jack's having to come to terms with an increase in his mother's face 'going blank' (*Room*, 20). This is the child's language for his mother's recurring depressive episodes which leave her immobilised and unable to attend to him. The reader has what I would call an 'empathetic advantage' over the child narrator in the sense that she understands that the mother's depression is caused by the experience of having been imprisoned and sexually abused for years. Through Jack's eyes, though, the 'blank faces' and the 'leaking of her eyes' (ibid.) initially only register as lapses of attention towards him. The mother's outward expressions of emotions have not yet been firmly connected to her internal experience; they are not yet understood as indicative of her own frustrated needs.

The affective dissonance that I felt upon having to constantly switch between Jack's naïve *neediness* and Ma's obliquely rendered *desperation* prevented me from reading the text as an uplifting representation of the value of a mother's sacrificial, remedial love. Indeed, *Room* starkly illustrates that the kind of intensive mothering that Ma performs is borne out of desperate necessity by a severely traumatised mother whose basic needs for social connection have not been met. Ma's obsessive lavishing of attention on the child and her attempts at introducing a sense of tightly regulated normality that entirely revolves around the child's well-being can be read as a crucial element of a 'protective counternarrative', something 'forged of and in the traumatic space of their confinement'.[57] This counternarrative consists in the lie that the world outside of 'Room' does not exist. Jack does not understand that his mother has needs, or that these needs are being curtailed in the most brutal of ways, because his mother has decided to radically remove all painful reminders of the reality of her former freedom. As Kathleen Costello-Sullivan points out,

[57] Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018), p. 93.

> Ma is able to construct the alternate world called "Room"—one that is self-contained, "real," whereas the Outside World is unreal and separated by a boundary that cannot be readily crossed, like the boundary between the atmosphere and outer space.[58]

What is interesting about Costello-Sullivan's perceptive analysis of the text's representation of the 'boundary that cannot readily be crossed' is that it neatly encapsulates one of the main problems associated with the world of Room: Jack lives in a world with little to no empathy. The rigid border erected by Ma leaves the child unable to imagine other people's lives; the barrier to empathy is so fundamental in that the child does not even know that anybody besides himself, his Ma, and their captor, named 'Old Nick' exist.

While Nussbaum suggests that the developing child learns that 'people other than herself have legitimate demands', and that 'her own needs are not the center of the universe' through relaxing her need for the adult's constant attention, it is just such focused, sustained attention that her ideal reader needs to lavish on a fictional text in order to keep on practising this key insight in adulthood.[59] With reference to her own mother, Nussbaum comments on the importance of her younger self's recognition that she was in 'competition for her [mother's] attention against other distractions (her gardening, my father)'.[60] Yet when it comes to reading, 'daily life, with its routines, its inattentions, its patches of deadness' needs to be abandoned in order to make way for 'the more concentrated attention that produces and animates the literary text'.[61] Donoghue's text challenges the artificial separation of daily life and the literary text, suggesting that the tenet for raising a psychologically healthy child equally applies to the reading experience: it has to strike a 'balance between indifference and

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[58] Costello-Sullivan, p. 97.

[59] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 215.

[60] Ibid., pp. 211-12.

[61] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 9.

intrusiveness, attention and the giving of space'[62]. This balance is particularly important and acquires a certain ethical weight given the subject matter of the novel. The reader has to accept that she cannot 'intrude' on the mother's emotional 'space' through her consumption of the novel; the text does not make the mother's traumatic experiences accessible. As Donoghue herself puts it in an interview, in writing *Room*, her 'conscience wasn't troubled […] I knew that by sticking to the child's-eye perspective there'd be nothing voyeuristic about it.'[63]

In fact, the text encourages the reader to move her focus away from the suffering mother and to indeed witness how Jack begins to practise *Einfühlung* by attributing personalities and moods to inanimate objects. The text tracks Jack's emotional dependence on a radically limited set of objects. Thus, we encounter Wardrobe, Bed, Skylight, Lamp, Rug, Rocker, Mirror, Shelf, 'Meltedy Spoon with the white all blobby on his handle when he leaned on the pan of boiling pasta by accident.' (*Room*, 7). Objects are anthropomorphised so as to reflect their importance in Jack's emotional life: 'I flat the chairs and put them beside Door against Clothes Horse. He always grumbles and says there's no room but there's plenty if he stands up really straight.' (*Room*, 9) As Sarah Crown writes about *Room*, '[i]ts objects, which he names as friends – Plant, Skylight, Rug – swell in our minds, too, assuming far greater proportions than the physical space would appear to allow'[64] The observation that the novel encourages the perception of strange or distorted proportions in the reader aligns with the cognitive literary scholar Marco Caracciolo's analysis. It is Caracciolo's contention that Jack's 'cognitive strangeness' causes the reader to experience what he calls an in-going and an out-going defamiliarisation. His proposal that 'the minds of strange-enough characters'

[62] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 188.

[63] Crown, n.p.

[64] Crown, n.p.

like Jack 'have the potential to reveal the workings of narrative empathy' warrants further scrutiny. Characters like Jack, Caracciolo argues, 'disrupt perspective-taking in a way that can serve as a magnifying lens in investigating empathetic processes at large'.[65]

What I would like to propose to substantiate Caracciolo's argument is that Room investigates the processes of *narrative* empathy: While Jack attributes feelings to the objects in 'Room', he cannot undergo a literary education as envisioned by Nussbaum because the basic assumption that literature and TV refer to real people, objects, and events is radically suspended. Narrative empathy is defamiliarised through a removal of narrative's metaphorical power. For example, Jack reminds us that

> Women aren't real like Ma is, and girls and boys not either. Men aren't real except Old Nick, and I'm not actually sure if he's real for real. Maybe half? He brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he's not human like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. Maybe Door makes him up with a beep beep and the air changes. I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer. (*Room*, 22)

Jack's inability to apprehend metaphorical relationships foregrounds the ability of language to 'make things real'. By placing her child protagonist in a traumatic space, Donoghue deliberately disrupts the normal processes of linguistic signification that are indispensable to an empathetic reading experience. Through Jack's idiosyncratic fusion of signifier and signified, narrative empathy's fundamental attentive 'gap' is highlighted: narrative empathy asks us to bridge the gap between the words on the page and the people, or types of people, they refer to. Jack's inability to bridge that gap because of his

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[65] Marco Caracciolo, *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers' Engagement with Characters* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), p. 185

uncompromisingly literal understanding of the world may thus induce a type of meta-empathy in the reader. She is encouraged to reflect on the ways in which empathy does not only rely on a focus on the literary representation, but on an attention that is directed outwards again, towards her knowledge of the world. As such, the text celebrates the split or divided attention of reading.

Defamiliarisation/Demotherisation

As Caracciolo has argued, Ma and Jack's subsequent escape from Room requires Jack to undergo a process of radical defamiliarisation that mirrors the 'ingoing defamiliarisation' that the reader has had to go through by adjusting to Jack's skewed world view.[66] For example, Jack reacts to a psychiatrists assessment that he is now finally safe by remarking, 'I don't say because of manners, but actually he's got it backwards. In Room I was safe and Outside is the scary' (*Room*, 273). The text thus continues to ask us to interrogate how we routinely attend to the world, and in particular, how we use narratives to make sense of the objects and people around us. When encountering other human beings for the first time, Jack notices that 'They all look like the persons on the medical planet, I have to keep remembering they're real' (*Room*, 203). In adjusting to his newfound freedom, Jack slowly begins to understand the meaning of metaphorical relations:

> I try biting myself, my shoulder, it hurts. […] I think about all the kids in the world, how they're not TV they're real, they eat and sleep and pee and poo like me. If I had

[66] Caracciolo, p. 195.

something sharp and pricked them they'd bleed, if I tickled them they'd laugh. I'd like to see them but it makes me dizzy that there's so many and I'm only one. (285-6)

Having abandoned the 'safe' environment of Room, Jack has to contend with the 'dizziness' of adopting a double- or indeed multi-minded focus of attention. The realisation that he is indeed not the 'only one' that needs to be held in his mother's as well as his own conscious awareness tellingly comes with the realisation that others can be 'pricked'; that is, with the realisation that the boundaries between self and other are indeed permeable and point to a shared human vulnerability.

Becoming aware of the function of language to represent and establish relations of equivalence, Jack makes the erroneous assumption that others, including objects, are vulnerable in the same way that he is. For example, he observes the vending machine at a police station with a focus on themes of entrapment and escape: 'The captain shows us the way past the amazing machine and I touch the glass nearly at the chocolate bars. I wish I knowed the code to let them out' (*Room*, 200). Similarly, when he becomes aware of the fact that his mother and himself have been moved to a psychiatric facility that specialises in the treatment of people affected by severe trauma, he assumes that their experiences must resemble his own:

"Was he in a shed too?" I ask.

Dr. Clay shakes his head.

"What happened to him?"

"Everyone's got a different story." (*Room*, 243)

In his attempt to attend to the narratives of 'real' people, Jack not only needs to get to grips with the concept of difference, but with the fact that distraction and inattention are a feature of human interaction. As he notes,

> Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear. (*Room*, 358)

The text here dramatises Jack's reluctant understanding that the intensive mothering performed by his mother is an exception, not the norm. The expectation of being attended to constantly is challenged by his observation of adults' attention being occupied by 'coffee' and 'other adults' rather than the 'small kid crying'. Indeed, Jack's process of radical defamiliarisation ultimately entails an experience of almost complete *demotherisation*, in the sense that his mother's attention is almost completely withdrawn from him. In the context of social science research, demotherisation refers to a 'new conceptual tool' that 'convey[s] the extent to which mothers can transfer part of their caregiving responsibilities to the state, grand-parents, their partner, or paid caregivers.'[67] Indeed, the responsibilities of caregiving are transferred, with Jack's grandmother, his step-grandfather, as well as his psychiatrist Dr Clay taking care of Jack. Divided attention, in the sense of shared responsibility, emerges as the central theme of the second half of the novel. In keeping with the text's distanced, oblique

[67] Sophie Mathieu, 'From the Defamilialization to the "Demotherization" of Care Work.' *Social Politics*. Vol. 23, no.4, (2016), pp.576-591 (p. 577).

attention to Jack's mother's experiences, the child does not dwell on the fact that the reason for his mother's lack of attention is her need for recovery after a failed suicide attempt.

I read the mother's suicide attempt as a particularly literal expression of the idea that the practice of intensive mothering needs to 'die' in order for the child to flourish in society. The novel subsequently traces Jack's gradual understanding that his mother is not there to attend to his every need, but that she exists as an independent person. Thus, in conversation with his psychiatrist Jack wonders how he is supposed to relate to his mother during her absence:

> But what I actually meant was, maybe I'm a human but I'm a me-and-Ma as well. I don't know a word for us two. Roomers? "Is she coming to get me soon?"' (*Room*, 342)

Jack understands that his mother's responsibility to 'get him' and thus attend to him again is tied to their hitherto shared identity as 'Roomers'. Now that his identity in the outside world is more complex – he is both 'me-and-Ma' as well as 'human' – Jack's claims on his mother's attention are less concrete. His response to this destabilisation is, on the whole, remarkably calm. In her review of the book, Susanna Rustin notes that *Room* is highly unconvincing as a realist representation, writing that

> [c]ompletely missing from the prose is any sense of panic, disorientation, depression, the nameless terror conjured up by a string of associations "like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains" described in *Jane*

Eyre. Donoghue's reader is asked to believe that Jack is, as his mother says at one point, "OK. More or less." Although I was impressed by her book, I couldn't.[68]

I would argue that the representation of a robust 'OKness' in Jack's character achieves two things. Firstly, it ties in with Donoghue's careful avoidance of the appropriation of the mother-victim's experiences. Secondly, Jack's 'happy' understanding of his experiences forces the reader to have a double-minded focus of attention – the text continually references more sensationalist ways of representing 'nameless terror' alongside Jack's patient 'wonder' at the world, both inside and outside of Room. For example, through Jack's eyes we find out about how mother and child are represented on TV: 'the bachelor loner converted the garden shed into an impregnable twenty-first-century dungeon. The despot's victims have an eerie pallor and appear to be in a borderline catatonic state after the long nightmare of their incarceration'; similarly, Jack finds himself described as the 'malnourished boy, unable to walk, is seen here lashing out convulsively at one of his rescuers' (*Room*, 205). The contrast between news reportage and Jack's internal narrativisation of events creates a distinctive dissonance; a dissonance that, I would argue, forces the reader to reflect on the ways in which she expects life in captivity to be represented and made affectively salient. *Room* refuses to represent Jack as a suffering victim.

'It's like a crater, a hole where something happened'

In a manner that is reminiscent of *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, the text refuses to give the reader empathetic access to the violent perpetrator. Yet Donoghue takes this refusal

[68] Susanna Rustin, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/07/emma-donoghue-room-booker-review Accessed on 11 April 2022, n.p.

further than Shriver. She deliberately diverts as much attention away from the perpetrator as possible: he remains even more hidden from the text than Ma, who only appears in dialogue with Jack. In this context, Donoghue's inspiration for Old Nick, Joseph Fritzl, remains a jumping-off point as opposed to a fully fleshed template. In so doing, Donoghue, too, offers a comment on Baron-Cohen's model of evil as 'zero degrees of empathy'. Baron-Cohen discusses Fritzl's crimes in detail, ending his discussion with a crucial rhetorical question, 'How could a father treat his daughter as an object and deprive her and three of his children/grandchildren of their right to freedom in this way? *Where was his empathy*?'[69] As Baron-Cohen implies, Fritzl's empathy is entirely absent, turning him into a representative of the sociopathic category of negative zero degrees of empathy. In a telling conversation between mother and child that takes place while they are still trapped in Room, Ma describes their captor Old Nick as a man devoid of empathy:

Ma stands up with her plate, she's nearly shouting. "He looks human, but there's nothing inside."

I'm confused. "Like a robot?"

"Worse."

"One time there was this robot on Bob the Builder – "

Ma butts in. "You know your heart, Jack?"

"*Bam bam*." I show her on my chest.

"No, but your feeling bit, where you're sad or scared or laughing or stuff?"

That's lower down, I think it's in my tummy.

"Well, he hasn't got one."

[69] Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, p. 8, original emphasis.

"A tummy?"

"A feeling bit," says Ma.

I'm looking at my tummy. "What does he have instead?"

She shrugs. "Just a gap."

Like a crater? But that's a hole where something happened. What happened?

(*Room*, 139)

As Ma puts it, Old Nick has 'nothing inside' and possesses a 'gap' instead of a 'feeling bit'. The dialogue initially betrays the child's literal understanding of a gap in Old Nick's chest, equating the man with a robot he has seen on TV. Yet Jack's internal monologue reconfigures the mother's idea of a gap as a 'crater', thereby associating a lack of empathy with a moment of original trauma, with the result of a violent collision. Jack wonders, 'What happened?' Yet the text never answers this question, asking the reader to keep on attending to the 'gap' itself. It therefore deliberately fails to dwell on the absence of empathy as an explanation for violence, while also suggesting that for Jack to grow into a 'healthy' child, he does not need to develop a laser-sharp focus of attention towards the other. Instead, the boy is shown to adjust well in the absence of intensive mothering and through strategic diversions of attention. To disattend to the other, Donoghue suggests, is just as important as to attend to her, especially when it comes to the successful representation as well as the overcoming of traumatic experiences. Fittingly, the book ends with a repetition of the motif of the crater, this time using it to describe the scene of Ma and Jack's imprisonment. Going back to Room one last time, Jack reappraises his past: 'I look back one more time. It's like a crater, a hole where something happened. Then we go out the door' (*Room*, 401). The text thus ends on a note that re-affirms the text's central message: Jack has not entirely understood the 'something' that happened in Room – yet this is crucial for his ability to move on.

In their interrogation of intensive mothering, both Shriver and Donoghue showcase the idiosyncrasies of focalisation to critique the notion of empathetic focus. By confronting the reader with unreliable or strange narrators, they celebrate the unknowable or ambiguous as a means of navigating the world. More so, they imply that the role of narrative does not lie in an establishment of empathetic access to (fictional) others, but in an awareness of the limits of the frames of our attention. Shriver's text lends itself well as an illustration of the fact that empathy is bound up in (often delusional) narratives of the good life, while Donoghue's text highlights that the promise of empathetic focus and attendant notions of empathetic transparency are often antithetical to sensitive representations of trauma. Literature, these two texts suggest, is not an 'empathy gym', but a '*meta*-empathy' gym that alerts us to the ways in which social contexts determine how we can focus on the other. In the following chapter, I will expand my analysis of the role of social hierarchies as the defining parameter of attention by examining the nature of empathy's focus through the lens of disgust.

2. Attending to the neighbour: Movements of disgust and distraction in Zadie Smith's *NW* and Katharina Hacker's *Die Habenichtse*

In an essay entitled 'Middlemarch and Everybody', Zadie Smith analyses George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as an example of 'that famous Eliot effect, the narrative equivalent of surround sound'. This surround sound, Smith argues, is constitutive of an ethics of idealised attention: as the novel's two main stories are joined, 'like the two hands of a piece for the piano, a contrapuntal structure is set in motion, in which many melodic lines make equal claim to our attention'. Smith observes that Eliot 'seems to focus not simply on those who are most good, or most attractive or even most interesting, but on those who are "there".[1] In this model, an anti-moralising point of view is transmitted from the author to the reader via a multi-perspectival narrative structure that asks for attention to be divided in a democratic, 'equal' manner. In Smith's critical reworking of this nineteenth-century surround sound, her 2012 novel *NW*, those who are 'there' happened to have grown up on the fictional Caldwell council estate in Willesden, London. Katharina Hacker's *Die Habenichtse* (2006) is based on the same narrative conceit: the majority of the stories that make up the novel are spatially anchored in a single street in contemporary North-West London. As such, the novels' structural attention towards the fictional other is both dispersed and focused: multiple focalisers are presented to the reader, yet they converge around the same geographical centre. As David James has argued, the deliberate compression of 'geographical and characterological coordinates' and a confined 'diegetic reach' is characteristic of contemporary literature's cosmopolitan imagination; an imagination that stages the possibility of forming an ethical commitment to global others in the narrative actions of a

[1] Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays.* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p. 29.

distinctively 'local' fiction.[2] Cosmopolitanism denotes 'an attitudinal or dispositional orientation' that demonstrates an openness to divergent cultural experiences and otherness, and both *Die Habenichtse* and *NW* explore this orientation and its limits through encounters in the urban space that explore empathy's relationship to disgust. [3]

As I will argue, both novelists share an interest in the alternating movement of attentional contraction and expansion characteristic of empathy, and they both link it to the tensions inherent in a cosmopolitan ethics of attention. Crucially, I will focus on both texts as a critique of empathy's conceptualisation as an antidote to the emotional and cognitive overload caused by the ubiquitous exposure to (the suffering of) others. Building on the previous chapter's line of argumentation, I not only analyse the problems inherent in the normative expectations of empathy as a narrow, fusional focus, but in the imperative to widen our focus of attention to include the lived experience of others who are not our kin. Sometimes, 'distraction' in the sense of attention's 'dispersal across a grid'[4] should simply be classified as the predicament that Judith Butler calls the 'unwilled proximity to others'; a predicament to which empathy makes us more rather than less susceptible.[5] Furthermore, Smith's text in particular foregrounds that in a global neoliberal economy, disgust might just be a much more efficient response to those affective intrusions that threaten to derail our individual progress and productivity.

My analysis is informed by theories of disgust as developed by Sara Ahmed, Winfried Menninghaus and Sianne Ngai; contemporary scholars that tease out how the disgust

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[2] David James, 'Worlded Localisms: Cosmopolitics Writ Small', in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. by Len Platt, and Sara Upstone. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 47-61 (p. 47).

[3] Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, Vertovec, Steven, and Robin Cohen. 'Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism', in *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*, ed. by Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 1–22 (p. 9; p. 11). p. 9, 11.

[4] North, p. 2.

[5] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 35.

experience can be translated into cultural practices of social demarcation and hierarchisation that challenge a cosmopolitan ideal of a common humanity. The impetus for my argument, however, comes from William Ian Miller's remarks on what distinguishes disgust from contempt. He writes, 'the objects of contempt simply do not merit strong affect; they are noticed only sufficiently so as to know that they are not noticeworthy'.[6] He also notes, '[o]ne can condescend to treat them decently, one may, in rare circumstances, even pity them, but they are mostly invisible or utterly and safely disattendable'.[7] Disgust, like empathy, runs counter to processes of contemptuous indifference; it is a mode of relatedness in which attention is intensely focused on the other. In their representation of disgusting, abject others, the two texts at hand point towards empathy and disgust's similarities, which most crucially hinge on a shared oscillation between incorporation and expulsion, or a fusional and an exclusionary focus of attention. In short, disgust foregrounds the complex dance of attention and distraction idiosyncratic to empathy. As Jesse Graham and others maintain, our moral concern for others consists of two forces, 'with centripetal forces pulling inward, urging greater concern for close others than for distant others' and opposing 'centrifugal forces pushing outward, resisting "drawing the line" anywhere as a form of prejudice and urging egalitarian concern for all regardless of social distance.'[8] By focusing on these two authors' engagement with the opposing forces of centripetal and centrifugal attention, I aim to show that (narrative) empathy is more than just a narrow focus that 'pulls inward'.

I am going to start my discussion of *Die Habenichtse* and *NW* by a close reading of two key passages that describe an encounter with a disgusting other. Both passages function

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[6] William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 215.

[7] Ibid.

[8]Graham, Jesse, Waytz, Adam, Meindl, Peter, Iyer, Ravi, and Young, Liane. "Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces in the Moral Circle: Competing Constraints on Moral Learning." *Cognition* 167 (2017): 58-65, p. 58.

as moments of diegetic meta-empathy: Hacker's Isabelle and Smith's Leah respond to the other's pleas for help – Isabelle climbs over her neighbour's garden wall to attend to a neglected child; Leah responds to a distressed stranger's knock on her door – yet find that their attention cannot be moulded into the appropriate shape of empathetic concern. As empathy interacts with and is threatened to be replaced by disgust, both women are forced to attend to the vagaries of their own attention.

The attentional spotlight of disgust

As Winfried Menninghaus argues, '[t]he fundamental schema of disgust is the experience of a nearness that is not wanted. An intrusive presence, a smell or taste is spontaneously assessed as contamination and forcibly distanced. The theory of disgust, to that extent, is a counterpart – although not a symmetrical one – of the theory of love, desire, and appetite as forms of intercourse with a nearness that is wanted'.[9] Menninghaus here traces the analogy that makes the transition from a food-based, instinctual core disgust to the affective positioning of sociomoral disgust possible: disgust is a visceral reminder that an object or a person should not be near us.[10] We may not ingest something disgusting because it runs the risk of contaminating us. Menninghaus sees 'love, desire, and appetite' as disgust's counterparts, yet concedes that in theorising disgust, a perfectly symmetrical pairing of a 'nearness that is wanted' and 'nearness that is not wanted' is not possible. As Sianne Ngai argues, this asymmetry is due to the indeterminate nature of attraction: 'Even if disgust is

[9] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. Transl. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 3.

[10] See also Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark R. McCauley, 'Disgust', in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. by Ed. Michael Lewis, Jeanette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett. (New York: Guilford, 2010), pp. 757–776 (p. 757).

boiled down to its kernel of repulsion, repulsion itself tends to be a fairly definite response, whereas the parameters of attraction are notoriously difficult to determine and fix'.[11] Indeed, in the sense that it functions as a protection against contamination, 'disgust is never ambivalent about its object' and 'never prone to producing (…) confusions between subject and object'.[12] In short, disgust is one response to the fundamental problem of distraction: the often unwanted blurring of boundaries between self and other.

'Confusions', or the 'obscuring of the subjective-objective boundary'[13] is an affective response to the nearness of others that one of the focalisers of Hacker's *Die Habenichtse* resists for the majority of the sections allocated to her. Hacker's novel consists of 39 numbered sections which are alternately focalised by multiple German and English characters. Isabelle, one of the main focalisers, is a German woman in her early thirties who has recently moved from Berlin to London, and we follow her as she settles into her flat on Lady Margaret Street in Kentish Town. Working as a freelance graphic designer, Isabelle hears disturbing noises coming from the flat next door, which at one point become indicative of domestic violence: 'Isabelle schrie auf, als in der Wohnung nebenan etwas gegen die Wand geschleudert wurde.' ['Isabelle gave a cry as in the house next door something was hurled against the wall.'] (*H,* 151; *H-N,* 173). Despite her outward expressions of upset, Isabelle chooses to ignore the noises and to turn on the radio (*H,* 151; *H-N,* 173). Indeed, Isabelle thus transforms a sound that should connote violence into mere noise, now masked by the sound of the radio: it turns into yet another unwelcome distraction. The other turns into a source of intrusion that negatively affects her productivity; Isabelle actively refuses to link the cries to a human subject worthy of her attention.

[11] Ngai, p. 335.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

Isabelle's decision is significant in that it directly contradicts the importance that the distracting noises are afforded on the plot level. *Die Habenichtse*'s plot is framed by a little girl's arrival and subsequent departure from house number 47. Sara, the person being hurled against the wall, is malnourished and underdeveloped for her age due to severe neglect and abuse on the hands of her alcoholic father: the opening pages of the novel describe the day she and her family move into a flat; the narrative closes as she is taken away in an ambulance. Isabelle's initial judgment of disattendability therefore counters the reader's attentional cues in the broader structure of the novel. This juxtaposition of the focaliser's and the reader's attention functions as the text's most important means of inducing meta-empathy: it highlights that our attention towards others is often directly manipulated by contextual cues beyond our control. Hacker makes the reader take note of the ways in which the text has framed her attention to the suffering of others. What is significant to the reader is merely distracting to Isabelle. Helga Druxes suggests that Isabelle's affective position as a 'stupefied, alienated protagonist[]'who is 'blurrily out of touch with [her] own emotions' is directly related to the fact that she and her husband Jakob are 'German yuppies' and 'materialistic globetrotters'.[14] Belonging to an 'internationally mobile financial manager class', Isabelle and Jakob, she argues, are not 'concerned about the plight of their underclass neighbors'.[15] Druxes' argument is reminiscent of Ulf Hannerz's essay 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture' in which he creates a dichotomy between 'cosmopolitans', the affluent members of an elite that enjoys global mobility and 'locals', who are defined by their socioeconomic and cultural immobility.[16] In *Die Habenichtse*, this idea of cultural 'mobility'

[14] Helga Druxes, 'The Indictment of Neoliberalism and Communism in the Novels of Katharina Hacker, Nikola Richter, Judith Schalansky, and Julia Schoch', in *German Women's Writing in the 21st Century*, ed. by Hester Baer, and Alexandra M. Hill. (Rochester: Camden House, 2015), pp. 154-174 (p. 158; p. 156).

[15] Ibid., p. 15; p. 156.

[16] Ulf Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7.2-3 (1990), 237–251 (p. 238).

is explored through an affective lens. Even though Isabelle is more 'mobile' than Sara, her ability to be *moved* emotionally is severely compromised.

The novel thus cements Isabelle and Sara's diametrically opposed background through a difference in representation of affective depth. All the focalisers are rendered in third-person free indirect discourse, yet while the feelings of the 'blurrily out of touch' Isabelle are rarely voiced (the reader must rely on outward expressions of emotions, such as the cry described above), Sara is overly aware of her emotions. On the afternoon of Isabelle and Sara's first encounter, the reader learns, Sara feels horror: she has been locked out of the house and in a state of hunger-induced hallucination, she has hit her cat Polly with a thick branch, injuring the animal's hind leg and paw. Upon realising what she has done, 'übers Gesicht liefen ihr Tränen, aber sie empfand nichts als Entsetzen, etwas, das kalt und schneidend war, während sie Polly sah, die dahockte, fauchte, als Sara die Arme sinken ließ' ['tears streamed down her face, but she felt only horror, something that was cold and piercing, as she saw Polly crouching there, hissing when Sara lowered her arms'] (*H, 225; H-N*, 249). In her review of the novel, Andrea Diener suggests that Hacker's text is littered with 'pitiable' characters. As she suggests, the text's close attention to the suffering of minorities – in this case a severely abused working-class girl – with the aim of evoking pity for their predicament runs the risk of reducing their identity to a position of victimhood. [17] Yet I see the text's representation of pain – Sara and ultimately Isabelle herself experience physical and emotional violence that is described in graphic detail – as an (at times heavy-handed) comment on the shock value needed to penetrate the privileged adult focaliser's habitual indifference. To be 'out of touch' with others is a default position for Hacker's characters,

[17] Andrea Diener, 'Die Frau ohne Eigenschaften', *Literaturwelt. Das Blog*, 2 February 2007, at <http://blog.literaturwelt.de/archiv/die-frau-ohne-eigenschaften/> [accessed 23 Mar 2019], n.p.

and it is a position that can only be challenged by the proximity of outsized, highly 'touching' displays of emotion. Sarah's victimhood needs to be firmly established for her to become an object that is finally worthy of Isabelle's attention. The text highlights that Isabelle is desensitised to the suffering of others and contextualises her lack of feeling as a routine response to the media culture of the early 2000s. In particular, mediated images of 9/11 and the ensuing Iraq war find their way into the sections focalised by Isabelle. Tellingly, the radio station that Isabelle turns on to drown out the noise of Sara's body hitting a wall is reporting on a 'Wüstensturm, in dem man keinen Meter weit sah, und so wurden die Spuren verwischt, *embedded journalism*, lautete das Schlagwort, aber man erfuhr doch nicht, was geschah' ['Desert Storm, you couldn't see a yard in front of you, and so all traces were obliterated, "embedded journalism" was the buzzword, but you still didn't get to know what was going on'] (*H*, 151; *H-N*, 173). Ostensibly designed to facilitate immersion, the 'embedded journalism' fails to convey anything to Isabelle, and all traces of human suffering are merely 'muddled in the sand'.

Sara and Isabelle's first face-to-face encounter is presented in stark contrast to Isabelle's mindless, distracted consumption of the news. Yet as we find out from the point-of-view of Sara, to finally be noteworthy to Isabelle also closely relates to being shamed. Reminiscent of Lionel Shriver's choice to foreground a shaming gaze, Hacker's linking of empathy and shame in the ensuing scene reveals that to pay close attention to another person's suffering can be a highly fraught act that cements rather than bridges social differences. Sara, we find out, notices that she has been watched by Isabelle, whose window looks out onto the garden in which the girl is trapped. This causes Sara to vomit: 'Dann beugte sie den Kopf und erbrach sich, einmal und noch einmal, gelben, bitteren Schleim, der im Gras einen gelben Fleck machte und bitter roch (…) [sie] wagte nicht, zu schluchzen, schluckte die Tränen, kauerte sich ein bißchen weg von dem Gestank, hob den Kopf nicht

mehr. Gleich würde die Scham kommen.' ['[s]he lowered her head and was sick, once and then again: yellow, bitter slime that made a yellow patch on the grass and gave off a bitter smell. (…) Not daring to sob, she swallowed her tears and shifted herself slightly away from the stench, not raising her head. The moment of shame was about to come.'] (H, 225; *H-N*, 249-50). Sara's vomit expresses both the guilt of having hurt the animal and the anticipation of shame. Essentially, she has been observed in a state of both vulnerability and transgression.

At this point, the narrative switches focalisers, representing Isabelle's point of view again. Hacker implies that only the sight of shameful victimhood can induce action in Isabelle, causing her to change her affective position from that of a passive observer to an active participant in the empathetic encounter. Thus, Isabelle spontaneously decides to climb her garden wall to reach the girl, metaphorically blurring the boundaries between self and other. The climb proves to be difficult and Isabelle slips:

> (…) ein stechender Schmerz, der sich zwischen den Rippen hindurch bis in die Lunge hinein fortsetzte, nahm ihr fast den Atem, er packte sie, raffte beinahe wohltuend zusammen, was die letzten Monate verstreut gewesen war, vage Schrecken und Hoffnungen und Enttäuschungen, die in einem weitmaschigen Netz hängenblieben. Es war zu weitmaschig, die Agentur, ihre Ehe, ihre Zeichnungen, London, Alistair und Jim, die Geräusche aus der Nachbarwohnung. (*H*, 226-7)
>
> … a stabbing pain that passed between her ribs and right into her lung nearly took her breath away; it seized hold of her and, in a way that was almost a relief, drew together the scattered sensations of the last few months, the vague alarms and hopes and disappointments that had got caught up in a wide-meshed net. Too wide: the

> agency, her marriage, her drawings, London, Alistair and Jim, the noises from the house next door. (*H-N*, 251-2)

Hacker here implies that Sara's victimhood is indeed crucial to evoke a change in Isabelle's openness to the communicability of affect. While her attention up until that point has been a 'wide-meshed net', made up of 'scattered sensations', her turning towards the vulnerable girl leads to a 'drawing together' of internal and external stimuli. Pain 'seizes hold of her', blocking processes of diffusion. This 'relief' is not only instantiated by physical pain but by the 'pull' of the vomiting, disgusting other now too close to ignore. As Sara Ahmed writes,

> Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects. (…) The object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted. As a result, while disgust *over takes* the body, it also *takes over* the object that apparently gives rise to it. The body is over taken precisely insofar as it takes the object over, in a temporary holding onto the detail of the surface of the object: its texture; its shape and form; how it clings and moves. It is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so "offensive" that it sickens and over takes the body.[18]

Disgust is essentially a state of hyperfocus, a 'temporary holding onto the detail of the surface'. Illustrating Isabelle's hyperfocus, the text scans the girl's body and her surroundings through the attentive lens of disgust:

[18] Ahmed, p. 85.

> Da lag das Mädchen, zusammengekrümmt. Es trug eine Art Trainingshose, darüber ein nicht sehr sauberes T-Shirt, das zu klein war. Isabelle betrachtete den Streifen Kinderfleisch ohne Freundlichkeit. Der Garten war übersät von Müll, altem Spielzeug, auf der Terrasse standen Bierflaschen und Küchengerät, eine Pfanne, einen Putzeimer entdeckte sie. Auswurf, Tüten, voller Müll, und das Kind stellte sich tot wie ein Tier, der Stock lag noch neben ihm im Gras. (*H*, 227)
>
> There the girl lay, doubled up on the ground. She was wearing some kind of tracksuit bottoms and a grubby T-shirt that was too small for her. Isabelle's eyes rested without sympathy on the bare strip of childish flesh. The garden was strewn with rubbish and old toys, the terrace cluttered with beer bottles and kitchen equipment – she could make out a frying pan and a household bucket. Detritus, bags crammed with waste, and the child was shamming dead, like an animal, the stick lying beside her in the grass. (*H-N*, 252)

In this passage Isabelle takes in the 'grubby' surface of the girl's clothing and stays focused on 'the bare strip of childish flesh', a perception that is 'without sympathy'. Helen Atkins's translation here slightly deviates from the original 'ohne Freundlichkeit', 'without friendliness', seemingly to drive home the point that Isabelle's position at this point precludes a 'feeling for' let alone an empathetic identification with the girl. Isabelle's gaze aligns the girl with 'rubbish', 'detritus' and 'waste', ultimately likening her to an animal, thereby illustrating disgust's rejection of the very animal vulnerability that incited Isabelle's interest in the first place. Not only is Sara turned animal, she is also feigning death, becoming as corpse-like as possible. However, before disgust can entirely 'over take' Isabelle's body, to use Ahmed's terms, Isabelle shifts her attention back to her sense perceptions, noticing the cold rain on the surface of her own body: 'Es hörte nicht auf zu nieseln, sie fröstelte.' ('It was

still drizzling; she felt chilly') (ibid.) Speech is further interrupting the disgust experience, demanding that the girl become human again, '–Steh endlich auf! Hatte sie laut gerufen?' ['For goodness' sake get up! Had she said that out loud?'] (ibid). In a movement that mirrors the hyperfocus of Isabelle's disgusted gaze, Sara obliges, watching Isabelle with 'intense concentration': 'Jedenfalls drehte das Mädchen den Kopf zur Seite und beobachtete sie, hielt jede Bewegung, jede Einzelheit in Isabelles Gesicht mit ihren Augen fest, angespannt, konzentriert.' ['At all events the girl had turned her head sideways and was watching her, registering every movement, every detail of Isabelle's face, with intense concentration.'] (ibid.)

Paul Bloom maintains that '[d]isgust is the opposite of empathy', explaining that 'as empathy leads to compassion in many (but not all) circumstances, disgust usually (but not always) leads to repulsion. Empathy triggers an appreciation of another's personhood; disgust leads you to construe the other as diminished and revolting, lacking humanity'. [19] Indeed, Isabelle is repulsed and understands the starved, highly distraught Sara as a being whose humanity is compromised. Yet she still turns towards her: 'Was für eine Idiotie, dachte sie wiederwillig, zögerte, dann beugte sie sich endlich zu dem Mädchen, packet es an den Schultern und richtete es auf. –Steh endlich auf!' ['How idiotic, she thought with distaste, as she hesitated but then at last bent down to the girl, took her by the shoulders and pulled her up straight. –For goodness' sake get up!'] (*H*, 227-8, *H-N*, 252). It is impossible for Isabelle to completely erase Sara's personhood, as Sara insists on keeping eye contact with her. 'Das Mädchen ließ die Augen nicht von ihr, Isabelle hielt es noch immer an den Schultern, versuchte, dem insistierenden Blick auszuweichen, es war ein Kampf, der unentschieden endete. Es war ein Kampf.' ['The girl's eyes never left her. Isabelle was still holding her by

[19] Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*. (London: Bodley Head, 2013), p. 140.

the shoulders, trying to evade that insistent stare; it was a contest that neither of them won. It was a battle.'] (*H*, 228, *H-N*, 252). Following Bloom's line of argumentation, the 'contest' or 'battle' could be seen as a battle between empathy and disgust, between the woman's desire to disattend to the disgusting child, and the child's desperate attempts at keeping the intersubjective connection of empathy intact. Yet Hacker complicates the relationship between empathy and disgust in the moment in which Isabelle finally meets Sara's gaze:

> (…) und Isabelles Hand erstarrte, sie fühlte, wie ihr Gesicht hart wurde, aber es gab keinen Ausweg, und sie drehte sich zu dem Kind, um seinen Blick zu erwidern. Sie fühlte, als wäre der Abstand zwischen ihnen ausgelöscht, als schmeckte sie in ihrem eigenen Mund den bitteren, sauren Geschmack von Erbrochenem, in ihrem Hirn Angst und Schuld. (*H*, 228)

> [(…) her hand was going stiff and she could feel her expression hardening, but there was nothing for it, and turning towards the child she met her gaze. She felt as though the distance between them had been wiped out, as though her own mouth was filled with the bitter, sour taste of vomit and her own mind with fear and guilt.] (*H-N*,253)

Upon meeting the child's gaze, the distance created by disgust is 'wiped out', and in a moment of empathetic identification Isabelle experiences Sara's sense perceptions and experiences 'as though her own'. The taste of vomit can here be seen an example of an idiosyncratic interrelatedness of empathy and disgust: in empathy, Isabelle tastes the girl's vomit; in disgust, the vomit is also representative of Isabelle's own 'retching out', it is the physiological correlate of her rejection of Sara. As the rest of the scene unfolds, the scales eventually tip towards disgust, and Isabelle leaves the child behind, deciding to take the

injured cat with her instead. Isabelle further distances herself from Sara through a re-definition of the disgusting body and her surroundings. She likens what she sees to images from the news: 'Sie nahm die Terrasse, den Garten, noch einmal in Augenschein. Es könnte überall sein, dachte sie, in Bosnien, in Bagdad, es war immer die Gegenseite ihres eigenen Lebens.' (*H*, 229-30) ['She surveyed the terrace and garden again. This could be anywhere, she thought, Bosnia, Baghdad, it was always the obverse of her own life.' (*H-N*, 254)]. Monika Shafi argues that in this moment Isabelle turns Sara into 'the global child suffering, the victim of the world's division into haves and have-nots'. This global other does not generate empathy because she is 'an abstraction'.[20] To Shafi, then, the 'obverse' of Isabelle's life signifies the opposite of empathy:

> Isabelle contradicts, in fact, [the] belief … that witnessing another's pain spurs empathy. Seeing Sara yields not compassion but frustration and disgust. Not only does the overabundance of images of agony blur the line between the virtual and the material (as revealed by Isabelle's thoughts), but the direct encounter with the child, who is perceived as abject, challenges the idea of common humanity on which empathy is based.'[21]

I would argue, however, that it is precisely in the empathetic identification with the child's repulsive physicality, in the co-experiencing of 'Angst und Schuld' [fear and guilt], that Isabelle – and by extension the reader – *discovers* a common humanity that she finds hard to bear. Empathy is not absent or replaced by disgust, it precedes as well as interacts with disgust. Julia Catherine Sander remarks that the characters in *Die Habenichtse* share a

[20] Monika Shafi, *Housebound: Selfhood and Domestic Space in Contemporary German Fiction*. (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), p. 177.

[21] Ibid.

'Lebenswelt des Leidens', an 'environment of suffering', and it is indeed this shared affective environment that is expressed in Isabelle's reluctant, disgusted empathy.[22] Isabelle is all too aware of Sara's suffering when she takes one last look at the child: 'Isabelle mußte lachen. Ein paar Worte würden genügen, Sara zu beschwichtigen, sie könnte ihr die Hand entgegenstrecken und sie ebenfalls hinaufziehen, zu der Katze, die schnurrte, was für ein albernes Schauspiel, dachte Isabelle, wie idiotisch, sich einzumischen.' ['Isabelle couldn't help laughing. A few words would suffice to pacify Sara; she could reach out her hand and pull her up too, to where the cat sat purring. What a farce, thought Isabelle, how stupid of me to get involved.'] (*H*, 230, *H-N*, 255). The problem revealed in this passage is not so much the absence of empathy, but the absence of caring actions (pacifying words, the reaching out of a hand). Recognising Sara's 'Auswegslosigkeit und Leid', 'hopelessness and suffering', Isabelle chooses laughter over a compassionate response (*H*, 230; *H-N*, 255). Menninghaus writes that '[d]isgust (…) and laughter are complementary ways of admitting an alterity that otherwise would fall prey to repression; they enable us to deal with a scandal that otherwise would overpower our system of perception and consciousness'.[23] (11). Isabelle needs to laugh in order to reject the 'scandal' of Sara's vulnerability, which is not only overwhelming in its intensity and alterity, but in its capacity to remind her of her own repressed vulnerability. Menninghaus further elucidates, '[t]he sudden discharge of tension achieves in laughter, as in vomiting, an overcoming of disgust, a contact with the "abject" that does not lead to lasting contamination or defilement'.[24] Isabelle does escape defilement, deliberately associating herself with the fresh grass and the 'pleasant smell' of her own garden, thereby

[22] Julia Catherine Sander, *Zuschauer des Lebens*: *Subjektivitätsentwürfe in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. (Bielefeld: Transcipt Verlag, 2015), p. 145.

[23] Menninghaus, p. 11.

[24] Ibid, pp. 10-11.

distancing herself from both the presence of the child and other, mediated images of the suffering of global others (H, 230; H-N, 255).

However, Isabelle's attempt to return the child to a state of disattendability is only temporarily successful. That is because of Sara's distinctively 'abject' state. On the one hand, to refer to the common usage of the term, Sara is an abject other because she is in a wretched condition, embodying the effects of extreme violence and social marginalisation. On the other hand, Sara is abject in the way that Julia Kristeva uses the term: she occupies the liminal state between subject and object in the eyes of Isabelle. The abject, or more precisely, the process of abjection as described in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (Kristeva 1980; *The Power of Horror* 1982), refers to the relationship of the subject towards disgust-inducing objects as well as to the rejection of said objects in order to maintain a self-other distinction. While originating as a model of the child's psychic development centred around the rejection of the maternal body, abjection extends towards all levels of social and cultural life; abjection is the 'defilement' that must be 'jettisoned from the Symbolic system'.[25] 'Defilement' here does not equate to that which is 'unclean' or that which is traditionally considered disgusting. As Kristeva writes,

> [i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour.[26]

[25] Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. L.S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 65.

[26] Ibid., p. 4.

As Ahmed explains, the abject's liminality lies in the fact that in abjection, a border is turned into an object itself; what makes us 'sick to the stomach' is a substitute for the border that needs to be secured 'through the response of being disgusted'.[27] We are disgusted at the abject because as an 'in-between' it is unassimilable, we cannot incorporate or ingest it. Sara is 'ambiguous' and 'composite' because she is powerless and abused, yet she is also witnessed as inflicting violence herself; she is distinctively 'other' in that she is a poor, ugly English child, yet she shares a susceptibility to suffering with Isabelle, a conventionally attractive and affluent German woman. Rina Arya points out that the abject 'is the "other" that comes from within (so it is part of ourselves) that we have to reject and expel in order to protect our boundaries. We are unable to rid ourselves of it completely and it continues to haunt our being'.[28] Isabelle abandons Sara in the garden, leaving her literally and metaphorically walled in again: the girl has locked herself out, therefore turning the garden into her new prison. However, Isabelle's return to her side of the garden wall, with its attendant redirection of attention away from the child, does not re-establish order and secure boundaries, and Sara continues to haunt Isabelle until the plot of the novel culminates in one final encounter.

Hacker's representation of Isabelle and Sara's relationship serves to highlight two ways in which empathy and distraction interact. Firstly, it foregrounds that what we perceive as distraction, i.e., the things that consume our attention even though we wish they would not, are not necessarily the obvious, much maligned culprits such as the internet or TV, but indeed *other people*. Secondly, it shows that to assume that an extended, narrow focus is always synonymous with an idiosyncratic turning towards the other ignores the social hierarchies

[27] Ahmed, p. 86.

[28] Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2014), p. 4.

that influence how we can be affected by other people – often, the double-minded, back-and-forth motion of attending to the other as well as to ourselves leads to a reinforcement of intersubjective boundaries and a rejection of our own vulnerability. By exploring how it interacts with disgust, Hacker represents empathy as an often-unwanted destabilisation, and as such, her text problematises any notions of empathy as a straightforward attentional corrective.

NW and the problem of centrifugal empathy

While Katharina Hacker places the encounter with an abject other towards the end of her novel, Zadie Smith's *NW* opens with the unexpected intrusion of a stranger named Shar into the focaliser Leah Hanwell's life. On the first two pages of the novel, we meet Leah, who lies 'in a hammock, in the garden of a basement flat' and who is '[f]enced in, on all sides' (*NW*, 3). Not only is the introduction of the destabilising other structurally reversed in *NW*, but Leah's positionality is also initially likened to that of Sara's in *Die Habenichtse*; she too is – or at least *feels* – imprisoned. While Sara's prison largely consists of the absence of stimuli as she is left alone all day, Leah is imprisoned by sensory overload. Too many others vie for Leah's attention, a fact that is reflected in the style of the section, which presents Leah's distinctively centrifugal experience in a third-person narration complemented by passages rendered in stream-of-consciousness. As such, the Leah section are representative of an aesthetic of empathetic distraction. The sounds of the radio and the voices of others coming from the balconies of the Caldwell estate of Leah's childhood bleed into Leah's thoughts, most significantly the voice of 'a grim girl on the third floor [who] screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody' (*NW*, 3). The voice interrupts Leah's attempt at writing the slogan 'I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me' (a slogan she has heard on the radio) onto the pages

of a magazine she is reading, an attempt that fails because 'Pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages' (*NW*, 2). In the cacophony of sounds Leah fails to make a mark, yet others imprint their words on her mind; the girl on the balcony is

> Louder than the birds and the trains and the traffic. Sole sign of sanity: a tiny device tucked in her ear. I told im stop takin liberties. Where's my cheque? I told im stop takin liberties. Where's my cheque? And she's in my face chattin breeze. Fuckin liberty.
>
> I am the sole. The sole. The sole
>
> She unfurls her fist, lets the pencil roll. Takes her liberty. (*NW*, 3)

The 'Anglo-Saxon' girl's voice is rendered in a North London sociolect, associating Englishness with monetary obligations ('Where's my cheque?') and a curtailment of social 'liberties'. Yet Leah, incorporating the stranger's dialogue into her thoughts, an incorporation which is signalled by the absence of quotation marks, assures herself that she does indeed 'take her liberties'. From the very first page, Leah tries and fails to establish her independence from others, remaining, ironically, at the liberty of her sensory input. Tammy Amiel-Houser has linked Leah's experience of the fact that 'there is no sole authorship of a dictionary, no autonomous definition of the self'[29] to what Butler terms the 'predicament of unwilled proximity to others'.[30] Amiel-Houser claims that 'it is not necessarily distance and difference that disrupt empathy; sometimes it is actually unwilled proximity that causes the damage'.[31] I would like to amend this analysis by pointing out that what is 'damaged'

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[29] Tammy Amiel-Houser, Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy.' *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2017, pp. 116-148 (p. 127).

[30] Butler, p. 34.

[31] Amiel-Houser, p. 127.

through the unwilled proximity of others is not empathy per se, but an optimistic narrative of empathy as a *wilful* focus that masters the boundaries between self and other, between inside and outside. Leah's narrative represents a dispersed, and indeed distracted focus of attention: she holds the magazine, the radio, the neighbours, and the sounds and sights of the city in her conscious awareness. Leah's attention is centrifugal, directed outwards and away from herself, leading to a complete loss of self-consciousness. Rebecca Solnit finds a way to describe this centrifugal force, which is characteristic of empathy's wide focus: 'You are not yourself. You are crowds of others, you are as leaky as a vessel was ever made (…) The usual I we are given has all the tidy containment of the kind of character the realist novel specializes in and none of the porousness of our every waking moment.'[32] The image of a leaky and porous vessel is reminiscent of Eva's observation on the effect of disaster in Lionel Shriver's *Kevin*. Disaster, Eva muses, can act like acid on some people, 'stripping off the outside layer of skin that once protected them from the slings and arrows of other people's outrageous fortunes.'[33] Smith herself makes recourse to the image of skin that fails to protect the individual from affective proximity of others on the closing pages of *NW*, describing Leah as 'lying in the hammock in the garden, totally exposed' to the sun, with a nose that is 'burnt and peeling' (*NW*, 291-2).

On the opening page of the novel, Leah's porous attention is suddenly seized by a single stimulus, consisting of the arrival of the stranger at her front door: 'The bell is not being rung. It is being held down.' (*NW* 5). While a multitude of stimuli have hitherto 'fenced Leah in', the stranger at the door focuses Leah's dispersed attention in her desperate plea for help '(…) a woman is screaming PLEASE and crying. A woman thumps the front door with her fist. Pulling the lock aside, she finds it stops halfway, the chain pulls tight, and a little

[32] Solnit, p. 248.

[33] Shriver, p. 165.

hand flies through the gap' (*NW* 5). The 'little hand' that has crossed the threshold of Leah's home pushes an envelope through the door 'so close [Leah] must draw back to focus on what she is being shown' (*NW*, 5); as such the 'hand' is also a cue for the reader, foreshadowing the unfolding section's preoccupation with disgust and its idiosyncratic movement of 'drawing back'. As it turns out, the stranger is trying to justify her demands on Leah's attention by establishing herself as a local, showing her the address '37 Ridley Avenue'. Luckily for her, 'Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square as other people are to their families, or their countries' (*NW*, 5). This local allegiance is contrasted with Leah's spontaneous association of the stranger as a global type, the 'woman in a war zone':

> The stranger's knees go, she falls forward, crumpling. Girl or woman? They're the same age: thirties, midway, or thereabouts. Tears shake the stranger's little body. She pulls at her clothes and wails. Woman begging the public for witnesses. Woman in a war zone standing in the rubble of her home. (*NW,* 5)

Unlike Isabelle in *Die Habenichtse*, Leah does not use the image of a 'war zone' to remind herself that the stranger represents the 'obverse of her life' and is therefore safe to disattend. Instead, the invocation of a woman 'begging the public for witnesses' causes Leah to ask the stranger, 'You're hurt?' and to lead her further into her home (*NW,* 5). However, the compassion that Leah shows in this moment is not immediate. Leah needs to establish basic similarities between herself and the stranger ('They're the same age') before she can move on to interpret the stranger's body language as representative of universal symbols of suffering. Even then, she has to 'arrange[] her face to signify compassion' (*NW,* 6). In this regard, Leah responds to the woman in kind, understanding the stranger's emotions as part of

a performance that she has agreed to join, assigning herself the role of 'the good stranger who opened the door and did not close it again' (ibid.).

> Leah directs Shar to the kitchen. Big hands on the girl's narrow shoulders. She watches Shar's buttocks rise up and against her rolled-down jogging pants, the little downy dip in her back, pronounced, sweaty in the heat. The tiny waist opening out into curves. Leah is hipless, gangly like a boy. Perhaps Shar needs money. Her clothes are not clean. In the back of her right knee there is a wide tear in the nasty fabric. Dirty heels rise up out of disintegrating flip-flops. She smells. (*NW*, 6)

Like Isabelle in *Die Habenichtse*, Leah grabs Shar by the shoulders, an action signifying a desire to dominate the interaction and to 'direct' the other's movements. Leah perceives herself as 'big' compared to Shar, who has now ceased to be the 'woman in a war zone' and has turned into a girl again. In their asymmetrical dynamic, Leah is positioned as 'the good stranger' and Shar as the helpless other in need. However, as Leah's focus moves back towards her own body, her own dominance is challenged by intrusions of desire. Smith's prose is highly attuned to the minute changes in Leah's attention, dramatising how Leah's acute perception of an asymmetry of power is replaced by an awareness of her own body, a body that is androgynous compared to the femininity of Shar's 'little downy dip in her back', 'tiny waist opening out into curves'. Here, Leah's attention, in its back-and-forth movement between self and other, is tinged with desire; yet it is a desire that quickly dissolves as soon as Leah engages in more deliberate perspective-taking and directs her attention towards the woman's motives.

The moment that Leah considers that the woman might not be 'begging for witnesses' but for money, her gaze is re-focused in disgust. The text thus traces the 'nasty fabric' of the

abject other, associates her with uncleanliness and bad smell as well as a 'wide tear' and 'disintegration'. Shar's physical proximity, the fact that she has crossed the threshold of Leah's home slowly comes to signify a troubling violation of boundaries. The boundaries between self and other are disintegrating like Shar's flip-flops, or like the tea bag in the cup of tea that Leah prepares for herself and Shar: 'The leaves break their borders and swarm' (*NW*, 10). As Alice Bennet argues, '[i]f the threshold is also the model of the division between the self and the world, then attention is what troubles that boundary'.[34] According to Bennett, Leah's attention 'betrays' her because it 'is part of the outside inside [her]'[35]. Bennett does not directly link this 'outside inside her' to ideas of the abject and neither does Amiel-Houser, who notes that a 'sense of lurking vulnerability runs throughout Leah's fluid interior monologues'; a vulnerability that explains why Leah 'cannot bear to identify with this begging woman, to fall into the debased position that she associates with Shar'.[36] Amiel-Houser ultimately figures this vulnerability as an economic vulnerability: Shar, we later find out, is a drug addict squatting in an abandoned house who feigns a family emergency to scam Leah out of money; in a 'post-welfare state' her predicament is too close to home. For Leah, Amiel-Houser argues, '[t]he fear of being turned out to the streets, exposed to harm, is constant'.[37] While Leah's redirection of attention along the lines of disgust does indeed follow considerations of economic status ('Perhaps Shar needs money'), the presence of the stranger unsettles several other identity categories, which necessitates Leah's construing her as abject.

Most importantly, Shar forces Leah to consider the limits of her own empathy, a value that Leah associates with the compassion that she has felt compelled to perform in their

[34] Bennett, p. 127.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Amiel-Houser, pp. 130-31.

[37] Ibid., p. 130.

encounter. Shar listens to the 'girl from the estate', who is 'still on her balcony, screaming', and 'shakes her head and whistles. She gives Leah a look of neighbourly sympathy. –Silly fat bitch' (*NW*, 11). Shar affectively relates to Leah only through their mutual distaste for a third party, highlighting that empathy is just as dependent on social rejection as it is on kindness and care. Upon discovering that they went to the same school and have mutual acquaintances, Shar offers a distinctively hostile evaluation of Leah's best friend Natalie Blake, another focaliser of the novel. She remarks that Natalie was a 'Up herself. Coconut. Thought she was all that', sealing her disapproval with a 'look of blank contempt [that] passes over her face' (*NW*, 9). Natalie is a 'coconut', a black woman on the outside but 'white' on the inside, someone who blurs racial identities. Shar thereby openly expresses thoughts that Leah secretly harbours; she is the intolerant, unacceptable other that is already inside her. Shar's language haunts Leah; when Leah next meets her friend Natalie, she 'blushes as an illegal word thrusts itself into her mind, Shar's word: coconut.' (*NW*, 55). Shar calls into question Leah's belief in a harmonious, multicultural society, a belief which is tellingly expressed in a lack of attention paid to markers of Shar's ethnic or religious identity. 'Not relevant? What do you mean? How could you tell me that whole story and not mention the headscarf?' Leah's friend Natalie reprimands her, thereby offering a metanarrative comment on the significance of Leah's 'tolerant' attention (*NW*, 52). Leah's white Irish mother Pauline conjectures, 'You were robbed on your doorstep by a Gypsy, weren't you?', to which Leah replies, 'Nope. Subcontinental.' (NW, 16). As the 'good stranger' Leah only has to recognise that Shar is 'woman', and that she is suffering. During another conversation with her openly racist mother, Leah escapes into a daydream that further illustrates her commitment to a utopian, cosmopolitan empathy that complements her 'allegiance to this two-mile square' (*NW*, 5):

> (…) Leah stares at a red bindi until it begins to blur, becomes enormous, taking up all of her vision until she feels she has entered the dot, passing through it, emerging into a more gentle universe, parallel to our own, where people are fully and intimately known to each other and there is no time or death or fear or sofas or – and may have had our differences, but he loves you. And you love him. You should get on with it.' (*NW*, 39)

To focus on the bindi, a marker of cultural identity, to recognise yet to 'pass through it', here entails the possibility of a universal, gentle empathy which results in everyone being 'fully and intimately known to each other'. However, this global vision is dependent on the absence of 'time or death or fear'; in short, it is impossible. Its impossibility is further illustrated by the interruption of Leah's daydream by dialogue. Pauline reminds Leah that she should 'get on with it', referring to the fact that it is Leah's duty as a 35-year-old wife to have a baby. Leah is rudely awakened, and abstract affective commitments are replaced by concrete gendered expectations.

Pauline is not aware of the fact that Leah is in fact already pregnant. The reader has been privy to this information for some time. In her abject state as a shameless liar, Shar has not only forced Leah to hand over money, she has also forced the literal 'other' inside Leah out in the open: Leah spontaneously confesses to Shar that she is pregnant, '[s]he's just saying sentences, one after the other, they don't stop' (*NW*, 9). This final violation of intersubjective boundaries is accompanied by touch: 'Shar has a dark look. She grins satanically. Around each tooth the gum is black. She walks back to Leah and presses her hands flat against Leah's stomach' (*NW*, 10). Shar, again described using the vocabulary of the disgusting and evil, further destabilises Leah's sense of bodily autonomy, an autonomy that has been under threat from the moment the reader meets her. Shar's presence exacerbates

an idiosyncratic cognitive dissonance: Leah wants to believe in a benevolent empathy that transcends identity categories, yet she has to maintain intersubjective boundaries to negotiate the distress caused by the physical as well as psychological proximity of others. Shar not only triggers Leah's protective disgust, she also acts as a distorted mirror of Leah's idea of empathy as diffused attention, embodying a 'boredom' that has multiple foci: Shar loses interest in the 'otherness' inside Leah, her 'hands drop, her face glazes over once more with boredom. She starts talking of things. All things are equal. Leah or tea or rape or bedroom or heart attack or school or who had a baby' (*NW*, 10). Right before Shar leaves Leah's home, Leah watches her 'ashing her cigarette on the kitchen floor, though the door is open and the grass only a foot away. She is slow, maybe, and possibly clumsy; or she is traumatized, or distracted' (*NW*, 12). Shar cannot be captured with empathetic accuracy, and with a diffused 'equality' all potential explanations of her behaviour exist alongside each other.

To return to Smith's observation that the narrative structure of *Middlemarch* is a structure in which all characters have equal claims on our attention, the character of Leah suggests that to attend to everything that happens to be 'there' is difficult to achieve outside of its literary confines. In the real world, what is 'there' is overwhelming, and results in a stretching of attention that is not sustainable. Like the teabag in her cup, Leah's attention must burst. Smith's text creates a distinctive tension between narratives of empathy and their practice, using the impact of a mimetically rendered, highly distracted stream-of-consciousness narrative as well as a carefully placed intrusive encounter on the plot level to direct the reader's attention back onto the complexity and fragility of attention itself.

As such, her narrative ethics differ from Hacker's in significant ways. Hacker's text, while similarly attuned to the impact of socioeconomic disparities on processes of real-world empathy, explores the potential of a narrative voice that gathers and unifies the disparate perspectives of the inhabitants of Lady Margaret Road in a centripetal movement.

Die Habenichtse and the problem of centripetal empathy

This voice, though it shows some characterological flexibility in its employment of free indirect discourse, is characterised by an overarching, melancholic register. I find this register particularly jarring when it is used to focalise the English-speaking child Sara. In a pathos-laden German, Sara's predicament is made accessible for the reader. For example, we are encouraged to imagine how the girl spends her lonely days locked in the flat, watching the rain against the windowpane:

> In manchen der dicken Tropfen, die fett auf der Scheibe auftrafen, dann einen Moment, wie verwundert, auf der Stelle verharrten, war etwas eingeschlossen, glänzend und vergrößert, ein winziges Insekt, mit durchscheinenden Flügeln oder eine Rußflocke, ein Körnchen Sand oder Staub. Was immer es war schimmerte, schimmerte einen langen Augenblick, bevor es, verwirrt, spindelnd weggerissen wurde oder allmählich davonglitt, vielleicht noch einmal aufgehalten, um sich dem Auge in starrer Durchsichtigkeit darzubieten, etwas Winziges, Davongespültes, das nie mehr an seinen Ort zurückkehren würde. (*H*, 73)

> Big, fat drops landed on the windowpane and paused for a second as if in surprise; in some of them something was imprisoned, shining and magnified, a tiny insect with translucent wings, a flake of soot, a speck of sand or dust. Whatever it was shimmered, shimmered for a long moment before it was snatched away, twirling, confused, or slipped gradually from sight, perhaps held back one last time to show itself in its rigid transparency, a tiny thing, helplessly washed away, that would never return to its original place. (*H-N*, 89)

The narrative rests on the minute details of Sara's sensory perception, paying close attention to the objects 'imprisoned' in the raindrops. These objects – mirroring Sara's imprisonment in the flat – 'show themselves' to us: they are revealed to the eyes of the narrator and in turn the reader's, not Sara's own; the adult language is not Sara's, yet it serves to create an illusion of 'rigid transparency', or to return to the concerns of Lionel Shriver discussed in the previous chapter, of an 'open view' of the child. In order to accurately convey the objectification Sara must endure, and to create empathetic access for the reader, the child needs to be controlled and made 'tiny' by the non-native language. Dorothy Hale describes the risks of this technique: 'the Jamesian novelist who puts his own vocabulary at the service of the young girl he seeks to represent is blind to the way that vocabulary compromises her otherness by bestowing upon her the sensibility of her creator'.[38]Unlike Leah's sections in *NW*, which can be understood as a literary representation of Leah's attentive idiosyncracies, *Die Habenichtse* continually foregrounds its author's attempts at 'fixing' her fictional characters' attention, that is, their turning away from the suffering of others. Even as Hacker narrates disgust, the novel as a whole encourages incorporation and fusion; the opposite of dispersal. As my own annoyance at the seemingly inappropriate German narrative voice highlights, this attempt at fusion is never entirely realised, leaving room for the reader to remain in a state of tension and ambiguity.

Ambiguity towards the possibility of an affective centre of common humanity is further explored in Hacker's use of certain motifs, such as that of the kitten or 'little cat' and the idea of a momentary 'rip' in perception. The former motif relates to an establishment of animal vulnerability that is shared by the majority of the focalisers. The 'kitten' first appears

[38] Dorothy Hale, '*On Beauty* as Beautiful? The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith', in *Fiction since 2000: Postmillennial Commitments*, ed. by Andrzej Gasiorek and David James, special issue, *Contemporary Literature*, 53. 4 (2012), 814-844 (p. 819).

in one of the sections dedicated to a character named Jim. A drug-addict with a pattern of physical violence, Jim is squatting in the house situated on the other side of Sara's family home. Hacker gradually reveals memories of his former life, first focusing on his relationship with an ex-lover, who is implied to have died of an overdose. Thus Jim remembers with fondness, 'Er hatte sie festgehalten, mit beiden Armen, und sie gehörte ihm, er hatte ihren Nacken umfaßt und gedacht, daß er ebenso zerbrechlich war wie der eines Kätzchens' [] (*H*, 30). Here, to be 'fragile as a kitten' both connotes Jim's recognition of his partner's inherent vulnerability, as well as his capacity to harm her. Towards the end of the novel, Hacker picks up the latter theme of violence: Jim ends up killing Sara's cat Polly, and through this act of violence, he is metaphorically connected to both Sara and Isabelle (*H*, 253).

Isabelle, too, is at one point perceived as an animal that might come to harm. Andras, a Hungarian-German man who acts as a focaliser in some of the passages that are set in Berlin, understands Isabelle as a 'gefangenes Tier' ['] (H, 35-6; H-N, 43). He picks up on 'Wellen,', 'waves,' something that 'sein Empfangsgerät auffing, ohne sie deuten, ohne sie verarbeiten zu können. Isabelle erinnerte ihn an ein gefangenes Tier, das täuschend reglos blieb, um seinen Ausbruchsversuch vorzubereiten, fühllos für alles andere als die eigene Entscheidung.' ['his sensory apparatus picked up without being able to interpret or process them. Isabelle reminded him of a captured animal that remains deceptively still while preparing its bid to escape, indifferent to everything but its own moment of decision'] (ibid.) Not only does the text introduce Andras as an unusually sensitive focaliser who intuits Isabelle's feelings (unconsciously, without being able to 'process' them), the metaphor of the vulnerable animal that remains 'fühllos' ['indifferent'] to protect herself, not only foreshadows the dynamics of Isabelle's disgusted rejection of Sara, it also functions as a key to the text's conceptualisation of empathy as the unsettling and often interrupted process of embracing a common humanity. The reader is primed to align with Andras's perspective – a

perspective of affective openness – and to understand Isabelle's trajectory within the novel as that of a woman's reluctant coming to terms with her own vulnerability. To be vulnerable entails, to return to Kristeva and Arya's conceptualisation of the abject, to be close to the other that comes from within, which is a process in which focused attention oscillates between empathetic ingestion and disgusted expulsion. Throughout the novel, Sara acts as a symbol of ultimate animal vulnerability, and as a result, the other characters gravitate towards her. For example, the nickname given to her by her brother Dave is quite literally 'little cat'. Sara's personhood is all but erased by her victimisation. Thus she reflects on her name: 'Sara. Manchmal verschwand der Name vollständig (…) Dave nannte sie little cat. – Weil du dich wie eine kleine Katze hinter dem Sofa versteckst. Schau doch, sogar Polly sitzt auf dem Sofa. Oben drauf.' ['Sara. Sometimes the whole name vanished. (…) Dave called her "little cat." – Because you hide behind the sofa like a little cat. Look, even Polly sits on the sofa. On top of it.'] (*H*, 53; *H-N*, 64). Sara is more animal than her own cat; like Isabelle, she is a trapped animal spending her life cowering in anticipation of harm.

The other motif that Hacker introduces, that of the 'Riß', or 'crack' in perception, consequently refers to those moments in which her focalisers briefly stop 'hiding behind the sofa' and open themselves up to their own and other people's suffering. For example, Jim experiences an undercurrent of desperation underneath his habitual violence, noticing '[g]anz kurz Verzeiflung, etwas, das erst nur ein feiner Riß war und plötzlich schmerzte, wie ein Messer, das ein Stück aus dem eigenen Kopf herausschnitt, die Erinnerung herausschnitt' ['Desperation, just briefly, which to begin with was no more than a fine crack and then suddenly hurt, like a knife cutting a piece out of his own head, cutting out memory'] (*H*, 98; *H-N*, 117). The 'crack' is simultaneously an affective intrusion as well as a 'cut' that removes painful memories and makes them disattendable again. In an analogous movement, Isabelle briefly returns Andras' empathetic investment in her, noticing that 'Andras war traurig

gewesen; einen Moment spürte sie es so deutlich, als sei es ihre eigene Empfindung. Dann ein Riß. Entfernt.' ['Andras had been very sad; for a moment she felt it as plainly as if the sadness had been her own. Then a sharp pulling away. Gone.'] (*H*, 113; *H-N*, 134). In this instance, Andras' emotions are 'pulled' from her mind, yet elsewhere the image of the 'Riß' is re-imagined as a 'crack' in Isabelle's indifference. At one point, Isabelle comes close to attending to the horror of Sara's abuse upon hearing Sara's mother's 'hysterisches Gelächter', 'hysterical laughter': 'Entsetzt starrte sie die Wand an, die keinen Riß zeigte, sich nicht öffnete, und es wurde wieder still dahinter' ['She stared in horror at the wall, which did not crack, did not open up, and on the other side everything went quiet again.'] (*H*, 151; *H-N*, 173). The anticipation of an insight into others' lives, through a metaphorical crack in the wall between their houses, is disappointed.

It bears noticing that the 'Riß' is thus imagined, in line with Hacker's treatment of disgust, as a kind of attention that entails both a turning away *and* a potential turning towards the other; it is imagined as an attentive state with an arrested potential. Thus Jim muses that 'In dem Riß war immer auch ein Licht, etwas Gleißendes' ['In that crack there was always a light, too, a dazzling brightness'] (*H*, 98; *H-N*, 117). In another telling vignette, we find Isabelle's head pressed against the wall 'überrascht von etwas, das wie ein Geräusch der Wand selbst klang, kaum ein Geräusch, eher eine Materie, die ihren eigenen Klang hatte' ['startled by something that seemed like a noise made by the wall itself, scarcely a noise, more like a substance with a sound of its own'] (*H*, 152; *H-N*, 174.) The wall or barrier itself becomes an object of contemplation. It is no coincidence that the character of Isabelle, who moves in between states of indiscriminately divided attention, disgusted inattention, and a reluctant empathetic focus, is associated with the image of a boundary. Isabelle is most representative of Hacker's interest in the complex relationship between attention and

distraction. In fact, Hacker can be understood as part of a modern German tradition, which, as Carolin Duttlinger argues, consists of writers who

> are not concerned with one state or the other but with the interaction between the two – with how attention gives way, or rise, to distraction, or vice versa. This relationship is sometimes conceived spatially, as a threshold or liminal zone, and sometimes dynamically, in terms of transition, oscillation, or dialectics.'[39]

As such, Hacker's text is continually invested in readerly meta-empathy. Following the interwoven narratives of the novel's multiple focalisers calls for attention directed towards the detailed and deliberately 'moving' representations of suffering that, as Hacker suggests, extends to all of humanity – or at least to both her privileged German characters and their marginalised English counterparts. Yet the text is equally invested in creating an acute awareness of the ways in which this affective movement towards a shared affective 'centre' is continually interrupted and blocked. When *Die Habenichtse* won the German Book Prize (Deutscher Buchpreis) in 2006, the jury praised the novel for its avoidance of 'plakativen Antworten', 'pithy solutions' to complex ethical dilemmas: 'Wie willst du leben? Was sind deine Werte? Wie sollst und wie kannst du handeln? Die Qualität des Romans besteht darin, diese Fragen in Geschichten aufzulösen, die sich mit den plakativen Antworten von Politik und Medien nicht zufrieden geben.' ['How do you want to live your life? What are your values? How should you and how can you act? The quality of the novel can be found in answering these questions through stories that do not settle for the pithy solutions found in

[39] Duttlinger, *Attention and Distraction in Modern German Literature*, p. 7.

politics and the media'].[40] The jury's appreciation of the novel's representation of the difference between the things we ought to do and the things we *can* do points to Hacker's preoccupation with the limits of moral attention. 'Handeln', or 'action' is circumcised by the unstable and ultimately unreliable attention of the individual. A change in the individual's distracted, impassive behaviour, Hacker suggests, is hard or near impossible.

This impossibility is starkly outlined in the novel's climactic final scenes. Enacting *Die Habenichtse*'s idiosyncratic centripetal movement, the text's most underprivileged characters – the addict Jim and the abused girl Sara – metaphorically converge with Isabelle, the most privileged, 'foreign' character in one last, violent encounter. Jim assaults and imprisons both Sara and Isabelle, leaving them locked in the flat on Lady Margaret Street in which he has hitherto been squatting. He has forced them to undress at knife point, and leaves the neighbourhood for good, taking their clothes with them (*H*, 302; *H-N*, 333). Thus 'stripped' of her protective identity of indifference, Isabelle has no choice but to identify with the violent Jim and to put on some of the dirty clothes that he has left behind. This forced empathetic identification has distinctive notes of disgust: 'Im Schlafzimmer fand sie auf dem Bett ein T-Shirt und eine Jeans, beides schmutzig, Jims Geruch so intensiv, daß sie würgte, aber sie schlüpfte hinein' ['In the bedroom, on the bed, she found a T-shirt and a pair of jeans, both dirty, the smell of Jim so intense that it made her retch, but she slipped into them'] (*H*, 303; *H-N*, 334). To acknowledge the other inside of her one last time, to admit that she, like the overtly violent Jim, has not been 'moved' by the fate of the little girl and has failed to help her, leaves Isabelle in shock (*H*, 301; *H-N*, 332). On the final page of the novel, we find Isabelle and her husband Jakob having to decide whether to act on what has finally come to their attention: the reality of suffering close to home. '– Isabelle? sagte er, wir können hier

[40] Quoted in Friederike Gösweiner, *Einsamkeit in der jungen deutschsprachigen Literatur der Gegenwart*. (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2010), p.81.

nicht stehenbleiben. Sie öffnete die Augen und sah ihn an. – Ja, antwortete sie und ging langsam auf die Tür zu, die ins Schloß gefallen war' ['–Isabelle? he said, we can't just stand here. She opened her eyes and looked at him. –Yes, she answered, and slowly walked towards the door that had clicked shut'] (*H*, 309; *H-N*, 341) Again, Hacker mobilises the image of the threshold to foreground how a subject is forever caught between distracted inaction ('stehenbleiben', 'stand here') and wilful action ('auf die Tür zugehen', 'walking towards the door'). The ideal of a cosmopolitan attention, which enacts a worldly openness at a 'local' level, is arrested yet again. Andrea Diener is unconvinced by the novel's ambiguous ending, asking the question,

> Welche These liegt diesem Roman also zugrunde? Daß wer im Leben nicht mindestens ein mittelschweres Trauma durchleiden mußte, eigentlich gar kein richtiger Mensch ist? Daß Friedenszeiten Generationen von gefühlskalten, aber gutgekleideten Menschen hervorbringen, die sich vor lauter Langeweile an den nächstbesten Außenseiter klammern, der ihnen über den Weg läuft, um ihre unwürdige Existenz ein wenig aufzufrischen? Das ist doch nicht Ihr Ernst, Frau Hacker!
>
> [What's the moral of this novel? That you're not actually a real human being unless you've experienced at least some minor form of trauma in your life? That times of peace produce generations of cold-hearted yet well-dressed people who are so bored that they try to spice up their sorry existence just a little bit by latching onto the next best outsider to cross their path? You can't be serious, Ms Hacker!][41]

[41] Diener, n.p.

Unlike Diener, I find that the novel's representation of a 'cold-hearted' character's momentary, inconsequential 'latching' of attention onto the outsiders that have been thrown in her path encapsulates a 'These', or 'moral', that can serve as a pertinent criticism of fiction as a straightforward 'empathy gym'. The text deliberately undermines the idea that attention can be moved in ways that approximates desirable forms of empathetic focus. We are left with the image of a threshold, and therefore of indeterminacy, instead of a neat resolution that entails the correction of an (to critics like Diener, unlikable) character's wayward attention.

On dwelling

While Hacker's text is interested in exploring empathy's complex attentional pattern by focusing on the image of the threshold, Smith uses the concept of 'dwelling' to highlight that even her most 'distracted' character, Leah, is irrevocably 'tied' to the titular NW postcode.

A striking example of this is the insertion of a concrete poem in the shape of a tree into Leah's narrative. Two lines of the poems read like this:

Three flats. One apple tree. Freehold, leasehold. Heavy with seed.

Sitting on your laurens. Under an apple tree. Have a little *boy*?' (*NW,* 24)

The words 'freehold', 'laurens' and 'little boy' are actually intrusions from a monologue by Leah's husband Michel, a French-Algerian immigrant to London, a monologue that is displayed in its two-page entirety immediately following the concrete poem. Upon reading the poem, I was forced to pay attention to two different literary styles, and I jumped back and forth in the text to figure out where Michel's speech had found its way into Leah's poem. I had to jump to page 25 to find Michel's sentence 'If we ever have

little boy I want him to live somewhere – to live proud – somewhere we have the freehold' and to page 26 to find the sentence 'The bottom line is like this: I was never just OK to sit on my laurens and take charity, I never was interested in that.' In his monologue, a monologue to which Leah is not paying full attention ('–You're not even listening,' Michel says; *NW,* 26), Michel describes his ideology of social mobility. He has set out to find personal freedom in the metropolis of London, figuring the city as a space of transcendence:

> In France, you're African, you're Algerian, who wants to know? There's no opportunity, you can't move. Here, you can move. You still have to work! You have to work very hard to separate yourself from this drama below! This is my point: I don't like to let it in. But this is what you do, perfect example, this girl, you let her in – I don't even know what is in your mind – but I don't allow this drama in. I know this country has opportunities if you want to grab them, you can do it. (*NW,* 25)

Michel refers back to Leah's encounter with Shar, describing her desire to empathise with the stranger as a tendency to immerse herself in the 'drama from below'. While Leah dreams of transcending categories of identity in the name of an idealised empathy centred around care, Michel wants to transcend limiting social boundaries in order to improve his own lot, and that of the 'little boy' he dreams of having. While Leah is comfortable in the shared council housing they live in (the 'three flats' mentioned in the concrete poem), Michel wants to have a 'freehold', a space fenced in by the logic of ownership. The couple's opposing conceptualisations of the meaning and potentialities of empathy is not only reflected on the content level but in the style in which they are rendered. The text therefore enacts linguistic heterogeneity, embodying the difficulties of a marital – let alone global – integration of difference in its narrativizing of Leah's disrupted attention, a narrativisation

that has the capacity to break this reader's flow of attention. Yet what this passage also shows is that Leah's distracted reception of her husband's words quite literally 'tie' her to him and the house they share.

Michel associates empathy, the act of 'letting drama in', with an affective movement that blocks the opposing (and more important) movement of socio-economic mobility. The text, affirming such an assessment, explicitly connects Leah's empathetic distractibility with her career: she has a low-paid council job that only attracts women, 'the empathic sex' (*NW*, p. 27).[42] As Leah writes down at work, 'I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY', and then 'doodles passionately around it. Great fiery arcs, long pointed shadows' (*NW*, 29). The 'fiery arcs' of empathy lead to 'long pointed shadows'.

The dark side of the centrifugal, affective movement of empathy also comes to haunt another character. The only character who leaves the confines of the NW postcode throughout the text, a young black man named Felix, announces to an acquaintance:

> "You listening? Next level. People can spend their whole lives just dwelling. I could spend my whole life dwelling on some of the shit that's happened to me. I done that. Now it's time for the next level. I'm moving up in the game and I'm ready for it." (*NW*, 136)

Felix, a recovering drug addict, here alludes to extensive experiences of economic and emotional struggle, experiences which have significantly altered his life trajectory as well as those of his siblings, one of whom is in prison for armed robbery. Yet Felix's attempts at 'moving up in the game' are literally and metaphorically cut short: a few hours later, his character becomes the victim of knife crime, and dies (*NW*, 148). The crime is committed by

[42] See Amiel-Houser for a comprehensive analysis of the interaction of neoliberalism and empathy in *NW*.

a black man who Felix has confronted in a busy Tube carriage on the way back to his local stop, Kilburn Station. The confrontation is significant because it highlights how, despite Felix's desire to 'move' and free himself from the affective ties holding him back, he cannot escape the parameters of attention that emerge through the 'unwilled proximity' of others in everyday life: the packed train carriage here acts as a metaphor of the social dynamics of urban life. Felix asks the man to tell his companion, another young black man, to move his feet from a seat so that a white, pregnant woman can sit down. Felix experiences an embodied, empathetic alignment with the experience of the woman who is too close to ignore, noting that it 'was a hot day to be in that state. Looking at her made the sweat break out across Felix's nose' (*NW*, 145). At the same time, this spontaneous alignment is structured by patterns of attention that reproduce white privilege.

'Sorry, could you ask your friend to move his feet?', the white woman asks Felix (*NW*, 145). In a quick-fire assessment of the situation, the woman assumes that by virtue of their race, the three men – Felix, the barely conscious man with his feet up on the seat, the friend next to him – must know each other, or have a natural affinity for each other based on their race. This is not the case, and Felix takes a moment before he acts, looking at 'his motionless "friend" opposite' (*NW*, 145). Here, the woman's understanding of their relationship clashes with that of the reader, who knows that Felix takes his new-found sobriety seriously, feels distaste for the drugged-up man, and has deliberately 'established a private space of his own' as he sat down in the carriage (*NW*, 143). The reader's knowledge of Felix's thoughts has thus primed her to understand the woman's assumption of 'friendship' as racist, an assessment that is further supported by a strategic use of quotation marks around the word 'friend'. Empathy, then, is taken to a meta-level: the reader's privileged access to Felix's mind clashes with the unspoken rules of attention in everyday encounters, such as the

daily commute illustrated here. When Felix finally confronts one of the black men, these rules are further foregrounded:

> "Why you asking me? Why don't she ask me?"
>
> "Your man's got his feet on her seat, blud."
>
> "But is it your business, though? Why you tryna make it your business? Who you calling blud? I ain't your blud." (*NW*, 145)

The other man is quick to point out that the woman has acted with a sense of entitlement to Felix's attention, as well as to his co-operation (she has 'made it his business') – she has not even attempted to confront the men taking up space herself. As a response, Felix tries to appeal to the very ties of racial kinship that the white woman has tried to impose on the three men: they are 'blud'. Yet this appeal backfires, resulting in the other man's assertion that they cannot be reduced to identity categories, especially not those that make them 'other' from a white perspective. To de-escalate the situation, Felix decides to give up his own seat for the pregnant woman.

Having observed the men's interaction, the woman scolds the two men who have not acted in her interest:

> "You should be ashamed of yourselves," she said.
>
> They were pulling into Kilburn Station. The carriage was silent. No one looked – or they looked so quickly their glances were undetectable. Felix felt a great wave of approval, smothering and unwanted, directed towards him, and just as surely, contempt and disgust enveloping the two men and separating them, from Felix, from the rest of the carriage, from humanity.' (146)

Felix notices that his actions have earned him a spontaneous 'wave of approval' that further cement the otherness of the two black men, who are now enveloped with 'contempt

and disgust'. He is now complicit in the men's marginalisation; in a 'smothering and unwanted' manner, he is rewarded for upholding a Black/White binary in the everyday dynamics of attention. As Ayan Abdulle and Anne Nelun Obeyesekere note, this binary and its inescapability are 'rooted in proximity politics and the capacity of Whiteness to operate as a structuring power.'[43] Felix, so keen on 'moving up', is suddenly embroiled in what Michel calls the 'drama from below', a different way of describing the realities of non-White marginalisation. What the text suggests here is that Michel's assessment – that this drama deserves an attentive turning away in disgust – is in fact an ordinary and functional response to the 'unwilled proximity' of vulnerable others in the metropolis.

As is evidenced by his thought that a disgusted rejection of the two men equates to an exclusion from 'humanity' itself, Felix recognises that this redirection of affective attention is functional but cruel. Thus, Felix is not surprised when the two men follow him out of the Tube station to mug him. The two men want to take their revenge on Felix, who is after all the cause of a public and visceral reminder of the very powerlessness he himself has been trying to escape.

'"Big man on the train. Ain't the big man now,"' one of the men says to Felix right before he fatally stabs him. Felix notes that 'instead of fear, a feeling of pity came over him; he remembered when being the big man was all that mattered' *(NW,* 148). At the end of Felix's narrative, then, he is confronted with the inescapability of anti-Black prejudice and violence. The Tube scene, as well as the entire section entitled '(W1)' (*NW,* 104-148), illustrate that proximity to Whiteness, that unspoken 'structuring power', not only influences parameters of attention but whole life trajectories. Where and how we direct our *focus*, NW

[43] (Ayan Abdulle and Anne Nelun Obeyesekere, xvii)

suggests, is thus a highly political act; an act that uncomfortably transcends desires for cognitive self-improvement.

Other aspects of Felix's narrative attest to the fact that Felix's ability to develop a laser-sharp focus increases rather than decreases his experience of social isolation and stagnation. The entire section devoted to Felix is made up of encounters in which differences in socio-economic status are systematically dissected and related to an enduring sense of affective disconnection. Felix is unusually susceptible to other people's markers of identity, and keenly aware of the ways in which said identities limit how their affective attention can be moved. For example, he notes that his current girlfriend's ex-lover 'had taken his "I'm-a-male-nurse-I-find-hip-hop-too-negative-I-can-cook-curried-goat-I-want-to-move-to-Nigeria" routine back to south London, where, in Felix's opinion, it belonged' (*NW,* 132). In this context, Felix's journey to the W1 postcode represents a journey to a place where he does *not* belong. He travels there to finally break things off with a white lover who he met while working in London's oppressively racist film industry, as well as to purchase a vintage car, a car which is positioned as status symbol traditionally associated with the white middle class. The seller, a young men called Tom who represents this socio-economic bracket, is the only person whose internal monologue interrupts that of Felix; a narrative device that highlights that Felix is in irrevocably 'foreign' territory that is not usually populated by 'your lot,' as his lover Annie puts it (*NW,* 141). Thus Tom remarks that 'Felix's gaze was intense – he met your eyes no matter how you tried to avoid it – and Tom was not used to looking at even his closest friends that way, no matter a perfect stranger to whom he hoped to sell a car' (*NW,* 110). Felix's 'intense gaze' makes for a reading experience in which glaring mismatches in linguistic patterns, political ideologies, as well as lived experience are foregrounded through awkwardness, embarrassment ('Felix took a moment to appreciate that his own skin could not broadcast shame so quickly or so well', *NW,* 109) and anger ('some flicker of

imperiousness in her face tipped Felix over. He started shouting', *NW*, 135). The text furthermore tracks moments of cynical, self-defensive humour regarding the perceived 'other's' idiosyncratic habits of attention. For example, Tom, who works in advertising, remarks, 'How close to superfluous his job was these days! The slogans came pre-embedded, in people's souls' (NW, 114). Tom here reflects on Felix's belief in the power of affirmations reflective of 'good life' fantasies. The very focus that makes Tom feel exposed and defensive is at the heart of Felix's personal ideology of self-improvement, a process he commits to with the help of his new girlfriend, Grace. Felix tells his soon-to-be ex-lover Annie that Grace is 'like her mum, she's got that Nigerian education thing: focused' (*NW*, 134). The ability to focus is understood as a means of getting rid of the '"negative sources of energy" they were meant to be cleansing from their lives' (*NW*, 134). Thus, Felix in turn observes the habits and self-justificatory ideologies reflective of Annie's privileged life marred by addiction through the lens of his own willpower: he 'thought of how he would describe this scene of sobriety on Tuesday at seven p.m. to a group of fellow travellers who would appreciate its heroic quality' (*NW*, 133).

There are instances in which Felix considers the benefits of an expansive focus of attention, one in which the particularities of people's lives do not box them in but connect them back to their shared 'humanity'. Comparing the squalor of his father's NW council flat with the degenerate state of Annie's flat, which she owns as a result of generational wealth, Felix concludes, 'It was worse than his father's situation, yet he saw now that the spirit was much the same: a large life contracted into a small space. (…) The sense of suffocation and impatience was identical, the longing he had to be free' (*NW*, 122). There is an intense desire towards freedom, towards transcending the social structures that put 'large', complex lives into neat categories. It is the text's tragic irony that Felix tries to use the very focus that 'suffocates' the individual as a means of 'heroism' – only to end up dead.

In the Felix section, Smith associates empathy with the opposite of 'heroic' focus: Thus Felix responds to Annie's sensitive understanding of his complicated family dynamics with 'a great impractical warmth towards her' (*NW*, 134); similarly, his involuntary empathy for the pain he causes her by breaking off their affair causes him to muse that 'losing in the way she was losing right now was a kind of virus and pity the way you caught it' (*NW*, 140). As I was reading the pages focalised by Felix, I felt a unique kind of empathetic dissonance. I highly enjoyed the text's sharply delineated portraits of social types, while at the same time remaining aware of the devasting consequences this 'boxing in' has in real life. This awareness, I argue, is not only induced by the description of empathy's 'impractical', virus-like qualities that defy notions of concentration. The text also nudges us towards meta-empathy through strategically placed moments of narratorial self-consciousness. Smith foregrounds that the *novelist's* exacting attention partakes in the habitual and rigid partitioning of lives, condemning them to a certain fate not just on the page but in the reader's mind. The following quote is a clear illustration of this strategy of inducing meta-attention to the reading process:

> Felix chuckled into his chest and leant against a lamp post to roll a fag. He had the sense that someone was watching and taking it all down ("Felix was a solid bloke, with his heart in the right place, who liked to watch the world go by") but when that fancy was finished there was nothing else for him to do. (*NW*, 120)

Felix's story is 'taken down' by Smith, who follows him for a while as he 'watches the world go by', but as soon as the defining features of his perspective have been observed, the text's 'fancy' changes, and he dies. The constraints of the medium mean that the reader never properly 'dwells' on the things that, in real-world contexts, define lived experience.

Yet I would argue that the text's strength lies in gesturing beyond itself, towards the world in which 'dwelling', the long-term inhabitance of a shared social environment, defines

how we understand other people's emotions. What Felix's attempt at 'not dwelling' foregrounds is that even if we try to direct our attention in a way that seems most beneficial to our flourishing, the affective proximity of others inevitably ties us to a place. As Ahmed points out

> Emotions are after all moving, even if they do not simply move between us. We should note that the word "emotion" comes from the Latin, emovere, refering to 'to move, to move out'. Of course, emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or what connects us to this or that. The relationship between movement and attachment is instructive. What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the "where" of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others.[44]

Ahmed's conceptualisation of the relationship between movement and attachment helps us think through the ways in which it is impossible to remove 'distraction' from an empathetic engagement with others. Attention is not just a cognitive skill of sorts, but a fundamental way of interacting with others that is more akin to a space or a movement; it is the threshold that needs to be crossed, it is the movement outwards that ultimately fixes us in place.

[44] Ahmed, p. 11.

In yet another striking passage that makes use of a strong narratorial presence, Smith points to the limits of reading as a focused, immersive experience of other people's lives. She writes,

> Walking down Kilburn High Road Natalie Blake had a strong desire to slip into the lives of other people. It was hard to see how this desire could be practically satisfied or what, if anything, it really meant. "Slip into" is an imprecise thought. Follow the Somali kid home? Sit with the old Russian lady at the bus stop outside Poundland? Join the Ukrainian gangster at his table in the cake shop? A local tip: the bus stop outside Kilburn's Poundland is the site of many of the more engaging conversations to be heard in the city of London. You're welcome. (245)

Not only does Smith describe imaginative perspective-taking as a desire, but she also classifies the drive to 'slip into' somebody as something 'imprecise' that cannot easily be satisfied in 'practical' ways. To read, the passage implies, is not enough. The text points to the concrete actions of following, sitting, and joining others, and finally to the act of listening to 'engaging conversations'. Crucially, these conversations do not happen on the page, but at 'the bus stop outside Kilburn's Poundland', where the paths of 'the Somali kid', 'the old Russian lady', 'the Ukrainian gangster' converge. Understanding the minds of others, here almost comically representative of a 'cosmopolitan' metropolis, *NW* implies, can only ever be an approximation, achieved by a locally rooted attention that is attuned to the constant flux of life.

As such, Smith's engagement with 'dwelling' complements Hacker's preoccupation with the threshold of suspended attention. Rather than possessing a clearly delineated shape with a desirable, 'ethical' outcome, empathetic attention remains something that cannot easily be tamed. An analysis of the mechanisms of disgust and the related movement of centrifugal

and centripetal attention in both Hacker and Smith's texts has shown that the 'focus' of empathy is irrevocably dispersed and re-directed in ways that is often unpredictable; the 'many melodic lines [that] make equal claim to our attention' are fundamentally hard to control.[45]

[45] Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p. 29.

3. Attending to the past: Melancholic diversions in Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* (1997) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2007)

Distraction, as I have argued, is much maligned because it is equated with shallow modes of engagement that are purely focused on the present moment. To be distracted is akin to being completely unaware of – or uninterested in – the past. To live life, as Sachs puts it, like a 'Humean being' that is caught in 'the flutter of ephemeral sensations', seems, at least initially, incompatible with a sensitive understanding of the past.[1] This chapter interrogates to what extent empathy, that way of relating to the other that is seemingly attuned to her historical situatedness, illuminates the lives of others in the past. By turning to the two performatively melancholic narrators of Patrick Modian's *Dora Bruder* and Teju Cole's *Open City*, I aim to show that distraction, in the sense of a literary aesthetic that celebrates split attention, diversions and blind spots, is more successful at establishing an understanding of dead and distant others than a diligent focus on their lived experiences. This chapter expands on the notion of 'dwelling' by reconfiguring it as a melancholic inability to let go of the other.

Some of the most influential definitions of melancholy – a notoriously slippery term that has historically referred to a passing mood state, a temperament, or a disease – mark it as a decidedly un-empathetic phenomenon. In Freud's definition of the term in 'Trauer und Melancholie' (1917), a definition that informs both texts, melancholy is characterised by an individual's 'painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity

[1] Sachs, p. 28.

to love, inhibition of all activity'. [2] Like mourning, melancholy is understood to be a reaction to the loss of 'a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on', yet it cannot be subsumed by mourning's inherent sociality.[3] In this framework, melancholy is a pathological response that severely inhibits the capacity for empathy, seeing that it leads to withdrawal and loss of interest in the shared experience of others. Elaborating on Freud's observations, Charles Shepherdson points out that melancholy is best understood as a petrifying affect.[4] While an emotion entails 'an articulated and meaningful relation to the other', affect behaves like 'a charge of energy'.[5] In melancholy, the subject is affectively incapacitated, 'in contrast to the mourner, who feels grief in connection with others who likewise grieve.'[6] That is because of the way in which the individual internalises loss: as Freud writes, in melancholy 'the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged'.[7] The object is entombed within the ego, where, as Shepherdson sums up, 'it continues to live, with a life that brings suffering to the subject'.[8]

The suffering that belongs to a melancholic identification with the lost other consists in 'self-reproach, guilt and even hatred' because the splitting of the ego in melancholy 'allows the subject to hate in himself the object that has died and abandoned him.'[9] The subject is subsequently incapacitated by melancholy's 'charge of *jouissance*', the sense of

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[2] I am quoting from James Strachey's translation. Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia' [1917]. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol- XIV, 243-260, p. 244.

[3] Ibid., p. 243.

[4] Shepherdson, Charles. *Lacan and the Limits of Language*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 84

[5] Ibid., p. 83

[6] Ibid.

[7] Freud, p. 245

[8]Ibid., p. 81.

[9] Ibid., p. 82.

painful satisfaction taken in this symptom of self-reproach. [10] Similarly, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok point out that the melancholic identification with the other can be seen as a particularly prized fantasy, a kind of 'magic of incorporation': '[I]n order not to have to "swallow" a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost, as if it were some kind of thing'.[11] In a Freudian framework, then, melancholy is a highly self-centred response, privileging the melancholic's isolated experience of both pain and pleasure. Yet at the same time, in its tendency to 'swallow' and collapse the difference between self and other, melancholy's excessive closeness to the other resembles fusional forms of *Einfühlung*. I first turn to Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* to explore how Modiano's attempt at reconstructing the life of a Parisian Holocaust victim self-consciously explores empathy's limits by engaging with the pull of appropriative empathy that is contrasted with a distracted reception of the other's fundamental absence. I then turn to Teju Cole's *Open City* to consider how its narrator's strategies of melancholic evasion and diversion might nudge the reader towards a reading practise that does not prioritise linear focus, but that instead champions the value of mis- and re-readings.

Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder*: Melancholic *brouillage*

Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* is a first-person narrative told in 26 chapters that loosely follow a primary timeline that spans from 1941 to 1943. Modiano reconstructs the events of the final years of Dora Bruder's life, starting with her escape from the Saint-Cœur-de-Marie convent and ending with her deportation to Auschwitz. Building on this structure,

[10] Sheperdson, p. 90.

[11] Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel. Renewals of Psychoanalysi*s. Transl. Nicholas T. Rand. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 20.

the text additionally delves into other events of Dora's and her parents' lives leading up to 1941, drawing on various historically accurate sources such as police reports, municipal records, maps, newspapers and letters. Modiano complements this narrativised archival research with biographical details of his father's life in the early 1940s, as well as his own memories of growing up in Paris in the post-war years. While Modiano's memories focus on the first twenty years of his life, the text adds a level of meta-historiographical self-consciousness by foregrounding Modiano's incomplete research process and including memories from the late 1980s until 1996, a timeline that starts with Modiano's first encounter with Dora Bruder's name and that ends with the writing of *Dora Bruder* itself. As such, the text continually enacts a split of attention that is, ultimately, *distracting*: the genre, subject positions and timelines change frequently, often several times on the same page. Nevertheless, the text possesses a homogeneity rooted in the melancholic logic that pervades Modiano's work as a whole, a logic that centres on unifying themes of irrevocable loss, enduring loneliness, and compulsive repetition. The latter theme also guides the compositional rhythm of *Dora Bruder*. The individual chapters have very similar patterns of temporal juxtaposition, and the text's gloomy mood is dependent on recurring images of light and darkness. *Dora Bruder*'s strong authorial presence and poetic language signal its status as a piece of creative non-fiction, that is, a distinctively literary hybrid of biography and autobiography. As such, the text is representative of a distinctive oscillating movement: veering between biography and autobiography, between knowing and un-knowing, as well as between appropriative focus and distancing diversions.

Dora Bruder is often hyper-conscious of its own focus of attention, always just one step away from explicitly defending its own melancholy, of assuring us that Modiano is aware of the ethical stakes of psychically prolonging the life of a Holocaust victim. In *Dora Bruder*, empathetic self-consciousness is always linked to an awareness of the imperative to

move from the pathological state of melancholy into an active, socially legible process of mourning. The question as to what allows the 'affective discharge' of melancholy 'to be transformed into a symbolic elaboration wherein the object can finally be lost' is not only of a narrowly clinical but of wider importance, especially in the context of memory culture.[12] For mourning to be successful, the excessive closeness of the incorporated, 'swallowed' other needs to be replaced by a communal understanding of an appropriate distance towards her. As Dominick LaCapra points out in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, melancholy is a response to historical trauma that makes it impossible 'to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then, which is related to, but not identical with, here and now'.[13] The melancholic subject position 'acts out' trauma as opposed to approaching it with the distance needed to work through and mourn the events of the past. As such, LaCapra not only aligns melancholy with pathology and (vicarious) traumatisation, but he also characterises it as an ahistorical, decontextualised response. In a melancholic understanding of time, LaCapra argues, the individual is locked 'in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses'.[14]

The element of compulsive repetition present in melancholy attention foregrounds that attention, as Paul North points out, is

> obsessive, about its activity and its objects, and, continuing in this direction, the content of its patience and the objects of its obsession is greed. This is its self-referential core: it holds greedily onto greed. The hand of attention stretches out,

[12] Sheperdson, p. 90.

[13] LaCapra, p. 66

[14] Ibid.

> *adtenere*, toward the things it wishes to take and possess, and it compels itself to do so again and again.[15]

What Modiano's text shows, on a very basic level, is that an overly attentive focus on the lost other is inherently self-referential. The most glaring absence in the text is not in fact the eponymous Dora but empathy proper: Throughout the whole text, Modiano does not empathise with a single person, there are no face-to-face encounters. Yet while the text's self-referentiality might point to a single-minded, decidedly undistracted focus of melancholic attention, *Dora Bruder* simultaneously implies that the only way Modiano can relate to Dora is to perceive her as an intrusion from the outside, quite literally from the 'outside' of the built environment. Consequently, the very first page of the text presents Modiano's first encounter as an intrusion, as a sudden interest in a particular detail that sends him on a path of autobiographical diversion.

In the opening section of *Dora Bruder*, the reader is confronted with the object that sparks an intense obsession in Modiano: a missing person ad. A block of text in an old copy of *Paris Soir* dated 31 December 1941, Modiano writes, has caught his eye. As he puts it, 'je suis tombé à la page trois sur une rubrique: « D'hier à aujourd'hui. »' ['a heading on page three caught my eye: "From Day to Day"'] (*Dora Bruder*, 9; *The Search Warrant*, 3).[16] The reproduction of the ad, which quite literally connects the 'yesterday' of the past with the 'today' of the time of discovery, achieves the effect of a reconstruction of Modiano's experience for the reader. Hence, we too read for the first time:

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[15] North, p. 3.

[16] All English translations: Modiano, Patrick. *The Search Warrant*. Transl. Joanna Kilmartin. London: Harvill Secker, 2014.

> On recherche une jeune fille, Dora Bruder, 15 ans, 1m55, visage ovale, yeux gris-marron, manteau sport gris, pull-over Bordeaux, jupe et chapeau bleu marine, chaussures sport marron. Addresser toutes indications à M. et Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris.
>
> [Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1.55m, oval-shaped face, grey-brown eyes, grey sports jacket, maroon pullover, navy-blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes. Address all information to M. and Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris] (*DB*, 9; *SW*, 3)

Modiano goes on to explain his spontaneous fascination with the ad. The only reason that his attention is hooked, we learn, is because of the familiar map of Paris the ad evokes in his mind. As he comments, 'Ce quartier du boulevard Ornano, je le connais depuis longtemps' ['I had long been familiar with the area around the Boulevard Ornano'] (*DB*, 9; *SW*, 3). The opening section closes with the remark, 'L'immeuble du 41, précédant le cinéma, n'avait jamais attiré mon attention, et pourtant je suis passé devant lui pendant des moins, des années. De 1965 à 1968' ['I had never really noticed the building next to the cinema, no. 41, even though I had been passing it for months, for years. From 1965 to 1968'] (*DB*, 11; *SW*, 5). The text, then, opens with a chance find that makes the familiar unfamiliar; the ad from the time of Occupation directs attention to something that has hitherto gone unnoticed. Modiano zooms in on the details that are anchored in his own memory: the cinema rather than the house in which Dora's parents lived, the missing person ad that he has read eight years prior to writing the text rather than events in Dora's life. To open the text with the ad signals transparency with regards to his own writing process, and it presents Modiano as somebody who is twice removed from Dora's death: the ad is a text authorised by Dora's

parents, and it tells of her initial disappearance from Saint-Cœur-de-Marie convent's boarding school in 1941 rather than her deportation in 1942. The text here seems to work against the stereotypically melancholic response to historical trauma. At no point does Modiano imply that he cannot distinguish between the 'back then' and the 'here and now'. The narrator does not directly relate to Dora's loss, we are told: his attention is structured by a spatial paradigm rather than affective identification, let alone a melancholic 'swallowing' of the other. The disappearance and subsequent death of Dora only relate to the narrator insofar as he and Dora occupy a shared space, Modiano initially intimates, a space that seemingly limits Modiano's scope for unchecked identification.

As Roxanna Curto points out, *Dora Bruder* connects the trajectories of Dora and Modiano's life via the principle of metonymy. She writes, '[t]he characters are always portrayed according to their surroundings, and the narrative itself proceeds via tangents and relations of contiguity between the people, objects, and places described'.[17] This principle of metonymy, she argues, is central to the text's careful avoidance of any metaphorical conflation of identities. As Curto explains with reference to Roman Jakobson's definition of metaphor, 'in a metaphorical relation it is possible to substitute an element for another because the two elements always have the same function within the linguistic system to which they belong'.[18] By contrast, in a metonymical relationship two elements 'do not resemble each other in general, and do not necessarily have the same function'.[19]

I have at times found it difficult to appreciate Modiano's complex ethics of what I believe to be a *pseudo*-metonymic attachment to the dead, expressed in an aesthetic that champions intricate, affectively charged interpositions of personal memory, archival

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[17]Roxana Curto, 'Narrating via Fragments: Patrick Modiano's Metonymic Style in *Dora Bruder*', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies,* 18.4 (2014), pp. 352-359, p. 353

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

research, references to Modiano's previous texts as well as allusions to other (classic French) texts. As I was reading, I noticed flashes of irritation or boredom: this was a text that felt distinctively *muddled*. The text might not explicitly set out to establish metaphorical identity, but my reading experience nevertheless foregrounded the discomfort of distraction, that directionless, shapeless collapsing of inside and outside. Modiano himself finds a word for this disorienting process: *brouillage*. Modiano first mentions the process of *brouillage* in the second section of the text. As he writes, 'D'hier à aujourd'hui. Avec le recul des années, les perspectives se brouillent pour moi, les hivers se mêlent l'un à l'autre. Celui de 1965 et celui de 1942' ['From day to day. With the passage of time, perspectives become blurred for me, one winter merging into another. That of 1965 and that of 1942'] (*DB*, 12; *SW*, 6). The year 1965 and the year 1942 have special significance here: Modiano 'muddles' or 'blurs' these years not simply because of the shared spatial connection of the area around the Boulevard Ornano but because of several key events that relate to his father's and his own biographies.

We later find out that Dora's parents were looking for her in 1941 because she ran away from the Saint-Cœur-de-Marie convent, an escape she repeated one more time in 1942. Modiano identifies with Dora because he, too, ran away from a boarding school twice, in 1960 and 1965. 1942 not only marks the year in which Dora was eventually arrested by the Jewish Affairs police – it marks the year in which the same fate befell Modiano's father. Albert Modiano, we find out, was picked up by a 'panier à salade', a Black Maria or paddy wagon, and only managed to escape by the skin of his teeth (*DB*, 65). To complete the uncanny connections between the years 1942 and 1965, during the latter year the Black Maria's journey to the police station is repeated again, this time with both Albert and Patrick Modiano as the occupants, in the aftermath of a heated dispute between father and son. This dispute marks the beginning of Modiano's complete estrangement from an already neglectful father (*DB*, 66). There is a reason, then, why Modiano peruses a newspaper from 1941 in the

first place. Modiano's interest in the 'années noires' of the Occupation and the Holocaust is deeply personal, and his particular focus on the figure of Dora Bruder revolves as much around relationships of similarity as relationships of contiguity. 'Se brouiller' seems a particularly apt verb here, seeing as it both connotes the process of the timelines blurring as well as Modiano's painful falling out with his father, 'le fils se brouille avec son père'. The connections that Modiano establishes between himself and Dora are gradually revealed to be much more complex than the initial spatial association lets on, leading to a multi-faceted *brouillage*.

In the first instance, Modiano recognises similarities that amount to the disquieting revelation that 'I could have been the other'.[20] Had he been born twenty years earlier, Modiano, too, could have been a Jewish runaway unable to evade capture. Identification here is based on a categorical identity ('child of a Jewish father'), yet at the same time it is concerned with experiences specific to Modiano's life. Patrick Colm Hogan describes 'experiences imbued with unusually strong emotions' as the memories that are wont to 'trigger identification through a sort of structural mapping'.[21] This process does *not* follow the metonymical logic mentioned above, but it is uncomfortably analogical in nature, encouraging a temporal *brouillage*. As Hogan writes, '[a]ll empathy must be to some degree analogical. It must be a matter of experiences that are similar in structure, consequence, and intensity'.[22] Confronted with the emotionally charged memories of the *fugues* in his own life, Modiano notices a strong identification with Dora along analogical lines. Even as he reflects on the different circumstances of their respective *fugues*, or escapes, he notes, 'Mais il semble

[20] Susan Rubin Suleiman, '"Oneself as Another": Identification and mourning in Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder*.' *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 31.2 (2007), pp. 325-350, p. 330.

[21] Patrick Colm Hogan, 'The Epilogue of Suffering: Heroism, Empathy, Ethics.' *SubStance*, Issue 94/95 (Volume 30, Number 1&2), 2001, pp. 119-143, p. 135.

[22] Ibid., p. 136.

que ce qui vous pousse brusquement à la fugue, c'est un jour de froid et de grisaille qui vous rend encore plus vive la solitude et vous fait sentir encore plus fort qu'un étau se resserre.' [But it seems that the sudden urge to escape may be prompted by one of those cold, grey days which makes you more than ever aware of your solitude, intensifying your feeling that a trap is about to close.] (*DB*, 59; *SW*, 52). Modiano was never confronted with the threat of persecution, let alone death, and as such never had to experience what he terms 'la noirceur', 'the blackness'. And yet Modiano cannot help but shake off the feeling that he is connected to Dora through an experience of 'grisaille', which translates as both 'greyness' and 'melancholy'. Referring to an image of a vice tightening, Modiano links a vivid sense of confinement and persecution to a more muted gloom. Images of light and darkness are central to a creation of an idiosyncratic melancholic unease, the sense that the blackness of the 'années noires' seeps into the present moment, tinting everything in various shades of grey. Here, the blurring of moments of time, the temporal *brouillage* is connected to what Julia Holter has identified as Modiano's '*brouillard* très reconnaissable', a very recognisable *fog* of sorts.[23] As Holter points out, Modiano's texts often create 'un brume ambiante', a *sfumato* that is 'chargé d'un émotion lancinante liée à la perte et à l'angoisse' ['an ambient mist', 'charged with a throbbing emotion linked to loss and anguish'].[24] By imagining Dora's anguish with recourse to his own memories, Modiano muddles several perspectives: that of Dora as a teenage runaway, that of Modiano as a teenage runaway, and that of Modiano as a writer in the present moment. The text encourages the reader to attend to all those perspectives at the same time and to understand them as distinct from each other, yet it also presents them as perpetually under threat of collapsing into each other.

[23] Julia Holter, *Le clair-obscure "extreme contemporain". Pierre Bergounioux, Pierre Michon, Patrick Modiano et Pascal Quignard*. (Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017), p. 163.

[24] Holter, p. 163.

Here, the text's distinctively distracting logic runs the risk of appropriation. Modiano's forging of connections between Dora and different versions of himself does not amount to a complete melancholic incorporation of the other, but it is indicative of the text's tendency towards appropriative identification. Susan Rubin Suleiman argues that Modiano's appropriative identification consists in the 'instance[s] of assimilation between self and other', of using the other as a means of shaping his own sense of self .[25] By focusing on Dora's identity as a fellow 'rebellious' teenager, Suleiman writes, Modiano engages in a self-narration and self-reflection that revolves around his own disturbed youth.[26] Suleiman points out that 'if this were the only thing accomplished in *Dora Bruder,* it would be a rather troubling book', seeing that 'using the life of a young Holocaust victim so that you can tell your own story, no matter how painful it is, comes very close to exploitation, or (…) the kind of "excessive" identification with the victim'.[27] As Suleiman sees it, *Dora Bruder* at times illustrates a deeply self-oriented relationship with the other that can be summed up with the sentence 'I resemble that person and now let me tell my story'.[28]

In this context, Suleiman debates whether the text's excessive focus on Dora hides other, more oblique instances of appropriative identification. After all, her surname, *Bruder,* is the German word for 'brother', a fact which acquires a potentially troubling significance: might Dora simply be a stand-in for Rudy, Modiano's younger brother who died when Modiano was 12 years old?[29] His conspicuous absence from the text could be read as a

[25] Suleiman, p. 330.

[26] Ibid., p. 333.

[27] Suleiman, p. 333.

[28] Ibid., p. 334.

[29] Ibid, p. 342. See also Dervila Cooke, *Present Pasts: Patrick Modiano's (Auto)Biographical Fictions.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 300.

representation of a loss that is entirely hidden from consciousness,[30] thereby acting as the elided source of melancholy in the text.

Suleiman comes to the conclusion that Modiano ends up inhabiting a position of empathetic identification that maintains both similarity and difference. Central to Suleiman's conception of an empathetic orientation towards the other is that it has to lead 'to ethical consciousness and mourning'.[31] In this context Suleiman highlights how Modiano engages the reader by asking her to extend her concern to Dora and her family. She analyses Modiano's pointed use of the pronoun 'vous' to directly address the reader, understanding it as 'an invitation to the reader: "you too are concerned".[32] I would argue, however, that Modiano does not encourage a direct relationship between the reader and Dora, but rather that he asks the reader to identify with his own melancholic relationship with her. Before the act of mourning Dora herself can even be considered, the reader first has to position herself with regards to Modiano's self-conscious blurring of perspectives.

This act of positioning has the potential for meta-empathy. The text here asks us to decide whether Modiano's autobiographical discourse, so obviously foregrounded again and again, establishes an affective distance between us and Dora that preserves and respects her difference, or whether it is intrusive and indicative of melancholic appropriation. In this context, what I first judged as the text's irritatingly *muddled* quality turns out to be one of its strengths: the text does not firmly support either an aesthetics of difference or an aesthetics of appropriation. Its oscillating attention made me think carefully about the ethical implications of directing our focus – to our own lives, or to those of others – perhaps precisely because its indeterminacy irritated me so much.

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[30] Freud, p. 245.

[31] Suleiman, p. 334.

[32] Suleiman, p. 337.

A passage which picks up the image of the *fugue* again highlights this crucial indeterminacy:

> Il faudrait savoir s'il faisait beau ce 14 décembre, jour de la fugue de Dora. Peut-être l'un de ces dimanches doux et ensoleillés d'hiver où vous éprouvez un sentiment de vacance et d'éternité – le sentiment illusoire que le cours du temps est suspendu, et qu'il suffit de se laisser glisser par cette brèche pour échapper à l'étau qui va se refermer sur vous.
>
> [It would help to know if the weather was fine on 14 December, the day of Dora's escape. Perhaps it was one of those mild, sunny winter days when you have a feeling of holiday and eternity – the illusion that the passage of time is suspended, and that you need only slip through this breach to escape the trap which is closing around you.] (*DB*, 61; *SW*, 54).

Modiano here again invites the reader to pay attention to the interplay of light and darkness and thereby share his melancholy experience of *grisaille*. If the years of the Occupation are the 'noirceur', then the 'sunny winter day' described in this paragraph represents the futile attempt at escaping their lasting resonance throughout the years. To suspend time, then, not only entails a blurring of timelines and subject positions, but also Modiano's imagining of an alternative history of freedom, of a counterfactual 'breach'. This, of course, comes close to a 'swallowing' of the lost other. Mourning is in fact delayed;

neither Modiano nor the reader confront Dora's death directly, focusing instead on the event of Dora's escape via the analogous event in Modiano's biography – over and over again.

Yet alongside this melancholic repetition, Modiano introduces a level of meta-attention by stressing the 'sentiment illusoire', the *illusory* feeling of temporal suspension, to which he, as well as the readers he has addressed using the plural 'vous', succumb through a process of 'se laisser glisser', of 'slipping'. While on the one hand describing a merging of perspectives, 'slipping' also refers to a momentary lapse of judgment, of a distinctively *misguided* attempt to map personal memories and affective experiences (for example, 'le sentiment de vacance') onto the separate event of Dora's 'fugue'. Holter maintains that a reader of Modiano's texts 's'y laisse glisser avec un certain plaisir, en lâchant ses prises rationnelles' ['slips into it with some pleasure, letting go of his rational holds'].[33] *Dora Bruder* is a text that continually encourages an identificatory confusion that dissolves into melancholy, while at the same time interrupting any overly appropriative tendencies by turning the reader's attention back onto the gaps, breaches, and lapses produced by a merging of non-identical, mismatched perspectives. Unlike Holter, then, I believe that the *un*pleasantness of this wavering movement is more important than a pleasurable, yet mindless 'letting go of rational holds'.

To read *Dora Bruder* means to be repeatedly confronted with the question whether individual, focused attention really is an adequate tool of apprehending the 'dark' chapters of the past. In this context, it is interesting to turn to one of the most vocal critics of Modiano's attentive orientation towards a Holocaust victim. Historian and activist Serge Klarsfeld implies that Modiano actively encourages the reader's melancholic overidentification with Dora. In a letter addressed to Modiano, Klarsfeld writes, 'Peut-être êtes-vous amoureux de

[33] Holter, pp. 163-4.

Dora ou de son ombre et, comme nous l'avons cherché ensemble, vous tenez à la garder pour vous-même, tout en la faisant aimer par un large public. Je resterai donc avec les milliers de visages que j'ai pu retrouver, dont celui de Dora, sans trop chercher à comprendre' ['Perhaps you are in love with Dora or her shadow and, even though we have looked for her together, you want to keep her for yourself, while making her loved by a large audience. I will stay with the thousands of faces I have been able to find, including that of Dora, without trying too hard to understand'].[34] Here, Klarsfeld touches on two aspects central to a Freudian conception of melancholy. Firstly, he mentions the painful satisfaction taken in chasing after the shadow of a dead person, a satisfaction Klarsfeld likens to being in love. Secondly, Klarsfeld points out Modiano's seeming refusal to 'share' the object of his obsession with him and to mourn Dora as a victim among thousands of others. Klarsfeld here mobilises the binary of melancholy versus mourning, pitting Modiano's poetics of *brouillage* against his own project of remembrance.

Throughout his letter, Klarsfeld express his annoyance at the fact that nowhere in *Dora Bruder* does Modiano explicitly acknowledge the time-consuming archival research that Klarsfeld provided for him. Indeed, Klarsfeld, whose *Mémorial des enfants juifs deportés de France* (1978/2012)[35] Modiano greatly admired, provided Modiano with facts as well as useful contacts to aid in the search for traces of Dora Bruder. Klarsfeld's *Mémorial* is a book listing the name of Dora Bruder as well as the names of more than 80,000 other children who were either killed in France or deported to concentration camps abroad. It might initially seem ironic that a text about the tragedy of irreversible loss engages in its own act of erasure. Not only does Modiano's text de-emphasise the importance of Klarsfeld's research, but it

[34] Serge Klarsfeld and Patrick Modiano. 'Correspondance Modiano/Klarsfeld.' *Patrick Modiano*. M. Heck and R. Guidée (eds.). Paris: L'Herne, 2012, pp. 178-186, p. 186.

also fails to acknowledge that Klarsfeld's text could have easily been Modiano's first point of entry into Dora's life. However, this erasure is, narratologically speaking, necessary: the kind of melancholy that Modiano deals with can only exist in the medium of his 'enquête-roman', as Klarsfeld calls the text, the medium of the investigative novel that merges fact and fiction.[36] More pointedly, encountering Dora's name in a list among thousands of other names does not offer the same intrigue as the discovery of the missing person ad that establishes an initial geographical and thereby biographical proximity for the writer-narrator. Klarsfeld instead argues for a collaborative and divided attention – *collaborative* because the act of research and remembrance needs to be collective, not only performed by the individual author or reader, and *divided* because it must properly understand the metaphorical dimension of Dora's life: she stands in for tens of thousands of other lives that all deserve our attention.

If Modiano's *Dora Bruder* only managed to convey a blurred obsession with Dora's shadow, then a reader might be inclined to agree with Klarsfeld assessment. However, Modiano complements the memory-based fragments of the text – which, as I have argued, already induce a potentially uncomfortable, self-conscious attention – with a particular dramatization of his archival research that, as I will show, lessen the impact of Klarsfeld's criticism.

Anti-hero of the archive

In her monograph on modern romances of the archive, Suzanne Keen analyses a subset of contemporary novels which represent archival researchers aiming to achieve empathy with their human subjects. Keen characterises this type of researcher as somebody who 'denies sharp differences of the past from the present' and whose outlook suggests that 'a researcher with the right identities and emotional qualifications can better comprehend

[36] Klarsfeld and Modiano, p. 186.

those who were misunderstood in the past than anyone who coexisted with them'.[37] This researcher, Kenn suggests, turns herself into a heroine of sorts, seeing as she manages to extract just the right kind of information needed to accurately represent the lived experiences of those marginalised in the past. With reference to novels by Alan Hollinghurst, Adam Mars-Jones, Stevie Davies and Robert Goddard, Keen singles out the theme of the 'uncanny unhinging of agency, [in which] the researcher seems to be singled out by the quest, to be fated to be the one individual from the present who can reach into the dormant past to reanimate the interests of the silenced historical subject'.[38] At times, Modiano presents himself in a very similar light, emphasising that '[j]'ai l'impression d'être tout seul à faire le lien entre le Paris de ce temps-là et celui d'aujourd'hui, le seul à me souvenir de tous ces détails.' ['I feel as if I am alone in making the link between Paris then and Paris now, alone in remembering all these details'] (*DB,* 51; *SW,* 45). Furthermore, as his preoccupation with Dora's escape suggests, Modiano is particularly invested in understanding Dora's life through the lens of his own, heightened sensitivity to marginalisation. In assuming the role of the lone quester, Modiano must inevitably 'write out' the figure of Serge Klarsfeld, whose inclusion would turn *Dora Bruder* into a narrative of collaboration.

At one level, Modiano presents his melancholy throughout the text as entirely inevitable: how can one mourn somebody whose existence has been erased from history? After all, in a Freudian framework, melancholy always signals that a loss has been withdrawn from consciousness and has not yet been (collectively) metaphorised.[39] Keen suggests that in the realistic novels she analyses, the hero-researcher's success often consists in eliciting

[37] Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction*. (University of Toronto Press,) p. 183.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Freud, p. 245.

outrage on behalf of the silenced dead.[40] *Dora Bruder* explicitly engages in such ambassadorial work. As Marja Warehime points out, Modiano assumes 'the "solitary" position of the memorialist of those "hors-la-loi" whose lives would otherwise be lost to history'.[41] Modiano's teasing out of analogical relationships, rather than merely amounting to appropriation, also speak of such attempts to tell the story of the 'hors-la-loi', the 'outlaws'. The question of how Modiano can speak on behalf of Dora and the many other 'outlaws' whose mere existence had been criminalised is repeatedly foregrounded in the text. Moments in which Modiano's credentials are questioned – either by himself or others – are juxtaposed with the singular importance of his task. Thus, Modiano describes that he was initially denied access to Dora Bruder's birth certificate because he bears no biological relation to her, leading him to wonder if the civil servant in charge of the request was 'l'une de ces sentinelles chargées de garder un secret honteux, et d'interdire à ceux qui le voulaient de retrouver la moindre trace de l'existence de quelqu'un.' ['one of these sentinels of oblivion whose role is to guard a shameful secret and deny access to anybody seeking to uncover so much as a trace of a person's existence.'] (*DB*, 18; *SW*, 12). Modiano narrativises his quest to fight collective oblivion, making himself available as a figure for reader identification in the service of drawing attention to the fact that in the post-war years 'most administrative records regarding Jewish affairs were deliberately destroyed'.[42]

Even though Modiano eventually manages to obtain Dora's birth certificate and gains access to a wealth of other primary sources such as family photographs, school ledgers, police reports, as well as the 1942 register for the Tourelles camp in which Dora was briefly

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[40] Keen, Romances of the Archive, p. 183.

[41] Marja Warehime, 'Paris and the Autobiography of a Flaneur: Patrick Modiano and Annie Ernaux.' *French Forum*, vol. 25., no. 1, 2000, pp. 97-113, p. 111.

[42] Béatrice Damamme-Gilbert, 'The Question of Genre in Holocaust Narrative: The Case of Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder'*. *Genre Trajectories. Identifying, Mapping, Projecting*. Eds. Garin Dowd and Natalia Rulyova. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 45-65, p. 60.

interned, he never presents his primary sources as the building blocks of a complete narrative. In this respect Modiano is unlike the heroic researchers Keen describes above. In fact, Modiano presents himself as an *antihero* of the archive, perpetually hesitant to come to any conclusions, and even more hesitant to allow for the possibility of empathy with his subject. Here, Modiano's performative melancholy also consists in his peculiar attachment to the never-ending, futile process of finding proof of her existence. For example, with regards to examining yet another potential source at a local secondary school, he writes, 'le directeur [de l'école] … m'a proposé de venir consulter moi-même les registres. Un jour, j'irai. Mais j'hésite. Je veux encore espérer que son nom figure là-bas.' ['the head [of the school] … suggested that I come and consult the register for myself. One of these days, I shall. But I'm in two minds. I want to go on hoping that her name is there.'] (*DB*, 16; *SW*, 10).

By presenting Modiano as the unsuccessful quester, *Dora Bruder* grapples with the role of archival research in commemorating its eponymous figure. Modiano here gestures towards Benjamin's idea of the materialist historian who adopts a 'distracted attentiveness towards his subject matter.'[43] This distracted attentiveness can be, as Carolin Duttlinger argues, associated with the

> deliberate montage technique which displays, rather than conceals, the eclectic nature of historical evidence. Benjamin's attention is directed not at the obvious, the landmarks of cultural achievement, but at the debris of history, at those objects and phenomena that have been excluded from collective consciousness.[44]

[43] Duttlinger, 'Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin', p. 44.

[44] Duttlinger, 'Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin', p. 44.

Michael Sheringham convincingly argues that Modiano sees the whole city as an archive, engaging in what he calls 'archival journeying'.[45] According to Sheringham, Modiano's pedestrian itineraries in the 1990s 'turn the city into a palimpsest, a multi-decked set of archival traces'.[46] Sheringham likens Modiano to a wraith haunting the city, remarking that 'as he walks, ghost-like, in Dora's and his own past footsteps, Modiano injects himself into the veins of his city'[47] I find Sheringham's observation that it is Modiano himself who haunts the streets of Paris particularly interesting, considering that it both aptly illustrates Modiano's appropriative identification with Dora, as well as the text's refusal to directly conjure up Dora's 'ghost' for the reader's consumption. In its focus on the meaning of the text's multi-layered traces, Sheringham's reading complements other spatial approaches to the text that rely on Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory.

An inter-generational structure of memory transmission, postmemory is a structure in which memory is 'not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation'.[48] Photography, especially family photography, plays a special role in postmemory: as Hirsch writes, '[p]hotography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability.'[49] Hirsch here relies on Roland Barthes, who conceptualises photography as 'a new space–time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph

[45] Michael Sheringham, 'City as archive: a dialogue between theory and practice.' *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 23, no. 3, (2016), pp. 517-523, p. 521.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory'. *Poetics Today*, vol 29. no. 1 (2008), pp. 103-128, p. 107.

[49] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*. *Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 20.

being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*'.[50] *Dora Bruder* does not actually devote much space to the representation of photography, yet the 'illogical' conjunction of immediacy and anteriority in the text is undeniable, as is Modiano's dwelling on the past's irretrievability. As Jennifer Howell writes, *Dora Bruder* can be understood as an adapted postmemorial narrative, 'one whose nucleus is geographic rather than photographic' (65).

Thus, Modiano walks the city to find locations like the address listed in Dora's missing person ad, to see if they might link him to the past by collapsing the 'there-then' and 'here-now'. Again, Modiano presents himself as the unsuccessful quester, remarking, '[p]ar moments, le lien s'amenuise et risque de se rompre, d'autre soirs la ville d'hier m'apparaît en reflets furtifs derrière celle d'aujourd'hui.' ['There are moments when the link is stretched to breaking-point, and other evenings when the city of yesterday appears to me in fugitive gleams behind that of today'] (*DB*, 52; *SW*, 45).

When figured as a postmodern flâneur or as a psychogeographer, to name some of the critical paths that Modiano's peripatetic writing has already inspired, the importance of Modiano's affective experience of the cityscape is paramount.[51] Modiano's embodied perception of Paris has an ambivalent relationship to postmemory, which Hirsch has also defined as the construction of a space of remembrance.[52] *Dora Bruder*'s spatial politics revolve around the complex and often paradoxical process of remaining attentive to absence, a process which consciously undercuts the postmemorial effort to find 'an intimate material

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[50] Quoted in Jennifer Howell, 'In defiance of genre: The language of Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* project.' *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 59-72. p. 63.

[51] See Adam Shatz, 'Promenade Dora-Bruder', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 38 No. 18. (2016), online 22 September 2016 at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n18/adam-shatz/promenade-dora-bruder> [accessed on 9 February 2020] , n.p.; Maya Warehime, 'Paris and the Autobiography of a Flaneur: Patrick Modiano and Annie Ernaux.' *French Forum*, vol. 25., no. 1, 2000, pp. 97-113.

[52] Marianne Hirsch, 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy.' *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal et al. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 3-23.

and affective connection that would transmit the affective quality' of past events.[53] 'On se dit qu'au moins les lieux gardent une légère empreinte des personnes qui les ont habités,' ['It is said that premises retain some stamp, however faint, of their previous inhabitants,'] Modiano remarks, continuing to analyse just what this 'empreinte' or imprint consists of, affectively speaking (*DB*, 30; *SW*, 24). 'Empreinte: marque en creux ou en relief. Pour Ernest et Cécile Bruder, pour Dora, je dirai: en creux. J'ai ressenti une impression d'absence et de vide, chaque fois que je me suis trouvé dans un endroit où ils avaient vécu.' [Stamp: an imprint, hollow or in relief. Hollow, I should say, in the case of Ernest and Cécile Bruder, of Dora. I have a sense of absence, of emptiness, whenever I find myself in a place where they have lived.'] (ibid). Modiano dramatises the impossibility of emotional transportation, an impossibility that is not merely born out of a desire to keep an ethical distance towards his subject, but that also illustrates the extent of collective amnesia. Modiano defines Dora through everything that cannot be known about her, everything that cannot be explored through empathy, thereby documenting Dora's life through the lens of an idiosyncratic negative attention. In this context, Maya Warehime's contention that Modiano is a memorialist of the 'hors-la-loi'[54] should be amended: it is perhaps more appropriate to call Modiano a counter-memorialist. With reference to young German artists and monument makers in the 1990s, James Young notes that their counter-memorial practices reveal only abstract links to the Holocaust, writing that '[i]nstead of seeking to capture the memory of events, therefore, they remember only their own relationship to the events: the great gulf of *time* between themselves and the Holocaust'.[55] I would like to suggest that Modiano's text creates a similar counter-memorial tension, one that exists between the affective availability

[53] Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', p. 38.

[54] Warehime, p. 111.

[55] James E. Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today.' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter, 1992), pp. 267-296 (pp. 271 f.).

of its narrator and the denial of empathy with its subject. We are overexposed to Modiano's melancholic *brouillage* with Dora, yet we experience Dora and the precise events of her life as always beyond our reach. In this context, Modiano's anti-heroic persona is one that is receptive to what North calls 'fundamental distraction': as a 'relationship of thought to non-being and its variants: not-quite-being, more-than-being, not-yet-being, no-longer-being.' As such, it is a distraction that is 'tending away from phenomenology and ontology toward fantasy, literature, and art.'[56] It is, ultimately, absolutely central to his understanding of the built environment as covered in traces of Dora's existence whose 'précision topographique contraste avec ce que l'on ignora toujours de leur vie – ce blanc, ce bloc d'inconnu et de silence' ['topographical precision contrasts with what we shall never know about their [Dora and her parents'] life – this blank, this mute block of the unknown'] (*DB,* 29; *SW*, 23).

The silence of amnesia can only be met with the melancholy, distracted awareness of 'la tendresse attristée', the 'sad tenderness' of the voices that have been lost to the Holocaust. Modiano takes this expression from *Miracle de la Rose* by Jean Genet to refer to the Parisian accent of the many Jewish children who 'étaient si parisiens qu'ils se confondaient avec les facades des immeubles, les trottoirs, les infinies nuances de gris qui n'existent qu'à Paris' ['were so Parisian that they merged effortlessly into the facades, the apartment blocks, the pavements, the infinite shades of grey which belong to Paris alone'] (*DB,* 140; *SW*, 131). This image, which quite literally conceptualises melancholy as a petrifying affect, is not only representative of Modiano's use of spatial metonymy, but it also highlights one final aspect of Modiano's *grisaille*: it is inextricably linked to intertextuality.

[56] North, p. 13.

The melancholic pedigree

In his memoir *Un pedigree*, published eight years after *Dora Bruder*, Modiano self-consciously comments on his habit of namedropping the members of the intelligentsia who were part of his parents' social circle when he was a child. He writes, 'Que l'on me pardonne tous ces noms et d'autres qui suivront. Je suis un chien qui fait semblant d'avoir un pedigree.' ['I hope I can be forgiven all these names, and others that will follow. I'm a dog who pretends to have a pedigree'] (*Un pedigree*, 11; *Pedigree*, 5). In *Dora Bruder*, which already functions as a partial autobiography, Modiano establishes a similar kind of pedigree: a pedigree that legitimises his appropriative identification with Dora within a tradition of literary melancholy. Modiano finds echoes of the theme of the flight not just in his own memory but in the fictional space of French literature. Thus, he adds the topography of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* to the network of spatial relations that he has already established between himself and Dora. Modiano points out the uncanny coincidence that Cosette and Jean Valjean's attempt to escape from Javert and his police by hiding in a garden that turns out to be situated 'exactement au 62 de la rue du Petit-Picpus, la même addresse que le pensionnat du Saint-Cœur-de-Marie où était Dora Bruder' [precisely at no. 62 Rue de Petit-Picpus, the same address as that of the Convent of the Holy Heart of Mary where Dora was a boarder'] (*DB*, 53; *SW*, 47). Modiano goes on to quote from *Les Misérables*, picking a passage in which Hugo writes that his description of the 'petit couvent' ought to bring 'l'histoire mélancolique', the 'melancholy story of Jean Valjean' to the reader's mind (*DB*, 53; *SW*, 47).

In this instance, Modiano reconfigures his melancholic *brouillage* as a superimposition of literary and historical traces, a process which he likens to waking from a dream and realising with a sense of vertiginous estrangement that the streets of Hugo's fictional map of Paris 'étaient décalquées sur celles qui vous sont familières le jour' ['had

overlaid the one[s] with which, in daytime, you are familiar'] (*DB*, 52; *SW*, 46). By foregrounding its own artifice and its status as an intricately layered literary object, *Dora Bruder* constructs a distinctively aesthetic experience of melancholy. Consequently, we are alerted to Modiano's delight in the interplay of coincidences and similarities that blur the line between *Dora Bruder* and other texts. Ultimately, Modiano's attention is that of a *romancier* who understands Dora, himself, and his own work in their relation to literary patterns and traditions**.** Here, my reading of Modiano's (self-)referential attention is influenced by Mary Cosgrove, who analyses melancholy as a performative discourse rather than a subject position, and who maintains that melancholy can only really testify 'to the insufficiency of signification' itself.[57] Central to Cosgrove's argument is the contention that melancholy turns into a performative discourse when it foregrounds the iterability of language. Quoting James Loxley, Cosgrove explains that any utterance is iterable because 'it cannot be said to belong ultimately or originally in any particular context'; it furthermore 'carries the trace of the other contexts in which it features: the example of quoting and citing reveal this particularly starkly'.[58] Because of its definitional multiplicity and disparate intellectual histories, melancholy's iterability carries the trace of nothing less than the cultural forms that attend to the 'universal human experience of sorrow'.[59] By foregrounding its own conventionality, then, melancholy performs the struggle of language to 'say anything meaningful about atrocity and its aftermath'.[60]

[57] Mary Cosgrove, *Born Under Auschwitz. Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature.* Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014., p. 6.

[58] Qtd in Cosgrove, p. 5

[59] Cosgrove, p. 9.

[60] Cosgrove, p. 9.

As Dervila Cooke remarks, Modiano relies on the reader's awareness of his self-referentiality as well as the fundamental 'versionality of narration'.[61] She points out that Modiano all but encourages 'multiple-text readers' who are familiar with his extensive fictional work, which to a large degree consists of novels in which investigative narrators that closely resemble Modiano engage with the *années noires* and the formative first two decades of Modiano's life in Paris.[62] Modiano himself points out that 'j'ai vraiment le sentiment d'écrire toujours le même livre' ['I really feel like I'm always writing the same book'].[63] In fact, we find that Modiano's creativity seems to be fuelled by an idiosyncratically melancholic inability to move on from the past or to say the 'meaningful' thing about it. At some point in his memoir, Modiano indirectly comments on his creation of texts that compulsively rehearse certain themes and events, in particular the first 21 years of his life:

> Je n'ai rien à confesser ni à élucider et je n'éprouve aucun goût pour l'introspection et les examens de conscience. Au contraire, plus les choses demeuraient obscures et mystérieuses, plus je leur portais de l'intérêt. Et même, j'essayais de trouver du mystère à ce qui n'en avait aucun.
>
> [I have nothing to confess or elucidate and I have no interest in soul-searching or self-reflection. On the contrary, the more obscure and mysterious things remained, the

[61] Dervila Cooke, *Present Pasts: Patrick Modiano's (Auto)Biographical Fictions.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 13.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Akane Kawakami, *A Self-conscious Art: Patrick Modiano's Postmodern Fictions.* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 111.

more interesting I found them. I even looked for mystery where there was none.] (*UP*, 45; *P*, 41).

The melancholic 'intérêt' inextricably linked to a sense of 'mystère' are part and parcel of the 'Modiano novel' or style *Modianesque.* As Akane Kawakami argues, Modiano creates an effect that is akin to a popular subgenre, 'eliciting from the reader the chain response of recognition, anticipation and subsequent fulfilment or disappointment'.[64] 'This,' Kawakami writes, 'results in the reassuring familiarity which some have seen as dull uniformity'.[65] There is something pleasurably predictable about Modiano's melancholy logic in *Dora Bruder*, so much so that the reader might be inspired to imaginatively insert herself into the text's web of intertextual connections. Thus, John Taylor closes his review of *Dora Bruder* by writing, 'Let me conclude by relating a personal coincidence obliquely linked to the girl's ongoing story', thereby enacting his own version of looking for mystery where there is none.[66] Taylor, it turns out, has found a rare book in a bookshop just before he set out to write his review. *Au bord de la nuit*, the French translation of the German writer Friedo Lampe's *Am Rande der Nacht* (1933, is a text which Modiano finds himself drawn to because of the familiarity of its tone and atmosphere. He reflects on the fact that the text was censored by the Nazis, writing that '[i]l n'était même pas juif. Qu'est-ce qu'on pouvait bien lui reprocher? Tout simplement la grâce et la mélancolie de son livre.' ['He was not even Jewish. To what, then, could they possibly have objected? Quite simply, to the charm and nostalgia of his book'] (*DB*, 95; *SW*, 87-8).

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[64] Kawakami, p. 10.

[65] Ibid.

[66] John Taylor, 'The Sad Tenderness of Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder*.' *The Arts Fuse*. 30 May 2015. At <https://artsfuse.org/128389/fuse-book-review-the-sad-tenderness-of-patrick-modianos-dora-bruder/> [Accessed on the 8th of December 2020], n.p.

What this quote starkly illustrates is that it is almost impossible to separate the discourse on memory and forgetting, which is concerned with the difficulty of mourning the victims of the Holocaust, from the circular movements of appropriative melancholy that tie both Modiano and the reader to the story of Dora Bruder. By foregrounding how ethical and aesthetic discourses blend into each other, *Dora Bruder* illustrates that narrative empathy is implicated in complex and interlinked processes of identification that veer between melancholic merging and distracted reception.

Teju Cole's *Open City:* Melancholic misdirection

In contrast to Modiano's text, the story of Julius, the German-Nigerian narrator of *Open City*, is not instantiated by an encounter with a singular loss. Julius approaches melancholy from a macro perspective: not only is he a psychiatrist in residence who specialises in 'affective disorders in the elderly' (*Open City*, 7), but he also draws on his knowledge of critical theory and psychoanalysis to interpret the events of his life over a 6-month span with a view to what he calls 'the epidemic of sorrow sweeping our world' (*Open City*, 208). Starting in the autumn of 2006, his narrative is loosely structured by many, often compulsive walks in New York and, for a span of three weeks, in Brussels. *Open City*'s plot is minimal, yet any discussion of the text's dynamics of reader engagement would be remiss if it did not highlight that it ends with Julius's acquaintance Moji accusing him of raping her when he was 14 years old. Julius tells the story of the events leading up to this unexpected accusation in hindsight, in a diaristic style and opening *in medias res*: 'And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city.' (*Open City*, 3). From the very first sentence, *Open City*'s narrator approaches his life from a distance, and with a strong awareness of an audience. Occasionally, the novel's linear chronology is interrupted by Julius's memories of his

childhood in Nigeria. Julius's self-consciousness with regards to the temporal ordering of his narrative partly resembles that of Modiano's, yet *Open City* differs from *Dora Bruder* in one crucial aspect. Julius, unlike Modiano, seeks out the company of others in the present moment and exposes himself to their bids for empathy. Almost all of the twenty-one chapters of *Open City* chronicle Julius's encounters with one to three others, some of whom are his psychiatric patients. The most striking pattern to be found, however, is that of Julius's focus on the migrant other. In the opening chapter of the novel, Julius finds himself in his apartment, looking 'out the window like someone taking auspices, hoping to see the miracle of natural immigration' (*Open City*, 4). He is fascinated by the 'sight of geese swooping in formation across the sky', wondering 'how our life below might look from their perspective' (ibid.). The people that Julius has chosen to feature in his narrative make up a flock of migrants whose movements he charts just like that of the geese in the sky, and whose collective perspective he wishes to inhabit so as to understand his own experience 'below'. Attentiveness towards the other is, more often than not, motivated by a desire to shape his own sense of self, to connect his self-narration to larger narrative patterns. His inability to forge this connection is reflected in the novel's melancholic affect. Even though the novel is filled with numerous stories other than Julius's own, it can never shake its narrator's profound sense of disconnection. Julius remains unmoored throughout, unaffected by the devices used to anchor his story: the walks in the city and the conversations with others. Much of *Open City*'s impact relies on its ability to distract the reader from the fact that Julius's melancholy, encoded in the image of the birds in flight, is not, in fact, a study of exquisite detachment, but a wild-goose chase that conceals far darker emotions.

Deconstructing the 'compassionate African'

Julius's first encounter with another person consists in a visit to his former professor of English literature, Professor Saito. The retired academic, we find out, has been acting as a mentor and grandfather figure since Julius's college days. Julius surmises that due to Saito's cancer diagnosis, his 'social interactions had been curtailed to a degree that must have pained him', thereby framing his visit as motivated by empathy and compassion for a friend (*Open City*, 11). That he might be equally motivated by his own loneliness briefly transpires when Julius mentions his newly formed habit of going for walks, professing to the reader that he 'wanted to tell him more but didn't have quite the right purchase on what it was I was trying to say about the solitary territory my mind had been crisscrossing' (*Open City*, 12). Instead of sharing his thoughts, Julius reverts to entertaining Saito with a funny anecdote about one of his patients, paying close attention to how his presence 'energize[s]' Saito, noticing how Saito 'had enjoyed the story (…) that its strange and unhappy contours had amused him (and troubled him) in the same way they had me' (*Open City*, 12-3). Here, Julius presents himself as an attentive listener, a self-assessment that remains intact throughout the text. Julius knows how to make others feel comfortable and elicit their stories, a skill that he explicitly links to his friendship with the older man: 'In these conversations, as I now recall them, he did almost all the talking. I learned the art of listening from him, and the ability to trace out a story from what was omitted' (*Open City*, 9). Julius turns into an audience for Saito's life story, showing a particular interest in the Japanese American man's studies before the Second World War and his later internment in the Minidoka Camp in Idaho (*Open City*, 9). In this context, Julius recedes into the background, merely observing the recall of memories: 'It was the late thirties again, and [Saito] was back in Cambridge, breathing the damp air of the fens, enjoying the tranquility of his youthful scholarship' (*Open City*, 14). In a move that is characteristic of the text's self-consciousness, Julius highlights the limits of his listening skills. Thus, he lets the

reader in on the fact that '[a]t times, it seemed as though [Saito] was talking more to himself, but he suddenly asked a direct question and, interrupted from my own little train of thought, I scrambled for an answer' (*Open City*, 14). With one sentence, the gulf between self and other is established once more, and the reader is left with an image of disconnection. However, this self-conscious moment has the paradoxical effect of making Julius seem more rather than less sensitive, if not to others, then certainly to himself and his own habits. Julius, we gather, is honest, offering us a perspective that is attuned to nuance and the natural flux of attention.

Elsewhere in *Open City*, Julius's strategy of projecting his own reliability by admitting to his own flaws is much more explicit and concerned with graver shortcomings than a wandering attention. Julius remembers wooing his former girlfriend Nadège by joining her on a volunteer visit to a detention centre for undocumented immigrants. He finds himself in the company of devout Christians who, as Julius wryly observes, all have 'that beatific, slightly unfocused expression one finds in do-gooders' (*Open City*, 62). Subsequently, Julius meets Saidu, a war refugee from Liberia, who embarked on a long and arduous journey to the United States via Guinea, Morocco and Portugal. Julius sits down for one and a half hours to listen to Saidu's account, which is reproduced in the third person with only minor interjections over the span of five pages (*Open City*, 64-70). Distinguishing himself from the 'unfocused' faces of his companions, Julius recalls how Saidu 'began to speak, rapidly, about how he had ended up confined in this large metal box in Queens. I encouraged him, asked him to clarify details, gave, as best as I could, a sympathetic ear to a story that, for too long, he had been forced to keep to himself.' (*Open City*, 64) Julius signals his complete immersion in the story of the other by brief interruptions such as 'I was startled by a sudden knock on the Plexiglas' (*Open City*, 66). The level of detail that the text provides, such as Saidu's memory of seeing a 'small white snake' in the darkness of a bombed-out building in Monrovia which turns out to be 'an open exercise book, its pages fluttering in the wind',

again positions Julius as a highly skilled listener whose attention can hold other people's traumatic life stories (*Open City*, 66). Yet Julius later on interrogates his motives for listening to Saidu in the first place. He admits that he was drawn to Saidu's story because of how it would reflect on him and his empathetic abilities: 'I told the story to Nadège (…) Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story. I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself' (*Open City*, 70). Julius comes to the realisation that he himself is not so different from the 'do-gooders' who turn the act of listening into a self-indulgent act of performative virtue.

As a narrator, Julius is completely frank about his ability to tell a story that embellishes his self-image and, as is the case with Nadège, seduces the listener. The implied reader is assured that she has a slightly different relationship with Julius than his former girlfriend, who meets the 'compassionate African' but misses out on the self-critical, counterbalancing story. It is the text's central irony that Julius merely replaces the story of the 'compassionate African' with that of the 'honest African' in a ploy to seduce the reader. By admitting to his own vanity, by laying bare his past attempts at manipulation, Julius does not break old patterns, he repeats them. As he compares his shortcomings to that of many other do-gooders, Julius emphasises his common humanity, encouraging the reader to adopt a favourable attitude towards him. Here, the text also encourages what Erin McGlothlin calls *ideological identification*, that is, a reader's alignment with the narrator's moral and ethical world view.[67] By highlighting that he has stopped using other people's stories to portray himself as altruistic, Julius appeals to the reader's appreciation of honesty and self-reflection

[67] Erin McGlothlin, 'Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response.' *Narrative)*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2016), pp. 251–76 (p. 264).

at the same time as he asks her to excuse his human fallibility. However, even as he attempts to justify his distinctively 'normal' behaviour, Julius also uses his self-consciousness to project his disconnection and loneliness.

Julius is eager to turn himself into the melancholic antihero of his own story. Unlike Modiano's antiheroic story, which relies on incomplete historical facts and personal memory to make unstable connections with the other, Julius's 'failure' of empathy is located in the repeated experience of pseudo-proximity. As Rebecca Clark has pointed out, Julius's story has a distinctively parasitic character. The people Julius meets turn into 'hosts' for his self-narrative, into the structure that enables his diaristic reflections. As Clark puts it, Julius 'plays the role of the invited guest', and just like a biological parasite that 'secretes tissue to combat its loneliness and connect to its meal', Julius 'spins stories instead'.[68] Clark's analysis is particularly suitable to highlight the difference between Modiano and Cole's texts: while Modiano weaves the fragments of another person's life into his own life story, Julius voraciously consumes other people's fully drawn-out narratives. He 'collapses all of the stories he hears and retells them in his own affectively flat, unidirectional univocality'.[69] While the metaphor of the parasite does not feature in Julius's explicit self-reflection, Julius nevertheless comes close to spelling out the central self-referentiality of his story when he remembers 'flitt[ing] from book to book' in his apartment (*Open City,* 5). He reflects on his habit of reading books out loud, writing that 'a book suggests conversation' (*Open City,* 5). However, there is no real conversation to speak of, considering that Julius only 'read aloud with myself as my audience, and gave voice to another's words' (*Open City,* 5-6). Julius

[68] Rebecca Clark, '"Visible Only in Speech": Peripatetic Parasitism; or, Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*.' *Narrative*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2018), pp. 181–200 (p. 189, p. 191).

[69] Clark, 189.

consumes and then ‘reads out’ the stories of others in his narrative, only to find that he has merely been talking to – and about – himself.

It is no surprise, then, that Julius’s memory of a perfect empathetic union with his German grandmother is essentially silent. Remembering his Oma’s visit to his childhood home in Nigeria, Julius revisits ‘the silence I shared with Oma (her hand on my shoulder, kneading it); my parents were gone an hour, and in that hour we two communed almost wordlessly, simply waiting’ (*Open City*, 35). He recalls that it had been impossible to share this experience with his parents ‘because what it was had been without words’ (ibid.). It is this memory that prompts him to leave New York for a holiday in Brussels, where he suspects his estranged grandmother now lives. His interest in a lost other thus differs from Modiano’s in crucial ways: here, familial ties account for the initial trigger, and the other is initially approached with a belief in an unmediated communion. Furthermore, Julius’s search for his Oma is, unlike Modiano’s search for Dora, not particularly methodical– Julius spends an afternoon consulting a phonebook and reading the Belgian White Pages (*Open City*, 101) – and ends soon after he arrives in Brussels. Here, the city is not conceptualised as an archive, and it is not imbued with the negative presence that Modiano puts at the centre of his text. ‘Every now and again, looking into the faces of the women huddled at the train stops, I imagined that one of them might be my oma,’ Julius writes. ‘It was a possibility that had come to me each time I was out in the city, that I might see her, that I might be tracing paths she had followed for years’ (*Open City*, 115). Yet the other’s trajectory, or the details of her everyday life, do not occupy Julius as much as they do Modiano, and his attention is even more firmly directed back at himself. Thus Julius imagines that his Oma ‘might indeed be one of the old women with their orthopedic [sic] shoes and crinkly shopping bags, wondering from time to time how her only daughter’s only son was doing. But I could recognize the nostalgic wish-fulfillment fantasy at work’ (ibid.). Again, Julius adds an idiosyncratic layer

of self-consciousness to his recollections. As a result, the earlier memory of empathetic fusion seems less like a bonafide encounter with alterity than expressive of the same tendency towards self-absorbed 'wish-fulfilment'.

As he is asking the reader to identify with his clear-eyed self-awareness, Julius repeatedly confronts her with her own idealised and indulgent notions of empathy, thereby reinforcing the text's effect of encouraging cognitive identification through the critique of other, ostensibly more questionable processes of emotional identification. Pieter Vermeulen argues that Cole's novel 'invite[s] consumption' as a 'moving [tale] of migration and exile,' yet refuses 'to offer the kind of gratifying and cathartic emotive transports that circumscribe the niche of literary migrant fiction in the global marketplace'.[70] Similarly, the text initially presents the loss of Julius's grandmother as the easily palatable origin of his melancholy, only to undermine the significance of this loss as a means to bind the reader closer to Julius. In an article entitled 'Closeness through Unreliability', Faye Halpern argues that by creating unreliable narrators such as the butler Stevens in Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* (1988), authors create situations 'in which the more an unreliable narrator claims things the authorial audience know to be wrong, the closer emotionally we feel to the narrator'[71] In the case of Stevens, Halpern argues, we empathise with him as a victim because we understand how an unhappy childhood and class ideology have adversely affected his ability to read social cues and to respond to others with warmth and kindness (ibid.). This kind of emotional identification, however, only works because Stevens is, for the most part, unaware of his own biases. Julius's self-awareness pre-empts the sense of intellectual distance – or intellectual

[70] Pieter Vermeulen, 'Reading Alongside the Market: Affect and Mobility in Contemporary American Migrant Fiction," *Textual Practice*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2015), pp. 273-293 (p. 278, p. 282).

[71] Faye Halpern, "Closeness Through Unreliability: Sympathy, Empathy, and Ethics in Narrative Communication." *Narrative*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2018), pp. 125–45 (p. 129).

superiority – experienced by the readers of such 'clueless', unreliable narrators. By deconstructing the 'compassionate African', Julius binds us to him not because we feel for or with him, but because we identify with the imperative to resist the self-centred emotional gratification offered by certain kinds of nostalgia. Rather than perceiving Julius as emotionally stunted or simply unable to properly empathise with others – an assessment that the text might support at other points, especially towards the end – the reader is more likely to see his detached melancholy as a critique of facile and indulgent modes of identification.

In this context, it should also be noted that Julius often rejects others who 'seek a subaltern, oppositional form of solidarity'.[72] When he encounters a black cabdriver who is offended at his lack of response to a greeting of 'my brother', he admits, 'I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me' (*Open City*, 40). Julius's rejection of other's bids for connection based on racial solidarity is usually accompanied by an element of aesthetic distancing. The cabdriver is rebuffed immediately after Julius has studied the paintings in the permanent collection of the American Folk Art Museum, an experience that tellingly leaves him feeling like 'someone who had returned to earth from a great distance' (*Open City*, 40). Similarly, he describes his desire to dissociate from a man of Barbudan origin: 'Are you Yoruba? Kenneth was, by now, starting to wear on me, and I began to wish he would go away' (*Open City*, 53). In this moment, Julius notices that Kenneth's 'upper body was powerful, but his legs were spindly, so that he looked like Nabokov's Pnin come to life' (*Open City*, 52). As Paul Crosthwaite argues, Cole deliberately evades any stereotypical representations of Africa and Africans, that is, the 'stock spectacles of "primitive" folk belief or obscene violence, poverty, and degradation offered up for easy metropolitan

[72] Sam Durrant, 'Open/Closed Cities: Cosmopolitan Melancholia and the Disavowal of Refugee Life', in *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 608-631 (p. 625.)

consumption'[73] To avoid perpetuating the images of this kind, Crosthwaite notes, Cole gives us a highly educated protagonist who is conspicuously 'westernized' and who is positioned at a far remove from them.[74] I would argue, however, that just like his explicit self-criticism, Julius's American education and frame of reference, rather than complicating 'metropolitan consumption', actually serve the function of turning Julius into a figure of ideological identification for the (predominantly western) audience.

Julius's orientation towards his black 'brothers' significantly differs from Felix's orientation in Zadie Smith's *NW*. Felix is similarly avoidant of a solidarity that 'lays claims on him' and that equates black identity with degradation, poverty, and violence, but his avoidance is rooted in visceral, personal experiences of these phenomena. Felix wants to transcend identity categories he has known intimately; Julius, on the other hand, presents himself as somebody who has no knowledge of these categories in the first place. Julius's intellectualism signals his role as a detached observer, a role that ostensibly allows him to come to astute and unbiased conclusions; conclusions that differ from Felix's hyperfocused observations that gesture towards a suffocating social reality. Throughout the text, Julius conceives of himself as a 'postrace' cosmopolitan subject freed from restrictive categories of identity,[75] thereby showcasing what Lily Saint has called 'a solipsism masquerading as a superficial cosmopolitanism'.[76] Even as he ingests other people's stories, Julius does not identify with any one of them, showcasing a quality of attention that is as wide and measured as it is indeed superficial. In his influential review of the novel, James Wood states that

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[73] Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 214.

[74] Ibid, p. 214.

[75] Maria Bose, 'Virtual Flânerie: Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription.' *C21 Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1-29 (p. 24).

[76] Lily Saint, 'From a Distance: Teju Cole, World Literature, and the Limits of Connection.' *Novel*, 51.2 (2018), pp. 322–338 (p. 335).

'[m]ore than anything, "Open City" seems a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism common to thousands, if not millions, of bookish types'.[77] The text illustrates just how much the 'solitary liberalism' of the 'bookish types' that Julius courts as an audience eschews any confrontation with the 'ugly feelings' that can characterise empathy. Any forms of affectively charged identification that rely on analogy, on an uncomfortable recognition of sameness, so present in Modiano's text, especially in its more appropriative moments, are curiously absent from Julius's story. Julius presents himself as isolated, rejecting empathy as a process that presupposes any shared traits or experiences. As a narrator, Julius goes some way towards illustrating that melancholy is indeed 'a dialectic between emotional withdrawal and its apparent opposite, the most intense or exceptional devotion of affective energy'.[78] Representing the pole of emotional withdrawal, Julius's insistence on 'having no causes' and on 'being magnificently isolated from all loyalties' (*Open City*, 107) forms the basis of his disembodied, passive point of view; a point of view which encompasses a transatlantic history of suffering.

As such, Julius conforms to the trope of the dispassionate melancholic who demonstrates that he 'has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic'.[79] As Wood writes, 'Julius stands to one side, and it is clear that his political inactivity has to do with his ability to see things so well'.[80] Wood's assessment of the novel has been widely criticised because it represents an uncritical alignment with Julius's evasive perspective and seems to reflect the biases of Wood's own brand of 'bookish' liberalism.[81]

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[77] James Wood, Wood, James. "The Arrival of Enigmas." *New Yorker*, 28 February 2011. At <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas> [Accessed on the 21st of September 2020], n.p.

[78] Jonathan Flatley, p. 1.

[79] Freud, p. 246.

[80] Wood, n.p.

[81] See Durrant, Saint, and Viermeulen.

His review, however, proves my point that the text encourages an ideological identification with its narrator, an identification which might cause the reader to overlook any instances of authorial irony. As he connects his freedom of movement in the cosmopolitan 'open city' to the open wound of ever-present historical atrocity, Julius makes it difficult for readers to criticise his melancholic detachment and conceptualisation of space as a privileged affectation. Sam Durrant has already noted that the text presents us with two perspectives, that of 'the cosmopolitan wrapped up in his own privileged life and the postcolonial novelist who seeks to expose the violence that underpins that privilege'.[82] Yet at the same time, Durrant writes, the 'difficulty in maintaining this distinction is that Julius himself is aware of certain forms of historical violence'.[83]

Open City, Open Wound

Whereas Modiano documents his flawed quest to find the traces of Dora's life in Paris, Julius instead encounters countless stories of death and destruction on his walks in New York. In fact, Julius notices traces of violence with a learned ease, thereby demonstrating that he has read Freud 'for literary truths' (*Open City*, 208). Julius understands the city as an 'open wound', one of Freud's central metaphors for melancholy.[84] Looking at Ellis Island, Julius reflects on the landmark's symbolic meaning for African immigrants like himself. It 'was a symbol mostly for European refugees', he writes. 'Blacks, "we blacks," had known rougher ports of entry (…) This was the acknowledgment [the cabdriver had] wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every "brother" he met' (*Open City*, 55). Even though Julius rejects the idea that he should identify with others because of a shared racial identity, his

[82] Durrant, p. 20.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Freud, p. 253.

focus of attention betrays a more distanced, spatialised recognition of the systemic racism his 'brothers' would like him to acknowledge. For instance, he encounters evidence of New York's history of slavery by noticing an unremarkable monument on a small patch of grass just off Broadway (*Open City*, 220). The spot, which marks the site of an African burial ground, prompts an experience that Julius describes in distinctively melancholic terms. 'What I was steeped in, on that warm morning, was the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York. At the Negro Burial Ground, as it was then known,' Julius writes, 'excavated bodies bore traces of suffering: blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm' (*Open City*, 221). Julius understands the loss of lives as an 'echo' of violence suspended in time. However, as he considers his relationship to the suffering of thousands of others in the past, the diffused focus of Julius's melancholy blocks any possibility of emotional identification. As he writes, '[h]ow difficult it was, from the point of view of the twenty-first century, to fully believe that these people, with the difficult lives they were forced to live, were truly people, complex in all their dimensions as we are, fond of pleasures, shy of suffering, attached to their families' (*Open City*, 222).

In his inability to 'fully believe' in the lived experience of the dead, he stands in marked contrast to one of his psychiatric patients, identified only as 'V.'. An acclaimed academic researching the genocide of her ancestors, the Delaware and other Native American tribes of Manhattan Island, V.'s melancholy is pathological to the point of suicide. Earlier in his narrative, Julius recalls V's confession that '[i]t's a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past' (*Open City*, 27). As Julius notes, her studies of the atrocities committed at the hands of early European settlers such as the Dutchman Cornelis van Tienhoven are taking an emotional toll on her, leading to a diagnosis of clinical depression (*Open City*, 26). Reflecting on the fact that the small monument he has stumbled upon does not do justice to the original size of the African burial ground, Julius in turn has the ability to respond to

instances of large-scale erasure with wry humour: 'There was certainly no chance that six acres of prime real estate in lower Manhattan would be razed and rededicated as holy ground' (*Open City*, 221). Humour is not available to V., who internalises the unmourned loss of her forebears and vehemently asserts, 'I can't pretend it isn't about my life.' In fact, she says, 'it *is* my life' (*Open City*, 27, my emphasis). Even though Julius does not frame it as such, V.'s suicide functions as a foil to his guarded, abstract melancholy that carefully sidesteps the dangers of overidentification. The establishment of this contrast is part of a tradition that pits the 'genius' of creative melancholy against a medicalised melancholia. [85] Juliana Schiesari points out that this central juxtaposition operates along gendered lines: 'The divergence, however, between what we could call inspirational or philosophical and the pathological or medical traditions of melancholia should not blind us to the misogyny that subtends them both'.[86] If Freud maintains that 'the melancholic has a keener eye for the truth'[87] then this diagnosis does not automatically extend to women. Melancholy is a decidedly masculine discourse: '[G]reat melancholics are men, and their pathological sense of loss has, in the Western canon, acquired a cultural status denied to woman's more mundane experiences of sadness'.[88] As Jennifer Radden explains, feminist perspectives on melancholy tend to emphasise this 'contrast between loquacious male melancholy and the mute suffering (…) of women'.[89] I argue that it is in Julius's relationship to V. that the reader is able to identify a

[85] I chose to use the term 'melancholy' throughout this chapter as I primarily approach the concept from the perspective of a heterogeneous discourse. Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[86] Schiesari, p. 97

[87] Freud, p. 246.

[88] Cosgrove, p. 100

[89] Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 35.

postcolonial, feminist critique of his melancholy that is never quite captured by his own self-consciousness.

V., we find out, kills herself at the same time as Julius wanders the streets of Brussels, a city that symbolises a very different connection to his ancestry. True to the parasitic tendencies that Clark highlights in her analysis of the text, Julius uses the memories of a retired Belgian surgeon he has met on the plane to Brussels to position himself within his transcontinental family history. Describing the 3rd of September 1944 as 'the happiest day of my life', Dr Annette Maillotte provides Julius with a historical event that forms the basis of another episode of what Julius elsewhere refers to as 'wish-fulfillment' (*Open City,* 90; 115). Imagining his family on the day of Brussels's liberation, Julius writes, 'I saw them all, even the ones I had never seen in real life, saw all of them in in the middle of that day in September sixty-two years ago' (*Open City,* 96). In his 'mind's eye' he pictures his family 'with their eyes open as if shut, mercifully seeing nothing of the brutal half century ahead and, better yet, hardly anything at all of all that was happening in their world' (ibid.). The paradox of imagining lost others with 'eyes open as if shut' differs from the melancholic logic of Modiano's counterfactual 'breaches' in that it allows Julius to avoid the *noirceur* of the Second World War altogether. Julius's melancholy is, most of all, a discourse he can use to talk about the '[s]laughter and destruction (…) [that] had taken place on the Somme, in Ypres, and before that, out at Waterloo' in abstract terms (*Open City,* 97). It bears noticing that Julius does not locate the war in Brussels itself. After all, Brussels was, in military terms, an 'open city', thereby more accurately representing a space of surrender and exemption (ibid). It is characteristic of Julius's modus operandi that he should be drawn to Brussels: Emotionally speaking, he is always at least one step removed from the horror of the past. The title of the novel, then, neatly encapsulates both Julius's worldliness and his habitual evasion of violence.

Julius's strategy of distancing himself from the emotional impact of a global history of destruction is applied to the event of 9/11, which he contextualises to such a degree that it almost loses any distinguishing features. The site of 9/11, he states, 'was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.' Rather than only focusing on the 2001 terrorist attacks themselves, Julius goes all the way back to the erasure of the 'communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes and quarrelled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay' (*Open City*, 58). As Dominick LaCapra points out, instead of seeing particular historical losses for what they are, a melancholic perspective such as the one betrayed here might 'present them as mere instantiations of some inevitable absence or constitutive feature of existence', leading to an 'endless, quasi-transcendental grieving'[90] Julius's palimpsestic focus is, affectively speaking, both overwhelming and highly distracting: the 'melancholy siege on the city' that he senses in Brussels equally applies to his own position (*Open City*, 97). Instead of actively confronting 'the fatal tussles', he surrenders to the onslaught of melancholy history, coming to resemble 'a city in waiting, or one under glass' (ibid.). While Modiano's melancholy is performative in the sense that it modifies his identification with a victim of the Holocaust through a focus on his creative lineage, Julius's melancholy is performative because it presents the violent events encoded in New York's cityscape as interchangeable stories in a universal history of sorrow. In this sense, Modiano and Cole both use metaphorical structures to illustrate melancholy's polarity: Modiano embodies melancholy's excessive closeness to the other by exploring the similarities between Dora and himself, and Julius embodies its

[90] La Capra, p. 65, p. 69.

emotional withdrawal and detachment as he focuses on the occurrence of impersonal, cyclical violence.

Julius aligns himself with a discourse of melancholy that, to critics like Ariela Freedman, is characteristic of an individual affected by the trauma of 9/11. She notes that the text is characterised by a Freudian 'inhibited absorption' that is 'rather like the fog that envelops Cole's narrative'.[91] This description of the text's melancholy corresponds almost entirely to Julius's own observations. Paraphrasing Freud, he argues that the process of introjection, the 'benign internalisation' of the victims of 9/11 has not taken place. Instead, he finds evidence of incorporation: 'The dead occupy only a part of the one who has survived; they are sectioned off, hidden in a crypt, and from this place of encryption they haunt the living. The neatness of the line we draw around the events of 2001 seemed to me to correspond to this kind of sectioning off.' (*Open City*, 208-9). In New York, he maintains, 'mourning had not been completed, and the result had been the anxiety that cloaked the city' (*Open City*, 209). It is certainly easy for Freedman to take Julius at his word and find the primary source of his melancholy in the events of 9/11, given that he already uses the literary critic's analytical toolbox to establish that connection himself. In line with all the other features of the text that encourage an intellectual identification with him, Julius tempts the (professional) reader to follow him down the path of what Rebecca Clark has identified as 'symptomatic' readings of the novel. 'In a symptomatic reading of *Open City*,' Clark writes, 'Theory would be able to peel away the obfuscations and absences of the surface in order to tell us what the novel is, unbeknownst to itself, really about. Such a reading would be, in Heather Love's words, about "the metaphorical depths of the text (…) hidden meanings,

[91] Ariela Freedman, 'How to Get to 9/11: Teju Cole's Melancholic Fiction', in *Representing 9/11. Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. by Paul Petrovic (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 177–86 (p. 184).

symbolic content, and repressed historical or psychic content"'.[92] However, as Clark points out, the text itself already brings this content 'precociously to the surface', thereby 'rendering subterranean excavations in the veins of psychoanalytic, postcolonial, deconstructionist, even Marxist critique somewhat exhausted and toothlessly obvious'.[93] As such, any of the 'explanatory devices' one might bring to the text are already precluded: 'Neither Cole nor Julius are implying that New York City is a "palimpsest" of obfuscated historical trauma. They are saying so. Right there on the surface'.[94] Clark touches on an interesting dilemma with regards to the reader's responses to the self-conscious theoretical discourse in the novel. Should the reader dismiss the narrator's evaluations (of events, of himself) entirely, or should she shift her focus and perhaps understand them as an expression of the *author's* self-consciousness?

As is evidenced by Freedman's references to Cole's Twitter account, her analysis of *Open* City's relationship to trauma not only relies on taking Julius at face value but on conflating his point of view with that of the author. Freedman quotes a tweet posted on the 11th of May 2014: '[Whatever concerns the pain of others is impossible writing made briefly possible. After lightning, night is still night.]'. She takes the content of this tweet and its 'inhibiting square brackets' to be representative of *Open City*, calling it a 'deliberately melancholic attempt to navigate the double bind of the need to represent and the taboo of the unrepresentable'.[95] While I agree with Freedman that the novel itself is concerned with a double bind of sorts, I disagree with her analysis of where the unrepresentable 'pain of others' actually lies. Freedman's argument goes to show that Julius's transcendental

[92] Clark, p. 184.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Clark, p. 184.

[95] Freedman, p. 178.

melancholy allows the reader to focus on any one of the interchangeable sites of potential trauma: in a novel primarily set in New York, 9/11 is a viable, yet 'toothlessly obvious' centre of analysis, to use Clark's words again. At one point, Freedman discusses a moment in the text in which Julius comments on *The Last King of Scotland*, a film which deals with the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin's relationship to his Scottish physician. She quotes the following passage, understanding Julius's response as 'a meta-textual reflection on the goals and methods of examining trauma'[96]:

> I wished to believe that things were not as bad as they seemed. This was the part of me that wanted to be entertained, that preferred not to confront the horror. But that satisfaction did not come: things ended badly, as they usually do. I wondered, as Coetzee did in *Elizabeth Costello*, what the use was of going into these recesses of the human heart. Why show torture? Was it not enough to be told, in imprecise detail, that bad things happened? (*Open City*, 31)

Freedman's analysis of the passage as representative of Cole's aesthetic strategies with regards to the trauma of 9/11 ignores the context of the quote on several levels. She introduces the quote by stating that Julius 'reflect[s] on the historical legacy of colonialism and slavery in America'[97] when in fact Julius reflects on the representation of dictatorship and genocide in Africa. Julius grapples with the fact that the film shows the 'nuances in [Idi Amin's] personality', that he has witnessed how Amin 'had hosted wonderful parties, told genuinely funny jokes, and spoke eloquently about the need for African self-determination' (*Open City*, 31). Julius here reflects on the unease he feels upon noticing his own need to be entertained and to identify with the positively valued qualities of a murderer, his own

[96] Freedman, p. 182.

[97] Freedman, p. 181.

preference ‘not to confront the horror’. If Julius questions the use of going into the details of ‘bad things’ in the quote above, this is not done in the service of exploring, as Freedman would have us believe, ‘a measure or a method that can avoid the sensuous exploitation that serves as an act of voyeurism’.[98] Julius does not want to avoid voyeurism; Julius wants to avoid the reality of violence altogether.

To elaborate on his thoughts about the representation of atrocity, Julius adds, ‘We wish to be spared, whether the story was about Idi Amin or Cornelis van Tienhoven. It is a common wish and a foolish one: no one is spared.’ (*Open City*, 31). I argue that in order to make sense of Julius’s self-consciousness, the reader has to pay attention to the reasons why Julius wishes to be spared the ‘bad things’. If there is an overarching meta-textual comment to be found in this passage, it is to do with how readily we apply our preconceived notions with regards to the meaning of melancholy – that it signals a struggle to properly mourn the unrepresentable, such as the tragedy of 9/11 – instead of paying attention to the discrepancies and inconsistencies that suggest other interpretations. Following Clark’s call to avoid any of the obvious symptomatic readings, I take up her observation that there are ‘some pointed silences in the novel that (…) can and should be productively voiced and analyzed.’[99] Clark notes that the text hints at some silences, ‘even draws our attention to [them], but does not exactly explicate itself. There are images and theories that Cole lays perfunctorily on the table, but never quite uses’.[100] As discussed above, Clark herself focuses on the image of the parasite. The image I would like to focus on is the one that is offered in Julius’s comment on Idi Amin: that of the reader who wishes to be spared. While Clark’s analysis is concerned

[98] Freedman, p. 182.

[99] Clark, p. 184.

[100] Ibid.

with the ways in which the text obliquely exposes Julius as an opportunistic storyteller, the last section of my analysis turns to his willing audience.

Melancholy misdirection: 'Is he one of us?'

Throughout the text, Julius relies on strategies of misdirection and diversion, using his melancholy as a means to hide the 'ugly feelings' that are part of his life story. As Lily Saint has argued with reference to Sianne Ngai's book of the same name, through Julius's 'repeated avowal of the will to connect with others, more "ugly feelings" of guilt, depression, futility, rage, disappointment, and failure (…) are kept to a minimum'.[101] Julius's focus on the spatiality of both New York and Brussels is a key aspect of the text's diversion of the reader's attention. Julius's narrative espouses what Helmut Lethen has called the 'Denkraster der Memorialkultur', the 'cognitive grid' or 'thought patterns' of memorial culture.[102] Lethen uses this expression to analyse W.G. Sebald's use of melancholy in *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt* (1995). Sebald, whom Cole calls 'the teacher I never met' in a collection of essays called *Known and Strange Things,* is one of the key influences on *Open City*'s aesthetic of narrative digression.[103] As Lethen notes, Sebald's text dramatises a 'einmalig melancholische Art [des] Verschwindens' ['an idiosyncratically melancholic art of disappearing', my translation] of the author, who deliberately presents himself as a grammatical subject circulating in a 'Papieruniversum' ['paper universe'].[104] Cole is certainly inspired by Sebald in his creation of a narrator who almost disappears behind his peripatetic digressions, that is, behind a barrage of information prompted by a palimpsestic

[101] Saint, p. 327.

[102] Helmut Lethen, 'Sebalds Raster: Überlegungen zur ontologischen Unruhe in Sebalds *Die Ringe des Saturn.*' *W. G. Sebald: Politische Archäologie und melancholische Bastelei.* Eds. Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschläger. (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006), pp. 13-30 (p. 15).

[103] Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), p. 50.

[104] Lethen, p. 14.

understanding of the built environment. Much more can be said about the connection between Sebald and Cole, yet I want to consider how Lethen's reading of Sebald's creation of narrative 'traps' for the reader might also apply to *Open City*.[105] As Lethen tells us about his practice of reading against the grain of the 'grid' of memory culture, '[ich werde] dem kalkulierten Tiefsinn nicht nachgehen, sondern andere Nachbarschaften aufsuchen als die, die er uns nahe legt.' ['I will not follow this calculated depth, but instead I will visit other neighbourhoods than the ones he presents to us'].[106] To consider which 'neighbourhoods' Julius shows us, and which he leaves out, gets to the heart of the text's strategies of misdirection.

Here, I want to consider a seemingly ordinary neighbourhood-encounter that unsettles Julius's previously detached relationship to the notion of black 'brotherhood'. Observing three young black men on one of his walks in Manhattan, Julius again tries to position himself towards these men in terms of a loose, unthreatening connection. As he writes, there was

> only the most tenuous of connections between us, looks on a street corner by strangers, a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being "brothers." These glances were exchanged between black men all over the city every minute of the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each man's mundane pursuits, a nod or smile or quick greeting. It was a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out here. (*Open City*, 212)

[105] cf. Kaisa Kaakinen, 'Melancholy and the Narration of Transnational Trauma in W. G. Sebald and Teju Cole.' *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative*. Ed. Hannah Meretoja and Colin Davis. (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 142-158.

[106] Lethen, p. 15.

Yet the glances Julius reads as 'mundane', habitual solidarity acquire a different significance when ten minutes later, the three men turn out to have assessed and followed him in order to mug him. Thus Julius helplessly observes that '[t]hey began to kick me all over – shins, back, arms – a quick, preplanned choreography' (*Open City*, 212). In her reading of the novel, Paula von Gleich points out that Julius's story is characterised by what she calls 'narrative strategies of flight', or specific forms of 'oversharing and evasion', that refuse identification with the dark undercurrent of gendered anti-black violence.[107] As she points out, Julius's narrative contains several buried moments of 'eruptions' that, if spotted, point to the real impact of the slave trade and its enduring anti-blackness in his life: 'I suggest an attentive reading strategy that pits the novel against its protagonist and looks for breaches in the narrative flow, eruptions of transatlantic history, and the personal past of the protagonist'.[108] I would like to expand on the reading strategy that von Gleich espouses by analysing the mugging as a particular kind of 'eruption' that again results in the reader's meta-attentive awareness that Julius 'wishes to be spared'. What Cole's text brilliantly illustrates is that an establishment of empathy, if we take it to mean an accurate understanding of the motivations behind Julius's actions as well as his situatedness in specific personal and historical contexts, does not require us to stay 'focused'. To be 'attentive' here means to let our attention jump back and forth, and to abandon the idea that we will understand 'what life is like for you out here' by immersing ourselves in the melancholic, pseudo-empathetic traps that Julius creates for us.

Like Julius, we must re-read if we want to 'get' what is going on; like Julius, we must acknowledge that we are quick to understand certain (narrative) gestures as 'mutual respect'

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[107] Paula von Gleich,'The "fugitive notes" of Teju Cole's *Open City*.' *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2022), pp. 334-351 (p. 335, p. 337).

[108] Ibid, p. 337.

when they are anything but. Throughout the novel, Julius reads others' markers of and interest in blackness as threatening when they are nothing but bids for connection; here, he reads 'blackness' as unthreatening when the obverse is true. Julius models that the specific ways in which one is unempathetic, the ways in which one mis-reads the 'small glances' is highly informative; to understand the ways in which we become distracted from the reality of a social situation is indicative of our own entanglement in systems of power.

Julius has, by virtue of his mixed-race heritage as well as his education assumed a certain proximity to whiteness – yet this proximity does not act as buffer against anti-black violence. In the mugging incident, his relative position of privilege is faced with a violent backlash reminiscent of the stabbing scene in *NW*. His very identity re-confirms the existence of parameters of attention that operate along the structures of a white centre and a black periphery; these structures are fundamentally anti-black. Julius, rather than liberated, and 'opened' by his cosmopolitanism, ends up just as boxed in, just as much of a target of violence as Felix. It is furthermore highly significant that Julius's assault is committed by those he considered 'brothers', seeing that it hints at a history of violence that is much more personal than Julius would like to admit.

Julius has offered us Brussels and New York as the sites of his urbane melancholy, yet towards the end of the text, the reader is redirected to a place much closer to home: Lagos, Nigeria. The most important, unsettling encounter of the novel turns out to be one that has already occurred halfway, bringing with it, as Julius himself remarks, 'an irruptive sense of the past' (*Open City*, 155). A figure from his Nigerian childhood enters the picture: an acquaintance called Moji Kasali appears in a supermarket in New York, surprising Julius through a reversal of the narrative's usual direction of attention. 'I didn't recognize her,' Julius recalls, 'and she followed me for a while, tracing my steps' (ibid.). Moji already knows

who Julius is, but has to remind him of her own identity. She is the older sister of an old friend from boarding school, we learn. For a while, we can observe Julius's struggle to understand this enigmatic woman, whose haughty demeanour confuses him. Even after spending time with her over the course of a few months, he admits that he 'was having such a difficult time reading her' (*Open City*, 204). When Moji is finally ready to tell her story, its content almost comically contradicts Julius's expectation of a flirtatious conversation (*Open City*, 240):

> Then she turned to me and said, in a low and even voice, emotional in its total lack of inflection, that there were things she wished to say to me. And then, with the same flat affect, she said that, in late 1989, when she was fifteen and I was a year younger, at a party her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, I had forced myself on her. (*Open City*, 244)

Moji's accusation of rape cuts through Julius's carefully constructed self-image of the detached yet attentive observer, forcing the reader to re-position herself towards Julius's narrative habitus. In the novel's penultimate chapter, then, Julius's refusal to identify with the victims of historical violence asks to be re-read as an attempt to evade identification with its perpetrators. Like *Dora Bruder*, *Open City* here uses melancholy to alert the reader to processes of amnesia and forgetting. However, whereas Modiano is primarily concerned with the holes in archival and collective memory, Cole locates his novel's 'blind spots' in the personal memory of its protagonist. As Cole writes in an essay of the same name, *Open City* 'is in part an examination of the limits of sensitivity and of knowledge'.[109] Julius's self-awareness has exhausted itself, and thus Moji has to point out to Julius that his forgetting of the assault amounts to a 'torturous deception' (*Open City*, 244). She explains to him that 'the

[109] Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, p. 383.

luxury of denial had not been possible for her'. 'Indeed,' as Julius repeats to his implied audience, 'I had been ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar, and she had thought of me, either fleetingly or in extended agonies, for almost every day of her adult life' (ibid.). Julius's melancholy affords him the 'luxury of denial', yet Moji has to contend with the 'ever-present' agony of traumatic intrusions. While Julius has been able to tell his story in the measured tone of the urbane melancholic, Moji's voice takes on the 'strained, shattered tone' of embodied suffering (*Open City*, 245).

Moji's suffering, however, does not shock Julius out of his complacency. In fact, Julius prefaces Moji's revelation with a detached professionalism, assuring us that 'I am only too familiar with bad stories – badly imagined, or badly told – because I hear them frequently from patients' (*Open City*, 243). As a psychiatrist-in-training Julius knows 'the tells of those who blame others', knows the 'characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives' (ibid). To him, Moji's accusation has 'nothing in common with such stories' (*Open City*, 244). Even as he essentially assumes responsibility for an assault he has all but forgotten, Julius still manages to centre the narrative around his self-awareness, reclaiming the role of the self-critical antihero. It is in this capacity that he admits that he cannot help but 'take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him' (*Open City*, 243). The fact that Julius is not as well-acquainted with his own mind as he has led us to believe undermines the text's previous prompts for reader identification tied to Julius's reliability. Julius asks, with reference to 'the story of my life', 'And so, what does it mean when, in someone else's version, I am the villain?' (*Open City*, 243). For Pieter Vermeulen it means that the text now 'refuses to repay the reader's emotional investment in its protagonist', rendering him 'conclusively (…)

unavailable for readerly empathy'.[110] Rebecca Clark similarly wonders what kind of affective responses the text affords the reader, asking 'whether our inescapable narrative intimacy with Julius denies us the space for recoil – forecloses the possibility of really feeling the disgust his actions ought to merit'.[111] Clark's assertion that we should feel disgusted by Julius, yet are unable to do so, exposes the ethically ambiguous nature of reader identification and the narrative empathy it engenders. As I have discussed in my previous chapter, disgust is an affect that can be harnessed to establish social hierarchies and to vilify those who we perceive to be part of an out-group. By blocking the disgust response and instead causing us to identify with Julius's measured, predictable – and to the mind of this reader, tedious – discourse on melancholy, Cole is asking us to consider all the ways in which we resemble Julius. Cole uses Julius's melancholic voice to decrease the distance between him and his readers, only to expose our patient investment in Julius's self-conscious digressions as an unwitting partaking in his evasion of feelings of guilt. I found the final revelation of the text unsettling in a gratifying way, given that I had found the narrator of *Open City* so boring that I had frequently abandoned my reading: I could now safely ignore this man's ramblings; I was finally freed from the straitjacket of disciplined attention. I would argue that Cole does not actually make Julius unavailable for empathy, but that he asks us to consider what our 'complicity' as readers says about our own habits of attention instead. In short, it encourages the reader to develop meta-empathy.

Upon a second reading, it becomes almost glaringly obvious that Julius not only knows how to spot the 'badly imagined, badly told' stories of others, but that he himself has been telling us one of those stories all along. To return to the quote that Freedman discusses as evidence of an anti-voyeuristic aesthetic, Julius aligns himself with J. M. Coetzee's

[110] Vermeulen, 'Reading Alongside the Market', p. 283.

[111] Clark, p. 195.

Elizabeth Costello (2003) to explain why he does not want to show us the 'bad things'. As Sam Durrant has already noted, this reference to Coetzee also creates an oblique connection to one of the author's other works, *Disgrace* (1999).[112] In this novel a South-African professor of literature engages in a highly intellectualised recounting of events to distance himself from the aftermath of having sexually assaulted one of his female students. Even as Julius evades 'disgrace' on the content level, his continued mistrust in others, often expressed in throwaway comments that question the reliability of the other storytellers in his narrative, as well as his repeated references to rape and other forms of sexualised violence now take on a sinister quality. For instance, Julius doubts the veracity of Saidu's experiences as a war refugee from Liberia, wondering whether 'it wasn't more likely that he had been a soldier', given that he 'had, after all, had months to embellish the details, to perfect his claim of being an innocent refugee' (*Open City*, 67). Similarly, Julius admits that he is similar to a Moroccan immigrant who he meets in Brussels. Like Farouq, Julius writes, his presentation as a 'dark, unsmiling, solitary stranger (…) made me a target for the inchoate rage' of white Belgian racists (*Open City*, 106). In this context, Julius all but spells out his secret, adding that 'I could, in the wrong place, be taken for a rapist' (*Open City*, 106). The character of Farouq is particularly relevant to Julius's strategies of (self-)deception and melancholy diversion from the acts of violence that directly pertain to his life story. Farouq is a former student of critical theory, and in the many conversations that he shares with Julius, the two men often engage in a game of intellectual one-upmanship. Julius at one point alerts us to the fact that Farouq claims to be an autodidact, even though his choice of words seems to suggest that this particular aspect of his autobiography is pilfered from the biography of the writer Mohamed Choukri. 'This was a small instance, not of unreliability, but of a certain

[112] Durrant, p. 17.

imperfection of his sharpness, even if only modestly,' Julius writes. 'These minor lapses – there were others, and they were irrelevant lapses, actually, not even worthy of the label mistake – made me feel less intimidated by him' (*Open City*, 114). Farouq here acts as Julius's double, that is, as the intellectual who takes liberties with autobiographical truth. Julius gives us a template for our own reading: we, too, should look out for the almost inconsequential 'minor lapses', for the 'imperfection' in Julius's 'sharpness.'

If we do, we also notice the peculiar way in which he refers to his German grandmother's life story: '[i]t was only years later, when I became interested in these things for my own sake, that I surmised that my oma [sic], heavily pregnant, had likely been one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army' (*Open City*, 80). Even as Julius retrospectively becomes interested in 'these things', that is, the reality of sexualised violence, the text only ever tracks his avoidance of them. In an early scene we can observe Julius notice and then make 'safely disattendable', to use William Ian Miller's words, a 'Take Back the Night' march (*Open City*, 215). Julius tells us about the group of women protesting street harassment, remembering how '[f]rom several floors above, I watched them, as their faces came in and out of the spotlights of the streetlamps. "Women's bodies, women's lives, we will not be terrorized". I shut the window' (*Open City*, 23). In an idiosyncratic shift of focus, Julius directs his attention towards one of the numerous forces of impersonal violence in the text by briefly reflecting on climate change instead and highlighting the unusually high temperatures 'in the middle of November' (*Open City*, ibid.) As Giles Foden notes, as readers we can only avoid 'shutting the window' on the violence against Moji and other women in the text ourselves if we pay attention to the negative space, 'the space between forms or

around utterances'.[113] According to Foden, we should not read Julius's self-conscious reflections for their content but would instead 'do better to read them in relief, for what they say about him'.[114] By insisting on reading the text 'in relief', Foden's review of the novel points to *Open City*'s and *Dora Bruder*'s shared aesthetic preoccupation with absence, as Modiano, too, is interested in the things that can only ever be understood 'en creux'.

Yet the affective impact of Cole's misdirection of the reader's attention differs from the subdued movement of Modiano's melancholy *brouillage*. In an interview with *3AM Magazine*, Teju Cole states that his portrayal of Julius was guided by his attraction 'to things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader. I was interested in that move that went from "He's one of us" to "Is he one of us?" Many people were upset that I put Julius through that. But there's no such thing as a right to remain untroubled.'[115] In its ability to confront them with their erroneous assumptions about its narrator, the text indeed has the capacity to upset readers. Julius's melancholy detachment tips into a fundamental solipsism that many readers would be loath to identify with. However, as James Wood points out, the reader might very well come to the conclusion that 'Julius suggests that perhaps it is sane to be solipsistic'.[116] I would like to amend this assessment and point out that Julius merely suggests that we do not pay enough attention to the ways in which we, like Julius, wish to be spared and entertained: in short, how we wish to be distracted. As both *Dora Bruder* and *Open City* illustrate, this wish is inextricably linked to our experience of narrative empathy. Through

[113] Giles Foden, 'Open City by Teju Cole – review'. *The Guardian*, 17 Aug 2011, at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review/> [Accessed on the 31st of March 2021], n.p.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Teju Cole, Cole, Teju. 'Palimpsest City.' *3:AM Magazine*, at <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/palimpsest-city/> [accessed on 4 April 2020], n.p.

[116] Wood, n.p.

their engagement with their narrator's melancholic self-consciousness, both texts are therefore heavily invested in a project of meta-empathy.

4. Attending to the virtual: Social media and the pleasurable impossibility of empathy in Camille Laurens's *Celle Que Vous Croyez* (2015) and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021)

In her debut novel *Fake Accounts* (2021), the American literary critic Lauren Oyler writes about the screeching of the dial-up modem as a sound that signals the moment in which our social lives begin to be dominated by what she terms 'fakery':

> If we value authenticity it's because we've been bombarded since our impressionable teen years with fakery but at the same time are uniquely able to recognize, because of the unspoiled period that stretched from our birth to the moment our parents had the screeching dial-up installed, the ways in which we casually commit fakery ourselves. We are also uniquely unwilling to let this self-awareness stop us.[1]

The dial-up modem is a particularly relevant object of interest for authors like Oyler, who attempt to represent life online using the traditional medium of narrative fiction: A dial-up modem is a piece of technology that exists at the intersection of the old and the new in that it translates digital signals into analogue signals via the use of a telephone line.[2] This chapter

[1] Lauren Oyler, *Fake Accounts* (London, 4th Estate, 2021) p. 45.

[2] As Alexis Madrigal writes about the peculiar sounds emitted by dial-up modems, 'What you're hearing is the way 20th century technology tunneled through a 19th century network; what you're hearing is how a network designed to send the noises made by your muscles as they pushed around air came to transmit anything, or the almost-anything that can be coded in 0s and 1s.' (n.p.). Alexis Madrigal, 'The Mechanics and Meaning of That Ol' Dial-Up Modem Sound', *The Atlantic*, 2 June 2012, at https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/06/the-mechanics-and-meaning-of-that-ol-dial-up-modem-sound/257816/ [accessed on 5 September 2021]., n.p.

looks at the ways in which contemporary fiction translates the dynamics of social media by interrogating Oyler's assertion that the modem is furthermore a symbol of a profound affective shift, one in which authenticity is finally replaced by alienation, and in which the possibility of unguarded exchange gives way to a self-conscious awareness of collective (self-)deception. It asks how authors position themselves and their work in relation to an idealised 'unspoiled period', that is, a time before distracting social media seemingly compromised our ability to attend to and empathise with others.

In the following, I am using the examples of Camille Lauren's *Celle Que Vous Croyez* (2016) and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) to suggest that the screeching sound of the dial-up modem ushers in an era of dissonance; a dissonance that contemporary writers and readers feel when they enjoy devoting considerable time and attention to the 'fakery' of the internet. Both Laurens and Lockwood explore the communicative circuit of social media in autofictional texts that foreground the compulsive engagement platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram elicit from their users. They illustrate that we might enjoy putting our sustained attention towards others not *despite* a very slim chance of finding out who they 'actually' are, but precisely *because of* an absence of empathetic access in the virtual realm. This pleasurable and diverting 'fakery', as Laurens's text asserts, precedes social media by centuries. Yet despite a marked scepticism towards notions of empathetic transparency and authenticity online, both Laurens and Lockwood are interested in the possibilities of narrative empathy, especially in the kind of empathy that can be established between reader and author. As such, my analysis will also turn to the ways in which Laurens frames the reader's attention to her own suffering, as well as to Lockwood's attempts to write in a register that might be called 'virtual realism'. Both Laurens's and Lockwood's engagement with the reader points to a fundamental self-absorption at the heart of the writing practice, and as such, the two texts offer an authorial perspective on meta-

empathy: they destabilise the notion that focused attention necessarily leads to an empathetic, other-oriented text. Ultimately, the two texts confront us with authors who are unapologetically distracted by their online experience.

Social Media as reflexive communication

In her contribution to the collection *Networked Affect,* Jodi Dean posits that our relationship to the internet is best described as '[u]biquitous communicating' or as existing in an 'inescapable circuit in which we are caught, compelled, driven' (90). As Dean puts it, 'we get off, just a little bit, in and through our multiple, repetitive, mediated interactions' (89). A psychoanalytically inflected theory of affect such as Dean's is a fruitful avenue into both texts because it helps to illuminate how they might, on one level, challenge an ethics of representation that understands the establishment of empathy as a driving force behind both the production and the consumption of literature. Laurens' and Lockwood's texts provide alternative explanation as to what compels us to engage with others, online and offline, in fictional and in real worlds. The often-unspoken assumption in accounts of narrative empathy is that we *want* to empathise with others, and that as a result, much of our enjoyment of a text is dependent on whether our efforts are successful. Dean's argument starts out with the observation that when it comes to our internet use, we can be caught enjoying things that are in fact antithetical to what we *should* want in life. The common excuse that we would all be doing – and enjoying – other things if it weren't for the distractions of the internet, Dean writes, allows us to 'fantasize that we would actually prefer to be reading literary tomes (…) Confident in what we would prefer to do, if only we could, we overlook what we are actually doing'.[3] Dean puts the fantasy of 'reading literary tomes' on the same level as the fantasy of

[3] Jodi Dean, "Affect and Drive." *Networked Affect,* ed. by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and

'weeding a garden' or 'participating in the political process', thereby suggesting that reading literature has a privileged place among activities that sustain the individual and connect her to others according to liberal humanist ideals (ibid).

In her analysis of the realities of the affective networks created by the internet, Dean offers an alternative model of sociality. She understands social media in particular as governed by the logic of drive in the service of what she calls 'communicative capitalism', that is, the 'information and entertainment networks necessary for globalized neoliberalism'.[4] As Carolyn Pedwell puts it in her reading of Dean's article, through their compulsive interaction with social media, users are essentially providing 'digital affective labour'.[5] In Dean's model, this can be explained by the fact that the repetitive process of seeking satisfaction online produces a kind of pleasure that corresponds to the notion of 'drive' in Lacanian psychoanalysis:

> In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire and drive each designate a way that the subject relates to enjoyment. Desire is always a desire to desire, a desire that can never be fulfilled, a desire for a *jouissance* that can never be attained. In contrast, drive attains *jouissance* in the repetitive process of not reaching it. Failure (or the thwarting of the aim) provides its own sort of success.[6]

Michael Petit (Cambridge: MIT P, 2015), pp. 89–100 (p.89).

[4] Ibid., p. 90

[5] Carolyn Pedwell, 'Mediated habits: images, networked affect and social change', *Subjectivity,* 10 (2017) 147–169 p. 161.)

[6] Dean, p. 90.

Dean understands networked affect as the *jouissance* that is accrued through a circular movement of 'reflexive communication', of 'communication for its own sake'.[7] The futile yet pleasurable drive towards affective satisfaction expresses itself in habitual interactions such as 'commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in friends and new followers, layering and interconnecting'.[8] It is important to note that these interactions produce pleasure even if they fail to establish connections that could be described as empathetic in nature. In fact, empathy only really makes sense as a mode of emotional engagement if it is figured as elusive, or as something that binds users in its pursuit. Dean primarily figures digital affect as a 'binding technique', that is, as an experience that serves the purpose of protracting a relationship with a virtual environment.[9] Applied directly to the problem of empathy and distraction, Dean's model helps us understand how attention can be conceptualised in the context of social media: instead of being expressive of a conscious and informed choice, attention, even prolonged and absorbed attention, is reconfigured into a mechanism of binding and entrapment, as something that is antithetical to Edward Said's vision of the discerning attention that marks the 'modestly emancipated' reader.[10]

In this context, it bears dwelling on the fact that in Dean's framework social media are ultimately understood as corporate media that rely on a certain kind of *passivity* in their users.[11] Users are stimulated enough to keep on repeating their patterns of interaction; they are *moved*, but not to the point of 'reaching out' of the communicative circuit. As Pedwell points out, there is no incentive to exchange the 'feelings of community' for the establishment of active (and acting) communities, let alone communities that are committed

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Said, p. 9.

[11] Dean, p. 99.

to 'political engagement [and] solidarity'.[12] The way we use social media then, reveals quite starkly that to pay attention to others and to be moved by them does not necessarily cause us to act, either for ourselves, or for others. In *No One Is Talking About This,* Patricia Lockwood directly addresses this experience of passivity, commenting on her awareness of interacting with virtual objects that 'had been planted there on purpose by people who understood them to be poisonous', concluding that '[f]or a moment, if she allowed herself, she could even feel exhilarated to think that she had been manipulated in this way' (*No One*, 93). Lockwood's text here also highlights another central point of Dean's argument: social media are affective networks that can be characterised as 'participatory spectacles [that] let us stage and perform our own entrapment'.[13] Similarly, Camille Laurens's *Celle Que Vous Croyez* is interested in the communicative dynamics of voluntary entrapment. As Laurens puts it, '[c]e n'est pas pour rien que ça s'appelle la Toile. Tantôt on est l'araignée, tantôt le moucheron. Mais on existe l'un pour l'autre, l'un par l'autre, on est reliés par la religion commune. À défaut de communier, ça communique.' [There's a good reason for calling it the Web. One minute you're a spider, the next you're a fly. But you exist for each other, thanks to each other, connected by a shared religion. Not exactly taking communion, but communing.'] (*Celle Que,* 23; *Who You Think,* 15.) Ca communique – 'it communicates' its users, turning them into voluntary flies in the Web of distraction.

'Le lien que je recherchais n'existait plus': Camille Laurens's *Celle Que Vous Croyez*

In the first instance, *Celle Que Vous Croyez* resonates with an affect theoretical approach such as Dean's because it is interested in the ways in which social media

[12] Pedwell, 'Mediated Habits', p. 161.

[13] Dean, p. 93.

manipulate affective attention to reinforce a highly sexist political status quo. The text is concerned with imbalances of power, staging a series of encounters in which men, often in a position of considerable authority, engage with the story of a middle-aged woman 'catfishing' a younger man on Facebook, an experience that eventually leads to her nervous breakdown. In these encounters, Laurens challenges the possibility of empathy as a form of expansive and mutual attention through her complex framing of the novel's main plot. Using multiple focalisers and different genres to tell the same story, the narrative of a Facebook love affair gone awry is constructed within the restrictive parameters of male attention. Thus, the first section of the text's main body is presented as the transcript of the psychoanalyst Marc B.'s sessions with Claire Millecam, a professor of comparative literature. As such, Claire's account of her virtual relationship is not only limited by the scope of Marc B.'s professional, therapeutic attention, it is furthermore subject to his editing in the process of transcription. In the second section of the text, Claire's story, now in the form of her novel manuscript, is embedded in a statement that Marc B. reads out in order to defend himself at a disciplinary hearing related to his mishandling of Claire's case. Finally, the text re-frames Claire's story as the autofictional account of the author Camille Morand, who writes a letter to her editor, Louis, to convince him to publish the previous two sections as a novel called 'Va Mourir', or 'Go Die'. Finally, the author 'Camille Morand' is acting as Camille Laurens alter ego, thereby adding a meta-autofictional layer to the text.

Whether a woman's story lives or dies, the architecture of the novel suggests, is dependent on whether it manages to capture a man's attention. This theme is explicitly taken up by the *in medias res* description of a man's withdrawal of attention in the novel's prologue. Presented as the deposition of an unnamed female academic, the prologue yet again alerts the reader to the ways in which women's narratives are framed and categorised. 'Je discutais avec lui depuis vingt minutes' [I'd been talking to him for twenty minutes], the

woman opens her testimony, referencing a meeting with an academic colleague (*Celle Que* 11, *Who You Think* 3). After sketching a relationship among equals who discuss their respective writing 'sur le même thème' [on the same subject], the narrator moves on to describe her male colleague's sudden loss of interest in her upon the arrival of a young female student (ibid.). She registers a distinctive change in the quality of the man's attention, which causes his voice to sound 'très douce' [so tender] and filled with 'd'attention suave' [a smooth attentiveness] (ibid.). His attention is not merely split but entirely withdrawn, leaving the narrator with the distinctive impression of having ceased to exist: 'il m'a tourné le dos comme ça sans un mot d'une seconde à l'autre pfft sans un mot sans une excuse j'ai cessé d'exister' ['he turned his back to me just like that without a word with no apology I no longer existed'] (ibid).

These lines are part of a longer monologue, rendered with only minimal punctuation, in which the narrator becomes increasingly more animated, linking her memory of being ignored by a colleague to the intersection of deeply rooted misogyny and ageism, moving from a French to a global scale, and from the seemingly harmless and quotidian withdrawal of male interest to the ubiquity of sexual assault and murder. Equating a loss of attention to a loss of life, the narrator suggests that a woman's disattendability lies at the core of a slippery slope of violence (*Celle Que*, 11-13). Reacting with anger to the request to calm down, the woman is recorded as saying, 'non je ne me calme pas ils nous vendent ils nous tuent pourquoi je me calmerais enfin écoutez ils nous tuent nous ils nous liquident tout est dans le journal vous êtes des hommes aussi c'est votre job c'est votre came' ['no I won't calm down they sell us they kill us they liquidate us it's all in the newspaper it depends what sort of paper you read you're men too it's your job it's your hit'[14]] (*Celle Que*, 2; *Who You Think*, 4).

[14] The translation is not particularly accurate here. It omits the emphatic repetition of the refusal to calm down and adds a detail – 'it depends what sort of paper you read' – that, in its media-critical slant, interferes with the

The deposition, which gives the reader no clue as to the events that occasioned it, and which withholds the questions posed to her by her male interlocutors, then closes with the narrator's impassioned insistence that women everywhere are told to 'Va mourir!', to 'Go die!' (*Celle Que* 13). The prologue thus turns into a testimony to the realities of gender-based violence itself, and in her role as an unnamed everywoman fighting men's indifference, the narrator's language pushes against the formal constraints of the deposition; on the page, the lack of punctuation signifies both the limits of the medium as well as the rhythms of a freewheeling, feminist performance of anger.

Celle Que Vous Croyez's overall narrative structure, in its approximation of a Russian doll in reverse (we move from the focaliser at the centre towards the outermost frame) thus makes for a reading experience that constantly diverts attention. Yet in keeping with the tone of the feminist overtones of Laurens's linguistic performance of anger, to defy focus, to avoid being pinned down, can be understood as a means of subverting the frame of the male gaze. Yet while any analysis of *Celle Que Vous Croyez* would be remiss not to point out that the text uses representations of (impotent) anger to emphatically illustrate how misogynistic, dehumanising habits of attention block empathy, it is nevertheless a different affective experience that is at the heart of the Laurens's overarching critique of the gendered politics of empathy: it is that of a woman's taking pleasure in participating in her own entrapment, both online and offline. This takes the form of actively desiring the men who perpetuate her own disattendability as a middle-aged woman. The prologue introduces this dissonant desire in its focus on the narrator's desire for the very colleague who ignores her in favour of a younger woman. The text lingers on his body, noting that 'j'aimais bien ses yeux verts cheveux noirs

meaning of the original text. The point is precisely that the woman in question does not represent her point of view as opinion. The underlying message is not to 'read the right newspaper' but to 'open their eyes to objective reality'.

les cheveux noirs j'avais envie de m'enfouir dedans il y avait du blanc sur les côtés des cheveux gris-blanc m'enfouir dedans y plonger le visage tout entier les toucher sentir leur masse les respirer' ['I kind of liked his green eyes his black hair I felt like burying my way into that black hair there were white patches on the sides grayish-white hairs burying myself in it burrowing my whole face in there touching it feeling how thick it was smelling it'] (*Celle Que* 11, *Who You Think* 3). Freewheeling anger and breathless desire merge, setting the tone for the novel's extended meditation on women's experience of ageism. As Claire Millecam later provocatively asks her psychoanalyst Marc B., 'Mais dites-moi, pourquoi une femme devrait-elle, passé quarante-cinq ans, se retirer progressivement du monde vivant, s'arracher du corps l'épine du désir'? ['But tell me, why should a woman over forty-five gradually withdraw from the living world, rip the thorny prick of desire from her flesh'?] (*Celle Que* 40, *Who You Think* 31).

This question resonated with a wider audience and resulted in the novel's adaptation into a film with Juliette Binoche, who plays the role of Claire Millecam.[15] The novel lends itself to a film adaptation in the sense that it situates the problem of gendered attention within a distinctively visual regime, and furthermore repeatedly proclaims the broad appeal of its central themes. 'C'est un fait, partout, tout le temps : les hommes apprennent la mort aux femmes. Du nord au sud, intégriste ou pornographique, c'est une seule et même dictature. N'exister que dans leur regard, et mourir quand ils ferment les yeux,' ['That's a fact, everywhere, all the time: men teach women to die. From north to south, fundamentalist or pornographic, it's the sole same tyranny. Existing only in their eyes, and dying when they close their eyes,'] Claire tells Marc B. (*Celle Que* 46, *Who You Think* 37).

[15] *Celle Que Vous Croyez*. Directed by Safy Nebbou, Diaphana Films, 2019.

Crucially, Laurens presents the internet as yet another marketplace in service of the patriarchal 'dictature': In the online attention economy, women fare well if they can cater to the *regard masculine* and sell their sexuality. Thus, Claire remarks, 'vous savez que *teen* est, avec *sex*, l'entrée la plus fréquente sure Google dans le monde?' ['did you know that the combination of "teen" and "sex" is the most common Google search in the world?'] (*Celle Que*, 26-7; *Who You Think*, 18). In a world that that equates youth with desirability, Claire, a woman in her late forties, is at risk of invisibility. 'J'ai lu que sur les sites de rencontres, la frontière entre quarante-neuf et cinquante ans est pour les femmes le gouffre où elles s'abîment. A quarante-neuf ans, elles ont en moyenne quarante visites par semaine, à cinquante ans elles n'ont plus que trois' ['I read somewhere that on dating Web sites the watershed between forty-nine and fifty is an abyss for women, they get swallowed up by it. At forty-nine they get an average of forty visits a week, at fifty they are reduced to three'], she says (*Celle Que*, 41; *Who You Think*, 32). Laurens here illustrates that the problem with social media is not one of distraction as defined as 'a dispersal of attention across a grid,'[16] leading to a shallow consumption of information. The problem lies in the narrow, ageist parameters that frame its users' attention.

Claire partly explains her decision to pretend to be a 24-year-old woman – a woman half her real age – as a cynical act within a hostile yet predictable social media environment that only puts the spotlight of attention on young women. Initially, the construction of her fake Facebook profile does not require much empathy for the target of her deception, the 36-year-old Christophe, aka KissChris, a close friend of her most recent ex-boyfriend Joe. The profile of 'Claire Antunès' is merely the most likely profile to elicit interest. Furthermore, Claire does not want to build a relationship with Christophe, she just wants access to his

[16] North, p. 2.

Facebook profile to spy on Joe. As such, her act of 'catfishing', which usually refers to the creation of an online persona designed to elicit romantic feelings, is reflective of her attachment to Joe.[17] This attachment is decidedly unhealthy, with Claire characterising Joe as a man who, illustrative of the text's complex web of different kinds of (un)empathetic connections, employs sadistic empathy to keep his desperate love interests hooked. 'Il savait où était la faille – les pervers, d'une certaine manière, sont ceux qui connaissent le mieux les femmes', Claire explains. ['He knew where the crack in your armor was – in a way, perverts know women best of all'] (*Celle Que*, 21; *Who You Think*, 13)

Even as she condemns 'distracting' social media as perpetuating both ageism and sexism through their narrow frame of attention, Laurens vividly illustrates Dean's idea of online interaction as determined by an irresistible 'binding technique'. For Claire, a compulsive engagement with social media platforms starts out as a desire to find what she calls a 'radeau', a life raft: 'on se noie dans la traque, dans l'attente, on ne peut pas faire son deuil d'une histoire pourtant morte, et en même temps on surnage dans le virtuel, on s'accroche aux présences factices qui hantent la Toile, au lieu de se déliter on se relie' ['you drown in the tracking game, in the expectation, you can't grieve for a relationship, however dead it may be, and at the same time you're hovering above it in a virtual world, clinging to fake information that pops up all over the Web, and instead of falling apart, you go online'] (Celle Que, 22; Who You Think, 14). 'L'attente', the waiting, the expectation online, is characterised by 'drowning' in fake information; yet crucially, it is also highly addictive, leading to a prolonged, multimedia experience of proximity:

[17] See Ellen McCarthy, 'What is catfishing? A brief (and sordid) history', The Washington Post, 9 January 2016, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/01/09/what-is-catfishing-a-brief-and-sordid-history/> [accesed on 1 April 2022], n.p.

> ‘On peut tout imaginer, on imagine tout, on regarde les profils de ses nouveaux amis, de ses ami-e-s, en quête d’un post révélateur ; on décrypte le moindre commentaire, on fait d’incessants recoupements d’un mur à l’autre, on réécoute les chansons qu’il a écoutées, on en interprète les paroles, on s’informe de ses goûts, on visionne ses photos, ses vidéos, on guette la géolocalisation, les événements auxquels il va participer, on navigue en sous-marin dans l’océan des visages et des mots.’ (*Celle Que*, 23-4)

> ‘You imagine all sorts of things, you do imagine all sorts of things, you look at his new friends’ profiles – both male and female – looking for a revelation in someone’s posts; you decipher the tiniest comment, you keep cutting from one wall to another, you play back the songs he’s listened to, read meaning into the lyrics, learn about what he likes, view his photos and videos, keep an eye on his geo-location, the events he’s going to, you navigate like a submarine through an ocean of faces and words.’ (*Who You Think,* 15-16)

The frantic gathering of clues, consisting of written, visual, and aural communication, logs of geographical movements and acts of ‘befriending’, is likened to a submarine moving through ‘an ocean of faces and words’, underlining both the clandestine nature of Claire’s obsession, her (futile) attempt at gaining access to her former lover’s hidden motives, as well as providing a metaphor for a state of deep absorption in the virtual environment. As such, Laurens provides a first-person account of the very mechanisms that Dean has identified as unique to contemporary social media, namely that the communicative circuit of social media facilitates compulsive attachments, the enjoyment of which produces a sense of anxiety –

Claire knows that she should be grieving her dead-end relationship yet finds herself hooked in Joe's social network, repetitively clicking on wall after wall.

The virtual environment becomes even more addictive once Claire introduces her alter ego and starts playing with what Simon Bréan has already analysed as 'ces manipulations et mensonges, qui pourraient s'organiser comme une suite de marivaudages tragique' [these manipulations and lies that are arranged in the manner of Marivauxian tragedy].[18] Claire directly references *Les Fausses Confidences* in conversation with Marc B., and it reappears in the text's prologue, which is presented as a video tape of a rehearsal taking place at the La Fourche clinic. The text's parallels to the play's plot of deception and mistaken identities introduce an element of metafictional playfulness. The pleasure of fakery, whether it happens online or on stage, lies in a relishing of skilful manipulation, of mastering the attention of one's target audiences. Laurens here understands social media as an extension of fiction: 'Nous sommes tous, dans les fictions continues de nos vies, de nos mensonges, dans nos accommodements avec la réalité, dans notre désir des possessions, de domination, de maîtrise de l'autre, nous sommes tous des romanciers en puissance,' [In the ongoing fictions of our lives, in our lies and our accomodations with the truth, in our need to possess, dominate, and control other people, we're all novelists in the making,'] Laurens's alter ego Camille Morand later on maintains (*Celle Que*, 125; *Who You Think*, 114). This is an interesting point, seeing as it takes us back to the question if the novel really is an 'attention technology' that significantly differs from the 'distraction' of inauthentic social media. To be on Facebook, Laurens seems to suggest here, is not actually all that different from writing a

[18] Simon Bréan, at 'Imposture et ontologie de la fiction réaliste : une lecture science-fictionnelle de *Celle que vous croyez* (Camille Laurens)', *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* [Online], 22, 15 June 2021, at [accessed on 11 May 2022].

novel or acting in a play. Thus Camille exclaims, 'Le nombre de personnes qui s'inventent un personnage, c'est fou ! La vie est un roman !' (*Celle Que*, 124).

In this context, it bears noticing that Camille Laurens's life is indeed turned into a 'roman', and one that requires repeated re-writing. Writing, like being online, is an addictive activity, requiring her to return, again and again, to painful truths about sexism. Echoing the themes of her previous text *Romance nerveuse* (2010), which also described the love affair of an older woman and a younger man,[19] it becomes obvious that it is not only the Russian doll structure that takes the reader out of the flow of the text. Laurens creates a web of intertextuality that asks the – attentive, multiple-text, possibly academic reader – to divide her attention across Laurens's œuvre to make sense of the text. What is striking is that in its idiosyncratic doubling – of previous themes, of alter egos – Laurens ultimately asks the reader not necessarily to empathise with her, but to identify with her, in the sense of asking her to consider the many relationships of identity. What the text performs, in this context, is a perhaps inadvertent illustration of the pitfalls of attentive focus: it leads to a self-absorbed kind of attention which uncomfortably foregrounds the author. Reminiscent of the dangers of *Einfühlung*, Laurens's aesthetic strategy in *Celle Que Vous Croyez* consists of an array of focalisers feeling into each other to the point of complete identificatory confusion.

Unlike Modiano, who even in his practise of *brouillage* highlights the ways in which his personal memories as well as his previous texts differ from his current objects of novelistic attention, Laurens here writes prose that circles in deliberate, metaphorical movements around wholly autofictional centres. I found the text's idiosyncratic note of self-absorption – an absorption that often closely resembles self-pity – highly grating. The text's deflated anger, its masochistic interest in compulsive, gendered behaviours seemed to lead to

[19] Camille Laurens, *Romance nerveuse*. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2010).

a toothless kind of feminism: a feminism stuck in mere (self-)observation. Yet I understand my frustration with the text as peculiarly productive. It alerted me to a fundamental lack of attention to the lived experiences of women who are *not* Laurens's autofictional doubles. In attending to my own frustration as a reader, I was able to pursue lines of inquiry that offer valuable perspectives on the limits of the 'fiction as empathy gym' model. As it turns out, I had to put my dissonant feelings in the context of Laurens's ethics of unnarratability.

Millecam/Camille, Morand/Laurens: Autofiction, the internet and the 'langue manquante'

The second half of the text, entitled 'Une Histoire Personnelle', 'a personal story' opens with the draft of a letter written by an author called Camille Morand, who claims that the 'Va mourir*'* section we have just read is indeed a manuscript of a novel that she hopes to publish with the help of the letter's addressee, her editor Louis. It is not only the name of the author that suggests a strong autofictional element but the fact that the content of the letter alludes to the highly publicised scandal involving Laurens and the author Marie Darrieussecq. Thus the alter ego 'Morand' writes, 'Comment peux-tu croire, toi, Louis, qu'il n y ait aucune distance entre la fiction et la réalité ? Ou pire : que j'aie volé cette histoire à quelqu'un ? Vampirisé sa vie ?' ['How can you think, Louis, that there's no distance between fiction and reality? Or worse: that I stole this story from someone? Parasitized their life?'] (*Celle Que,* 122, *Who You Think*, 112). 'Louis' here stands in for P.O.L., Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, Laurens's former editor, and the language of vampirism and parasitism is an echo of the central argument of Laurens' incendiary article called 'Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou'. In the article, Laurens accuses Darrieussecq of 'plagiat psychique', that is, of 'psychic plagiarism', claiming that Darrieussecq's novel *Tom est mort* (2007)

heavily relied on her own autofictional work *Phillippe* (1995), which details the traumatic experience of the death of her son two hours after his birth.[20]

As Leslie Barnes has pointed out, Laurens's condemnation of using other people's lived experiences as inspiration for fiction was somewhat hypocritical given the fact that Laurens's texts have historically relied on fictionalising the lives of those close to her, to the point that her ex-husband sued her for an invasion of his privacy.[21] Laurens as 'Morand' is aware of this irony, frequently reassuring her editor that he will not have to worry about any legal action upon the publication of 'Va Mourir'. However, as Barnes highlights, the main problem with Laurens's article does not lie in its hypocrisy but rather in the fact that Laurens was trying to take it upon herself to determine 'the moral parameters of a work of literature', a position that in this case led to what Barnes considers an indefensible negation of fiction's 'space of empathic imagination'.[22] Agreeing with such an assessment, Laurens's long-term editor P.O.L., who at that point had published both Laurens and Darrieusssecq, subsequently sided with the latter and terminated Laurens's contract. It bears mentioning this controversy because of what it says about a certain kind of conception of narrative empathy on Laurens's part that also seeps into *Celle Que Vous Croyez*: if it is at all possible to achieve, it is only ethical in certain configurations and it may never breach another's embodied suffering.

Laurens's ethics of autofiction are apparent in *Celle Que Vous Croyez*'s exploration of women's suffering through the lens of personal experience projected outwards. Thus, what Claire has called 'une empathie maladive envers mes semblables' [an unhealthy empathy for my kind] is first and foremost based on the author's witnessing and writing of her own

[20] Camille Laurens, 'Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou', *La Revue Littéraire*, 32 (2007), 1-14.

[21] Barnes, Leslie. 'Truth, Trauma, Treachery: Camille Laurens v. Marie Darrieussecq.' *MLN*, 130.4 (2015), pp. 998-1012, (p. 1011).

[22] Ibid.

embodied experience (*Celle Que* 45; *Who You Think*, 36). If read alongside Laurens's article '« Qui dit ça ? »', which was written in the aftermath of the Darrieussecq controversy, this inside-out movement can be connected to a psychoanalytically inflected philosophy of language, a philosophy that has important implications for her understanding of social media and virtuality. In the letter section of *Celle Que Vous Croyez*, which acts as a meta-autofictional device of sorts, Camille Morand confesses that she has not actually stolen Claire Millecam's story, but that the central plot of her novel 'Va Mourir' is unfortunately based on her own, even more painful experiences involving a younger man that she first met online. 'Camille Morand' (and by extension Camille Laurens the author herself) can only envision the affective network that connects her to other women acting as her alter ego because of an experience of suffering that is irrevocably tied to her own body. As Laurens writes on the meaning of the question « Qui dit ça ? »', or, 'Who says that?', 'Une telle interrogation est liée au sentiment que la langue, fût-elle écrite, est issue d'un corps, et l'on me persuadera difficilement que ce qu'on écrit n'a aucun rapport avec le corps qui l'écrit' ['Such a question is linked to the feeling that language, even if it is written, comes from a body, and it would be near impossible to persuade me that what is written has no relation to the body that writes it', my translation].[23] Laurens continues to explain her unwillingness to separate language from a signifying body by stating that '[c]'est particulièrement vrai lorsque l'écrit concerne des événements du corps tels que la jouissance, l'accouchement, la maladie, la souffrance ou la torture physique, l'agonie, la mort.' ['[t]his is especially true when the written word concerns bodily events such as enjoyment, childbirth, illness, physical suffering or torture, agony, death.', my translation].[24]

[23] Camille Laurens, '«Qui dit ça ? »'. *Autofiction(s)*, ed. by Burgelin, Claude, et al. (Lyon : Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2010), pp. 25-34 (p. 27).

[24] Ibid.

As Lauren states in response to the question of what is at stake with autofiction, she writes, 'L'enjeu, c'est de ne pas séparer l'écrire du vivre, de cheviller la fiction que j'écris à ce qui s'écrit en moi' [What is at stake is to not separate writing from living, to anchor the fiction I write to what is written in me, my translation][25]Like her narrators' relationship to her own desire which can never be fulfilled, a relationship to language emerges that is based on an acknowledgment of a fundamental 'impuissance', or 'impotence'. As soon as the ultimately unspeakable anchoring of experience in the body is acknowledged, a paradoxical yet shareable language emerges. Thus Laurens writes, 'Le corps qui écrit en deuil sécrète une langue de manque, une langue manquante, une langue travaillée par le vide, l'impuissance.' ['The body that writes in grief secretes a language of lack, a lacking language, a language worked by emptiness, impotence', my translation].[26] In so far as it represents a universal experience of constitutive absence, this language of lack, or lacking language, can finally facilitate identification with others, or, to account for the dynamics of *Celle Que Vous Croyez*, for others to identify with the writer who has suffered. Laurens pithily sums up this idea by closing her essay by answering her own question 'Qui dit ça ?' not with the expected 'C'est moi' ['It's me'] but with the phrase 'Ce sont moi' – 'They are me'.[27] Laurens tries to explain that this type of identification is not available for readers of the 'plagiarising' Darrieussecq: 'Le corps qui imagine un deuil, lui, mime la langue du deuil, il ne le sécrète pas, il l'exprime, la naturalise, la fabrique, l'imite ; comme l'a très bien dit Catherine Cusset, « il reproduit sans la produire »' ['The body which imagines mourning, for its part, mimics the language of mourning, it does not secrete it, it expresses it, naturalizes it, fabricates it, imitates it; as Catherine Cusset aptly put it, "it reproduces without producing it"', my

[25] Camille Laurens, '(Se) dire et (s') interdire' in *Genèse et autofiction* ed. by Jean-Louis Jeannelle and Catherine Viollet (Brussels: Academia Burylant, 2007), (139).

[26]Laurens, 'Qui Dit Ca?', p.30

[27] Ibid., p. 35.

translation].[28] Laurens here comments on certain implications of empathy as far they concern the author. In her desire to 'produce' rather than imitate an affective experience, Laurens completely undermines the enterprise of empathy as focused attention on somebody else. As she clarifies, 'Il y a une différence entre « je mime » et « je m'y mets », entre le bien dit et la pulsion du dire. La force de l'autofiction, pour moi, vient de sa confrontation courageuse au réel' ['There is a difference between "I mime" and "I put myself in it", between what is well said and the urge to speak. The strength of autofiction, for me, comes from its courageous confrontation with the real', my translation].[29]

In the context of *Celle Que Vous Croyez,* a courageous confrontation with the real does not refer to the trauma of the death of a child, as would be the case with the text *Philippe,* but a reckoning with the nature of her own desire. This reckoning must ultimately lead to a confrontation not just with her lover's absence, but with her own alienation from herself, her own inevitable complicity in her erasure in the deeply misogynistic society into which she was born:

> Je n'arrivais pas à croire que le sentiment profondément humain éprouvé dans le désir amoureux ait si entièrement disparu au profit d'un déni aussi hermétique, et à chaque message je butais pourtant sur la même évidence : le lien que je recherchais n'existait plus. (165)
>
> I couldn't bring myself to believe that the profoundly human emotion experienced in romantic desire had so completely disappeared and been replaced by such total denial,

[28] Ibid., p. 31

[29] Ibid, pp. 32-3.

and yet with each new message I was confronted with the same irrefutable fact: the link was no longer available. (155)

I would argue that this understanding of social media directly relates to Laurens's authority to speak on matters of the virtual. In a way, she is concerned with the issue of 'maîtrise' in yet another way: she is *mastering* social media and speaking confidently of its mechanisms because it is, she asserts, in vital ways, not just like fiction, but just like *auto*fiction. While Laurens represents the pleasures of distraction and deception, she can do so only by having paid attention to her own experience and her own suffering. Like the process of 'doubling' herself repeatedly in her fiction, social media ask the user to bind herself to its restrictive parameters of attention, over and over again. In this respect, Laurens is an illuminating author to read within the context of the media hierarchies that underpin ideas of the novel as an attention technology that is superior to other, newer media. Dorothee Birke writes, 'Considering the novel from the vantage point of media ecology and archaeology brings home one central point: that it is by no means merely a dinosaur, a remnant of an old media environment.'[30] Here, it makes sense to bring the text's preoccupation with ageing and the attendant loss of relevance in a brutal attention economy in conversation with the text's more metafictional concerns. As Birke notes, 'True to the self-reflexive stance of their eighteenth-century forebears, contemporary novels continue to participate in the larger conversation about media hierarchies. Digitalization has, it transpires, furnished the genre with yet another way of rethinking its own potential and asserting its status.'[31] Laurens, born in 1957, therefore provides a counterweight to the (admittedly not un-

[30] Birke, Dorothee. 'New Media Narratives: Olivia Sudjic's Sympathy and Identity in the Digital Age.' *Narrative in Culture*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Roy Sommer (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 199–214, p. 203.

[31] Ibid., p. 204.

ironic) position expressed by the likes of 'millennial' writers like Oyler, whose protagonist diagnoses a 'pre-dial-up modem' world that provides more opportunities for 'authentic' engagement. At the same time, her focaliser's assertion that an engagement with social media inevitably leads to the realisation that 'the link was no longer available' (inadvertently) points to the fact, that in her single-minded focus on her own vulnerability and distractibility online, Laurens loses the crucial attentive 'link' required to meet others in narrative empathy. The insight that fiction precedes social media in its capacity to provide the diverting pleasure of alter egos is highly pertinent to my discussion of narrative empathy. It foregrounds the fact that fiction, after all, has a role to play in making us aware of our own self-absorption; as such, it does not promote 'focus' but encourages a perhaps particularly uncomfortable meta-empathy towards ourselves.

'He felt as breakable as a link in her arms': Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking About This* (2021)

'We are starting to see narrators for whom online life is as real or more than what we used to call "real life,"' Christian Lorentzen writes about Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, a text he sees as an example of the emerging genre of 'virtual realism' in contemporary American fiction.[32] One of virtual realism's main tasks, he argues 'will be chronicling the effects of technology on our minds and turning that into art'.[33] In her autofictional novel, Lockwood narrates the impact of the gleeful immediacy of social media on her mind through the detached, ironising lens of the chronicler. By turning into an

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Christian Lorentzen, 'Literature', Life After Trump – A Special Supplement, *Harper's Magazine*, February 2021, at <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/02/life-after-trump/#literature-christian-lorentzen> [accessed 21 July 2021].

[33] Ibid.

attentive witness to her life online, Lockwood aestheticises the very experiences that are often positioned as antithetical to empathy by contemporary commentators. As such, the focus of Lockwood's attention frequently turns to unusual objects of representation: 'And if someone doesn't, she thought, how will we preserve it for the future – how it felt, to be a man around the turn of the century posting increasing amounts of his balls online?' (*No One*, 27). In the virtual realm, then, the question 'How does it feel?' comes to bear on increasingly absurd, mediated experiences, experiences that are consciously juxtaposed with the content of a '*social* novel' (*No One* 27, original emphasis).

The idea that a social novel should only ask this empathy-generating question in particular contexts recurs in most of the novel's early reviews. A poet and memoirist known as 'the cool queen of Twitter'[34], Lockwood has received praise for those elements of her text that are about a traumatic experience that seemingly returns her (and her readers) to the affective normality of what Oyler terms the 'unspoiled period' before the internet became ubiquitous. Echoing a critical consensus, a review by Adrienne Westenfeld entitled 'In the Face of Tragedy, Patricia Lockwood Found the Real World Again', highlights how the second half of Lockwood's text focuses on events that cannot be mediated, or indeed be 'spoiled' by the distractions and distortions of the digital realm. [35] In a manner resonant of Camille Laurens's preoccupation with the (un)representability of embodied suffering in *Celle Que Vous Croyez*, the events in question are the birth and death of Lockwood's niece: *No One Is Talking About This* not only deals with the impact of the quotidian experience of social media but with the loss of a child and the attendant loss of a mothering role. In his

[34] Hadley Freeman, 'Patricia Lockwood: "That's what's so attractive about the internet: you can exist there as a spirit in the void"', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2021, at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/30/patricia-lockwood-thats-whats-so-attractive-about-the-internet-you-can-exist-there-as-a-spirit-in-the-void> [accessed 21 July 2021].

[35] https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a35463236/patricia-lockwood-no-one-is-talking-about-this-interview/

review of the text, Mark O'Connell refers to a moment of 'wrenching sadness' in the lead up to the infant's funeral that to him 'feels real, and raw, and authentically absurd.' As he points out, 'I was with these people, in their pain and hilarity. I was, for the first time, and in the old and funniest way, laughing out loud. Ahahaha.'[36] O'Connell here directly responds to a quote that can be found early in the novel:

> "Ahahahaha!" she yelled, the new and funnier way to laugh, as she watched footage of bodies being flung from a carnival ride at the Ohio State Fair. Their trajectories through the air were pure arcs of joy, T-shirts turned liquid on them, just look what the flesh could do when it gave in, right down to the surrendering snap of the…
>
> What's so hilarious, said her husband. (*No One,* 9)

Lockwood's description of the 'surrendering snap' capture an unashamedly poetic enjoyment of the morbid footage of what appears to be people falling to their death (a fact that is confirmed further down the page). In language attuned to movement – 'flung', 'arcs of joy', 'trajectories', 'T-shirts turned liquid' – Lockwood attempts to describe what it is like to be moved to hilarity by the video content of a social media platform. To label her response as 'the new and funnier way to laugh' marks her affective reaction as part of a contemporary and collective experience, as does the subtle address of an (imagined) community in the form

[36] Mark O'Connell, 'No One Is Talking About This by Patricia Lockwood review – life in the Twittersphere', *The Guardian,* 12 February 2021, at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/12/no-one-is-talking-about-this-by-patricia-lockwood-review-life-in-the-twittersphere> [accessed 21 July 2021].

of the phrase 'just look what the flesh could do when it gave in'. The ellipses followed by the interruption of the flow of attention in the form of the husband's direct speech, however, mark this experience as simultaneously deeply self-absorbed. Lockwood here not only describes Dean's idea of online *jouissance* as found in the repetitive engagement with 'networks that generate and amplify enjoyment', but she also highlights what Dean calls social media's capacity to create 'feelings of community' even in the absence of actual community.[37]

According to O'Connell's review, this kind of online humour and joy, in its ambiguous sociality and reflexive affect, is somehow 'inauthentic' and antithetical to reader identification. By contrast, the 'authentically absurd' humour to which O'Connell refers is based on a moment of shared respite from overwhelming grief. It consists in a slip-of-the-tongue, in Lockwood's brother-in-law accidentally calling his deceased daughter his 'wife', which causes the whole family to erupt into hysterical laughter (*No One*, 110). It is no coincidence that this distinctively 'offline', Freudian humour is linked to 'rawness', or the reader's ability to be 'with these people'.[38] The people to which O'Connell now pays a different kind of attention, are not part of the amorphous group of social media users described in the novel, but the members of a family, and they therefore exist within a social context that is narrow enough to be explored by the spotlight of narrative empathy.[39] O'Connell here furthermore posits that an 'old' way of laughing is predominantly based around an empathetic identification with another person's suffering, and a subsequent valuation of types of humour that facilitate such identification. The 'new' kind of humour, by

[37] Dean, p. 90.

[38] O'Connell, n.p.

[39] Ibid.

contrast, aestheticises suffering within the attention economy of the 'viral video' and does not depend on experiences of identification.

O'Connell recognises 'inauthentic' collective experience and 'authentic' familial experience as two separate spheres that lead to distinct kinds of emotional engagement. He thereby exhibits an attitude towards empathy, that ability 'to be with' other people, that Lockwood herself foregrounds in the text. Describing an audience member's response to one of her author events, Lockwood quotes a woman as saying '"I was with you, I felt I was a part of it, until you made the joke about the humpback"' (*No One*, 109). Lockwood's joke, entirely in line with her Twitter persona, comes up against the audience member's expectation of empathy for a condition from which she herself suffers ('she could see the hump on her back', ibid). Lockwood now finds herself wondering why she had 'made that joke in the first place, when her grandmother had a hump, for God's sake, when she could still feel it under the slow trustful circling of her childish hands?' (ibid.) The 'slow trustful circling' of private, loving attention is contrasted with the sweeping, broad focus of attention inhabited by the outrageous online persona that Lockwood describes as 'an intact personality that she had no access to in ordinary times': 'It was not just inside her, but spilled a little beyond; it struck huge gestures off her body like sparks from a flint.' (14).

Unlike O'Connell, I would argue that the success of *No One Is Talking About This*'s complex exploration of empathy's relationship to social media depends on an *inseparability* of the 'slow trustful circling' of the domestic scene and the 'huge gestures' of virtual spectacle. Consistently switching between a performative self that is stuck enjoying herself and a private self that opens herself up to the affective experiences of others, Lockwood's third-person, past tense narrative makes it difficult to uncouple the mundane from the profound, virtual connection from real connection, or indeed the inauthentic from the authentic. This blurring of boundaries is particularly pronounced in Lockwood's use of irony.

This stands in pronounced contrast to Laurens, who insists on the sanctity of a language of loss, on the holding sacred of pathos. Lockwood, however, ironises the language of loss itself from the beginning. Thus Lockwood writes

> "Myspace was an entire life," she nearly wept at a bookstore in Chicago, and the whole audience conjured up the image of a man in a white T-shirt grinning over his shoulder, and a private music began to autoplay for each of them. "And it is lost, lost, lost, lost!" (*No One*, 25)

As the narrator of *No One Is Talking About This*, who relishes such parodic performances of lament, Lockwood paints a picture of herself as a minor internet celebrity whose success is based on her self-conscious sense of humour. Crucially, this humour is hyper-aware of its own favoured online platform (Twitter), which differs from the actual stage in a bookshop that Lockwood occupies in this passage. The outward signs of emotion (weeping, the emphatic repetition of the word 'lost'), already deliberately overdrawn, are now particularly out of place: mourning the loss of an online life, of the now defunct social networking platform Myspace, does not translate without a sense of absurdity. That this absurdity is inauthentic in the sense that it defies empathetic identification that prioritises the maxim 'I suffer therefore I am' is not a *failure* on Lockwood's part, but a deliberate choice that is reflective of the sort of humorous distance that 'living online' entails.

Throughout the text, Lockwood suggests that to be immersed in what she calls 'the portal' – a term that does not quite mean 'the internet' but rather, the internet as used as a social network – markedly influences the individual's ability to affectively position herself towards others. Imagining how she would feel in the event of a hackers' attack on the world's

technological infrastructure, she writes, 'in our real lives our large deforming senses of irony would leave us completely undefended. Like what if this was hacked and the hackers turned all instances of the word *as* into the word *ass*? That would be really funny' (95). Lockwood carefully dissects how the internet user's scope of attention and imagination is limited by the discursive parameters of her mediated social interactions. Daily immersion in the portal is not only linked to an inability to react appropriately to 'real life', but as metaphors such as feeling 'along the solid green marble of the day for the hairline crack that might let her out' illustrate, it is also linked to a pervasive sense of being entirely stuck in the virtual realm (*No One,* 3). The representation of this stuckness is precisely what turns Lockwood into somebody who, to return to Lorentzen's observation on the writers defining a new virtual realism, is 'chronicling the influence of technology on our minds and bodies'.[40]

To explain the centrality of irony to Lockwood's creation of virtual realism, it is useful to return to Sianne Ngai's writing about 'ugly feelings' as meta-responses. Lockwood uses the doubleness of irony to amplify a sense of unease that characterises social media consumption, which consists in an experience of pleasure about which one simultaneously feels ashamed. Crucially, this shame is directly related to a blatant failure to generate morally 'ennobling' reactions to the objects and people she encounters online.

Instead of feeling horror while watching a video of people falling to their death, the narrator experiences glee; instead of 'authentically' confronting the loss of a human life, the narrator performs the mourning of a defunct social media platform; instead of imagining the catastrophic consequences of an attack on the world's infrastructures, the narrator pictures its comic potential. The narrator's 'large deforming senses of irony' are not just part of Lockwood's carefully curated brand as an author – used to capture the attention of her

[40] Lorentzen.n.p.

audience on Twitter – but something that is intrinsic to the experience of being online. In the absence of directly spelling out the meta-feeling of being ashamed about enjoying 'the poisonous things' that manipulate her attention on social media, Lockwood resorts to irony (*No One,* 93) This results in the use of pithy images and one-liners that never take their own shock value entirely seriously and self-consciously signal their own inappropriateness. This is Lockwood's primary way of expressing the unease and anxiety users feel when they are caught enjoying what they should not be enjoying.

'And that was what it was like'

A sense of unease and guilt pervades the narrative in the sense that, to follow Dean, the social media user as embodied by Lockwood's narrator is constantly aware of the fact that she neglects the 'active participation' of a democratic citizen and exchanges it for a passive consumption of political news. Set during the years of Trump's presidency, Trump makes an appearance in *No One Is Talking About This* as the 'dictator'. As if to remind herself and the reader to stay alert to current affairs, and reminiscent of Smith's authorial interventions in the form of direct address, Lockwood inserts 'Politics!' as the opening exclamation of a paragraph, continuing to write, 'The problem was that they had a Dictator now' (*No One*, p. 4). Alongside Trump's presidency and its ramification for American public life, the key political background to the text consists in the threat of climate change. Politics always hovers just at the edges of the narrator's awareness, yet is never quite put into the narrative's focus, a fact which is not only enacted by the narrator's exclamatory reminders, but comically illustrated for the reader by the image of her husband's anti-Trump tattoo. 'The day after the election her husband had woken up with the strong urge to get a face tattoo', Lockwood writes, noting that he settled on 'the words STOP IT in very small letters right near his hairline, where they could hardly be seen' (*No One,* p. 24). Politics, and political

resistance, so goes Lockwood's self-aware message, only happen at the margins of the narrative, and are often scarcely noticeable. The first half of the text, then, turns into a largely plotless accumulation of short paragraphs that chronicle the narrator's focus of attention, which wanders aimlessly in the portal, and which deals with the problems representative of a '*social* novel' (p. 27) in a flippant, half-distracted way.

Distraction in the sense of continued re-direction of attention is a central stylistic feature of the text. The paragraphs are often connected by a loosely associative logic or presented as a mere enumeration of the rapidly changing objects that attract attention in the portal. Lockwood explicitly comments on this feature of her text, marking it as an intrinsic part of contemporary experience rather than something unique to her style. As she writes about the prevalence of 'disconnections' rather than connections in the sense of a linear narrative, and the prevalence of the 'blank spaces' preceding the many new paragraphs introduced on each page of *No One Is Talking About This*, 'these disconnections were what kept the pages turning (…) these blank spaces were what moved the plot forward. The plot! That was a laugh. The plot was that she sat motionless in her chair' (*No One,* p. 64). Here, Lockwood's text can be linked to North's theorisation of fundamental distraction as the moment in which cognition stops.[41] The blank spaces represent the 'empty' moments of scrolling and clicking from one item to the next, the moments of nothingness that occur before another photograph, video, meme, or text presents itself to the narrator's attention; a narrator who chooses to reflect these crucial gaps of distracted non-thinking in her retrospective narrative.

Aside from foregrounding irony as the predominant response to virtual others and objects, Lockwood's paradoxical attention to inattention could be called one of the most

[41] North, p. 6.

important examples of her virtual realism. Her fragmented style represents, to use Jonathan Crary's observation on information systems, a mode of contemporary sedentarisation, which produces 'an unprecedented mixture of diffuse attentiveness and quasi-automatism, which can be maintained for remarkably long periods of time.'[42] This, Lockwood insists, is what it feels like to sit motionless in a chair for hours on end, and to follow the path of (in)attention as guided by the algorithms of social media. Lockwood is extraordinarily self-conscious about her text's aesthetic qualities, and she thus asks the question, 'Why were we all writing like this now?', replying to herself by asserting, '[b]ecause a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between, was the only way to make it' (*No One*, p. 63). The connectivity of the portal, 'the new kind of connection', then, relies on the 'little space-between' of distraction and calls for its reproduction in literature.

I would like to argue that Lockwood's style not only attempts to represent the aimlessness and fragmentation of a distracted mind, but that it deliberately reflects on the role of fiction as envisioned within the empathy economy associated with the president that preceded the 'dictator' of *No One Is Talking About This*. Barack Obama can be seen as a champion of the narrative that empathy is the solution to a host of socio-political problems. In a speech on literacy and empathy given in 2007, he envisioned a global 'empathy deficit':

> The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. And the great power of books is the capacity to take you out of yourself and put you somewhere else. And to suddenly say, "Oh, this is what it's like"—maybe not perfectly—but it gives you some glimpse of "This is what it is like to be a woman," or "This is what it is like to be an African-

[42] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 78.

American." Or "This is what it is like to be impoverished in India." Or "This is what it's like to be in the midst of war."[43]

Lockwood directly questions the possibility of empathy as envisioned by Obama in the context of the media that the average American is more likely to consume than reading a novel,[44] turning to the example of a poet turned Instagram activist. As she writes, 'There was a poet who was walking across America barefoot to raise awareness of climate change – how was this supposed to work, exactly?'. 'This' turns out to works as a parody of Obama's imperative to 'stand in somebody else's shoes'. The Instagram poet encourages his followers to look at pictures of his feet: 'He posted a new picture of his feet every day, so that she saw the innocent blisters spread and break, saw the tarry crust grow thicker, saw here and there where a nail had gone in' (29-30). Within the parameters of social media, the poet's attempt to make people 'follow' him, to use a phrase that connotes both the literal activity of subscribing to his Instagram account and the process of imaginative perspective-taking, manages to capture the narrator's attention in two ways. Firstly, it leads to the narrator's fascinated noticing of the gruesome details of his injuries, of the 'blisters' and 'tarry crust'. Yet this primary attentive response is soon replaced by an acute awareness of the poet's ultimate disattendability. As Lockwood sums up her response to the poet's sudden death,

> and then no one ever saw his feet anymore, their frank black miles and their nail-marks and their mission fell out of the bloodstream of the now. Someone was dead, she had never met him, yet she had zoomed in on the texture of his injuries a dozen

[43] Qtd in Jurecic, p. 13-14.

[44] Johan Hari points out that by 2017, around the time the novel is set, 'the average American spent seventeen minutes a day reading books and 5.4 hours on their phone', p. 76.

times, as she might squint at the pink of a sunset she was too lazy to meet outside. And that is what it was like. (30)

Using the metaphor of 'falling out of the bloodstream of the now', Lockwood foregrounds the present-focused attention elicited by social media, in which potentially empathy-generating stories are converted into a series of images which have an affective impact, yet do not lead to the imaginative perspective-taking required of truly 'standing in the shoes' of somebody else – this is prevented through the mechanisms of obsolescence, or of getting lost in the 'stream' of other images, such as that of a pink sunset. Lockwood's vision of virtual interaction thus exaggerates the gap between a first affective response to stimuli and the development of cognitive empathy. Social media encourage users to 'meet' the other through a close engagement with, a 'zooming in' on her most salient features, yet they leave the user in a 'lazy' state; to return to Dean again, users do not 'reach out' or, to use Lockwood's language, meet the object of representation, be that a sunset or a person, outside of the communicative circuit of social media. Elsewhere, Lockwood sums up this process as 'You were zoomed in on the grain, you were out in space, it was the brotherhood of man, and in some ways you had never been flung further from each other. You zoomed in and zoomed in on that warm grain until it looked like the coldness of the moon.' (13). Yet in reading Lockwood's text, the reader is nevertheless encouraged to respond in seemingly empathy-generating ways; as Lockwood closes her section on the Instagram activist, 'And that is what it was like' (30). Lockwood turns the reader's desired reception of a book, which Obama sums up as 'Oh, this is what it's like', into an element of the text itself. This might signal the narrator's self-reflection and empathy with her past self, yet it primarily serves to interrupt the reader's flow of attention, reminding her of the desired outcomes of her reading experience: empathetic understanding. This creates an element of meta-empathetic self-

consciousness. Reminded of the text's purpose, the reader is now primed to question if Lockwood's text achieves its own goals.

Yet there exists a certain tension in Lockwood's choice to end a section that ostensibly offers a definitive summary of her narrator's empathetic 'laziness' with the sentence 'And that is what it was like'. It is a choice that encourages, as mentioned above, a certain self-consciousness and scepticism towards the text's ability to truly make the reader understand 'what it was like', yet it also encapsulates an attempt, however doomed, to use the conventional medium of fiction to represent the newer media that make up Lockwood's reality. Even as she asserts that contemporary habits of distracted attention are not only pervasive but also antithetical to the slow establishment of cognitive empathy, she still relies on the (partial, imperfect) empathetic availability of her literary persona. This theme of unstable, paradoxical connection appears in both sections of the book, characterising the narrator's relationship to people online as well as in the 'real' world.

In a section that foregrounds what Lockwood herself terms 'breakability', the reader finds out what happens when the connection that Lockwood has made online, through a repeated exposure to the images that are supposed to represent another person's life story:

> "What was your name?" she asked, and he told her, and a mundane ecstasy began to rush in her veins – his had been one of her very favourite lives. She remembered it in the minutest details: the pints after work, the rides back and forth on the train, his search for ever spicier curries, the imagined dimness of his apartment with its crates of obscure records, the green waving gentleness of it all. She stood up and held him, she could not help it. He felt as breakable as a link in her arms. (*No One*, pp. 22-3)

Upon meeting him in real life, she realises that virtuality entails a 'breakable' connection, one that does not become more concrete in real life. Again, like Laurens, Lockwood is interested in the double meaning of 'link', or 'lien', as something that is easily lost or broken. Just like Laurens wonders how something that seemed so concrete, and seemingly expressive of romantic, 'real' connections can be cruelly cut off, so does Lockwood realise that her connection to the other is something that is unstable and breakable.

This acknowledgment of fragility and pseudo-empathy is furthermore found in Lockwood's treatment of the echo chamber effect, which Lockwood understands as a 'school of fish'. The consumption of a shared (visual) language online is equated with a sense of a commonality. Complementing the metaphor of the 'bloodstream', the image of the 'school of fish' conveys a primal, pre-reflexive attitude towards the other; an attitude that also characterises the workings of empathy in the sense of creating an in-group and an out-group[45]:

> Every day their attention must turn, like the shine on a school of fish, all at once, towards a new person to hate. Sometimes the subject was a war criminal, but other times it was someone who made a heinous substitution in guacamole. It was not so much the hatred she was interested in as the swift attenuation, as if their collective blood had made a decision. (*No One*, p. 9)

Through the hyperbolic association of 'war criminals' with 'someone who made a heinous substitution in guacamole', Lockwood points out that an assumption of a shared

[45] Suzanne Keen, Empathy and the Novel, p. xiv.

experience, whether experienced online or in the real world, leads to a dangerously simplified understanding of the world.

The threat of a unified 'reading' of the world is also expressed in Lockwood's use of the image of the portal's creation of a 'single eye'. As she writes, 'Each day to turn to a single eye that scanned a single piece of writing. The hot reading did not just pour from her but flowed all around her; her concreteness almost impeded it, as if she were a mote in the communal sight' (*No One*, p. 58). Yet it is in an acceptance of her concreteness, which contrasts with being a citizen of the disembodied online world, that Lockwood ends up finding a form of empathy that holds up to her scrutiny.

The strange face

In this context, I would like to explore the second section of the book, which other critics have seen as an example of a triumph of the real over the virtual, as something altogether more nuanced. It is representative of a post-humanist ethics that sees the value of literature in its ability to foreground its own constructedness or 'strangeness', yet it is a strangeness that crucially relies on a reference to virtual distraction.

The arrival of Lockwood's niece represents the arrival of a stranger who is fundamentally other. Born with a congenital disease, the baby is an almost supremely isolated creature:

> "Everything that could have gone wrong with a baby's brain went wrong here," the doctors told them, and so she began to live in that brain, thinking herself along its routes, thinking what it meant the baby would never know the news. The picture of it

approached total abstraction, almost became beautiful. "The neurons all migrated into isolated pods, where they will never talk to each other," the doctors said. (127)

In this sense, she represents the opposite of Lockwood's hyperconnected life online. Yet, as Lockwood's autofictional narrative highlights, this does in no way impede a fierce interest in – as well as deep love for – the child. The face of the child, which resembles that of the 'Elephant Man', corresponds to what Namwali Serpell calls an example of 'strange faces' or 'stranger faces'. Stranger faces, she argues, are 'hard to read because they intensely distort the assumed correspondence between the surface and its meaning.'[46] In their illegibility, they come to be a symbol of 'new models of being, aesthetics, affect, and ethics that rely not on identity or truth, but on pleasure, in all of its richness and complexity.'[47] Serpell's conceptualisation of these new models of ethics resonates with the pleasure of online distraction as theorised by Dean because it similarly takes pleasure in the failed effort to connect: 'In psychoanalysis, the pleasurable compensation is called disavowal. As Octave Mannoni said, "I know very well, but nevertheless," or applied here: "I know I can't read this face but nevertheless I try, and take pleasure in the effort."'[48]

However, the strange face of the niece and the pleasure of failing to read her is something that cannot quite exist online. As Lockwood writes, 'in the portal, where the entirety of human experience seemed to be represented, and never the shining difference of that face, those eyes, that hair.' (*No One,* 196). The unrepresentability of the niece turns out to instantiate the naming of *No One Is Talking About This*. Lockwood, we read, 'wanted to

[46] Namwali Serpell, *Stranger Faces*, (Oakland: Transit Books, 2020) p. 13-14.

[47] Ibid., p. 14.

[48] Ibid.

stop people on the street and say, “Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!’ (*No One*, 145). Yet *No One Is Talking About This*

> She leaned over the child and said something; she said, “It is going to be just like your mother.” The moment was so pristine and so meaningful that something must be done to alleviate it, so she picked up her phone and began scrolling through Jason Momoa pics, all the while thinking, bitch, if this even happens while you were looking at Jason Momoa pics?!? (*No One*, 185)

In moments of anticipated grief, both her own and the baby’s mother, Lockwood does not invoke the immediacy of experience, but rather, she introduces an aspect of mediation; she inserts the photograph of a stranger in between the reader and her experience of heightened emotion. In so doing, she invites the reader to become aware of the ‘gap’ of representation and of our tendency to attend to the very things we should not be attending to.

My own experience of said gap was marked by feelings of sadness, followed by amusement and resentment. Not only was I feeling sad, in a straightforwardly empathetic way, upon reading about the narrator’s inevitable loss, but I was amused at her inappropriate translation of pathos into the ephemeral images of meme culture, the very inappropriateness of which I recognised in my own habitual responses. Rather than fantasising about scenes of idealised domesticity and maternal empathy occurring within an ‘unspoiled time’ before the arrival of the internet, I found myself reflecting on my own social media use. After reading *No One Is Talking About This*, I was not inclined to put my phone away – but with a lingering sense of resentment towards the idiosyncratically American voice intruding on my thoughts, I occasionally caught my attention wandering towards life’s ‘pristine moments’

thinking, ‘Bitch, if this even happens while you were scrolling past a video of a Golden Retriever balancing seven pancakes on his head?!?’.

I would like to argue that authors such as Laurens and Lockwood illustrate the fact that it is difficult to defend (narrative) empathy as a bonafide antidote to a technology-addled mind. Instead, what a text like *Celle Que Vous Croyez* suggests is that our tendency towards distracted self-absorption not only precedes our current social media age, but that it is in fact something inherent to fiction. Similarly, *No One Is Talking About This* rigorously defends literature as something that gleefully represents and playfully interacts with our fickle attention. Read together, the two novels show that a fragmented, distracted attention is not only *unavoidable* but as just as insightful as focused empathetic understanding: it teaches us to value the pleasurable unbridgeability of difference, whether in fictional or in real-life contexts.

Conclusion

As I was conducting my research, I often found myself wanting to conform to the ideal of the focused reader. I wanted to be the person on whom nothing is lost, despite having set out to critique precisely such exaggerated demands on a reader's attention. The very fiction of empathy that I was interested in interrogating – that it can be equated to a precious form of focus – was firmly embedded in my mind. Yet, as I have argued throughout this thesis, my wandering attention turned out to contain important, if not precious, information in and of itself. As Felix, one of the focalisers of *NW* puts it, empathy is often more akin to a sense of 'warmth' than a cold, exacting focus, and it is, after all, hugely 'impractical' (*NW*, 134). Feelings such as frustration upon analysing Laurens's self-centred autofiction, or of boredom upon trying to make sense of the overtly melancholic musings of *Open City*, interrupted the linear flow of my attention, blocking easy empathetic access to the characters I was trying to 'read'. The four chapters of my thesis illustrate that an embodied understanding of my own distractibility provides me – and hopefully other readers – with a flexible and nuanced understanding of the workings of empathy. Meta-empathy, the ability to attend to the fluctuations and often unsettling qualities of empathetic attention, is intended as a mode of analysis that allows for a flexible, comparative perspective attuned to the socio-politcal realities that determine who and what we deem worthy of notice.

My thesis has argued that to envision the development of narrative empathy as a tool of cognitive self-improvement underestimates the conceptual as well as ethical value of reading empathy through the lens of distraction. By focusing on empathy's 'long history', especially its roots in German theories of *Einfühlung*, I have pointed out that empathy and distraction are intimately entangled concepts that emerge within capitalist modernity.

With reference to Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and Emma Donoghue's *Room*, chapter one has argued that fiction has the ability to critically reflect on

the idea that a narrow focus on the other is a beneficial way of understanding her. Turning to the concept of intensive mothering, I have shown that the texts' complex focalisation foregrounds that the expectation of perfect focus is implicated in highly sexist ideologies of gender.

Chapter two highlighted how empathy consists in a complex set of attentional movements by turning to the concept of disgust as explored by Katharina Hacker's *Die Habenichtse* and Zadie Smith's *NW*. By analysing how disgust relates to a centrifugal, dispersed focus of attention as well as to a movement of centripetal incorporation, I have argued that contemporary fiction is invested in representing empathy as a complex way of interacting with the world that exists at the 'threshold' or 'dwelling place' of both focused and distracted attention.

Chapter three, which discussed Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* and Teju Cole's *Open City*, has highlighted that an understanding of the distant other might not be achieved through a narrow focus of attention, but through a distracted openness towards absence and through an acknowledgment of our attentional blind spots. Melancholy here emerges as a self-reflexive, ironic mode that that can foreground the difficulty of approaching racialised violence by means of a empathetic focus.

In chapter four, by referring to Camille Laurens's *Celle Que Vous Croyez*, I arrived at the conclusion that fiction's relationship with distraction in the sense of diversion and self-absorption predates the current information age. In its celebration of distraction and strangeness, I have argued, Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* points to the value of accepting the lasting impact of social media on how we 'read' the world.

Throughout my thesis, I have looked at only a narrow selection of fictional work in three languages, using examples that, while possessing experimental elements, still belong to the genre of literary fiction that relies on psychologically rich representations of individuals.

My thesis has thus neglected experimental fiction, particularly the genre of internet or hyperlink fiction; a medium that is highly invested in the relationship between a 'distracting' virtual environment and the reader.

Further work could also be done on the genre of narrative non-fiction about empathy as represented in the work of Rebecca Solnit and Leslie Jamison, who I have quoted throughout my thesis. Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* and Jamison's *The Empathy Exams* are inherently meta-empathetic, and they directly respond to what I call the 'narratives of empathy' that expound empathy as a means of defeating distraction. The embodied approach that I pursue throughout my thesis finds intriguing resonances in the genre of *creative* non-fiction that transcends the strictures of academic writing; strictures which no doubt have contributed to my continued anxiety to stick to the rules of 'close reading'.

While I have touched on aspects of post-humanist philosophy in chapter four of my thesis, it has been beyond the remit of this project to examine environmental criticism and both its interest in animal-human relationships and in our relationship to (inanimate) nature. This thesis's continued engagement with the concept *Einfühlung* would no doubt greatly benefit from an engagement with this theoretical background.

These gaps notwithstanding, my thesis has developed the argument that fiction is not an 'empathy gym'. Instead of seeing fiction as a workout that produces rewards through diligent repetition, I champion contemporary novels as media that demand a different kind of sustained attention. Throughout my thesis, I have foregrounded instances of mis-readings, which in turn instantiated repeated re-readings. A meta-empathetic approach towards fiction does not demand that a reader *improve* her attention, but that she *acknowledge* the many parameters that define it. To repeatedly return to a text can help us establish a central insight of empathy: We are never truly alone with the other. There is no pure, unadulterated way of understanding the embodied minds of others. The things we temporarily ignore while we

direct our attention towards the other, the very things that grab our notice again at seemingly inopportune moments, are not something to eliminate from empathy: they are integral to any empathetic encounter. To be meta-empathetic therefore means to open ourselves up to critical thinking, and to radically accept that empathy is irrevocably embedded in a variety of socio-political systems that structure our attention. To understand ourselves as distractible is thus crucial to an understanding of ourselves as empathetic creatures in a complex, interconnected world.

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