On Compromise: Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the Disappointed Promise of Personhood

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Declaration

I, Stephanie Tsz Yan Ng, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

My thesis develops the notion of compromise as an affective atmosphere of the contemporary present, a product of liberal democracy, and an obstacle to flourishing as well as a potential means thereof. Situated at the intersection of neoliberalism and postfeminism, this project reads twenty-first century, Anglo-American fiction to understand why women who by all legal accounts constitute full-fledged citizens continually find themselves exercising their agency in ways that approximate bargaining. Building on existing theoretical insights into the culture of responsibilization and heteropessimism, my first chapter examines Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy which delineates a protracted attempt to live beyond the reassuring cadences of bourgeois domesticity by a protagonist who compulsively shoulders the self-effacing care work expected of women. Another close reading of the compromised cultural moment and compromises citizens make – conscious and unconscious – to sustain it, Chapter 2, studies the privatization and depoliticization of female pain in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a novel whose antiheroine manages to stomach the world after a self-administered, drug-fuelled hibernation. Reading Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Beautiful World, How Are You?* Chapter 3 situates the tendency to suture oneself to existing lifeworlds within the framework of liberal democracy which produces compromisers for citizens who, in an effort to preserve the promise of conflict resolution, tell themselves they consent to subpar conditions and buffer their experience of those conditions with heteroidealism. A more generative possibility of compromise as a means rather than an end emerges from Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* whose characters, co-parents-to-be, adapt to the good life genre, an endeavour that threatens its members' sovereign identities as much as it promises greater intimacy. Using compromise as a conceptual heuristic, my thesis foregrounds the messy desires, ambivalent politics, and gendered costs of living on in periods of stuckness.

Impact statement

Through its close analysis of twenty-first-century fiction and autofiction by women writers in dialogue with political, historical, and affective scholarship, my project elaborates various conceptualizations of compromise to understand instances of attenuated agency among citizens who are confronted with a discrepancy between empowerment rhetoric and their lived disaffection. Compromise makes visible this discrepancy; an ostensible choice with predominantly disempowering effects, compromise stabilizes ambivalent yet nonetheless fierce attachments to prevailing lifeworlds. As such, an analysis how compromise – well-intentioned, learned, and strategic – renders alternative possibilities ostensibly unavailable may expand scholarly work in cultural studies. With its application of feminist, gender, and queer theory, moreover, this research is poised to facilitate greater transdisciplinary dialogue which may be effected through collaborating with other academics whose interests border mine in order to adapt curricula, devise seminars, publish findings, and organize conferences. Engaging pointedly with the financial and felt precarity wrought by late-stage capitalism, my project lends itself to parsing broader questions about public contemporary life: its health; possible futures; the social, economic, and political adjustments requisite in shifting towards other paradigms of belonging. The aforementioned publication of transdisciplinary research could be tailored to optimize public dissemination, and seminars and conferences could likewise be opened to the public to marshal greater, collective efforts in this shift. Ideally and idealistically, the impact of this project lies in its potential to instigate debate about the inequitable distribution of risk and resources across the contemporary West as well as the acquiescent, affective responses that uphold this compromised world.

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Introduction

Part biography, part film criticism, and part literary journalism, *Suite for Barbara Loden*, a translation of Nathalie Léger's book *Supplément à la vie de Barbara Loden*, is a quiet mediation on the psychic lives of women who have since the 1970s been promised sovereignty yet stripped of power. What began as a short encyclopaedia entry about Barbara Loden's arthouse film *Wanda* spiralled into a transatlantic research project, culminating in Léger's insightful, interwoven portraits of three women caught between pseudo-feminist aspirations, conventional desires, and their own fears of both. *Suite* fixates on Loden's identification with her autofictional protagonist Wanda whose role she wrote and rewrote and acted and directed "as a way of confirming [her] own existence" (Léger 120). Léger emphasises that Loden created *Wanda* to give her own life some semblance of resolution. The obsessiveness with which Loden tries to capture her own self through filmmaking signals a sense of emptiness, on the one hand, and claustrophobia on the other. It is the same emptiness and claustrophobia that pervades Loden's performed femininity: she puts up a "vivacious" front, "conscientiously plays her part," and, in her younger years, posed as a 1950s pinup, the ultimate icon of femininity (Léger 21, 36). Both on screen as Wanda and in her everyday life, Loden tried to fit in as the sexy, amicable blonde while yearning to escape the mould of such an archetype. To Léger, Loden's acting career perfectly encapsulates the essence of womanhood: to be a woman is to "throw herself into […] the role" in the same way that actresses must commit to their performances (Léger 65). Léger's account of Loden suggests that no woman can precede the scripts that inform her femininity and that therefore any identity she claims threatens to collapse without the audience or narrative line currently responsible for giving her life. Loden's entire existence can be typified by her on-screen persona – an exhausted, fragile negotiation of the projections, impulses, and obligations vaguely ascribed to women in a changing world.

Loden's film resists any eventful storytelling, offering instead a thinly fictionalized account of ordinary violence, the kind experienced by "a lonely, unloved child […] who has been silenced, forced to submit to someone stronger than they are" (Léger 27). Wanda neglects and eventually leaves her family before meeting Norman Dennis, a man to whom she grows attached even though – or perhaps because – he mistreats her. He holds power over Wanda, a fact solidified by her use of the honorific 'Mr.' By contrast, Mr Dennis utters her name only once. "There is nothing easily recognisable between them," Léger notes, "neither lust, nor passion, no exchange," and they never look at each other at the same time (37). Whereas the film makes clear that Wanda's apathy towards domestic life is what drove her to leave her

community, it leaves open the question of why Wanda re-embeds herself in another similarly ungratifying relation. Her stubborn attachment to Mr Dennis can be attributed, perhaps, to her conviction in the ever-receding promise of affective belonging and to an equally steadfast belief in her unworthiness (Léger 23). Drifting and disaffected, "doing her best [to] cope with life" while convinced that "she's no good at anything," Wanda, Léger writes, citing Plath, blindly anchors her "selfless self" to Mr Dennis, "submerging [her]self until his purpose becomes [her] purpose" (38). She hopes to find if not tenderness, then a place, a direction, an identity, or "a kind of happiness" with and through him (Léger 72). Sitting in the passenger seat while Mr Dennis drives in circles on America's endless freeways, Wanda effectively entrusts her life to a stranger.

Wanda consents to belittlement and boredom, even letting Mr Dennis coax her into a bank robbery simply because he "pay[s] her some attention" (Léger 93). She bends to his gentle coercion, feeling its ring of love wash over her as he tells her about his plan: "*you're going to do this*, as if he were asking her to live, *maybe you never did anything*, *but you're going to do this*" (Léger 92). In the subtle climax of the film, Wanda has managed to take hold of Mr Dennis' gun amidst a scuffle between him and their hostage. She calmly points it at the latter while an astonished Mr Dennis collects himself and looks at her for the first time; his gaze is not one of objectification or disdain but a mixture of admiration, complicity, joy, and terror. For the remainder of the scene, Wanda is "luminous," basking in the moment of reciprocity that passed between her and her partner (Léger 106). For a while, the viewer shares Wanda's relief and budding optimism but slowly realizes that Mr Dennis' "absolution" is but an off-hand gesture, designed, in combination with his patronizing comment, "*you did good*," to keep Wanda grovelling for more (Léger 106). It becomes clear that Wanda left one "ugly type of existence" only to land in another because she "doesn't know what she wants" except to be seen, affirmed, believed (Léger 35). Wanda immortalizes what life felt like for women in the 1970s: "wondering what she's actually going to be able to do with the freedom that everyone keeps telling her about," plucking up the courage to live differently, but ultimately encountering the necessity of yielding to others in the hopes of belonging and for the sake of survival (Léger 46).

My project starts from the observation that the film offers a model of femininity still relevant to women today, a model personified by an indecisive, submissive woman who manages to reap some libidinal reward from her adverse circumstances. Wanda is the antithesis of women's liberation, subjugating herself to men who denude her of power. "*You're a zero*," Mr Dennis sneers, "*you may as well be dead*," to which Wanda concurs that "she is dead, for

sure" (Léger 44). To dismiss her concurrence as a mindless concession would be a reductive reading of Wanda's character development. Contra the feminist critics of the film, I read Loden and her alter-ego as agential subjects whose agreeability is both taught and strategic, affording a façade behind which to slip away. Only by accepting that women have agency but are compelled to exercise it in ways that directly oppose their emancipation can this project ask: what other instances of compromise exist in contemporary women's writing? How do women in the historical present manage, to borrow Léger's words, "the fact of still being there in spite of everything" (116)? How is this fact of persistence rendered in terms of empowerment? My aim is to explore the affective lives of women who, by all legal accounts, constitute full-fledged citizens yet must nonetheless encounter themselves as nonsovereign. I investigate why, even and especially after decades of feminist cries for emancipation, women are still adjusting to the disappointed promise of personhood, preferring illusion and disillusion over confrontation. What strategies are enacted to defer the realization that the dream of feminist liberation is close to dead? How does the inability to recuperate that very emancipatory energy manifest in the somatic and psychic realms?

To contextualize my research, I elucidate the co-optation of feminism's emancipatory promise by neoliberalism. Drawing on the work of Wendy Brown, William Davies, and Nancy Fraser, among others, I offer, to begin, an overview of late-capitalist policies and attitudes before delving into the alliance between feminism and neoliberalism which has been variously called a "dangerous liaison," a "perverse, subterranean elective affinity," and "a mutual entanglement" by Marxist feminist scholars (Eisenstein "Dangerous" 487; Fraser *Fortunes* 296; Rottenburg *Rise* 5). I focus on the ways in which meritocracy has supplanted solidarity, cries for freedom are appeased with the proliferation of consumerist choice, and demands for greater public participation are "harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation" which does little to level gendered inequalities (Fraser *Fortunes* 299). My contextualizing sections draw forth the thematic of compromise around which my project is organized: the compromised cultural and political landscape; the rhetoric of compromise spouted by neoliberal governments and internalized by their citizens; the ambiguously gendered inflections in the very word 'compromise,' like its resonances with compliance and conflict-resolution (feminized processes), on the one hand, and with tenacity (conventionally masculine quality) on the other. To parse the ambivalent feelings that arise from conditions of unbelonging, I turn to affect, queer, and trans theorists, namely Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, Hanna Schaefer, Andrea Long Chu, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose guiding insights for this project are condensed in the

third Methodology section. This introductory chapter closes with summaries of the chapter to follow.

I. The History and Rationality of Neoliberalism

Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* compellingly illustrates the insidious workings of neoliberalism, "a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of modern life in economic terms" (17). Though globally ubiquitous, its specific policies and attitudes differ across time and space. In America, neoliberalism emerged at the Universities of Chicago and Virginia as a repudiation of Keynesian social democracy.[1] Its macroeconomic policies were first tested in Chile in 1973 and carried into the Global South from there. By the end of the 1980s, neoliberal initiatives had rooted themselves in America during the Reagan presidency and gained sure footing across the Atlantic under Margaret Thatcher's reign. Western Europe was next, and, finally, much of Eastern Europe as well, following the dissolution of Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s (Brown *Ruins* 18). Supranational institutions, like the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund, reinforced austere governmental interventions, broadening both hyper-financialization and unequal wealth distribution to a global scale (Brown *Edgework* 38; Harvey 159). Everywhere, conditions for capital accumulation were secured through policies that eliminated capital controls; enforced regressive tax and tariff programmes; privatized state support; commodified basic human needs in its place; and permitted significant depletion of environmental resources. These stringent market reforms have not increased private-sector employment – one of their primary, original goals – but have instead succeeded in a "more diffuse, ethical agenda of anchoring political hopes and identities in non-socialist economic forms" (Davies "The New Neoliberalism" 127). The new, liberal democracy that emerged in the 1970s, "contoured by nation-state sovereignty, capitalism, and bourgeois individualism," is rife with internal contradictions and exclusionary policies that privilege the already privileged (Brown *Undoing* 44).[2] Behind the rhetoric of inclusivity, equality, and freedom lies a distinctly *anti*-democratic system that anchors democracy to the economy.

[1] The American tradition of neoliberalism is in turn influenced by the Austrian School of economic thought which originated in late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century Vienna.

[2] My project, situated squarely in an Anglo-American context, is deeply sensitive to entanglements between socioeconomic and gendered privilege. It does not, however, engage as extensively with the question of racial dis/advantage. The fact that capitalist regimes disavow the racialized labour which sustains it must of course be acknowledged. The historical hierarchization of peoples around the world has intensified with the ramification of neoliberal hypercompetitive individualism beyond the economy proper, though a hunger for collective action has also grown more palpable (take, for instance, the cross-cultural Black Lives Matter movement). Even so, however, the hegemonic framework persists, favouring the already privileged and withstanding protest.

Neoliberalism was initially imposed on citizens during, in William Davies' terms, the "combative" phase (1979-1989), but gained popular legitimacy as market values penetrated cultural consciousness during the subsequent "normative" phase (1989-2008) which saw the rise of Third Way, centre-left politics ("New Neoliberalism" 124, 127). Sean Hier identifies moral panic as an "acute form[] of regulatory intervention" that was used to bring understandably resistant citizens in line which, with time, has been supplemented with moral regulation, a quieter yet no less proactive tactic of subjectification that governs through individualizing risk and liability (883). In its "transmi[ssion] through a dialectical process of subjectification intended to cultivate particular kinds of subjectivity," moral regulation echoes market rationality, a phrase that, in Brown's instrumental definition, which is in turn indebted to Foucault, designates a dominant mode of governance that produces subjects, behaviours, and a new organization of the social through democratizing the ethical management of the self (Hier 883; *Edgework* 37). On a macro scale, market rationality encroaches on institutions external to the economy, submitting the performance and value of schools, hospitals, media outlets, and governments to a market-centric calculus. Informal ranking systems have turned schools into firms, learning into financial investment, and teaching into the production not of thoughtful people but high-functioning tools. In the same vein, Obama's 2013 State of the Union address formulated reforms, like taking measures to slow global warming and reduce domestic violence, in terms of their contribution to economic growth (Brown *Undoing* 25). The way in which profitability aligns sustainability is furthermore evident in "ethical" or "green" capitalism.

On a micro scale, market rationality reconfigures human beings into *homo oeconomicus*, highly efficient, self-sufficient entrepreneurs and consumers whose "moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care'" (Brown "Nightmare" 694). Unlike the figure of classical liberalism who reserved market behaviour for purely economic exchanges on a need-satisfaction basis, the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* approaches all areas of life with considerations of utility and maximization in mind, driven by the responsibilizing rhetoric that has replaced express state rule and provision (Brown *Edgework* 40). *Homo oeconomicus* run themselves like corporate firms, striving doggedly for excellence in health, career, and family life while balancing all such facets of life. Whether boasting the number of followers on social media, inculcating a growing variety of skills through self-help resources, or quite literally stepping it up if their fitness trackers report insufficient energy expenditure, neoliberal citizens are armed with an abundance data with which to enhance their personal portfolios (Brown *Undoing* 34). This mode of governmentality "convenes a 'free' subject," appearing to empower

individuals in encouraging them to pursue self-optimization (Brown *Edgework* 43).[3] But, as my first chapter shall show through a discussion of Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, responsibilization not only poses serious harm to mental wellbeing but also lets the state pervert consent among its citizens into an instrument of domination.

At first glance, this eudaemonic articulation of productivity seems innocuous, but it has in fact enabled neoliberal governments to absolve themselves of any obligation to provide support for social problems, leaving citizens to problem-solve their way through a host of hardships: recessions; healthcare disparities; environmental disasters; educational inequalities; and shortages in prison, police, and military personnel. The one task for government is to ensure that 'winners' continue to be distinguishable from 'losers,' and that "the contest [i]s perceived as fair" (Davies "The New Neoliberalism" 127). Unlike classical economic liberalism's laissez-faire 'tuck and barter' system, neoliberalism "does not presume the ontological givenness of [its] thoroughgoing economic rationality" and thus relies on the state to protect the market and promulgate an ideological culture around it (Brown *Edgework* 40). Nowhere is this constructivist task more salient than government bailouts of major financial institutions and subsequent stimulus packages.[4] Acting as umpire in a world where all relationships operate like "sports-like relationships," the state merely legitimates "the equal right to inequality" and thereby "tabl[es] democracy's formal commitment to *egalitarianism*" (Laermans 92; Brown "Nightmare" 695).

The veneer of meritocracy obscures structural obstacles, like generational disadvantages, the gendering of unpaid carework, and racialized pay disparities between white- and blue-collar labour; meanwhile, the romanticization of entrepreneurialism helps to justify the dearth of public infrastructure. Because success and failure are redefined as the culmination of personal lifestyle choices, crime and poverty are attributed to individual aberrancy and inadequacy. The result, a permanent economic underclass and caste of non-citizen aliens, is not only seen as inevitable but sometimes slated for being a burden (Eisenstein "Womenomics" 37). Unhappiness is either framed as an accident or hidden away like a shameful, personal shortcoming, while happiness remains a terrorizing, normativizing impetus. Sara Ahmed's *The*

[3] That individual choice is compatible with political domination because subjects often mistake the former for freedom, availing themselves to authoritarian regimes that grant this putative freedom is a phenomenon well-studied throughout history. Brown cites, for instance, both Plato and the Frankfurt School intellectuals as prominent voices that raised the alarm ("Nightmare" 705).

[4] Such interventions revealed an ambivalent relationship between the neoliberal state and the economy, demonstrating the state's definitive investment in health of Wall Street, on the one hand, while cementing the impression that it was – and is – indifferent to the wellbeing of its citizens.

Promise of Happiness delineates the ways in which the promissory allure of happiness directs people towards and away from certain choices, reinscribing carceral norms that appear 'right' by virtue of their familiarity (11). The forms of support that do exist are implemented under the guise of caring about the psychosocial health of the workforce by public policymakers, private employers, and healthcare professionals poised to profit from sustained or even optimized productivity. Take, for instance, the addition of nap pods to offices or the expansion of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy programmes that promote dynamism and resilience in the workplace (Davies "Unhappiness" 69). Making no effort to tackle any substantial, structural cause of the population's exhaustion, these wellbeing initiatives feed into the "happiness duty" and enhance efficiency (Ahmed *Promise* 61).

Over the decades, the idea that "only once people have suffered will equilibrium be restored" has hardened into doxa (Davies "Pain"). A leitmotif of neoliberal ideology, compromise is as compelling as it is disappointing. Thatcher's pitch about the painful but worthwhile task of resetting the market – "the medicine is harsh, but the patient requires it in order to live" – is reincarnated every so often when neoliberal governments and banks conspire to create a recession (qtd. Baggini). "If we don't take the medicine now the medicine will be more painful for us to take later," Sir Stuart Rose, Executive Chairman of Marks & Spencer, echoed in 2010 to a chorus calling for spending cuts in 2010 (qtd. Robinson "Brown"). Neoliberalism's credibility is fast deteriorating, yet it endures, routinely propped up by "empty affirmation" and "pro-cyclical fiscal-contraction programmes" (Davies "New Neoliberalism" 133, 122). For Conservative critics, the easing of monetary policy in post-pandemic era has contributed to the most recent bout of inflation, and the sole solution is to increase interest rates such that corporations and civilians borrow and spend less. As Karen Ward, Managing Director of JPMorgan Chase and member of Jeremy Hunt's economic advisory council, stated, justifying interest rate hikes in 2023,

> [the Bank of England] ha[s] to create uncertainty and frailty, because it's only when […] workers, when they're a little bit less confident about their job, think 'Oh, I won't push my boss for that higher pay. (Wearden "Bank of England")

In the same breath as they blame the public for debt accumulation which has become synonymous with moral failure, policymakers try to convince citizens that good times are just around the corner. This financial morality, internalized by the public, generates a culture of self-recrimination and an expectation of further compromise, giving policymakers who

ingeminate it grounds on which to justify their aggressive market tactics – tactics reminiscent of the combative phase (Davies "New Neoliberalism" 130).

Unsurprisingly, Davies writes, citing recent market reforms in the United Kingdom, these tactics have failed repeatedly to produce the desired outcome – quite the opposite in fact – which renders the motivation for their deployment all the more unclear and thereby leading Davies to conclude that these measures are simply "some form of vengeance" ("New Neoliberalism" 131). Expanding the Right to Buy scheme to non-profit housing associations has only exacerbated Britain's inflation problem (Davies "New Neoliberalism" 130). The reintensification of anti-union legislation is likewise baffling, Davies argues, given that socialism is certifiably dead, and "the 'enemies' targeted now are largely disempowered and internal to the neoliberal system itself" ("New Neoliberalism" 132). In the current, "punitive" phase (2008-present) of neoliberalism, these harsh and senseless events are only sapping energy from citizens whose capacity for withstanding austerity has dwindled into "a sense that [they] 'deserve' to suffer" for a system that offers them little in return (Davies "New Neoliberalism" 130). Inflation, stagnation, hikes in energy prices and mortgage rates, insufficient living wage, blunted union action – none of this is new strife. What Davies' article "Pain, No Gain" highlights is that the principle of compromise finally feels completely spent, and unlike past decades in which people believed what they were sold – that "sunlit uplands" beckon from the horizon – the consensus now is that "the difficult bit never seems to be over." My project starts from precisely this disenchanting realization among citizens that the compromises they are continually called on to make will not amount to the tantalizing prosperity, security, and intimacy they are promised at every turn.

The ressentiment among citizens who make compromises for an economy that offers them less than nothing in return is aggravated by the social marginalization they suffer at the hands of responsibilizing, liberal-individualist understandings of personhood. For the last half century, neoliberal states in the Global North have decimated livelihoods, rendering obsolete domestic jobs in coal-producing, steelmaking, weapons manufacturing, and automotive industries while pursuing the cheap labor and tax havens of the Global South (Brown *Ruins* 3). These decades also witnessed a new alliance congeal between "the forces of cognitive capitalism," namely Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood, on the one side, and new social movements championing feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights on the other (Fraser "Progressive" 281). Known as progressive neoliberalism, this alliance was institutionalized by the Clinton administration, the principal engineer of the New Democrats, further cultivated by Obama's, and found equivalence in Tony Blair's New Labour farther

afield. Its adherents, predominantly hip, slender, young, secular, globetrotting, entrepreneurs and suburbanites ignore or even disdain their predominantly Christian, undereducated counterparts who feel not only "left out" of conversations about diversity and non-discrimination[5] but also "left behind" by the current iteration of capitalism that accommodates these modern, progressive buzzwords (Brown *Ruins* 3). Insulted by policies of equity and inclusion that appeared to favour everyone over them, some members – "though by no means all," Nancy Fraser interjects – of the latter demographic group were primed to believe a narrative about freeloading immigrants, wicked Muslims, and godless homosexuals ("Progressive" 282). Once the stronghold of New Deal social democracy, they are now devoted to Trump who acknowledges the vicissitudes of globalization, repudiates its attendant cosmopolitanism, and paints the Left "as tyrannical or even 'fascistic' in its care for social justice" (Brown *Ruins* 10). A sense of abandonment, betrayal, and dispossession among the white working- and middle-class is rippling across the West, mobilizing reactionary populist movements that imagine a pastoral, nativist retrotopia.[6] And even though, Brown notes, black and Latino citizens of the same socioeconomic background "did not suffer […] lost pride of place," their lived relationship to crisis and loss is no less acute (Brown *Ruins* 3). Articulating financial insecurity and social marginalization as comorbid conditions, Judith Butler's *Frames of War* describes precarity as an "*induced* condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (25; emphasis added). Enticed and instructed to make financial, personal, and political compromises for the sake of neoliberal hegemony, citizens are, as a result, stuck in compromised conditions of their own making.

Unemployment, stigmatization, and distrust in financial and governing bodies are ripe for a counter-hegemonic project that many fear will never come to fruition. These failures are experienced as not only natural, despite aforementioned evidence to the contrary, but also individual due to the neoliberal emphasis on personal choice (Fraser "Contradictions" 113). Firstly, because institutions have seized the human capacity for flexibility, dynamism, and spontaneity, any opposition to this system is easily equated with calls for inflexibility and

[5] The majority of Trump supporters, Fraser insists, are "themselves casualties of a 'rigged system'" ("Progressive" 284). That self-identified, leftist progressives "lost to a "'basket of deplorables' (racists, misogynists, islamophobes, and homophobes) aided by Vladimir Putin and the FBI" is a comforting but ultimately false "myth" (Fraser "Progressive" 283).

[6] Brown enumerates: "Make America Great Again" (Trump), "France for the French" (Le Pen and the National Front), "Take Back Control" (Brexit), "Our Culture, Our Home, Our Germany" (Alternative for Germany), "Pure Poland, White Poland" (Poland's Law and Justice Party), "Keep Sweden Swedish" (Sweden Democrats) (*Ruins* 5).

centralization – "not likely to be very galvanizing" (Fisher 28). In his aptly titled *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher notes that what little dissent does rumble is often monetized or pathologized: for instance, subversive expressions are transmuted into artifacts of pop culture, like hip hop and gangster movies; pharmaceutical prescriptions suppress bad feelings (10). Protests fail, moreover, because the definition of democracy, its animating ideology, has been fundamentally warped. Brown grieves the substitution of public mindedness with self-legislation; the identification of democracy with formal rights, especially private property rights; the transformation of sociopolitical problems into ones that can be righted with consumption; and the governance of *homo oeconomicus* through incentives and deterrents ("Nightmare" 703).[7] These complications only magnify existing disparities in political representation that arise from, say, the sway that large corporations hold over political campaigns by virtue of their hefty funding and lobbying practices. By colonizing the political arena and co-opting emancipatory energies, neoliberalism has secured hegemonic status.

People "seem resigned to their fate," Fisher reports, which "is a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism, but of *reflexive impotence*": "they know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it," he rues (21). Neoliberalism's self-fulfilling quality is theorized elsewhere by Jeremy Gilbert who, adopting a Gramscian perspective on our passive yet disgruntled acquiescence to the status quo, diagnoses the contemporary present as one of disaffected consent (3). John Lanchester concurs in his article about the shift in attitudes around capitalism in the decade since 2008: "elites seem to have moved from defending capitalism on moral grounds to defending it on the grounds of realism" ("After the Fall"). Curiously, this atmosphere of resignation coincides with citizens demanding government intervention, emboldened by the fact that politicians *are* able to help when forced to: support schemes during the pandemic serve as precedent. In response, neoliberal states are now exercising greater degrees of discretion in the interest of national security,[8] but whether these "securonomics" initiatives will succeed protecting the public and the environment is ultimately second to the fact that the state has had and intends to uphold its close relationship with the neoliberal economy (Davies "Pain"). Be it in allowing technocrats determine prices and credit on the basis of cold market rationality, maintaining a laser-focus on Wall Street, bailing out big banks while

[7] Davies notes that it was, tragically, centre-left governing bodies – not conservative-right ones – that, fuelled by reformist desire to shed both economic and social constraints of the Fordist era, framed progressive social values in market terms and used the "self-consciously progressive" rhetoric of public wellbeing to do so ("The New Neoliberalism" 128).

[8] Davies enumerates: onshoring, 'friendshoring' (producing goods that foster strategic alliances), and investing in green industries ("Pain").

neglecting citizens, or pumping tax credits and public subsidies into privately owned companies, neoliberal governments demonstrate an undying reliance on and allegiance to financial institutions. Neoliberal trends and tactics still loom overhead; the post-neoliberal vision proffered by large-scale public-private partnerships, ambitious as it is, "scarcely pretends to replace the status quo" (Davies "Pain"). The consensus at the individual and state levels is that neoliberalism is immutable and therefore acceptable. The feeling that it is here to stay constitutes another reason for the ineffectuality of protests.

"Faith in progress has been replaced by a sense of déjà vu," Davies writes, amplifying an argument attributed to Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Mark Fisher: "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" ("Pain"). The third reason for ineffectuality of protests is the loss of conviction in revolution among citizens and with it, the loss of a teleological vision of historical progress – a symptom of what Bernard Stiegler calls "spiritual misery" (1). The incapacity to articulate new forms of politics is both discursive and imaginative: the present teems with manifold movements too splintered in their interests to describe a vision of common good. Thomas Decreus and Hans Demeyer argue that in the place of a positive, straightforward horizon and an organized, collective subject, an anarchic desire to eviscerate existing political institutions has been the primary driver behind protests since 2019. Destituent movements are, Decreus and Demeyer explain, marked by division and anger, not an expectation of justice; they do not propose alternatives that could grow in their destructive wake. The fractured, eruptive quality of destituent movements brings to mind the aggression that Fisher attributes to the decentralizing power: he argues that capitalism's bureaucratic processes coupled with its horizontal allocation of power such that every subject is somewhat implicated but cannot be held entirely responsible has fomented a kind of impotent "anger [that] can only be a matter of venting," a force flung at fellow citizens who have come to represent an "unresponsive, impersonal, centerless" system (64). Without a shared ideology or programme into which to integrate, like semi-stable parties or unions, citizens, particularly those of the working class, resort to acting out against the attrition around them (Decreus and Demeyer). "The primacy lies not in building something, but rather in destituting what is already there," Mario Tronti observes, "to place the existent into crisis," which is a far cry from liberation.

II. Progressive Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the Elusive Promise of Emancipation

Profound resonances exist between neoliberalism and postfeminism, two ideological movements united through a common buzzword: empowerment. In the brief genealogy of

feminism that follows, I track the ways in which various milestones and critiques unwittingly lent themselves to the legitimation of a late-capitalist hegemony which runs directly counter to the equitable society originally envisioned.

For second-wave feminists, the target of their activism was, in the American context, as Fraser expounds in *Fortunes of Feminism*, the overt androcentrism and bureaucratic organization of Fordism. The family wage came under scrutiny for the presumption of a sole, breadwinning man, his stay-at-home wife, and the childrearing domesticity to which the latter was doomed. It came under scrutiny, in other words, because it was seen as a reminder of the second-class citizenship allocated to women. Second-wave feminist complaints against the paternalism of social democracy were quickly perverted by ascendant neoliberal-neoconservative administrations into an excuse that justified their dismantling of social democracy *tout court*. The concerted effort at promoting economic equality – once the beating heart of the feminist project – splintered, moreover, as the women's movement expanded and thus sustained interventions by different schools of thought. Whereas the issue of the family wage was once handled with the utmost urgency, attention was diverted to other, proliferating objects of concern. Interdisciplinary input from fields such as psychoanalysis, sociology, film, queer theory, and cultural studies challenged the notion that gender discrimination could be attributed to a single system of a specific geographic locus – be it capitalism in the West, patriarchy, or biology. Together, postcolonial, poststructural, and posthuman perspectives challenged the narrow universalism of 'women,' heretofore an exclusively white, bourgeois category, toppling, by extension, the metaphysical belief in the existence of a coherent, knowable self. The added influence of sexuality studies, a field spearheaded by Foucault who theorized power as dispersed networks rather than episodic or sovereign events, further pluralized, deconstructed, and displaced the terms through which feminist identity and demands were initially defined. The Marxist solidarity of second-wave feminism that focused on economic equality which had already, paradoxically – as aforementioned – lent itself neoliberalism's annexation of what Thatcher called "the nanny state" was further crippled by the "one-sided culturalism" that overtook the women's movement as its scope of concern widened (Fraser *Fortunes* 5). Put differently, neoliberalism advanced its agenda via two, simultaneous avenues: operating under the guise of helping women combat male-dominated Fordist culture, on the one hand, and profiting from the infighting which distracted participants from existing discussions about egalitarian economic reform. Speciously progressive, neoliberalism invited – or more specifically, as this section shall later illuminate, obliged –

women to join the precariat class, presenting itself as a solution while truncating emancipatory ideals (Fraser *Fortunes* 301).

Neoliberal economies poured resources into the economic development of women, superficially honouring calls for greater female presence in the public and for greater workplace diversity. In the First World, neoliberal management theorists proposed horizontal networks, project-oriented work, and the induction of women into wage labour (Fraser *Fortunes* 298). Feminism came to fit the romance of a flexible, reflexive capitalism famously examined in Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Greater attention was paid to gender parity in developing countries as well as by multinational corporations, nongovernment organisations, and international financial bodies that have decided women all over the world "constitute an untapped resource" (Eisenstein "Womenomics" 38). These institutions provide education, training schemes, and job opportunities that churn out everything from entrepreneurs to low-wage workers, supplanting grassroots movements, skewing local agendas to suit elitist funders in far-off lands, and furthering market solutions to world poverty, hunger, and disease in the process (Eisenstein "Womenomics" 45). Meanwhile, the impression that the West is abreast with social change boosts its soft power which further legitimizes – or at least distracts from – its expansionist, tone-deaf foreign policy (Eisenstein "Womenomics" 37). Moreover, new possibilities for women are still grounded in traditionally gendered and classed boundaries: their careers are disproportionately altruistic or people-oriented in nature; in high/er-risk environments, empathy is expected of women and valued for its capacity to mitigate high-risk situations (Anderson 6). Women are thus still trapped in essentialist constructions of femininity even as they live out what looks like the dream of liberation. The statistical fact that more women have been incorporated into the workforce is often labeled an axiomatic good made possible by free market, but to confuse feminist emancipation with neoliberalism's disfigurement of self-determination into something that feeds its global governance would be a gross mistake. Not only does womenomics fail to "cancel[] out the distinction between owners of the means of production and those who have to sell their labour," it also neglects to consider what kinds of gendered labour women usually perform once integrated into neoliberal systems, not to mention the progressive narrative it manufactures to skirt redistributive demands across the recently decolonized South (Eisenstein "Womenomics" 47; Brown *Ruins* 19).

With feminist empowerment and the principle of diversity sublated into the capitalist machinery, the neoliberal feminist[9] is a prime candidate for market rationality, eager to spin her unique talents, including and especially her physical attributes, into assets. Facebook Chief Operational Officer Sheryl Sandberg's bestseller *Lean In* is a prime example of the cool, go-getting rhetoric that urges women to internalize the revolution: overcome personal obstacles and swallow social setbacks as givens. Conspiring with the neoliberal ideal of meritocracy, these postfeminist recommendations intimate that a disproportionate lack of ambition among women is to blame for gender inequality and that 'true equality' is won through a succession of 'correct' – normative – choices, achieved one confident woman at a time. To add insult to injury, the mode of address employed by self-help discourse of this ilk – the use of the pronoun 'we' for its phantasmagorical plurality – obscures the individualistic stamp of neoliberal feminism (Spiers 15). Prominent postfeminist figures include former director of policy planning for the US State Department Anne-Marie Slaughter; former president of Barnard College Debora Spar; Hollywood stars, Beyoncé, Emma Watson, and Miley Cyrus; as well as political figures, Ivanka Trump and Hillary Clinton (*Edgework* 43; *Undoing* 45). The latter's 2016 presidential campaign was in equal parts fêted and loathed: she embodied, on the one hand, the emancipatory feminist ideals into which she staked her electoral claim and, on the other, their synergistic relationship with speciously progressive neoliberal principles and policies that treat citizens who fall outside its elitist purview with breezy disregard. That most of the names on this list are white is of little surprise; postfeminism, like the neoliberalism that has shaped it, privileges the already privileged, re-entrenching the social and economic underclass. Furthermore, as Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* warns, the "patriarchal invitation to power" whereby women believe that "if you are good enough, pretty enough," "you will be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy" is less credible – though no less aspirational – among racially othered women (119). Underscoring the competitive and selectively blind individualism of neoliberalism, the postfeminist culture of self-improvement, while inspiring to some, comes at the expense of structural overhaul.

The misogynistic creed of self-invention is broadcast to a fault, downplaying the chimerical nature of choice, the availability of which is dictated by both market fluctuations and positionality. Even those lavished with resources "invariably end up […] willingly desiring

[9] In this discussion, I use the terms "neoliberal feminist" and "postfeminist," "neoliberal feminism" and "postfeminism" interchangeably. I understand the postfeminist subject as one living through a historical present wherein neoliberal principles and feminist ideals have converged, privileging individual achievements of women over their solidarity.

the same […] fashionably adorned female bodily charm that always has been promoted by patriarchy and capitalism," Eva Chen notes, conjuring the image of a sleek, slender woman who signals allegiance to professional, male values through her comportment, size, and sartorial decisions (443). Like the figure of the responsibilized *homo oeconomicus*, she exists in a relation of docility-utility with the state. This conventionalizing tendency is well documented by Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* and Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*: anxieties among women spawned from a greater focus on bodily management, namely through dieting, grooming, or cosmetic surgery, are ascribed to rising rates of female participation in the traditionally male-centric public, indicating that postfeminist self-care is obeisant to the very patriarchal standards previous iterations of feminism sought to disrupt. It is enforced, moreover, by mutual surveillance: Rosalind Gill's meta-analysis of the evolution of postfeminism over the course of the 2010s corrals several studies on "a modality of looking in which girls and women police each other's appearance and behaviour through a homosocial gaze characterized simultaneously by affection and 'normative cruelties'" – a phenomenon foregrounded in Chapter 2 ("Sensibility" 617). Citing Barre classes and salad chains as prime examples of this disciplinary culture, Jia Tolentino's chapter "Always Be Optimizing" in her *Trick Mirror* describes the making of the literally and conceptually "overworked" woman who is in equal parts obedient and enthusiastic, allowed to be "whatever she wants to be as long as she manages to act upon the belief that perfecting herself and streamlining her relationship to the world can be a matter of both work and pleasure" (64, 65). Masculinist ideas of intelligible femininity prevail, though it now presents itself as, Tolentino equivocates, "optional, of course" (qtd. Oyler). "I like trying to look good, but it's hard to say how much you can genuinely, independently like what amounts to a mandate," she confesses (Tolentino 78). Tolentino's conflicting feelings around her own internalized misogyny instantiates the insidiousness of neoliberalism which manages to instil "the 'right' kinds of dispositions" through appeasing feminist demands for autonomy and greater economic participation (Gill "Sensibility" 610). In the neoliberal, postfeminist present, women are repositioned from passive consumers to active consumer-entrepreneurs – an ostensibly empowering transformation that does little to extract her from patriarchal commodity culture and its individualizing credo.

The double movement of empowerment and subordination whereby the postfeminist woman experiences herself as the architect of her life in choosing from an array of gender-essentialist lifestyles licensed by a patriarchal capitalist system is apparent in two additional arenas: reproduction and sexuality. Even as they are impelled to keep pace with men professionally, women are called on to seek personal fulfillment which is often translated into

motherhood. The neotraditional signification of domesticity as a sphere of female autonomy is reflected in and reinforced by romance films which inundated the 1990s. In contrast to prior decades during which, as Michele Schreiber reports in *American Postfeminist Cinema*, "there were not only fewer romance films produced, but the films that were released […] reflect a more cynical perspective on the conventions […] of the classical romance and maintain a tenuous connection to feminist politics," the 1990s witnessed a turn towards "lightheartedness, optimism and nostalgia" (18).[10] It marked the beginning of the third wave, an era of pink-packaged ultra-femininity – Barbie dolls, make-up, girl bands, fashion magazines, pastel-coloured chick-lit paperbacks[11] – which in turn paved the way for America's post-9/11 retreatism to patriarchal patterns that designate men as protectors and women as homemakers with a penchant for "nesting" and "comfort food" (Anderson 29). Angela McRobbie argues that films in which the protagonist is not straightforwardly naive but self-reflexive about her constrained circumstances are particularly successful at performatively reifying essentialist understandings of femininity because they assured the audience that conventional pressures and pleasures were part and parcel of being an agential, liberated woman (*Aftermath* 12). In other words, these knowingly old-fashioned plotlines manage to cohere with the postfeminist injunction to have it all in professional, homely, kinship, and sexual settings. What this injunction glosses over, however, is the care work requisite in homemaking and childrearing – the very work that neoliberal states devalue and deprive of its citizens. Women unable to calibrate a felicitous work-life balance must, in addition to being reproached for their poor time management, outsource care work to the lower socioeconomic classes – domestic, but more often from abroad – thereby further endangering female solidarity and ratifying postcolonial expropriation (Fraser "Behind" 108). Encouraging women to join the market while also peddling feminine domesticity and undercutting the value of affective labour with which she

[10] One of the harbingers of this reactionary turn was penned by Betty Friedan herself, a second-wave veteran whose landmark text *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, contends that women of the postwar era were encouraged to give up their career aspirations, adopt the "Occupation: Housewife," and find "fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (16, 38). Her book *The Second Stage*, published eighteen years later, intuits that something is "*off* ": feminism is in danger of breeding its own femini*st* mystique which denies, to its own detriment, "the importance of family, of women's own needs to give and get love and nurture, tender loving care" (Friedan 15, 22).

[11] Some feminist scholars distinguish third-wave feminism from postfeminism, arguing that the latter has a distinct, corporate flavour, whereas the former – the antecedent – was much more schizophrenic, encompassing a range of issues, subcultures, and modes of dissemination. Among these were the *riot grrrl* movement, Girl Power phenomenon, conversations about identity politics and sex positivity, and niche types of media, like zines and blogposts. The common, distinguishing factor of the third-wave and of postfeminism is their explicitly inclusive, intersectional telos relative to the second-wave.

is, as a result, overburdened, postfeminism idealizes the two-earner family and reduces some women into disposable units of labour.

Personal fulfillment is also translated into self-sexualization, especially by younger women who, invoking the language of consent and pleasure, emulate hypersexualized, commercially viable representations of their gender. In the last three decades, women have proclaimed themselves free-thinking, self-assertive agents, determined to recuperate the joy of stripteases and pornography from what they dismiss as prudish critiques of their boring, self-denying second-wave foremothers (Wolf 180). Attempts to call into question the eroticization of women are met with eyerolls: adopting the postfeminist language of choice, adherents of postfeminism assure their critics that they wish to cater to the male gaze. Sometimes, self-sexualizing women even abuse the use of irony as a "get-out clause," insisting that their performances of traditional femininity are actually parodies (Genz *Postfemininities* 11). In both cases, critics are faulted for denying their subjects the space to think for themselves. But "raunch culture as a path to liberation rather than oppression is [just] a convenient (and lucrative) fantasy," Deborah Levy points out in *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (82). The spectacular misogyny of Donald Trump perfectly instantiates the paradox that female sexuality, appearing so empowered, so triumphant, often abides sexist modes of derision and exploitation which undermine gender equality. Second wave feminists fought for, among other things, sovereignty over their own bodies: the right to control their reproductive capacity, to leave abusive situations, to love as they want, and to escape sexual mores that pit chastity against promiscuity. Inching from sexual objectification to sexual affirmation, women have, along the way, detoured to sexual subjectification, circumventing discussion about disciplinary forces impinging upon what subjectivities are available to women in the first place. Postfeminism fetishizes women's ambition and desire while limiting its scope such that agency refers to one's ability to choose maximum material gain in a ceaseless self-actualizing project. Seen as an invitation rather than a subtly oppressive imperative, self-optimization is buttressed by the intoxicating notion that freedom is not some far-off goal but an already-won reality (Chen 443). Thus, "the implicit assumption is that feminism no longer needs to be enforced politically," Stéphanie Genz explains, "'post-' becomes equivalent to both 'anti' and 'after'" (*Postfemininities* 20).

The fact that few women actually have cause for celebration is, however, slowly coming to the fore. The steady dwindling of social optimism, the result of decades-long economic decline, has much to do with the incipient sense that women are trapped in a state of pseudo- or thwarted liberation. Gill observes that "the neoliberal mantra of choice and self-determination is still present but [has] become[] infected with the experiences of precarity"; in

Genz and Brabon likewise propose a updated cultural analysis of postfeminism that "engages with a disillusioned and indeterminate recessionary environment characterised by deepening inequalities, dashed hopes and constantly lurking fears" ("Neoliberal Girls" 18; *Postfeminism* 2). Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant's comparative analysis of the *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and *Girls* (2012–2017) effectively illuminates a deep generational divide between the two television series, highlighting the diminished labour market portrayed in the latter and the demoralizing effects it has on its characters, post-millennium girls whose sense of entitlement for success evaporates as the realization that their human capital is no longer a coveted, lucrative asset settles. While, yes, feminism has become a "signifier of the good," happily invoked to remind women of their putative emancipation, it has not been impervious to the atmosphere of austerity that, as expounded above, crystallizes neoliberal injustice and the brutality of self-interest (Fraser *Fortunes* 303).

However, even though postfeminism's insouciant attitude towards structural injustice is giving way to a resurgence of interest in Marxist feminism in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, gender equality is still remote. The women's movement continues to be embroiled in stalemate, haunted by the same emphasis on self-reliance and compromise that protracts neoliberalism's undeath. Bust postfeminism,[12] a term coined by Genz and Brabon which designates a very specific twenty-first-century instantiation of postfeminism spawned in aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, still supports commodity culture and gendered conventions, albeit in a more subdued sense, having dispensed of the blithe materialism that ran rampant at the turn of the century. The commitment to consumption manifests within the domestic sphere which longer functions as a sanctuary from the office but is the workplace par excellence where entrepreneurial feminine labour in the form of blogging, baking, knitting, painting, crafting, upcycling, and bargain-hunting is romanticized as pragmatic yet nonetheless lucrative pastimes. Shopping is still recommended – albeit with frugal-mindedness – passed off as a consolation prize that rewards consumers for sustaining the thing that subjugates them. The status quo is preserved:

> the answer to recessionary experiences of (economic) hardship is not, as logic might dictate, to opt out of consumption practices but to seek 'thrift wisdom', exemplified by a nostalgic re-embrace of wartime propaganda and slogans of self-sufficiency and ingenuity – "Keep Calm and Carry On" […]. (Genz and Brabon 11)

[12] Bust postfeminism coincides with, to use Davies' terms, the punitive phase of neoliberalism ("New Neoliberalism" 129).

It is in fact preserved through the same rhetoric of empowerment that sold disciplinary self-care as independence during the shopaholic boom of the nineties and Noughties: just as the overachieving 'have-it-all' woman back then flaunted her emancipated status through her consumerist choices, the 'can-do' woman living through the bust era chooses to make do and mend[13] – in short, to reframe compromises that emerge from conditions of attrition in confident, voluntary terms. Though it has received scant scholarly traction, demarcating postfeminism, as Genz and Brabon do, into pre- and post-recessionary phases helps to highlight the ever-evolving, often counterintuitive strategies that compliant and complicit citizens feels, by turns, obligated and empowered to mobilize.

III. Conceptualizing Compromise in Postfeminist Times

My understanding of compromise is largely informed by the work of Jane Elliott on suffering agency, Sarah Bracke on resilience, and Jessica Benjamin on ideal love. Challenging the belief that the ability to determine the course of one's actions is an unalloyed good, Elliott presents instances wherein agential activity is inextricable from the structure of domination that induced it:

> Neoliberal governance is obviously not the neutral framework for free choice it purports to be, but the unacceptability of the choices it offers does not render them illusory or without import – quite the opposite: the choices between gas or childcare, illegal immigration or destitution, prostitution or starvation, are so significant and so painful precisely because they are so unjust. (87)

Given its overlapping ideological resonances with neoliberalism and bias towards conventional templates of belonging, postfeminist culture compels women to take action in ways, like those aforementioned in the previous section, that feel gratifying yet appalling. In experiencing her agency through survival – through compromise – the postfeminist subject loses sight of the boundaries between joyful, voluntary, and imposed. Elliot's formulation that "choice is experienced as a curse without simultaneously becoming a farce" shapes my conceptualization of compromise as a choice made under duress, under conditions of restricted possibility (84).

Bracke, alarmed like Elliott by the perception of agency as a "desired good," a "prize" won and flaunted through navigating compromised possibilities, similarly observes that much agential behaviour is moulded to fit the needs of the economy (53). The resilient subject, the focus of her article "Bouncing Back," "is one who can absorb the impact of austerity measures

[13] Issued by the British Ministry of Information during the Second World War, *Make Do and Mend* was a pamphlet that provided housewives with tips on how to be frugal yet fashionable in times of harsh rationing.

and continue to be productive," she writes, recalling the dejected citizens discussed in Davies' "Pain, No Gain" who have lived through a half decade of economic pummelling and manipulation (Bracke 61). Extrapolating from the work of several sociologists, Bracke relays different forms of resilience that seem to conflict with each other: adaptive, which entails "creatively responding to the challenge of the shock or trauma," and conservative, which implies "returning to a prior state" (55). The contradiction is resolved, however, through her examination of late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century ecological events, terrorist attacks, and financial disasters throughout which resilience was articulated as the capacity to buffer for trauma, recover quickly, and return to the "original shape" (Bracke 54). In all of these scenes and more, people wield ever-creative strategies to weather a lifeworld that, threatened by the possibility of injurability and undoing, is motivated to remain the same, hence the simultaneity of adaptive and conservative resilience which finds parallel in bust-postfeminism's craftiness and nostalgic neotraditionalism. Bracke emphasizes that the ethos of resilience dispossesses people of the capacity to envision and the skills to pursue other worlds, suturing them to "life *as it is*" and even one tinged with retrotopianism – "[life] *as it was* before disaster hit" (72). Put in dialogue, Elliott and Bracke's scholarship suggests that agency, spurred on by empowerment rhetoric, enables the self-reinforcing logic of compromise: cornered into survival scenarios by structural inequity, citizens take up agential modes of adjustment that only perpetuate the very hegemonic frameworks which demand further compromises from them. No wonder that choices made under these conditions feel indefensible no matter how logical.

Already trained in postures of compromise by neoliberal policymakers, women are unsurprisingly susceptible to accepting the constraints and inequalities prescribed by postfeminism. The financial, affective, and political compromises demanded of contemporary women are often expressed in progressive terms: peddled as the worthwhile undertakings of an empowered individual, these difficult choices are choices nonetheless – or so the line of thinking goes – and given the premium on individual choice, to say otherwise would be seen as illiberal or unfeminist. Compromises, moreover, are often presented as character-building challenges tackled head-on by model, modern women which postfeminism defines in both conventionally feminine and masculine terms. The postfeminist woman is at once pliant, in line with neotraditional conceptions of femininity, and deserving of conventionally masculine descriptors, namely strong, determined, and capable. She is flexible and cooperative without being so fragile as to lack the fortitude needed to endure tough scenarios. That postfeminist principles seem to defy gender binaries through their clever toggling of passivity and agency

of course bolsters the popular perception of its progressiveness and, by extension, the appeal of making compromises. The spirit of sacrifice and overcoming that propels people through compromised conditions keeps the fantasy of mastery intact; generates a kind of comfort in the being part of a collective project; and even dangles the possibility of building something stronger than before. Neoliberalism and its derivative postfeminism are complementary, interpellating women as agential subjects, minimizing the sway of normative demands over choices made, and dismissing the exploitation latent therein. Governing through the optimization of individual power which is ultimately undercut by structural constraints, postfeminism and neoliberalism operate overlapping machinations, generating conditions in which compromise feels ridiculous yet worthwhile.

To further understand why, as Tolentino writes, "there are rewards for succeeding under capitalism and patriarchy," I turn to Jessica Benjamin's rereading of Freudian theory in *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* which spotlights paternal identification among girls during the preoedipal stage as well as the psychic repercussions that ensue when said nascent bond is later denied (91). According to Benjamin, girls begin their lives "wish[ing] for a penis […] for the same reason that boys cherish theirs – because they see it as the emblem of the father who will help them individuate," as an emblem of power, difference, and desire (109). When inevitably the girl must reckon with her lack of phallus and the lack, by extension, of subjectivity it signifies, her identificatory love for the father becomes tainted by yearning and self-abasement. Identificatory love is perverted into what Benjamin calls ideal love:

> the wish for a vicarious substitute for one's own agency […] the passive form of accepting the other's will and desire as one's own; from there it is just a step to surrender to the other's will. (122)

Benjamin argues that through their submission to and adoration of the father women approximate the autonomous individuality over which patriarchy has monopoly by virtue of its phallic supremacy. At first glance, ideal love appears to redress the nonrecognition of women by patriarchal society, but it in fact reinforces the originary gender division that pits self-actualizing father against self-sacrificing mother thus prohibiting reconciliation of agency with femininity. Corroborating the idea that hegemonic structures are kept intact by subservience to and adulation of them, Benjamin's study lends psychoanalytic credence to not only the tacit, gendered understanding that a woman's search for selfhood necessarily entails "los[ing] herself in the identification with the powerful other who embodies the missing desire and agency," but

also the idea that doing so is profoundly self-affirming if self-annihilating as well – in short, profoundly compromising (116).

So far in this introduction, I have outlined various ways of thinking about compromise: as a contemporary keyword; a neoliberal ethos that exacerbates what it seeks to fix; a mode of subjectification with gendered connotations that resonate with those of postfeminism. Using compromise as a guiding heuristic to interrogate a range of the psychic, societal, and gendered reasons for feeling stuck, I examine a variety of case studies which hold up a mirror to the despondent climate of the post-Noughties in which women, interpellated as agential subjects, are nonetheless prone and resigned to conditions of (self-)effacement. In identifying some of the ways in which women navigate the hazy in-between space of sovereignty and subjugation, this project, situated squarely at the intersection of neoliberalism and postfeminism, attends not only to recessionary themes and imagery that forms the backdrop of my archive, but also the matrimonial, maternalist, and materialistic model of female subjectivity on which normative success is predicated. As my inquiry develops, other conceptualizations of compromise are foregrounded, namely as a product of liberal democracy (see Chapter 3) and – on a more heartening note – a potential means of flourishing (see Chapter 4).

IV. Methodology

To synthesize a range of interdisciplinary sources about the lived aspects and unconscious fantasies that stabilize structural inequality, I implement an affective analytical framework that, following in the tradition of psychoanalysis, prioritizes feelings and motivations, elements of individual interiority which I recognize are, at the same, bracketed by their sociopolitical contexts. In so doing, I strive to expand the space of feelings as a viable field of critical inquiry. My project weaves contemporary (post-2010) autofictional and fictional narratives together with scholarly literature to offer a capacious analysis of the dynamic and ambivalent lives of women in the present. Lauren Berlant's imbricating ideologemes, namely fantasy, genre, love, attrition, attachment, impasse, intimate public, and style, thread through all four chapters. Their thoughts on why and how people stay bound to situations that promise but thwart thriving as well as the moments of indifference, improvisation, and compulsive repetition that punctuate this "crisis ordinariness" undergird my close analyses of female protagonists who have little to which to cling, especially now that feminism has lost its radical edge and neoliberalism, its shiny, new, seemingly gender-conscious charisma (Berlant *Cruel* 81). People are not always steered by a "militaristic and melodramatic" sense of agency, Berlant avers, but caught, rather, in conditions of unbelonging within which they also find pockets of comfort (*Cruel* 96). In

Cruel Optimism, their most influential work on an eponymous concept (see Chapter 1), Berlant probes the self-negating motivations for defending normative fantasies that stabilize compromised lifeworlds. Because these fantasies are the gossamer web holding up people's sense of ongoingness, they are not easily relinquished even by people who have an interest in living otherwise. Upholding the sometimes unconscious, sometimes consenting, always stubborn attachment to the promise of continuity is often preferable to (self-)transformation and the disruption it wreaks. In their uneasy compliance with hegemonic norms, therefore, people take "small vacations from the will," like, for example, they turn to food for comfort (Berlant *Cruel* 115). *Cruel Optimism* devotes a chapter to the examination of overeating as a habit and a metaphor in order to make sense of contemporary citizens who surrender the agency demanded of them – momentarily letting go of themselves, so to speak. "Self-medication through self-interruption […] isn't merely a weakness of those with diseases of the will" but a common response to depleting environments (Berlant *Cruel* 115). Berlant's refusal to fetishize the dispossession, or, to use their terms, "slow death," in their study of unreliable agency uniquely positions them to meditate on the widespread disaffection and desire for change that have not amounted to such (*Cruel* 95).

The plenitude of Berlant's thought is kindred with that of other scholars all of which have been instrumental to my thinking. Reading Sianne Ngai's work on politically ambiguous, dysphoric feelings help to nuance my exploration of a disarticulated feminism, its emotional contours and internal antagonisms. Her focus on minor feelings reveals to me that the desaturated and diffuse nature of affect has greater descriptive purchase in comparison to the more "narratively structured," "object- or goal-directed," prescriptive quality of emotion (Ngai *Ugly* 25). Hanna Schaefer's conceptualization of impasse as an space "in which continuity continues […] tainted by a sense of socio- economic and ecological fragility" shapes my patience for characters who meander in different directions but fail to break the spell of suspension (98). Impasse allows the present to occupy infinitely more frames, she writes, tarrying with long cycles of adjustment. On the allure of conventionalizing rhythms, I look to Andrea Long Chu who maintains across her oeuvre on transgenderism, feminism, and normativity that desires do not necessarily orient lives in ways conducive to their flourishing. To try to restructure desire even for the honourable cause of making them tally with good politics and good behaviour would be a futile venture: "You simply cannot tell people how to feel, at least with the result that they start feeling the way you want them to (Chu "Impossibility" 75). Moreover, Chu argues, object of desires, whether reluctantly relinquished or doggedly defended, usually occasion a "romance of disappointment" anyway:

> One day, you tell yourself, it will give you what you want. Then, one day, it doesn't. Now it dawns on you that your object [of affection, of aspiration] will probably never give you what you want. But this is not what's disappointing, not really. What's disappointing is what happens next: nothing. ("On Liking Women")

These revelations about desire, messy and ambivalent, bring me closer to understanding why women nurture compromising attachments to lifeworlds that do them little favour. How do women protest – if they do at all – a kind of life the viability of which hangs in the delicate balance of choosing boldly, independently, yet prudently? How is maladjustment to the narrow parameters of postfeminist femininity normalized or otherwise brushed aside? Where do they find pockets of intimacy, reparativity, and reciprocity – fundaments of personhood? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discursive deployment of the preposition 'besides' in her non-dualistic pedagogy cautions me against conceptual binaries that arise as I strive for answers, and her perennial concern with the tensions and possibilities of relationality hones my eye to detect instances in which better forms – or less bad experiences – of common life peek through.

Like feminist scholar Yanbing Er who examined Sheila Heti and Jenny Offill's autofictional novels in relation to their postfeminist environment, I, too, acknowledge that my project is at risk of reproducing "the Western cultural perspective and its affiliated zones of privilege" (4). The writers and protagonists in my archive all hail from white or white-passing, educated, middle-to upper-class backgrounds whose livelihoods and sense of ongoingness have only recently been imperilled, an experience that stands in sharp contrast to that of historically disenfranchised people quietly bearing the brunt of austerity since the beginning. What makes members of the former demographic group ideal subjects through which to explore archetypal postfeminist qualities and their proximity to generic femininity is also what makes my narrow sampling a controversial decision: for better or for worse, this uneasy proximity to patriarchal power is not available to women of other positionalities. The aim of this study is not to attempt the impossible task of offering a comprehensive account of feminisms and femininities; rather it strives firstly to illuminate a few contemporary iterations thereof and secondly to interrogate the ways in which they legitimate scenarios which undermine the possibility of gender justice for people within and beyond their reach. Because the women writers and their characters included here are themselves embedded in the neoliberal spaces where postfeminism is most insidious, their narratives are saturated with its gains, losses, and affective texture. While imperfect indices of the diverse contemporary present, the fiction and autofiction included here are important, resonant snapshots of conflicting and counterintuitive choices that women in the postfeminist era feel compelled to make.

My critical approach to these texts is informed by Benjamin Kunkel's thesis in his article "Critic, Historicize Thyself!": "a new method of criticism [should] really be developed that is at once therapeutic *and* political, aesthetic *and* historicist" such that, in reading literature, a reader inspects not only "the overwhelming presence, determinative yet scarcely perceptible, of history at large in the activities of the narrowly circumscribed set of characters within a given novel," but also "his or her own life and circumstances with the same eye for invisible determinations" (92, 88). He arrives at this position in reviewing Joseph North's *Literary Criticism* which argues that the "historicist-contextualist" paradigm, ascendant in the 1970s when Marxist scholars pushed back against the New Critical view of literature as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object, has now calcified in to academic orthodoxy (1). What began as a needed corrective to formalism devolved in time, North complains, into an equally myopic materialism that treats literary texts as evidentiary support for assessments made about their contemporary contexts. In short, the historicist framework emphasizes thinking *about* rather than *through* a text. "Very few people […] start reading a novel by Virginia Woolf with the primary aim of learning more about British cultural life in the 1920s," he remarks, "[readers] are looking for something to go on with, something that will help them live their lives" (North 6). For North, a renewed criticism that simultaneously stresses the therapeutic value of literature and, through this foregrounding, expresses leftist political commitments would be ideal.

But if the historicist perspective is "barren and tautological," then, Kunkel counters, the aesthetic, ethico-psychological sensibility that North courts is vague and neglectful of the historical forces omnipresent in works of art and indeed the lives of reader-consumers (88). To cultivate new, ethical subjectivities and collectivities as North would like requires citizens, Kunkel contest, to be "alert at all times to the pressure of global history upon ostensibly private and isolated goings-on" (89). Kunkel expounds:

> the dimension of life to which his therapeutic ('something to go on with') register pertains [is] concerned above all with such things as individual well-being, intimate relationships, immediate social circle and private vocation: all of these matters highly dependent on one's own choices and actions. The dimension of life to which radical politics belongs, on the other hand, is mainly that of history, which gathers up and largely dissolves the affairs of individual people. (92)

The novel, to use Kunkel's concise definition, is "the most socially documentary of imaginative forms," enabling readers to encounter alterity, to momentarily inhabit other consciousnesses and different biographical circumstances through characters, which prompts them to situate

their personal predicaments within a larger, historical context. The self-evaluative element on part of the reader is practiced by the characters that populate the autofictional and fictional narratives analyzed in this project. Thus, not only do the novels in my archive interweave individual, phenomenological experiences of life with reflections of the contemporary present, they are also themselves peppered by an awareness that one is bracketed by the other. My sources lend themselves to the critical approach I take to study them: attuned to the aesthetic, personalist sensibility North advocates while recuperating the historicism that I, following Kunkel, find lacking in North's polemic.

One of the most pressing concerns in today's ailing, neoliberal societies is the sense of impotence among citizens who chafe against each other as individual entrepreneur-consumers with little concept of public-mindedness, so how can autofictional and fictional literature – reading it, writing (about) it – ameliorate the loss of faith in democracy? How, to borrow Ngai's formulation, can "the circumscribed standpoint of the literary […] examine problems whose greatest import arguably lies beyond the sphere of the aesthetic per se" (*Ugly* 2)? Broadly speaking, literature is usually praised for its capacity to awaken desires for justice and reconciliation; to catalyze solidarity; to explore diverse, maybe alien lifeworlds. If the current neoliberal regime can be distilled into one dictum, Margaret Thatcher's infamous "There is no alternative," literature, by contrast, is often celebrated for its maxim that there are alternatives (qtd. Robinson "TINA"). I stress, though, that my project is not a quixotic one. The characters I encounter are cognizant of the stunted political imaginary; they are not shocked to find their agency obstructed. The texts in my archive unveil the barbarism on which neoliberal civilization was founded and its dismissal, varying in intensity, of whole swathes of its population. They offer a complex picture of the part their characters play in systemic violence. They give voice to the suffering while elaborating a critical vision of the postfeminist era through their ambivalent portrayals of contemporary young women. They impugn putatively natural, normal expectations and, at best, reveal what looks inevitable to be contingent. But despite the propulsive movement towards resolution that grips many of the characters in the texts of my archive, none of the novels capitulate to closure. If they gesture towards scenarios of collective flourishing at all, these narratives shy away from blueprinting these slippery alternatives. This elusiveness – this inability to nurture the kernel of utopianism – is the product of precisely the disappointing, disenfranchising history of recent decades that my thesis interrogates. Literature need not necessarily dream up radically different futures. Literature may in fact be an ideal space to investigate compromised and comprising conditions since, as Ngai explains, "the situation of restricted agency […] is one that describes art's own position

in a highly differentiated and totally commodified society" (*Ugly* 2).[14] I subscribe to Ngai's belief that no culturohistorical artifact captures, through its reflexive preoccupation with its own impotence, ambivalent responses to political defeat as acutely as literature, hence the substantial close readings of fiction and autofiction in the chapters to come (*Ugly* 2).

V. Chapter Overview

My first chapter examines the largely unconscious attachment to the family ideal in the historical present through a gendered lens, reading Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy alongside the theoretical insights of Melinda Cooper, Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Lauren Berlant. Amidst the mounting precarity of contemporary neoliberal life, the family has emerged as both a privileged site of debt transfer and an emotional shelter. A symbol of aspirational success, the icon of the happy, healthy nuclear family works to placate frustrated citizens for whom the good life fantasy – the fantasy of durable intimacy, upward mobility, and home ownership – is a sham. Making home, adhering to conventional patterns of life is a near-impossible task for many, but women are uniquely penalized insofar as they both *require* and *are* the protections sorely lacking in the contemporary present. Nowhere is this sense of obligation to give and longing to receive care more conspicuous than in the female characters' ambivalent mediations on domesticity and autonomy, especially protagonist Faye's. A newly divorced writer constantly on the move, having profound conversations with strangers in liminal places, she tests the possibility of new relationalities. How might life unfold outside the reassuring cadences of private, bourgeois domesticity? While Faye's spontaneous acquaintanceships gesture towards moments of greater inclusivity through their improvised intimacy, they still, nonetheless, require an undue amount of empathy and negotiation on her part; she facilitates and recounts all the interactions, yet very little is divulged about her, which is strange for a first-person narrative. That Faye remains, on a formal level, an embodiment of the self-effacing affective labour historically foisted on women complicates the possibility of freedom that feminism has hitherto promised. I argue that a great majority of women cannot bear to relinquish their attachments to the good life fantasy, preferring the (self-)effacing labour its heteronormative paradigm demands to the unintelligibility of life without such predictable structures. Cusk's characters, for whom social membership feels, by turns, like suffocation and obligation, promising but never delivering the holding feeling of home, are gripped by a sense

[14] Ngai builds on Theodor Adorno's historical analysis of aesthetic autonomy in *Aesthetics and Politics* which correlates art's separateness from "empirical society" with its awareness of its own political ineffectuality, and this powerlessness constitutes the privileged object art's "guilty" self-reflection (qtd. Ngai *Ugly* 2).

of resignation, the affective mode of the historical present, which in turn breeds other minor and major feelings, ranging from irritation to rage.

Continuing to probe the incongruous ways in which women of the contemporary present exercise their agency, Chapter 2 turns to the figure of the sick young woman: her self-laceration; her pathologization; the wilfulness of her will-lessness. Reading Ottessa Moshfegh *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* through a reparative, empathetic lens, I attend to the question of what survival looks like for women who are compelled to conditions of generic belonging, even if achieving the look and feel of normativity means remaining in or even exacerbating their vague yet ubiquitous psychic pain. Starting with Reva, the best friend of Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist, I argue that her bulimia and incessant whining are techniques of self-management that facilitate successful if disappointing and painful membership to normative femininity. Contrary to expectation, complaining about pain is, according to Berlant, a mode of critique that formalizes emotional conventionalities even as it registers the disaffection of its subjects. Knowledge of injustices and irrationalities does little to dislodge repetitions particularly when those repetitions – the rituals of aspirational femininity, the cyclical binge-purge behaviour – are so comforting in their regularity. If Reva is a modern-day hysteric, then the protagonist is by contrast catatonic, yet the latter's espousal of numbness is just another strategy of holding on and getting on. The protagonist seems to recoil from the idea of community altogether, diving deeper and deeper into a drug-fuelled oblivion, yet, I argue, she is more attached to the normative world than she lets on; the ultimate goal of her hibernation is renewed fidelity to the social. My character analysis reveals that slow, habitual techniques of self-management are instrumental to living through the present, but it is precisely the work of self-preservation that siphons energy away from transformative action. The chapter then investigates the ambivalent readerly reception of the novel, challenging neoliberal notions of empowered, productive personhood as well as the attendant impulse to pathologize, glamourise, vilify, or capitalize pain, particularly female pain. Drawing from the work of Angela McRobbie and Ann Cvetkovich, I argue that disaffection among women in the contemporary present could be better understood in terms of a loss of fellow-feeling – the disarticulation of a once solidary feminism – and rectified were trauma situated within a collective, social context. Indebted to queer-feminist epistemologies, this chapter advocates the deprivatization of feelings without, crucially, trivializing the practices on which women have historically relied, practices that are simultaneously self-injurious and self-preservational.

My third chapter situates questions of agency and togetherness within the context of liberal democratic citizenship which, broadly defined, is a hybrid regime of two different

traditions: one that values individualism to the point of negating political unity and another that, by contrast, tries to guarantee a homogeneous mode of belonging by imposing an antagonistic frontier between *us* and *them*. The resulting sociopolitical system is thus a troublingly weak *modus vivendi* model of constitutional belonging wherein discrete, self-sufficient subjects mistake lawfulness and compromise for the common 'good.' Following a brief overview of pluralism, rationalism, and consensus as Chantal Mouffe describes them in *The Democratic Paradox* and *The Return of the Political*, I survey the ways in which Sally Rooney's characters in *Conversations with Friends* absorb, to their detriment, these three, key yet conflicting politic ideals. I track how these ideals colour the affective lives of protagonist Frances and her polyamorous peers; each one wants what is best for him/herself but has honed a non-confrontational, laissez-faire attitude to the point of self-effacement, so instead they settle for arrangements that offer minimal return. I discern a paradox: to manufacture a compensatory sense of empowerment, Frances tells herself she consents to these subpar conditions. The concession to the badness of contemporary life is felt, expressed, then largely suppressed by all of Rooney's characters across her three novels the most recent of which, *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*, I incorporate into my analysis of her compromise aesthetic. A better world begins, they believe, with reciprocal care. This quasi-revolutionary message is haphazardly, I argue, building on Rachel Greenwald Smith's theorization of stylistic hybridity, incorporated into the romantic plotline, producing lucrative feel-good narratives that offer limp class critique, easy entertainment, and a seemingly feasible utopianism. Chapter 3 ends with a contention: while planting socialist politics within the germ of heteroidealist love such that reciprocity is envisioned and enacted between individuals before expanded to benefit communities may appear to be a viable blueprint for collective flourishing, the privatizing, placating, postfeminist pull of normative coupledom persists, undermining the possibility thereof. The novels encourage readers to think critically about the contemporary political landscape while insisting that public and personal conflicts can be readily resolved through heteronormative love – through the revamped status quo. As such, it mirrors on a diegetic level the tendency to perpetuate the fantasy of stability and reconciliation which forms the bedrock of liberal democracy.

In the final chapter as in the first, the vicissitudes of family-oriented contemporary life highlight the intersubjectivity, ambivalence, and resourcefulness of aspirational belonging, though in contrast to Cusk's characters – and Moshfegh and Rooney's – who are fain to propping up a waning good life fantasy, those in *Detransition, Baby*, while equally disillusioned, manage to disturb and dilate both gender conventions and possibilities of being-

in-relation without invalidating their residual investment in conventions completely. My reading of Reese, Katrina, and Ames' romantic, platonic, and familial kinships is informed by Andrea Long Chu's concept of nonnormativity which has many resonances with Berlant's heterotopian vision and Sedgwick's thoughts on paranoid/reparative nondualism. Rejecting the cramped problem space carved out by the antinormative-normative divide which has historically steered queer, trans, and feminist theory, all three theorists propose instead the elasticating of existing lifeworlds without displacing messy, contradictory attachments to sociality. "What we commonly call 'structure' is not what we usually presume – an intractable principle of continuity across time and space – but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement seen as solid from a distance," Berlant reassures (*Inconvenience* 25). Examining the triad coparenting arrangement in *Detransition, Baby* enables a reconceptualization of seemingly immovable institutions, like marriage and the family, into infrastructures, "durationally extensive spaces for the pliable forms of life" (Berlant *Inconvenience* 23). In other words, whereas the first three chapters interrogate the reiterative power of compromise, the final one explores its generative capacity. The argument that citizens bend to accommodate existing lifeworlds – while true – often presumes fixed definitions of normative belonging and an equally rigid sense of intentionality, but, as my reading of Peters' novel demonstrates, inherited fantasies and individual agency are more pliant than that (Berlant *Inconvenience* 23). Even without conventional markers of viable family life, even in the symbolic absence and possible abortion of the baby, the three protagonists are able to cultivate a notional propinquity with each other, indicating a possibility of living for the projected good life fantasy that reproduces some comfortingly familiar aspects thereof while allowing for its fraying. To a greater degree than the novels studied in previous chapters, *Detransition, Baby* foregrounds the minute ways in which Reese, Katrina, and Ames' desires and decisions both directly facilitate and directly impinge on each other's wellbeing, bringing into focus the awkward fact that rewards reaped through compromise are undercut by their costs. The novel registers the implications of being attached not only to fantasies but also to people, serving therefore as a compelling case study of compromise as not only a tether to the macro but also a measure of laterality which distends the micro, which jostles the rigid individualism of the sovereign subject interpellated by neoliberalism and postfeminism.

Family Matters: Affective Belonging and Aspirational Normativity in Rachel Cusk's *Outline* Trilogy

In Rachel Cusk's *Kudos*, the autofictional protagonist Faye encounters an unnamed journalist whom she met ten years prior. Since they last spoke, Faye has periodically ruminated on the interviewer's description of her hometown, an enchantingly tranquil place bisected by cobblestone streets and silent waterways. The stillness of the neighbourhood mirrors the interviewer's domestic life: "simple, regulated," and "lack[ing] a quality that drove other people's lives into extremity, whether of pleasure or of pain" (Cusk *Kudos* 64, 63). The interviewer's life is the picture of upper-middle-class success, complete with two well-adjusted sons and a reliable, breadwinning lawyer of a husband. It is this placid, family-oriented existence curated with the upmost "self-control" and "courage of consistency" that Faye admits to having envied all these years (Cusk *Kudos* 65, 72). Her envy bespeaks a strong desire for stability and security. Even though Faye has grown wary of conventional structures the epitome of which is the nuclear family, she continues to pine after the "cadence of […] agreement" that such structures provide anyway (Cusk *Kudos* 62). This persistent yet largely subconscious attachment to the family ideal is a common feature among the *Outline* trilogy's many characters, informing the many anecdotes and experiences that unfold against a background of neoliberal austerity.

To interrogate the particular contemporaneity of this attachment to the family, I read Cusk's trilogy in dialogue with the political, historical, and affective work of, respectively, Wendy Brown, Melinda Cooper, and Lauren Berlant. Amidst the mounting precarity of contemporary life, the family has emerged as a privileged site of debt and wealth transfer. It is also, more importantly, seen as an affective shelter promising upward mobility, financial security, and reciprocal intimacy for disaffected citizens. A symbol of normative success – the very success that has been rendered unattainable by political and economic deregulation – the family helps not only to normalize the self-exploitative labour involved in its pursuit, but also placate its aspirants' inevitable frustration. For all the characters who populate the trilogy, alienated subjects drifting in liminal spaces, the family is a site of respite and illusion. My analysis adopts a gendered perspective in order to locate the motivations of Cusk's female characters who willingly shoulder the burden of social reproduction, sustaining a late capitalist system predicated on their very oppression. I argue that the often voluntary subordination of contemporary women can be traced to an overactive sense of responsibility characteristic of all neoliberal subjects, essentializing narratives that continue to assign care work based on sex, and the promise of belonging within the bounds of a heteronormative life script. In short,

women continue to perform the essential yet disavowed work of *femina domestica* out of compulsion and expectation, on the one hand, and a desire for ongoingness on the other. The trilogy suggests, in the portrayals of women as well as in the development of their narrator's life, that they would sooner accept the predictability of normative family life and the (self-)effacing labour it entails than the unintelligibility of life that strays from such a template. While the contingencies and incongruities of everyday life may be gruelling, life without any promise of social reciprocity – however fantasmatic – poses even more of a challenge.

I. Neoliberal Responsibilization and Depletion of *Homo Oeconomicus*

As sketched in the introduction, neoliberalism peddles the romance of a flexible, reflexive capitalism behind which it hides exclusionary policies that privilege the already privileged. But how has the commodification of uniquely human capabilities of sociability, creativity, and communication – the metamorphosis of the self into what Rudi Laermans dubs "Me, Inc." – experienced as liberating, pleasurable, even (91)? What is the putative appeal of market rationality? To respond, I turn to the fourth chapter of Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* which elucidates the production of self-investing citizens through a culture of responsibilization and the integration of this human capital into the ongoing project of macroeconomic growth. Replete with both positive and normative valences, responsibilization is a new kind of biopower, a term coined by Michel Foucault to describe governmental power over individual and collective life through the enactment of various, subtle disciplinary techniques. Neoliberal policies have replaced centralized authority and top-down management styles with networking models and collaborative, hands-on learning. What were once deplored as aggressive free-market reforms have evolved into a baffling amalgam of antistatism and new managerialism that "emphasize[] the importance of each sector doing what it does best and the importance of partnerships across these differences" (Brown *Undoing* 126). Superficially, this seems to empower the citizen, affording him every opportunity to harness his autonomy for personal growth and do what feels like meaningful work with other equally enthusiastic people. Upon closer examination, however, participation and inclusion are not, in neoliberal societies, accompanied by any "modest control over setting parameters and constraints [nor] by the capacity to decide fundamental values and directions" (Brown *Undoing* 128). Thus, this new politics of participation and inclusion is actually devoid of political agency.

Joining Foucault in his conceptualization of neoliberalism as a normative order, Brown observes that "[it] governs as sophisticated common sense," deriving "soft power" from the buy-in of its overburdened citizens (*Undoing* 35). Citizens do not arrive at collaboration and

complementarity through democratic deliberation, judgement and action; they are, instead, incentivized to work together and profit off of each other in the process. The human capacity for responsibility has been perverted into an "external moral injunction," deployed in the reorientation of citizens such that, ultimately, "the individual is the only relevant and wholly accountable actor" (Brown *Undoing* 133). Having been divorced from civic-mindedness, self-interest now aligns with hegemonic economic order, which mandates citizens to "discern[] and undertak[e] the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for […] surviving" (Brown *Undoing* 132-133). In other words, it is clear that the liberal-permissive ethos of the historical present extends only so far: citizens are strongly encouraged to toil in productive work or contribute in other ways to the consumerist economy but – equally as strongly – discouraged from engaging in any activity that might imperil the neoliberal state. They are free, in other words, not to live idly or organize protests but to live in accordance with the logic of individualism. Brown asks her reader to picture a death row inmate having to choose the method of his execution – that, for her, is an apt illustration of what freedom and agency have become.

Adopting a psychoanalytic lens to parse neoliberalism's ideological sway, Slavoj Žižek's article "'You May!'" argues that the disintegration of paternal authority left citizens confused: in the absence of a preordained code to which to conform, "all our impulses, from sexual orientation to ethnic belonging, [have become] matters of choice." Not a welcome change, the "reflexivization" of society has generated new existential anxieties for citizens who must now rely on the superego to provide structure and meaning (Žižek). The psychoanalytical equivalent of the modal verb *should*, the superego operates as a nagging inner voice of duty and correctness – a counterweight to the ostensibly liberal-permissive ethos of contemporary society. It instructs, "You must do your duty, and you must enjoy doing it," but it frames the instruction as opportunity (Žižek). Theorizing from a similar perspective, Laermans discusses the ascendancy of a psychopolitics of "biopotentiality," a concept which derives from the Foucauldian concept of biopolitical subjectivation: the double-pronged process of becoming a subject and subjecting oneself to certain axes of domination (102). Conflating duty with enjoyment, neoliberalism's "fun, […] playful, stimulating, inspiring" approach helps citizens subconsciously reconceive their subjugation to hedonistic and compulsive consumerist practices as a voluntary attachment thereto (Laermans 102). Battling feelings of purposelessness, drifting without the regulations that historically served as anchorage, and armed with all the tools necessary to achieve self-fulfilment, citizen-subjects have no reason *not* to give the best of themselves and by extension to out-perform each other. Moreover,

because self-enhancement offers a sense of progress experienced as deep libidinal satisfaction, citizens have come to associate compulsive personal development with gainful employment – gainful in both the monetary sense and the spiritual one. Neoliberalism has managed to renew the legitimacy of free market by furnishing solutions to the unfairness and dullness for which Fordist capitalism has often been criticized, advertising self-interest as a free choice while in fact subjecting citizens to a new psychopolitical regime through their realization of it.

Inevitably, the (self-)exploitative project of self-optimization coupled with the pervasive financial insecurity of the present wears out the citizen. Neoliberal citizens have no guarantee of social protection or even survival no matter how savvy or responsible they are (Brown *Undoing* 37). Instrumentalizable and therefore expendable units of human capital, they live at permanent risk of fiscal crises, downsizing, furloughs. The hyperactivity of the superego is matched only by the sheer impassivity of depressive spells, two poles that define, according to Laermans, the structure of feeling at present, one of manic depression. And even in those depressive spells, the superego is at play. *You should have done better*, it accuses, *and you should still do more*. Citizens are gripped by what Mark Fisher calls "depressive hedonia," a state in which the "inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure" is motivated by guilt and eventually breeds apathy (22). Neoliberalism withdraws public care by offloading ever more responsibilities onto its citizens who have come to value themselves based solely on their output. It achieves "maximum governance through maximum individual freedom," or, in other words, by concealing its economic agenda behind a host of incentives for citizens who feel somehow liberated in the endless pursuit of their own capital enhancement (Brown *Undoing* 110, 108).

It is against this backdrop of overexertion and neoliberal precaritization that Cusk's *Outline* trilogy is set: characters are busy doing what is unanimously considered good – responsible, respectable, worthwhile – yet unable to shake their disaffection or pinpoint its source. The trilogy's cast of middle-class characters, comprised mainly of writers, artists, and other young professionals in the Arts and Culture arena, have all had to habituate to a degree of flux and recalibrate their expectations as to what "living" might entail. Like the Greek man in *Outline* who lives periodically on a boat or Amanda who grew up flipping real estate with her parents, leaving the properties the minute they started to take on liveable shape, neoliberal citizens operate at a remove, numb from years of "being unmoored" (Cusk *Kudos* 56). Faye's cousin Lawrence typifies the "ragged," "confused," and "adrift" disposition of Cusk's many characters (Cusk *Transit* 118). Standing outside his well-tended country house, he looks to his guests like "an actor in some drama of bourgeois life," yet despite the expensive clothes, the

"air of faintly portentous vitality about him," and the manicured hedges dotting his property, something seems to be wearing thin (Cusk *Transit* 212). Lawrence steals away from his dinner party for a cigarette, trying to calm an underlying anxiety that is betrayed only by his "grimace-like smile" and facetious remark, "our life is in a state of crisis […] a permanent one" (Cusk *Transit* 212). Cusk's prose limns the ubiquity of broken promises that has for the last few decades started to dishearten even citizens of relative wealth.

The figure of the *homo oeconomicus*, usually enacted by male characters or characters who occupy the masculine role of the breadwinner, features heavily throughout the trilogy. "The principle of progress was always at work" in the life of Faye's friend Paniotis for whom pausing or resting is so strongly tied to malady and deferral that he struggles to be still even after decades spent chasing material success (Cusk *Outline* 99). Such is also the case for Faye's colleague Ryan who is perpetually climbing a literal and imaginary staircase, be it on the gym's step machine or in his zealous career networking. But self-realization is a game of diminishing returns: Lawrence, who recently embarked on a culinary journey, now approaches food as though every meal were "ultimately about discipline" (Cusk *Transit* 237). A posterchild of neoliberal self-optimization, he refuses food altogether if what he can access is not the best of its category. "You would never feel full to bursting on it," he pontificates, before fittingly nibbling on a decadent yet unsatisfying sliver of foie gras (Cusk *Transit* 239). His eating habits are born of an era whose people accept or even embrace hunger and insufficiency. But for all his talk about the challenge of being a person who prefers smoked duck over a modest cheese sandwich, for all his effortful attempts at optimizing his experiences, Lawrence fails utterly at hosting a simple dinner. He plans too sophisticated a menu, serving poussin to his fussy children who throw a tantrum in response. The scene, which spirals in absurd disarray, gestures towards a complaint in *Kudos* about a labyrinthine road system "permanently jammed while lacking the logic of a common destination" (Cusk 61). The metaphor crystallizes the frustration of navigating structural obstacles that have a way of overwhelming citizens such that they "end the day further away from [those] goals" (Cusk *Transit* 165). Not only, then, do Cusk's characters voluntarily overcomplicate things for themselves, they are thrust into an environment whose very design interferes with the attainment of their goals. The capitalist tenet of constant (self-)improvement threatens the very happiness it promises and "lea[ves] you alone with yourself" (Cusk *Transit* 239).

That citizens are grasping for "some kind of authority" is no surprise given the climate of atomization, competition, and uncertainty (Cusk *Transit* 55). Faye's contractor can recount several instances in which clients became embarrassingly anxious for his opinion, as though

he should be the arbiter of their tastes. Likewise, Faye's publisher notices a "yearning for the ideal of literature, as for the lost world of childhood, whose authority and reality tend[] to seem so much greater than that of the present moment" (Cusk *Kudos* 38). And although Faye herself declares, "I did not, any longer, want to persuade anyone of anything," alluding to her disenchantment with normative templates and narrative conventions in her life and in her work – a point of discussion in coming sections of this chapter – she, too, is seduced by a spam email in which the sender claims to feel a "strong personal connection" with her (Cusk *Outline* 19; *Transit*, 1). Faye caves, paying a small fee to access a supposedly personalized astrological report that might rekindle her faith in humankind. Her desire for some "explanatory text" in the face of "powerlessness" proves too strong (Cusk *Transit* 197). Like her contractor's many clients, Faye searches for guidance in a world where hierarchical traditions and moral judgments have started to crumble.

II. Family Obligation and the Elision of *Femina Domestica*

Drawing on the work of Melinda Cooper, this upcoming section discusses the centrality of the family to wellbeing of citizens struggling against affective and financial precarity. It then distils some reasons for the continued gendering of affective labour which gives shape to the family unit and offers a close-reading of such heteronormative, essentialist attitudes in the context of the trilogy. To focus the density of historical events in Cooper's *Family Values*, I begin with a theoretical formulation in Brown's *Undoing the Demos*:

> Disintegrating the social into entrepreneurial and self-investing bits removes umbrellas of protection provided by belonging, whether to a pension plan or to a citizenry; only familialism […] remains an acceptable social harbor, even as public supports for family life, from affordable housing to education, have themselves been degraded by neoliberalism. (27)

Often romanticized as last institution uncorrupted by market forces, the family's glowing reputation as a shelter from the everyday pressures of capitalism is, Cooper brilliantly illustrates, by design. Her book, *Family Values*, opens with the skyrocketing inflation of the late 1960s, asking how and why it became an unmitigated political crisis in the decades to come. For new social conservatives, the problem germinated from the welfare state which had allowed consumption to exceed "the limits prescribed by Protestant good sense" and undermined the "proper order of familial relations" (Cooper *Family* 32). The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) came under attack for subsidizing the non-normative lives of divorced or never-married African American women, members of what was denounced as

"an unproductive rentier class of welfare queens" (Cooper *Family* 53). Even though the AFDC consumed a tiny proportion of federal spending and cannot therefore be reasonably blamed for rising public deficits or inflation, the programme nonetheless came to epitomize the moral malaise of a society whose citizens dared flout the authority of the family (Cooper *Family* 56). While it is easy to see why the conservative camp was appalled by the increasingly liberalized attitudes toward sexuality that precipitated the decline of the family ideal, Cooper reports that certain neoliberal thinkers – some of whom even had social-democrat leanings – were in fact equally invested in its restoration because the family operates as an "immanent order of non-contractual obligations" which can relieve the state of such responsibilities (*Family* 33). In other words, neoliberals wanted citizens to spontaneously coalesce into mutually dependent, self-sufficient units for economic reasons: if fathers "chose" to support their dependants and mothers "chose" to perform unpaid reproductive labour, public deficit would gradually right itself (Cooper *Family* 60). Regardless of how their opinions of the family differed – an "a priori foundation" to be protected from corrosive market forces or an "equilibrium state" that works symbiotically with the market – neoconservatives and neoliberals concurred with its reinstatement as the ballast of social and economic order (Cooper *Family* 61, 60).

Under the Reagan presidency, neoliberals and neoconservatives began to revive the American poor law tradition, an austere system of public relief originating in Elizabethan times that placed strict conditions on its recipients chief among which is filial obligation to one's kin (Cooper *Family* 73). Only when Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed two decades later were federal entitlement to welfare benefits fully eradicated, replaced by the "natural" support mechanisms of the family (Cooper *Family* 102). Notably, the law discarded the AFDC in favour of a more punitive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programme whose primary objective was to locate biological fathers because once legal paternity was established, the state could impose family support duties, criminalizing those who did not comply (Cooper *Family* 103-104). The administrative costs of this manhunt for what is essentially just child support amounted to a significant portion of the federal budget – a sum that could have directly benefitted the impoverished women applying for welfare instead. By "detouring [welfare] payment […] via legally designated fathers," these new laws were devised, Cooper concludes, to remind citizens that they "cannot hope to find economic security" without also consenting to the contractual and noncontractual obligations of marriage (*Family* 105, 76). The Personal Responsibility Act also set aside funds to promote heterosexual, procreative marriage, which it understood to be "the foundation of a successful society," among citizens who did not fall into the welfare class (qtd. Cooper *Family* 107). The

ringing, bipartisan endorsement of Clinton's legislative overhaul – itself a continuation of Reagan's macroeconomic policies – lives on. Its laws have been reinforced by every president since, further cementing the centrality of the family to the social, political, and economic, or, put differently, the significance of private, non-marketized relations to public, market transactions.

Neoliberal and neoconservative policymakers repackaged the biological inclination to care for one's kin into a duty, thereby relieving the state of said duty. Milton Friedman, a key figure in the development and circulation of neoliberal economic policy, argued that the state should facilitate the familial transmission of property because not only does the bequeathment of wealth allow citizens to exercise altruistic love for their kin, it also aligns with wider notion of the self-sufficient family. Legitimizing the self-sustaining family unit has a practical benefit, too, namely that the financial and affective burdens of its constituent members remain private. Via some circular logic, then, kinship relations have become both the reason for and solution to contemporary, austere economic policies: by naming them as the proper source of economic and affective security, neoliberal governments could justify cuts to public infrastructure, which in turn forces citizens to seek shelter in the family, a structure that is itself fraught with contingency. The official neoliberal economy has come to fully depend on noneconomic background conditions, and analogously, the neoliberal individual, on the family.

The cultural and economic centrality of the family has likewise been revived in Britain; Davies reports in his piece "Against Responsibility," a review of Cooper's *Family Values*, that

> under the intense financial pressures of the post-2008 era, the family – once the seedbed for the Thatcherite ideologies of aspiration, independence and ownership, not least through the device of selling off council houses – has become the social security provider of last resort, a fallback when work and state benefits aren't adequate or available.

Rather than helping "hard-working families" "get on" as the Blair, Brown, and Cameron governments all repeatedly claimed to do, New Labour and Conservative parties are doing away with the effort altogether, becoming increasingly unwilling to offer welfare allowances to effectively lift all working class people out of poverty (Davies "Against"). Concurring with Cooper, Davies writes that austerity measures are "made on the basis of tacit assumptions about social support and care and where they ought to come from, if not from the state, […] forcing people to conform to norms that make things worse for them" ("Against"). As in the United States, the social repercussions of leaning so heavily on the family in the United Kingdom include: long-term dependency on "the bank of mum and dad"; an attitude of gatekeeping and hoarding that protects the elite; continued damage to the illusion of meritocracy; and the

intensified fetishization of home ownership which has only escalated housing prices, making acquisition even less feasible for young adults (Davies "Against"). The necessity of maintaining some financial and affective tether to one's kin is no longer unique to women, the sick, the elderly, and the disabled; the precarity of late-stage neoliberalism has left most able-bodied, middle- and even upper-middle class fiending for familial support.

Throughout Cusk's trilogy, the reverberations of a failing socioeconomic system are everywhere felt and managed, underscored by the nondescript, liminal spaces in which the trilogy is set, namely planes, parks, hotels, writing retreats, classrooms, a boat, a mountainside inn, and an unnamed city in Europe. The neoliberal impetus to do more and do better despite the feeling that "[e]verything has been used up" has resulted in emotional and cultural burnout (Cusk *Kudos* 173). The pub is "a refurbished allusion to its own non-existent history," Gerard rues in *Transit* (Cusk 27); in *Kudos,* Faye attends a few interviews in a hotel lobby wallpapered with photographs of worn leather spines, a cheap homage to the bookstore that was razed during the area's redevelopment (Cusk 175). This atrophying sociopolitical landscape foments what Faye describes as "a strange ache almost of homesickness" (Cusk *Outline* 177). Cusk's characters seek purpose, companionship, and solace in the family central to which are the figures of a husband, a wife, and a child under one roof. "So happy, so complete," Faye's friend Paniotis smiles wistfully, "how things ought to be" (Cusk *Outline* 92). Aligning individual lives with normative narrative lines of progress and community, absorbing the distractions, disruptions, and discrepancies of quotidian life as though they were simply moments of drama that add intrigue to an otherwise happy story, the family allows Paniotis and his wife to "look[] at the world through a long lens of preconception" such that the distance between them and an ever more promising future constitutes a kind of buffer against the present stress of living (Cusk *Outline* 119). Whereas Cooper focuses on the economic function of the family, the *Outline* trilogy offers a closer look at the affective and imaginary dimensions of the heteronormative template. A performative feat that reifies and standardizes its own conventions as they are being lived out by citizens who accept them by default, the time-honoured narrative of happy family life "[is] the basis of your faith," Ryan muses (Cusk *Outline* 45).

As Brown criticizes in *Undoing the Demos* and Cooper recapitulates in *Family Values*, however, this designation of the family as the sole source of affective support has intensified gender inequality. Brown dissects Thatcher's infamous declaration: "There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women… and their families" (qtd. *Undoing* 100). The ellipsis symbolizes a "routine neoliberal stumble" over the individual and the nuclear family, the very same point of disavowal that Milton Friedman also made decades earlier, when

he variously called each "[t]he ultimate operative unit" (Brown *Undoing* 104, 100). In conflating neoliberalism's basic unit of analysis – the family – and the "unavowed glue" that keeps those units running, citizens risk dismissing the family "as a backdrop, as a possession, or as an extension of the individual" (Brown *Undoing* 101). Logically, Brown asks, "is the family something that [one] 'has' or 'is'?" (*Undoing* 101-102). The answer, her third chapter suggests, depends on the gender of the citizen in question. Men have always dominated the public realm of the market, crossing freely between home and the *polis*, whereas women have always been relegated to the domestic sphere where they carry out the affective labour necessary to keep society afloat (Brown *Undoing* 101). Since Aristotelian times, wives and mothers comprise the majority of the "invisible infrastructure for all developing, mature, and worn-out human capital," birthing and socializing the young, minding the elderly, maintaining the household, forging connections, and preserving shared meanings and values that undergird social cooperation (Brown *Undoing* 105). The solution to neoliberal self-interest and individualism is a simple, time-tested one: appoint those who have historically played caregiver to sustain familial and social order. "Only performatively male members of a gendered sexual division of labor can even pretend to the kind of autonomy this subject requires," while the care work of women is elided even as it is assumed (Brown *Undoing* 103). The neoliberal conflation of the individual and the family is an act of erasure, ontologizing sexual and gender difference.

In "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode," Fraser focuses on the erasure of women, which, unlike the now familiar notion that capitalist accumulation relies on exploitation, has gone comparatively neglected. She guides her readers through an epistemic shift, inviting them to "look behind [Marx's] front story," to question the "overt violence and outright theft" of feminized care work the way that the "sublimated coercion of wage labour" has been critiqued countless times already (Fraser "Behind" 72, 61). Like Brown, Fraser concludes that social-reproductive activities are absolutely necessary to the existence of waged work and, by extension, the accumulation of surplus value that is the heart of capitalism, yet these "background conditions of possibility" are given no recognition, much less reward ("Behind" 57). The fact that affective labour is accorded no monetary value in a world where money serves as a benchmark of importance only further solidifies the essentialist subordination of women to their cash-earning male peers. Even if they manage to take up waged labour, assuming both roles *femina domestica* and *homo oeconomicus* oftentimes under the aegis of feminist empowerment, women earn significantly less than their male equivalents and are noticeably underrepresented in upper management owing to the fact that they are encumbered

by time-consuming, uncompensated care responsibilities (Brown *Undoing* 106). Capitalism institutionalizes the historical division between its "(non-human) 'natural' background" and its "(apparently non-natural) 'human' foreground" (Fraser "Behind" 67). No amount of individualism, entrepreneurialism, or equal opportunity schemes can disrupt the "non-accidental, structural imbrication" of continued patriarchal domination with contemporary strains on care (Fraser "Behind" 86).

Although *Undoing the Demos* offers a brilliant examination of neoliberal responsibilization and an equally detailed analysis of the essentializing discourse that continues to affix women to unremunerated carework, neither it nor Fraser's article brings both lines of reasoning together in what could be an even more productive discussion of gender oppression. The biological essentialism that consigns women to the supplementary role of *femina domestica* is widely critiqued and deeply engrained in, for example, the aforementioned welfare reform and poor law tradition which, Cooper argues, problematically reinforced the idea that women "stand to gain for personal *dependence* on a man and [men] benefit from assuming personal responsibility for the welfare of mothers and children" (*Family* 107; emphasis added). But as powerful and as internalized as that essentializing narrative is, it cannot fully explain why women are still charged with care work or how – more to the point – the gender-egalitarian, laissez-faire image of neoliberalism makes the subordination of women look voluntary. Only by interrogating gender oppression alongside Brown's analysis of responsibilization can we begin to untangle the convenient if contradictory impulse amongst *femina domestica* to provide care. The system of incentivization and penalization that has since the 1970s motivated citizens to accept an oppressive economic regime is the same disciplinary system that has instilled in women a sense of obligation to their traditional function. In short, the gendering of *femina domestica* persists due to not only centuries of expectation but also the more recent neoliberal production of compulsive, resilient, "morally burdened agents" (Brown *Undoing* 134).

The *Outline* trilogy captures the reality that women are still disproportionately charged with the provision of unrequited, uncompensated care despite superficial advancements towards gender equality. Women "encompass all the mundanities of domestic routine" by necessity, perceived to be naturally privy to "a different kind of life," one based on intangible, affective labour that their male counterparts need "never pa[y] any heed to" (Cusk *Outline* 165). Throughout the trilogy, on both the representational level as well as in its formal aesthetics, female characters embody decency, empathy, honesty, virtue, self-sacrifice, and thrift – qualities that go neglected. In each of the three novels, Faye encounters at least one

male character who both values and loathes his partner or ex-partner. In *Outline*, it is the Greek man who recalls the austerity of his third wife; in *Transit*, it is Lawrence who found his first wife's reliable and reassuring presence "relatively worthless" by nature of its limitless supply (Cusk 239); in *Kudos*, finally, it is the businessman in the opening scene whose tone rings with a certain, ongoing annoyance at how his wife "ran things" at home (Cusk 30).

The story of Penelope in *Outline* exposes the biological essentialism that works to saddle women with social reproduction. Penelope ruminates on the family dog Mimi to whom she was constantly bound be it literally, by a leash, or metaphorically, tethered to the immanent, domestic duties the animal came to symbolize. After the novelty of having a pet wore off, Penelope's children grew annoyed with it, irritated by the barking and hovering and pacing, which they likened to their mother's nagging. Not only, then, was Penelope expected to take responsibility for the petulant children's choice of a pet, she was also reduced, in their eyes, to the status of an animal by virtue of that responsibility. Even though Penelope has come to accept her preassigned role of *femina domestica* – her resignation is signalled through words like "had to" and "usually" – a silent torment nonetheless brews within, aggravated by the fact that she cannot of confide in those who "ask[] you to attend to them while remaining oblivious to what was inside you" (Cusk *Outline* 214, 212, 218).

The story of Eloise in *Transit*, meanwhile, reflects the neoliberal responsibilization that instills in women a compulsive attachment to the depleting role of *femina domestica*. Over the course of only two pages, Eloise insists twice on her inability to step away from domestic life even though it is so taxing that she has developed a habit of consoling herself. At the prospect of commiseration, Eloise grows oddly "excited[]," as though she has learned to take joy from, find pride in, or simply laugh away her burnout (Cusk *Transit* 240). Her behaviour is congruent with other women across the trilogy who tire of the supplementary role accorded to their gender yet perform it anyways, supervising their wayward male colleagues and pandering to sons while "rolling [their] eyes" and giving other women "complicit smiles" (Cusk *Kudos* 186, 188). Duty-bound to care for her children, she is actively *over*compensating for her ex-husband's shortcomings by gifting their sons extra Christmas presents on his behalf. When chided by her current partner Lawrence for overindulging the children, Eloise replies, "I just want them to be happy" (Cusk *Transit* 258, 259). "We've just got to love them," she whimpers behind a valiant, "grimacing" smile, her eyes brilliant with tears while her head remains lifted (Cusk *Transit* 232, 259). Eloise's composure can be read as an attempt to assert some agency, as though she chooses to supply the "self-abnegati[ng]" love that both of her husbands undervalue (Cusk *Transit* 232). But it is clear that Eloise's dignified façade is just one of many brave faces

commonplace in the neoliberal present, worn by citizens who honour their obligations under psychopolitical duress. Together, Penelope and Eloise's hardships make clear that contemporary *femina domestica* are subject to two separate yet mutually compounding narratives of expropriation: gender essentialism on the one hand, neoliberal responsibilization on the other.

Implicit in the trilogy is a common grievance amongst female characters: if, as Faye's colleague Sophia observes, behind every man and every child is a mother or a woman who has been assigned the part of mother, then who or what is behind the women? The answer seems to be, chillingly, that there is no such support. At best, affective labour is divided equally, at least supposedly, between partners, which seems to be the case for Irish novelist Ryan, an unnamed Welsh novelist, and their respective spouses. Ryan boasts of the "good partnership" he has with his wife, sharing childcare and housework (Cusk *Outline* 46). She is "no martyr," he assures Faye; in fact, she even has the time and energy to set up a charity to help other families that, like theirs, have autistic children (Cusk *Outline* 46). Ryan is such an ardent believer in marriage – "the best model for living," he proclaims, "at least, no one's been able to come up with a better one" – that he has transposed its dynamics onto his working relationship with Sara, the co-author of their bestseller, a project he playfully calls his "offspring" (Cusk *Kudos* 120). While Sara and Ryan share in the work of their manuscript, it is ultimately the woman who stays in Galway with her children, chaperoning them around in a Range Rover which she purchased with some of the book's proceeds, and the man who jets off to various international conferences. The Welsh writer similarly defends the marriage contract, arguing somewhat indignantly that his wife, a full-time mother, is glad to "help him find the time he needed to work" (Cusk *Kudos* 157). Like Ryan's partner, she, too, has found a way to extend her domestic concerns into the public, professional realm, namely by penning a surprise hit of a children's book the material for which flowed organically from years of fabricating bedtime stories. For all their cultural and charitable contributions, the "work wife" and the actual wives are still firmly embedded in their domestic, caregiving routines. The women mentioned here are spoken for in the most literal sense, absented even as they are interpellated.

Perhaps the best example of what Pieter Vermeulen in his discussion of economic, affective, and aesthetic austerity describes as the "self-effacing yet enabling role" of women lies in the novel's formal aesthetics (88). As principal narrator, Faye facilitates conversations, amasses insights, and relays them to the reader. "The work of converting other people's words into literary discourse […] brings neither intimacy nor joy," Vermeulen notes, but is, rather, driven by compulsion (89). The process of relating and relating *with* the stories is a taxing and

thankless one. The onslaught of self-absorbed stories is relentless, underscored by the integration of her voice with that of other characters: the prose picks up momentum as the direct speech of the interlocutor shifts to "indirect speech marked by 'he said' or 'he continued' before finally morphing into unmarked free indirect discourse which robs the narrator of both breathing room and individuality (Vermeulen 89). The elimination of chapter numbers in the second and third novels of the trilogy is doubly significant, emphasizing, firstly, the punishing pace at which Faye is steamrolled, and suggesting, secondly, a sense of disorientation that attends the spiritual misery at present. The affective labour required of Faye not only takes a depleting toll but also, as I shall now argue, goes underappreciated by characters and readers alike.

While the channelling of stories through a singular protagonist should logically make one's position more prominent, the opposite is true in the case of the trilogy's protagonist. Very little is divulged about her, and what *is* available must be cobbled together through the conversations she mediates, monologues so long and dense that they are almost satirical in comparison to her threadbare presence. Indeed, the protagonist's invisibility goes overlooked until her name is finally revealed towards the end of *Outline* – a moment in which the reader remembers that Faye is not simply a conduit and would have, in more conventional autofictional tales, been at the forefront instead. She is the glue of the trilogy, disseminating the subjectivities of other characters to her wide readership while remaining formless herself. The enabling role Faye undertakes has a gendered dimension: like Sophia, a feminist writer better known for her work as a translator who "enabled several […] writers – nearly all of them men – to become more internationally recognized than she was herself," Faye finds that her success as a narrator is also her erasure (Cusk *Kudos* 132).

Yet this erasure can also be read as, Mary Holland proposes, contra critics Kate Kellaway and Alexandra Schwartz who describe the "annihilated perspective" in the passive voice, a pitfall of a narrator who appears to have "renounced all personal agency and narrative authority," a feminist revelation (59). Cusk's fictional and autobiographical projects have always excelled in their depiction of modern, mundane femininity which emplaces her squarely within the tradition of consciousness-raising novel-writing[15] – shining examples include many of her earlier, family-focused texts, namely *The Lucky Ones*, *Arlington Park*, *A Life's Work*, and *Aftermath* – but despite resurgent interest in women's life writing this past decade, especially

[15] Cusk's work has strong formal and thematic links both low-brow chick-lit and high/er-brow women's writing, like that of Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin, Sheila Heti, Chris Kraus, and Maggie Nelson.

following the 2017 #MeToo movement, the revival of the personal has not prompted a renaissance of feminist politics.[16] That is, Holland argues, until the *Outline* trilogy, "a bold intervention in contemporary realism" featuring an "unprecedented kind of first-person [free indirect discourse]," was published (58).

Maintaining distance from the experiences she is compulsively relays and contemplates while still retaining her commitment as omniscient narrator to communicating the innermost lives of other characters, Faye operates from a "displaced perspective [that] refuses to use any singular point of view to control the vision of another or the story" (Holland 61). In so doing, Holland lauds, Faye constructs storytelling as a collaborative by readers and narrators alike, and she demonstrates the power of listening, of taking pause. For Holland, Faye's erasure is a disruptive act – a refusal to replicate "the patriarchal traditions that define the form of the novel" and, by extension, therefore, a refusal of the social forms that "make us 'behave'" (73). By developing a displaced first-person framework which allows her to inhabit "the negative spaces of what the men – and, by extension, the culture at large – are not, don't ask, and don't value," Faye is able to unveil a "truth of the self" usually overshadowed by the singular subjectivity of the narrator and other generic-ideological conventions (Holland 63).[17] Whereas my analysis of the trilogy's elision of its protagonist does not find silence to be intentionally disruptive a formal innovation, I do agree with the fundaments of Holland's thesis: the novels make visible existing forms of power that bracket on a textual level as well as on a sociocultural one the lives of contemporary women and their expression thereof. Be it a matter of rejecting the patriarchal dictates of what constitutes a voice (in the case of Holland's argument) or a matter of losing one's voice amidst obeying prescribed gender roles (in the case of my thesis which builds on Vermeulen's), the *Outline* trilogy pushes its reader to perform the difficult interpretive work about gender and power that Faye herself – that women, more broadly speaking – undertakes.

The representational content and aesthetics expression examined in this section has not only illustrated the routine absenting of women which can be traced to essentializing narratives of biological difference, but also lent crucial nuance to the "administered condition of being responsibilized" (Brown *Undoing* 133). Although this disciplinary condition affects *all*

[16] If anything, confessional writing is more likely now to be slated as "navel-gazing introspection rather than life-changing analysis and interrogation" (Genz and Brabon 131).

[17] Holland notes that Faye's relative silence, though a mark of gendered violence, can still be read as a conscious, political statement thanks to her class privilege. By contrast, Holland concedes, for Paula, Faye's working-class neighbour in *Transit* whose dismissal and disempowerment as a woman is aggravated by socioeconomic disadvantage, to adopt a stance of passivity and impassivity – willful or otherwise – would go unnoticed.

neoliberal citizens, it doubly penalizes women insofar as it compels them to provide the very protections that neoliberalism eradicates – protections that they both *require* and *are* (Brown *Undoing* 106). Whereas for *homo oeconomicus* self-interest begins and ends with himself, for *femina domestica*, self-interest necessarily encompasses the wellbeing of her family, a basic, functional unit of society whose members fall under a singular breadwinner and are therefore elided. "Symbolically and subjectively foundational to the family in a way that most men […] are not," women remain disproportionately responsible for the sociocultural processes that sustain a barely inhabitable world, yet they are entirely taken for granted (Cooper "Family Matters"). And it is precisely on the grounds of Cusk's formal innovations in the *Outline* trilogy which mirror the position of women in the contemporary present – essential yet effaced – that the novels were selected as part of the archive. Having discussed the relegation of women to background conditions in the context of both political theory and literature, I now turn to Lauren Berlant to understand why neoliberal citizens – those charged with affective responsibilities in particular – "stay attached to lives that don't work" ("Depressive" 2). Treating the fictionalized experiences of select female characters as case studies, I argue that women yield to a narrowly defined kind of life not because they have any illusions about happy families or reciprocal partnerships but because they know that the only possibility of survival is through compromise.

III. Cruel Optimism, Compromise, and Conformity

Building on Foucault and Butler, who reasoned that through performative naturalization, certain patterns of living have come to eclipse other, less socially intelligible forms of life, Berlant reads our investment in fantasies of normative belonging as an expression of the desire for unconflicted personhood – the desire, put simply, to fit in with the majority. Central to Berlant's interest are moments in which these fantasies clash with actual conditions of living, but rather than resorting to utopian idealization Berlant stays with the feeling of stuckness that plague its citizens. Their most influential work *Cruel Optimism* focuses on the slow decline of America, mapping attachments to the good life, the fantasy of which is premised on solid relations of intimacy, home ownership, and a financially viable job. Economic austerity and social malaise have rendered the good life unattainable, yet the fantasy thereof prevails, celebrated in popular media which has been selling it as a "domesticating package" since the post-war era (Berlant "Intimate Publics" 183). The fantasy's animating potency lulls citizens into ever more compromised conditions of possibility, simultaneously contributing to their present attrition while distracting therefrom, "allow[ing] the flirtation with some […]

sweetness" – just enough to warrant living on (Berlant ""Depressive" 3). Citizens invest – have little choice but to invest – their hope in this life-organizing fantasy, hence its optimistic charge. Berlant clarifies that attachments do not necessarily feel optimistic. Rather, the phenomenon wherein a subject is drawn repeatedly back to the scene of potentialities – the potentiality for some comfort, for instance – is characterized by optimism (Berlant *Cruel* 24). In short, citizens are trapped in relations of cruel optimism with the good life fantasy, an object of desire that at present cannot be realized yet – crucially – still offers temporary, anesthetizing comfort to sustain their attraction to what cruelly wears them out.

William Davies' article "The Political Economy of Unhappiness" exposes relations of cruel optimism to be intrinsic to the neuro-psycho-economic fabric of neoliberal societies which calibrate "an optimal balance of happiness and unhappiness amongst its participants" such that they are hungry enough to yearn and work for more but never so deprived nor dejected to reject their government outright (70). The good life fantasy modulates this affective economy of dissatisfaction, bribing insatiable, debt-laden consumers to tolerate "what should be unlivable relations of domination and violence" while working towards a bigger, brighter future (Berlant "Intimacy" 288). A particularly cruel disciplinary tool – cruel because it does not deliver on what it promises – the fantasy dovetails with neoliberalism's responsibilizing governance in that they both, Laermans writes, citing *Cruel Optimism*, "promise that it is doable to combine self-transformation […] and self-determination" (94). Moreover, they both advertise success as something to be "purchased by participation in the everyday economy" (Berlant *Cruel* 171). Injustice, inequality, and other energy-siphoning phenomena are overlooked as inescapable side effects of one's inclusion – however tenuous – in the ostensibly free and fair normative lifeworld (Berlant "True Feeling" 61).

The good life fantasy and neoliberal hegemony overlap most glaringly in the "social pedagogy of the rules for belonging and intelligibility" reified through the image of heterosexual intimacy (Berlant "Intimate Publics" 182). An amalgamation of the couple form, the love plot, and its derivative scenes of domestic bliss, connoting security, property, and therefore wealth, the fantasy functions as a template to which citizens aspire. It binds individual lives to trajectory of the collective and thereby helps citizens navigate surprises, blockages, losses, and banalities in neutralizing ways just as a literary genre prepares the audience for what will come in a given narrative (Berlant "Intimacy" 283).[18] In other words, Berlant's

[18] Berlant conceptualizes genre as "a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take" in her essay "Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness" (2).

affective theorization of the family fortifies Brown and Cooper's observation that it functions as an affective shelter while simultaneously stabilizing its citizens' ambivalence towards a narrowly defined, deceptively punishing kind of life. When the infrastructure of social life starts to change or crumble under pressure, a common – albeit paradoxical – response is to burrow deeper into the good life genre. Initially, only marginalized groups, who for the most part could not imagine for themselves a perfect life complete with cherubic children in picket-fenced suburbia, were skeptical about the principle of meritocracy and prospect of inclusion. That skepticism has since become mainstream, as conditions of ordinary life of even relative wealth have spiralled into conditions of attrition. Cultural conventions with which citizens make sense of the present are also fraying, leaving them more porous and disorganized. Desperate to take up positions of clarity, citizens intensify their ambition, renew their optimism, and sharpen their defence of what according to Cooper is "some imagined prior order of social reproduction, sometimes the nation or the race, sometimes, at a more intimate level, the family" ("Family Matters"). (Re)investment in this ideal, however, is in many ways the very origin of their suffering.

The good life fantasy, which within Cusk's trilogy culminates in the heteronormative ideal, thus evokes a sense of impasse. Change is difficult to instigate for fear that it would cause serious disruption to life, so citizens sooner accept the crisis ordinary's ongoing disappointments. This sensibility, quietist in nature, has a name: heteropessimism, "a mode of feeling […] particularly palpable in the present" that, Ana Seresin discerns, "consists of performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience" ("Heteropessimism"). Men's heteropessimism is manifest in their frustration with the Overly Attached Girlfriend, a familiar archetype of suffocatingly overcommitment and obsessive jealousy; women's, in return, is evident in their professed detachment from men. "Sure, some heteropessimists act on their beliefs, choosing celibacy or the now largely outmoded option of political lesbianism," Seresin concedes, "yet most stick with heterosexuality even as they judge it to be irredeemable" ("Heteropessimism"). Incels are a robust example of the heteropessimism political impoverishment: seething with resentment, they remain attached – involuntarily, they stress – to the object of disappointment (Seresin "Heteropessimism"). Like cynicism, heteropessimism is, to borrow from Lee Edelman, an "anesthetic feeling" that derives from disillusion and pre-empts any "overintensity of feeling" in the future (qtd. "Heteropessimism"). As such, to Seresin's dismay, it presumes that heterosexual culture is necessarily static for to register or encourage any change would be to lose its object of critique and to see its own logic disintegrate.

Heteropessimism therefore "create[s] a renewed investment in the consistency of heterosexuality […] even as this investment takes the disguised form of negative feeling" much like, as aforementioned, citizens return to fantasies of normative belonging even though, arguably, in recent years the good life is no longer unanimously hailed as a symbol of aspiration. In what follows, I turn to the *Outline* trilogy to show that despite efforts to escape the circuitous logic of cruel optimism, despite criticizing heteronormative culture, female characters are still for the most part enmeshed in modes of living predicated on their erasure. Living on in constant state of optimism and deferral, they return to the scene of what once looked like opportunity only to be gradually – often, knowingly – worn out by it.

I begin with the story of Linda, a novelist on a writers' retreat at a luxurious Italian castle who watches a fellow participant abscond the premises, disappearing down the long, winding road with a "light bouncing stride, carrying his small knapsack" (Cusk *Kudos* 47). At first, the reader imagines that Linda's envy for this defector stems from her desire to be free: free to roam the countryside, away from the pretentious dinner conversations made mandatory by her hostess, free of her enormous suitcase – her literal and figurative baggage. As the narrative progresses, however, her motivations to leave become more unclear. Linda wants, in fact, to leave the social decorum of castle life because she aches to be with what over the course of her stay becomes an idealized version of her family. She so misses the putative ease and intimacy associated with domestic life within popular imagination that she itches to help one of the castle maids clear the table as though somehow these chores would "justify [her] existence" (Cusk *Kudos* 52). When Linda calls home, however, the reality of her dreary flat seeps forth. She is suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling of being "trapped" in the same room with a husband and daughter who exclude her, and she remembers how she loathes housekeeping, an immanent, "unimportant" thing that handicaps her creativity (Cusk *Kudos* 51, 52). Although Linda realizes that by succumbing to the temptation of the good life fantasy "she may have missed the opportunity to understand something," and although she grows to enjoy the sojourn in Italy, the desire to "feel like an ordinary woman" nonetheless muffles any impetus to attend more residencies across Europe (Cusk *Kudos* 56, 51). In heteropessimist fashion, she resents her husband's neglect and find his habits "irritating," yet she remains attached to him, dredging up romanticized possibilities of belonging to manage her homesickness (Cusk *Kudos* 53). Penning a piece about the pernicious dynamics within her family unit which reaches the *New Yorker*'s wide readership, she not only participates in the "reinscription of heterosexuality's tired features" but also mines them for capital gain (Seresin "Heteropessmism). Linda's waffling between the trilogy's thematic binaries, namely those between freedom and familiarity,

feminism and family illustrates the difficulty of unhinging from heteronormative lifeworlds, the notion that bridges Berlant's work on cruel optimism and Seresin's on heteropessimism.

As though anticipating the question of complicity and quietism in Berlant and Seresin's theoretical work, Paniotis asks, "how are we ever meant to know, except by existing in a state of absolute pessimism, that once again we are fooling ourselves?" (Cusk *Outline* 95). The instances enumerated below suggest that skepticism and fantasy are not mutually exclusive – one does not blunt the other – but in fact, as the heteropessimist sentiment registers, the two are mutually reinforcing. Cusk's characters see heteronormative dynamics as profoundly adversarial: marriage is described as a "story of war" on two, separate occasions; couples kidnap children from each other as a show of strength; men promulgate misogynistic views, and women hold men in equally low regard, quietly deploring sexist double standards (*Outline* 166). Like Faye's children, though, who were either united by imaginative play or at each other's throats with a ferocity that matched whatever degree of intimacy once suffused their shared trance, men and women "struggle to free themselves from one another" but are ultimately unable to leave one another alone (Cusk *Outline* 82). Faye's penultimate interviewer in *Kudos* complains about the fact that girls are "dealt the losing hand," yet, she observes, they are prepared to accept this injustice by moulding themselves into "perfect," "inoffensive" daughters, pupils, and mothers, thereby giving men licence to be at best complacent or at worst envious, cruel (Cusk *Kudos* 191). In other words, women participate in the making of the tribe to which men belong, one "defined […] through a fear of women combined with an utter dependence on them" (Cusk *Kudos* 135). Sophia confesses, "my husband came very close to killing me […], and […] it was my willingness to be killed that allowed him" (Cusk *Kudos* 163). Amanda and Jane try to steel themselves against but repeatedly "fall[] for the idea of being looked after" only to encounter the same "finicky, disappointing reality": their one, lasting relationship is to an ideal (Cusk *Transit*, 169, 140, 145). Having ascertained her husband's infidelity through his carefree singing in the shower, Marielle is disabused of any remaining faith in their disintegrating marriage yet wants nonetheless to keep it intact, so much so that she blames him – "the idiot" – for hollering so loudly, for depriving her of the happy illusion (Cusk *Outline* 143). Looking down at the breakfast she prepared for herself, she wishes she could have "close[d] her ears" so that she might still have had an appetite for the delicious meal her husband would now find waiting for him (Cusk *Outline* 144). She wishes her husband had been more considerate – more careful to support her "avoidance of certain realities," not necessarily more mindful of his lust (Cusk *Transit* 29). Sometimes unconscious and fanciful but more often wilful and pragmatic, the optimistic attachments enumerated here reveal, to cite

Seresin, a secret investment "to the continuity of the very things we (sincerely) decry as toxic, boring, broken." ("Heteropessimism").

Only a handful of the women who populate the *Outline* trilogy persist in the difficult exercise of autonomy, "always getting up again and always, ultimately alone," risking social death (Cusk *Kudos* 170). Faye's acquaintance Angeliki pens a feminist autofictional novel that rewards her with international travel to market her work, bitterly and fittingly entitled *A Lonely Place*; the aforementioned interviewer in *Kudos*, an accomplished television talk-show hostess, is likewise isolated, confined to spot-lit "island," striving to promote female peers on her platform, while her colleagues cluster beyond the harsh studio lights (Cusk *Kudos* 187). Both Angeliki and the talk-show hostess, moreover, resort to gleaning whatever tenderness they can from several partners to whom they stay rigorously unattached, partners who by virtue of their insignificance make them feel "invisible" and "naked" in return (Cusk *Transit* 172-173). This kind of invisibility is perhaps more disempowering than even a mother's disappearance behind her child for at least in the latter case, the woman in question is guaranteed a modicum of company and "immunity" (Cusk *Transit* 242). In light of the knowledge that the world will simply "snuff out" a childless and solitary woman, the majority thereof voluntarily tether themselves – intuitively, compulsively, tactically, and uneasily – to the roles of mother and wife the importance of which are necessarily inflated such that the "ego has enough sustenance to stay alive" (Cusk *Kudos* 196; *Outline* 111). Survival for a woman is, if not directly dependent on whether she is with a man, then heavily swayed by whether she "accept[s] […] certain male codes of honour" which stipulate leniency towards the fairer, "basically powerless" sex that has strategically "obliterate[s]" itself (Cusk *Transit* 242; *Outline* 111). The onus on women to ingratiate themselves with, placate, or otherwise yield to men signals that the feminist project is far from complete. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the misogyny Felícia suffers at the hands of her ex-husband and, more jarringly, her own mother who lambasts, "look at what all your equality has done for you […] men no longer respect you," (Cusk *Kudos* 221). The latter pits Felícia against her cousin Angela, a twice-divorced woman who lives comfortably off of alimony and continues to treat her children like "assets" (Cusk *Kudos* 221). The trilogy makes clear that stretching life beyond patterns of living that are prescribed by available templates and backed by forms of institutional scaffolding is a costly risk. No wonder, then, that heteronormative fantasies of belonging remain if not an ideal then an object of ongoingness for the vast majority of citizens no matter how compromised they know it to be.

Faye's narrative arc offers insight into why women continue to acquiesce to relations of cruel optimism, returning to patterns of life that they are aware deliver little fulfilment. In what

is one of the trilogy's most evocative extended metaphors, she takes a swim in the Mediterranean, having been invited on a boat ride by the Greek man. At first, Faye so enjoys the latitude and silence of the sea that she must suppress an "impulse to move" further and further out, away from the social obligations that await her on the boat and ashore (Cusk *Outline* 73). Continuing to paddle around and watch a family in the neighbouring vessel execute their naturalized roles like "little clockwork figures rotating on a jewellery box," however, Faye starts to feel "afraid, alone" (Cusk *Outline* 86). The fullness of the family "glittering and flashing in the sun" throws her geographical and affective dislocation in stark relief (Cusk *Outline* 87). Struck by the realization that to follow her self-identified desire for freedom would mean to drown, Faye swims back to the boat, a zone of safety where she can regain footing. Later in *Outline*, Faye recounts a previous visit to Athens which was extended due to a vast ash cloud that grounded all air traffic. She recalls avoiding local contacts during the additional weeks, thrilled by "the feeling of invisibility [that] was too powerful" (Cusk *Outline* 248). Although, here, her tone is wistful, betraying a desire for life autonomous and unseen, seemingly beyond the social responsibilities of a wife, mother, and friend, Faye acknowledges that the dangers of a life lived freely outweighs its joys.

Neoliberalism's story of linear progress has become so customary and its allowance for only market-derived freedoms so narrow that contemporary life must tally with both to be considered bearable. As the trilogy unfolds, Faye herself is increasingly unable to imagine life otherwise; she buckles under the "actual and emotional expense" of life without limitations (Cusk *Outline* 24). Like children who when thrust in an alien situation will "retreat to the rules and regulations of what they have learned to regard as normality," Faye reverts to the good life's conventions, mortgaging a house and entering into a second marriage, hopeful that by trading in some of her freedom, she will "avoid or alleviate […] suffering" (Cusk *Kudos* 202). Although she once protested these conventions, regarded them as the will of people more powerful than she, Faye re-commits herself thereto, and to friends who question her decision to remarry she says, "I hope[] to get the better of those laws […] by living within them" (Cusk *Kudos* 225). The "eerie" insularity of the good life fantasy surfaces most notably in *Transit* when, as evening falls, the windows of the classroom in which Faye teaches creative writing grow opaque, boxing her in with workshopping students intent on "building amongst themselves the familiar structures" to which they are accustomed (Cusk 188). This claustrophobic motif re-emerges over the course of Cusk's three novels, cementing the sense of being boxed into a certain kind of life with people in whom you see your own reflection. Faye's conservative decision-making is alternately discouraged by the property agent, who

believes in looking beyond London – broadening one's horizons, so to speak – and commended by a supercilious interviewer in *Kudos* who thinks imagination has run rampant in a world that can no longer afford to indulge it. This divergence in opinion, together with Faye's ambivalence towards existing fantasies of belonging, testifies to a society marred by "exhausted possibilities," stuck between utopianism and cynicism (Cusk *Transit* 4). "I [am] doing my best," she repeats reassuringly to her children, cognizant that any viable life will only ever be a "good imitation" (Cusk *Kudos* 203). Faye takes a moment to appreciate the "paternalistic" aura of the Zeus-like face moulded into the white plaster above the front door, which concretizes the "structural, determinative" reality of the house (Cusk *Transit* 57). She can now be found at "the usual number, the usual address"; she can, in theory, graft her reinvigorated sense of belonging onto a designated space, though it is unclear whether Faye fully settles down again – the house is only ever depicted in various stages of renovation (Cusk *Outline* 12, 24). Forced to choose either a feminist, autonomous life stripped of all protections or the heteronormative template of belonging, which vaguely promises community and coherence, she adopts the latter.

If this analysis of Cusk's trilogy seems to vacillate between self-will and "the virtues of passivity" it does so only as a reflection of the individual narrative threads which follow a logic of eternal recurrence themselves (Cusk *Outline* 170). Caught in a lifelong game of fort/da with the idea of generic belonging, agitated by the loss of the desired object yet periodically producing their distress anew, characters become increasingly distressed and eventually empty yet no less optimistic. Perhaps, Faye ruminates, the problem is our inability to find "magic" or "delight" without suffering for it (Cusk *Outline* 18). Indeed, one of Faye's contractors in *Transit*, a Polish man who is woefully "homestuck," catches himself watching the thing that pains him the most: unions between travellers and loved ones at the airport arrival gate where he once worked. "It was addictive," Tony remembers, still wistful (Cusk 183). While all the characters of the *Outline* trilogy are, to use Berlant's words, "stuck in the impasse of the present," holding onto exhausting yet pacifying routines, the female characters are in a particularly difficult bind: they are, on the one hand, compelled to the responsibilities of *femina domestica* and necessarily accept the politically invisible gender subordination that accompanies this role or, on the other, forced to surrender what few comforts such a template of life promises should they withdraw from the binarized system altogether (*Cruel* 210).

IV. Conclusion

The *Outline* trilogy prompts its reader to ask whether the survival scenarios to which we attach are the very root of our suffering, yet, as I have shown, it equally reflects the lived reality that

any attempt at leaving those normative conventions behind are difficult to imagine. The stubbornness with which dejected citizens-subjects hold onto illusions of comfort and security stems from a feeling of defeat that they no longer know how to acknowledge or redress. Indeed, the very progression of the novels' titles corroborates the tenacity of the good life genre: a desire "to find a different way of living in the world" blossoms in *Outline* only to be quelled in *Transit* when Faye shifts back to the old routines and traditions of the family myth, a process that occasions congratulations in *Kudos*, however half-hearted (Cusk *Outline* 171). The structure of the trilogy seems to imitate Faye's circular path around the disorienting hotel in *Kudos*, a repurposed water tower that she feels has sent her "in search of things [she] had been right next to in the first place" (Cusk 34).

This chapter began with an overview of neoliberalism that is heavily indebted to Brown's work on neoliberal precaritization, optimization, and responsibilization. For the last half-century, neoliberal governments have gradually downsized care structures while instilling in citizens an insatiable appetite for capital enhancement and monopolizing the language of emancipation to that end. For the great majority of citizens, however, the frantic hoarding of money, knowledge, and pleasure fails to stave off emotional distress and financial trouble. Amidst the slow violence of the historical present, the family has emerged as a stabilizing form. It functions, Cooper reveals, as intended by the neoliberals and neoconservatives behind its relegitimization: a naturalized site of care and debt or wealth transfer. Moreover, the family serves as a symbol of the good life fantasy: a promise of upward mobility, security, and reciprocal intimacy rendered empty by neoliberal austerity. The "continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living," writes Berlant, conferring a sense of meaningfulness, chronology, and progression (*Cruel* 24). In short, the family is an icon of (hetero)normativity, which works to align its aspirants' expectations and conduct with hegemonic conventions.

While neoliberal citizens are compulsively attached to fantasies that neoliberal deregulation has made unattainable, it is women, in particular, who are doubly disaffected by the vague promise of belonging. Women are still disproportionately expected to supply the unrequited, uncompensated affective labour that underpins the wellbeing of the family – the basic, functional unit of neoliberal economies and an emblem of the fantasy that motivates survival. My analysis of multiple female characters in Cusk's autofictional *Outline* trilogy attests, firstly, to the suturing of femininity with domesticity in such a way that the family form obscures the individuality of its caretakers. Secondly, it reveals that the often voluntary subordination of contemporary women to the role of *femina domestica* is driven by essentialism,

responsibilization, and a desire for belonging. Finally, registering the heteropessimism that has slowly percolated through the contemporary present, it concludes that a great majority of women cannot bear to relinquish their attachments to the good life fantasy, preferring the (self-)effacing labour it the demands to the unintelligibility of life without heteronormativity's predictable structures.

Cusk's characters, for whom social membership feels, by turns, like suffocation and obligation, promising but never delivering the holding feeling of home, are gripped by a sense of resignation, the affective mode of the historical present. Although a few, poignant instances of unscripted joy, spontaneous conversations, and improvised companionships flower throughout the trilogy, Cusk's characters exist for the most part as atomized, disaffected individuals: confined to their respective chapters, drifting in liminal paces, rarely interacting in groups larger than three, and re-entrenching themselves – often knowingly – in normative plots that ultimately thwart their fulfilment. The performative posturing and the complaints tinged with feminist indignation seem progressive but achieve little in the way of individual emancipation let alone collective action – a stalemate into which Chapter 2 delves. Cusk's *Outline* trilogy leaves unresolved the feasibility of finding configurations of life that do not simply reproduce old patterns for *all* its characters, bespeaking the challenges that afflict neoliberal citizens.

Bad Feelings: Retreat, Resistance, and Repetition in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Continuing to interrogate the incongruous ways in which women of the contemporary present exercise their agency, this second chapter turns to the figure of the sick young woman: her self-laceration; her nebulous, invisible pain; her pathologization; the wilfulness of her will-lessness. I examine Ottessa Moshfegh's unnamed antiheroine in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, attending to the question of what survival looks like for women who – no matter how outwardly privileged – are inadequately equipped to protect themselves, let alone thrive. Young women oscillate between freedom they are told they must seize and the "requirement of feminine coherence" that is achieved only through the proper self-disciplining of unruly bodies and emotions (McRobbie 120). Guided by Lauren Berlant's notion of an intimate public, I begin by examining the ways in which young women try to secure conditions of generic belonging even if achieving the look and feel of normativity means remaining in or even exacerbating their vague yet ubiquitous psychic pain. Although, the novel's nameless protagonist appears to have a strong misanthropic streak, preferring solitude to the contrived yet nonetheless comforting camaraderie congealed by women's culture, I argue that her drug-fuelled hiatus from society is ultimately driven by a desire for affective belonging – the very desire the protagonist's best friend Reva exhibits without shame. Whether displaying an intense suspicion towards aspirational normativity or pursuing it with some earnest, both young women recognize the necessity of achieving an impersonal in-syncness with others, and both make clear Berlant's claim that "feminine undoing [i]s a condition of normative feminine competence" (*Complaint* 18).

The chapter then pivots from the characters' ambivalent feelings about conventional femininity to the reader's ambivalent responses towards wounded womanhood, situating both expressions of pain and reactions thereto within a wider culture that hesitates between, on the one hand, glamourizing and commodifying pain, and, on the other, neglecting and demonizing it. The protagonist's drug-induced hibernation project, simultaneously a feat of escapism and a cry for attention, catalyses conflicting understandings of female pain, feminist politics, and the messy business of compromise. Incorporating Susan Sontag's observations, I first trace readerly disdain for the protagonist's purposeful purposelessness to the neoliberal abjection of inaction and weakness. But even as readers acknowledge the protagonist to be a sovereign individual, actively and meticulously occupying passivity, many are still repulsed by her choices – a sentiment I probe in dialogue with scholar-activists Johanna Hedva and Lauren Fournier's respective work on Sick Woman and Sad Girl Theory. The protagonist makes

choices that only someone with her financial and racial privilege can afford; for citizens without comparable advantages, indulging in the same escapist feats, the same failures, would mean social and actual death. Moving towards a reparative reading of what Leslie Jamison describes as wounded womanhood, however, this section closes by challenging the necessity of pain to be morally palatable, aesthetically executed, or conceptually rigorous in order to matter.

To parse the aetiology of bad feelings, like the self-loathing of Moshfegh's characters, I turn to the work of Angela McRobbie and Ann Cvetkovich. The former posits that loss of feminist ideals is experienced melancholically by girls whose sense of rebellion, having no explicit object, is rechannelled as self-violence. The latter insists that minor traumas must be seen as on par with larger ones – larger, meaning both systemic and momentous. Together, these psychoanalytic and Marxist-materialist insights inform my argument that without an understanding of both illness and feminism as phenomena that necessarily reach beyond the individual, any effort to transform bad feelings into good ones will remain within the privatized, individualistic matrix of late capitalism. For the novel's antiheroine and her friend, non-suicidal self-injury is not only a symptom of generalized malaise, but also the means by which they try to overcome it. In other words, the respective drug-induced semicoma and bulimic behaviour are instances of self-management, which, much like prosthetics, enable the reconstitution of the subject such that she can remain attached to an unchanged environment where normativity is utopia par excellence. The protagonist's hibernation project is a culmination of "human creativity, energy, and agency […] all bound up in bargaining," strategizing for belonging in late capitalism's self-optimizing tenets (Berlant *Cruel* 41). Narrowly focused on one young woman's solitary, solipsistic quest, the novel reproduces the deeply calculating and atomized postfeminist culture it strives to satirize. But it is, I argue, through this satirization that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* crystallizes a fundamental obstacle of our contemporary political impasse: the priority continues to be on the viability of individual life rather than the prospect of collective, lasting belonging. Feminism's oldest adage, *the personal is political*, has splintered such that the personal is severed from the political.

I. The Imperative and Reward of Generic Femininity

My Year of Rest and Relaxation opens with a detailed portrait of the protagonist's friend Reva, a gauche and avaricious young woman who regularly travels downtown for knockoff merchandise; cycles through endless fad diets supplemented by a trusty binge-purge regimen; logs her daily caloric intake; and punishes herself on the StairMaster. Any desire to break from

these depleting processes is quelled by her obsession with the slim body and the normative femininity it symbolizes. This ideal is but one of many avenues that promises entry to what Berlant designates in *The Female Complaint* as "women's culture," a women-specific market-mediated affective space in which participants feel connected by various, predominantly textual artifacts that express commonality among them, thereby reifying a sense of emotional continuity between said bloc of consumers (10-11). In recent decades, loosely organized intimate publics have assumed an increasingly central role, compensating for the domain of the political proper which has fallen steadily short of providing for its citizens and inspiring felt belonging. Despite its ostensible diversity and accessibility, this semi-public sphere is in fact quite a carefully self-regulated, homogeneous community. Moreover, behind the "solidaristic activity" it advertises lies "sweetly motivated" yet ultimately coercive instances of white universalist materialism which "busily exoticiz[es] and diminish[es] the inconvenient and the noncompliant" (Berlant *Complaint* 6). But for individuals who have historically been deemed "puny," the allure of "be[ing] somebody in a world where the default is being nobody or, worse, being presumptively all wrong" is enough to mute all misgivings about the codes and hierarchies which thread through this holding environment (Berlant *Complaint* 3). As one such individual, Reva readily invests time, effort, and money into a relationality based on governance and mimicry.

The whittling of herself into the bodily ideal is the most visible way in which Reva secures subjective – and physical – likeness. Other strategies include staying up to date on the fashion trends, celebrity gossip, and soap operas; consulting self-help platforms; and parroting Oprah's pithy truisms. Through her "insider knowledge," Reva is pooled together with other women equally in need of and responsible for sustaining the "vernacular sense of belonging" (Berlant *Complaint* 20, 10). In fact, the very premise of *The Oprah Show* is to offer virtual intimacy to its viewership, a community of atomized individuals yearning for the same emotional clarity, hope, and anchoring force.[19] Dispensing unsolicited "life wisdom" culled from popular culture with the good intentionality that saturates compassion-laden normative femininity, Reva is, moreover, able to feel like not only an active agent in her own life, but also an active participant in the cult of successful womanhood (Moshfegh 13). In other words, diminishing herself into an unoriginal prototype of womanhood enables her to live "in

[19] Having witnessed four presidencies, played an influential part in the inauguration of a fifth, shepherded a grieving, post-9/11 America through two wars, and a financial recession, the programme has cemented its place in the national imaginary as the pinnacle of the "affective being-in-common" that Reva craves (Berlant "Affect in the End Times" 77-78).

proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition," perpetuating the "soft supremacy" of an anonymizing, elitist identity to which she feels smugly privy (Berlant *Complaint* 10, 6). The misguided attempts at securing mutuality through shallow, consumerist pleasures is evident, moreover, in her frequenting gay bars as well as her participation in Christian festivities, scenarios in which she manufactures, largely by herself, a feeling of kinship as a straight, Jewish outsider. Reva's desire to be part of a collectivity – any collectivity – populated by strangers who are literate in each other's disarticulated experience of power, pleasure, desire, and discontent outweighs the sense of unbelonging that plagues her attempts at realizing it.

Already obscured by the seductive illusion of female empowerment it promises, the painful cost of membership to postfeminist culture is further concealed by a conscious "shift away from wounded affect," Jamison observes in "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain." Young women, such as the two portrayed in *Rest and Relaxation*, assume strict custodianship of not only their physical look but also their emotional lives, preempting accusations of self-pity that would undermine the hard-won title Strong, Independent Woman. When jealousy, competition, and anxiety suffocate Reva, she raids Manhattan's bodegas for cheap, processed food to binge and regurgitate. This ability to ingest and expel food on command – to defy the body's cues – restores the control that she as a supposedly liberated young woman believes she has. Through this private, mechanical ritual, she maintains not only her dress size but also that distractingly "cheerful," "giggl[y]" façade for a little while longer (Moshfegh 7). Psychic pain is located in and managed through the hurting body. Typifying the "post-wounded" subjectivity Jamison theorizes, Reva does not once acknowledge her bulimia; no matter, not even Lysol can mask the "lingering stink of her sadness" (Moshfegh 109). Wary of melodrama, young women try to "stay numb and clever instead," Jamison observes in tune with McRobbie who expresses frustration with the use of irony as a mechanism of deflection. However, even as she utters, "fuck them" and "let them all go bald and burn in hell" about her colleagues who treat her like an intern, Reva still "tr[ies] to be everybody's favorite" (Moshfegh 8, 129). Even though she dreams of different conditions, and even though she drones on in "what-ifs, the seemingly endless descriptions of her delusional romantic projections," Reva does everything to keep her lifeworld intact, making "pacts" with her friend the protagonist to brunch regularly, stroll through Central Park together, and chat over the phone daily (Moshfegh 238). Met with indifference and insults, instead of "embolden[ing]" herself to seek fairer relations of reciprocity, she becomes even more keen:

> "We probably shouldn't be friends," [the protagonist] told her […]
> Reva called half an hour later and left a voice mail saying she'd already forgiven me for hurting her feelings. (Moshfegh 15, 17)

Similarly cast to the wayside by boss and lover Ken who assigns her to the Downtown office, Reva bargains with herself: "I *am* getting a raise," she rationalizes, and "I've always wanted to work in the World Trade Centre" (Moshfegh 206). Attached against her better judgment to compromised conditions of unbelonging, Reva figuratively and literally "eat[s] shit and slink[s] away," distracting herself from her complaisance with self-righteous anger and contrived insouciance (Moshfegh 205). Only by repressing her needs and desires and pain – only by electing self-effacement – can Reva live on, just about passing in public as a self-sufficient, self-contained member of normative contemporary femininity.

Vocalizing pain would seem, logically, to be the first step towards a different, more forgiving future, but – to the contrary – complaining about pain only calcifies it into a criterion of belonging to the compromised conditions that produced it. Jamison's argument that women guard against accusations of "pity-mongering" through self-deprecation and sarcasm is anticipated by Berlant's study of Dorothy Parker, an American writer who penned viciously humorous poems about womanhood's disappointments yet dismissed her own work as "'whines'" (*Complaint* 215). Juxtaposing, on the one hand, her subject's cantankerous work and radical leftist politics with, on the other, the respect for conventionality that Parker demonstrated in her private life and formal aesthetics, Berlant's chapter asks: what is this mutually inclusive relationship between sentimentality, with all its optimism and steadfastness, and rationality which tugs people away from their impulses? The answer lies in understanding Parker's witty, aphoristic complaints as "*performances* of cognitive superiority," failed defences against normativity's seductions (Berlant *Complaint* 216; emphasis added). Far from motivating women to reject the scene of suffering, female complaint actually helps to formalize emotional conventionalities, congealing the objects of much frustration and ridicule into cliché, "a proposition repeated until it takes on truth value" (Berlant *Complaint* 260). It anchors women to a melancholic relationship in its reiteration of what often feels like realism (Berlant *Complaint* 262). Parker was committed to both her life as it was and her vision of a better one; when she was confronted with the impossibility of the latter, "whining" lets her adapt to the former while sadly concretizing the status quo as well. Reva, a comparably prolific complainer, "whines" and "prattles" ad nauseam about the minutiae of life as a young women – grades, office politics, perceived cosmetic shortcomings, petty romance, her weight – but she ultimately "ha[s] no threats to make" (Moshfegh 75, 206). Juvenile and feeble, her catchphrase

"no fair" encapsulates the muted responsiveness to what is by now the codified "open secrets of insecurity and instability" of generic femininity (Moshfegh 75, 10; Berlant *Complaint* 22). In registering the atmosphere of stuckness that motivates other, more conspicuous gestures of self-injury, female complaint lends that stuckness discursive shape, precipitating a trans-spatial, transtemporal support network for women who want to air their grievances and thereby find a community, however tenuous. Sadly, complaint is not mobilized as counterpublicity but left to fester among the disaffected (Berlant *Complaint* 110).

Reva's narrative arc makes clear that, according to McRobbie, "to achieve a feminine identity makes women and girls ill," and according to Berlant, complaining about the conditions which produce that illness is also a sign of normal, aspirational femininity (97). Reva's awareness of the injustices does little to discourage her investment in the intimate public that incubates the very diffuse yet acute despair it promises to mitigate. To manage the stress of contemporary femininity, Reva doubles down on the techniques that promise, if repeated enough, to shape her into a model member of the intimate public she so idealizes – the very techniques that only add to the weight of being a young woman. Even though she remains unhappy living by the codes of normative femininity, struggling to close the gap between the aspiration and her practice, she drowns out her doubts, worried more about "what it would mean not to be framed by them" (Berlant *Complaint* 27). Trading in what looked to her friend like a "rich secretive interior life" for the parties and Pilates Manhattan had to offer "a plebian, straitlaced and conformist," Reva matured into what political theorist Engin Isin calls a neuropolitical subject that "governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties" (Moshfegh 154; 223). She takes it upon herself to individually manage the crisis of postfeminist womanhood through habits the "soothing appeasing, tranquilizing" effects of which are strong enough to help procrastinate the difficult work of addressing the sociopolitical problem (Isin 226). Binge-purge cycles *feel* productive; complaining *feels* cathartic; differentiating between "good" and "bad" femininity, "good" and "bad" foods, *seem* to offer clarity in an era where female desire, consumption, and pleasure are endlessly encouraged yet held in check. Reva's neuroses generate a sense of momentum which fuels her ongoingness at the same time as it siphons energy away from eliminating the need for self-management.

II. Living Easy

The protagonist scoffs at Reva's attempts to be enfolded into the dissatisfactory, generic femininity which appear all the more desperate by the ostracization that the latter suffers in so trying. However, as is quickly apparent, the protagonist herself is just as committed to living a

script infused with a mass-mediated "sense of being generally okay" (Moshfegh 144; Berlant *Complaint* 9). Multiple times, she describes Reva's desire "to have a nice life" as "pathetic"; "studied grace is no grace […] charm is not a hairstyle," she explains in a voice laced with Reva's characteristic patronization (Moshfegh 144, 10). Even in her descriptions of a general tendency among women to fit the mould, the protagonist manages to slight her friend: "women got Botox and boob jobs and vaginal 'cinches' […] *or so Reva told me,*" she reports, emphasizing her friend's superficiality while professing her own supposed disinterest (Moshfegh 28; emphasis added). But contrary to the blasé image she crafts of herself, closer analysis reveals that despite the relative ease with which she achieves the look of conventional femininity as a tall, thin blonde, the protagonist does nonetheless labour to that end. She does what all young women in New York "[a]re supposed to do": buys clothes; schedules colonics, facials, and highlights; showers, tweezes, bleaches, waxes, moisturizes, and exfoliates on repeat (Moshfegh 28). She luxuriates in the jealousy of her peers, recounting the "flock of Reva-like adorers" throughout her life who "worshipped" her speciously "effortless beauty" and "emulated" it to no avail (Moshfegh 65, 14, 10). During hiatuses in her self-care regimen, moreover, she takes comfort in the knowledge that she is still attractive enough to pass as "a celebrity in slovenly incognito" (Moshfegh 93). These hyperbolic musings bespeak the significance of social belonging for someone who appears but lukewarm about the prospect thereof. Reva's overt devotion to postfeminism's cliquey, conventionalizing culture is obvious; that the protagonist complains about her friend who complains about generic femininity signals, I argue, her own equally strong albeit more quiet attachment thereto. Indeed, as Berlant observes, "knowledge [of the irrationalities of attachment] does not break repetitions but can be a prison of its own" (*Complaint* 228). In describing Reva with exaggerated, demeaning flourish, the protagonist tries to minimize her own investment in the aspirational normativity she, in the eyes of many, embodies. At the same time, however, she de facto participates in women's culture by criticizing its already overdetermined dissatisfactions.

When Reva is not fashioned into an unflattering foil against which the protagonist carves out her own identity, she serves as a mouthpiece through which the protagonist expresses her critique of contemporary womanhood. Reflecting on her tumultuous relationship with Trevor, a recurring ex-boyfriend several years her senior, the protagonist remembers that she has always felt "stupid," "boring," "angry," and defeated enough in his company to propriate him with fellatio and even – once, on New Year's Eve – a hollow declaration of love (Moshfegh 76). Irked by the thought that she has stooped to such debased depths, the protagonist criticizes Reva instead, disparaging the latter's "corny and affectionate and needy" disposition as well as

her “absurd” loyalty to friends and to her boss Ken with whom she is having an affair (Moshfegh 17, 7). The protagonist shows no sympathy upon hearing that Ken has ended the dalliance, mustering only terse words of consolation delivered “robotically” (Moshfegh 203). She cognizes Reva’s pain but dismisses it or uses Reva’s “whiny, moronic” voice as an “analgesic” lullaby (Moshfegh 205). “Watching her take what was deep and real and painful and ruin it by expressing it with such trite precision gave me reason to think Reva was an idiot, and therefore I could discount her pain, and with it, mine,” the protagonist coolly explains (Moshfegh 166). By using Reva as “a magnet” and a mirror, the protagonist can briefly educe from within herself the suffering that is both blunted and renewed by her own one-sided romance before she promptly refuses it altogether (Moshfegh 204). The protagonist mourns the death of her parents through – not with – Reva’s loss of her mother in the same way. Sometimes, the protagonist simply conjures Reva’s familiar and irritating presence to confront and disavow her pain. “I already knew everything she’d say […] And what I’d say back,” she claims in one of the many passages that unfurl like seemingly bilateral conversations but are in fact comprised solely of the protagonist’s thoughts narrated in free indirect style (Moshfegh 253). Through Reva with whom she has more in common than readers might initially glean from her vacant, frigid façade, the protagonist can externalize and compartmentalize the hysteria, outrage, or “whatever garbage” seeps forth from her own interiority (Moshfegh 247). “That’s why I held onto her this long,” the protagonist reasons, attesting to the self-serving nature of their friendship which, in keeping with the “connexionist” grammar of neoliberalism, is valued primarily for its use in the numbing of emotions (Moshfegh 204; Boltanski and Chiapello 168).

Despite her suspicion of normativity, and despite the misconception among readers that she recoils from the idea of community, the protagonist is, I argue, so attached to the existing lifeworld that she paradoxically alienates others and, like Reva, resorts to self-erasure to survive it (Moshfegh 156). Her ultimate objective, this chapter argues, is to improve her outlook on contemporary life by willing herself to sleep away a year. She seeks a quack psychiatrist who prescribes a barbiturates not for – as Reva fears – suicidal ends but to aid the regenerative hibernation process. At home in her stupor, she slides into willful ignorance, zoning out to the same movies playing on loop, relishing the familiarity of Harrison Ford and Whoopie Goldberg “doing what they always do” (Moshfegh 72). Sporadically, segments of the news, interrupts increasingly lengthy chapters that mimic the protagonist’s slow descent into her chemically induced oblivion. She avoids “headlines of things going on somewhere in the distance,” tumbling ever deeper in the self-fulfilling observation, “none of it affected me” and

feeling hopeful that this is the beginnings of "a great transformation" (Moshfegh 104, 4, 54). What the final, exactingly orchestrated phase of her hibernation makes clear, however, is that far from disengaging from the social, the process in fact renews her fidelity thereto. When she comes to every few days, she bathes, exercises, excretes, and eats before putting herself under again. These habits, the ritualistic nature of which is captured by Moshfegh's monotonous prose, are redolent of Reva's binging and purging. Both characters demonstrate that as habits turn into compulsions and then into mindless routine, their capacity to "arrest [one's] imagination" – to put the subject to a literal or figurative "deep, boring, inert sleep" – expands such that all feelings, good and bad, "even hatred, even love," are muted and therefore survivable (Moshfegh 191, 166). While both bulimia and self-medicating are, outwardly, straightforward displays of repudiation – of food, of need, of the social – they are also practices of self-preservation. The ascetic care of the physical body doubles as techniques of managing affective pain. Wrapped in the fuzzy stupor of sedatives, losing time to the cyclical performance of menial self-care, the protagonist waits to emerge from her chrysalis ready to "live easy," "think easy," in tune with the bland optimism she once associated with Reva and mocked (Moshfegh 254). "The body is what the powerless work on when they have nothing else," Berlant quotes from Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, and it is in working on the body – suppressing it, medicating it – that both characters distract themselves from their disaffection with the historical present to whose normative scripts they remain ever more strongly attached (*Complaint* 237).

The drug-fuelled hibernation is a "chance of a new and better life," the protagonist claims towards the beginning of the novel, but I argue that it is more a second chance at the same life (Moshfegh 86). In the surrealistic climax of the novel, the protagonist tumbles down the metaphoric rabbit hole where she is stripped of any personalizing elements before arriving at a "new spirit," one whose once-jaded edge is replaced with unadulterated awe at the mundane, like breakfast cereal and squirrels (Moshfegh 275). The process is cathartic: she cries, gasping like a "newborn animal," vulnerable, naïve, a "blank canvas" (Moshfegh 287, 258). Everything is "interesting," "people [a]re so nice," she thinks (Moshfegh 275, 277). In the novel's denouement, the protagonist sits in Central Park, dumbfounded by the "majesty and grace […] of the willows," the melody of birdsong (Moshfegh 288). Where she once reeked of irony, she now "guess[es]," "imagine[s]," questions, and invokes the conditional tense (Moshfegh 279). A close reading of Moshfegh's prose reveals, however, that a solipsistic numbness persists in the protagonist's post-hibernation life which is signalled by the frequent use of "I" as well as

passing descriptions of strangers so sketchily conveyed they feel hallucinatory. Consider this passage about the protagonist donating her coat:

> I watched his hand smooth the fur, as though he were assessing its value. Maybe he'd steal it and give it to his girlfriend, or his mother. I hoped he would. But then he just threw it in a huge blue bin. (Moshfegh 279)

Filtered through the protagonist's watching, the scene exists claustrophobically within the theatre of her mind. The choppy prose shifts between independent clauses and half-thoughts. Her fragmented subjectivity is further evident in how she describes what was done to her by Ping Xi, an acquaintance she charged as her jailer during the hibernation exercise in exchange for permission to make whatever art he wanted with her unconscious body:

> In each piece, my head was huge. In a few portraits, [he] had collaged my actual hair. In *Artforum*, Ronald Jones called me a "bloated nymph with dead man eyes." […] The videos described were of me talking into the camera, seeming to narrate some personal stories – I cry in one – but Ping Xi had dubbed everything over. (Moshfegh 283-284)

From scraps of information, the protagonist collates a highly mediated image of herself that she cannot process as her own. In fact, her body and her voice are given over to the artist's whims and story, becoming as alien to her as the strangers who weave in and out of her digressive daydreams. If, physically and emotionally, she became a husk of herself through the steady ingestion of sedatives, here, in the new chapter of her life, she is still a husk of herself, not unlike the paintings at the Metropolitan Museum which she irreverently calls "feckless and candid and meaningless […] objects, withering toward their own inevitable demise" (Moshfegh 285). "My sleep had worked," the protagonist concludes, but her self-satisfaction can be met with only doubt (Moshfegh 288). The hollowness of her existence prior to *and* following her year of rest and relaxation is palpable. As much as she rhapsodizes about the grandeur of the world around her, the rhetoric feels mechanical, tired. It reads like yet another attempt at living through the everyday by detaching from that which threatens her insular existence.

The novel makes clear the courage of consistency required to remain the same (Moshfegh 58). From their respective analyses of Gregg Bordowitz's autobiographical documentary *Habit*, a meditation on habits that deaden and those that enliven, both Berlant and Cvetkovich observe the solace facilitated through banality. A routine of sameness allows Bordowitz to immerse himself into "a freedom for thought beyond immediacy" (Berlant *Cruel* 63). But neither Reva nor the protagonist is quite as successful in "learning [how] to submit to both the passivity and

the activity of […] living as a practice" such that life is casual, enjoyable, as opposed to merely survivable (Berlant *Cruel* 63, 62). Like Reva's bulimia, the protagonist's drug-fuelled hiatus takes work. The repetitive labour of sleeping – and it is surprisingly laborious, necessitating not just effort but extensive logistical micromanaging as well – resists becoming "a comfortable gestural rhythm" (Berlant *Cruel* 62). For the protagonist, the desired outcome of mere repetition is not the prospect of meaningful being so much as an engineered sense of momentum even during a period of stagnation, a state of dissociative coasting and cruising that makes life more liveable. Reminiscent of female complaint, her regularized, chemicalized sleep is praxis that does not lead to revolution or transcendence but is conducive simply to her self-preservation. It takes her away from thinking and feeling, reduces the present into an undulation of soft breathing, washes away her misanthropy, and returns her to an unchanged world. Indeed, the protagonist herself dithers on the goal of her hibernation halfway through the year, expressing that she has no intention, after all, of severing her allegiance to the social:

> At the end of my hibernation, I'd wake up – I imagined – and see my past life as inheritance. I'd need proof of my old identity to help me up access my bank account, to go places. It wasn't as if I'd wake [to have] a different face and body and name. […] I was born into privilege […] I'm not going to squander that. (Moshfegh 264-265)

For all her talk about her adventure to a "new world," she hangs onto "the old me," slotting back into the one-dimensional norms and fantasies that drove her to choose a secluded, homebound life in the first place (Moshfegh 275, 265).

III. Frivolous Suffering, Feminist Suffering

Rest and Relaxation is likely Moshfegh's most repugnant work to date, with some critics and layreaders alike groaning about the "disgusting selfish woman who slept a year away" (mwana). The antiheroine's beauty and socioeconomic privilege, key points of differentiation between her and other unlikeable characters across Moshfegh's oeuvre, only intensify the prevalence of readerly repulsion towards her. In today's neoliberal culture where cost-benefit analysis has been institutionalized beyond the economy proper, pathologization, efficient and prescriptive, takes precedence over the time-intensive, descriptive work of grappling with negative affect. Backed by a lucrative pharmaceutical industry, pathologization gives credence to the idea of "magic bullet medicine" and with it the idea that one can "target" and "kill" diseases, including unhappiness (Cvetkovich *Depression* 96). Moreover, the relative linearity of the medical model lends itself to the memoiristic self-help genre which reassures readers that they, too, can get over it – a genre venerated by the likes of Reva. Although these auto/biographical works seem

like an alternative to medical expertise, they are in fact quite compatible with the pharmaceutical sector and quite homogenous in their individualist attitude towards health (Cvetkovich *Depression* 94). Implicit in the "drugs-saved-my-life narrative" is the neoliberal belief that one is responsible for his/her own wellbeing, and, conversely, that illness or pain are "basically psychological event[s]" (Sontag, 58). While the idea that "people […] get sick because they (unconsciously) want to" and, correspondingly, that "they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will" may strike us as austere, it has not only hardened into a procedural truth, but also come to offer genuine emotional reprieve (Sontag, 58).

Nowhere in Moshfegh's novel is the culture of medicalization and responsibilization more evident than in the protagonist's upbringing. During the obligatory, pre-college safe sex talk, her parents substituting the word "love" with "oxytocin" and "intercourse" – an already clinical term – with "copulation" (Moshfegh 67). Later in the novel, she ruminates, "I could *think* of feelings, emotions, but I couldn't bring them up on me" (Moshfegh 137). Instead of probing the reasons for her disaffection, she tries to suppress its physiological signs, a habit inculcated in her since infancy by a mother who, tired of her colic child, sprinkled valium into the milk bottle. Her quack psychiatrist Dr Tuttle is also complicit in dismissing the protagonist's pain, alternately intellectualizing and prescribing it away: "if it's suicide, I can give you something for that" (Moshfegh 111). Every monthly appointment is a flurry of interruptions and presumptions and rote instructions, including advice to take regular showers and to brew some chamomile tea – gestures of care the protagonist must undertake by and for herself. Self-sufficiency is the default, as is the emphasis on getting well and doing so quickly. Pain is considered secondary and entirely indulgent owing to the common belief in its remediability.

The protagonist's ostensible failure of productivity – her unemployment, in every sense of the word – violates the assumed capitalist necessity of accumulation and consumption. Her dissociative ennui reads like the invalidism that the Romantics "invented […] as a pretext for leisure," Susan Sontag relays in *Illness and Its Metaphors* (34). The notion that energy, like money, must be properly spent dates back to Victorian times when Freud marshalled economic theory to hypothesize a relationship between psycho-libidinal processes and energy distribution (Sontag 64). Naturally, the economic hypothesis bled over into fantasies of bodily illness. Symptoms of tuberculosis were, for instance, likened to aberrant spending: the patient lies "wasting [away]," "squandering […] vitality" (Sontag 64). "While laziness might no longer be sin in a moral sense," Cvetkovich writes, "it is a major problem for neoliberal and market-based conceptions of the self that turn on productivity as a sign of one's identity" (*Depression*

113). The bias against pain thus discredits not only the protagonist's suffering but also her personhood which, within neoliberalism, counts only if and to the extent that it generates surplus value. "Hating on [those who self-harm] insists desperately upon our capacity for choice," Jamison formulates bleakly, "people want to believe in self-improvement – it's an American ethos, pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps." With little – no perversities, no deformities – to which to attribute the protagonist's disaffection other than the recent loss of her parents, the reader is quick to despise her undefined pain as something Other, disruptive, wasteful, and nonsovereign.

While the protagonist's voracious appetite for drugs is indeed controversial among readers, what bothers them most is arguably the fact that her self-medicating routine makes her sicker and more reclusive. This perspective is articulated by Reva who scoffs, "your problem is that you're passive. You wait around for things to change, […] Very disempowering" (Moshfegh 77). Contra her view, I posit that the protagonist is in fact guided by neoliberal principles – however absurdly – taking her psychic health into her own eager, reckless hands, purposefully dismantling the life that she painstakingly built as a model child, a model student, and until recently a model young adult. Whereas, customarily, one writes towards resolution – narrative resolution, emotional resolution – the protagonist does the antithesis. Her dream journal is formally and thematically "craz[y]," a motley of quasi-fictional nightmares: "then I saluted everyone like a Nazi and jumped overboard and everybody else got executed" (Moshfegh 60). The hyperbolic flourishes are strategic, intended to alarm healthcare professionals into prescribing more sedatives. Even in the velvet blackness, she is beholden to purpose and progress, happy to be "finally doing something that really mattered" (Moshfegh 51) The months of self-induced torpor is the expressed "goal," and her spiritual awakening, an "achieve[ment]" (Moshfegh 186, 71). That the process is productive in its very unproductivity stands in opposition to the impression of her as incompetent and disempowered. The reality that self-injurious behaviour can be wilful and expedite pathologization is well-documented. "The body is a language for dramatizing the mental," Sontag writes (45). "Bleeding is experiment and demonstration, excavation, interior turned out," Jamison concurs, confessing, "I cut because my unhappiness felt nebulous and elusive and I thought it could perhaps hold the shape of a line." To hurt oneself is to ratify bad feelings and thereby secure a reassuringly concrete diagnosis. In the absence of a cut – something localized, linear, and quantifiable – pain is but a point of discussion between patient and healer, a thought awaiting action. The protagonist's bouts of theatrical self-defeatism do exactly this: make her pain an empirical fact. Simultaneously, though, her performance of pain also contributes to essentializing attitudes

that pigeonhole sick women as unhinged, inconsolable harpies. *Rest and Relaxation* challenges the assumption that illness and passivity intrinsically signal disempowerment for its antiheroine – in distinctly neoliberal fashion – searches actively for a solution to her malaise albeit in ways that are compromised and contradictory. Not only is she the direct object of suffering (i.e. afflicted with pain), she is also the agent of that suffering (i.e. inflicting pain on herself).

Moshfegh's protagonist is not the first woman to lean into her pain. Disrupting master discourse through the first person perspective is a mainstay in feminism, from Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" to *écriture féminine* of the second wave and later the mediations on positionality by members of the third. One such disruptive engagement is Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" manifesto, a call to arms for "those who are faced with their vulnerability and unbearable fragility, every day, and so have to fight for their experience to be not only honored, but first made visible" (8). Inspired by Butler's work on precarity and resistance, it celebrates how illness "*feminizes* – e.g., render 'weaker' and 'more fragile' – [us]," envisioning a future of sustainable care infrastructures for all (Hedva 8). Lying in bed in chronic pain, "unable to march, hold up a sign, shout a slogan" while historic Black Lives Matter protests unfurl close to her apartment, Hedva "fuck[s] with the concept of 'heroism,'" proposing instead "a figure with traditionally anti-heroic qualities – namely illness, idleness, and inaction" (Hedva 5, 8). She intends Sick Woman Theory to encompass "anyone who does not have [a] guarantee of care," anyone who is pronounced "deviant"; "dysfunctional"; "dangerous" and "in danger" (Hedva 4, 10). It thus seems at first to be a promising framework through which to read the antiheroine, but several glaring differences between her and Hedva quickly emerge.

The protagonist is wealthy, white, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied, whereas the latter, a genderqueer Korean American, relies on food stamps and state-issued health insurance. Although the protagonist does indeed struggle to receive proper care from her private psychiatrist, her fight begins to sound more like a whine in comparison to Hedva's battle with the public healthcare system. The protagonist's choice to sequester herself, moreover, makes light of those for whom self-care is truly unfeasible. After all, she lives comfortably off her inheritance, financial investments, high credit limit, and – perversely – unemployment benefits. According to Arendtian thinking which insists on a dialectic of the public and the private, Hedva is doomed to be apolitical because she is physically unable to get her body into polis – a fact that weighs heavily (1). Moshfegh's protagonist seems reticent to engage with feminist ideals at all; she rather hopes that the hibernation will help her resettle more comfortably within the existing conventions. It is therefore not an overt statement of protest, but rather a collorary

to her existing and enduring apathy towards the political. Save a few mentions of the "consistently bad," "working-class coffee" from the Egyptian-owned bodega, "the lived real" – Berlant's phrase for social antagonisms, capitalist exploitation, lacklustre intimacies, and general attrition of life – is conspicuously absent from her first-person vantage (Moshfegh 5; *Complaint* 5). She floats above it all, smoking out the window of her ivory tower, a disappointment to her second-wave feminist foremothers who championed the right of every woman to do and be anything she wants, especially educated, bourgeois, Western women like her. To add insult to injury, Hedva's attempts to politicize the abjection she suffers by dint of her race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and ability are sidelined by the antiheroine's narrative arc which is familiar – indeed, notorious – among contemporary readers. Whatever sympathy the protagonist might win from proving herself capable of toiling for a desired outcome dissolves as soon as readers realize the insular and individualist motives for her hibernation. Even as readers acknowledge the protagonist to be a sovereign individual, actively and meticulously executing her passivity, many are still frustrated by the tone deafness of choices, however compromised and unfulfilling her life of privilege may be.

The protagonist's culturally insensitive hibernation project has much in common with the work of Audrey Wollen, a pioneer of Sad Girl Theory, whose activism was defined by taking selfies with contemporary theory books about biopolitics, medicalization, and embodiment during regular visits to the hospital. Through her wan expressions and self-reflexive captions, Wollen tries to reclaim various stereotypes, like the hysteric, in much the same way that Moshfegh's antiheroine, in her determination to be locked up by "warden" Ping, reappropriates the trope of the mad woman in the attic (Moshfegh 262). Sad Girls celebrate the capacity of "sorrow and […] self-destruction to disrupt systems of domination," wielding strategic essentialism into a highly aestheticized and publicized cry for attention (Wollen *Dazed*). However, while the agency of those who "say no to capitalism's hailing of the happy and productive neoliberal subject" cannot be denied,[20] Fournier rightly criticizes the heavy-handed irony and thinly veiled narcissism of Sad Girl selfies for commodifying the feminist and theoretical-philosophical content to which they pay lip service (655, 652). It is no surprise that the rise of Sad Girl trope coincided with the ascendance of social media platforms where personal details are traded in for aesthetic currency. Flattering selfies of conventionally attractive, quirky women, while perfect for mass dissemination and easy consumption, capable

[20] Berlant, Sianne Ngai, and Sara Ahmed, among others, have all explored the political significance of women – or, more broadly, subaltern subjects – claiming their right to withhold "good manners" expected of "the servant class," to resist being cute, to be a killjoy ("Unfeeling" 197).

of eliciting a bout of righteous anger in such a way that reinforces female complaint culture, are ultimately, forgettable at best and insincere at worst. Indeed, encoded in Sad *Girl* Theory's very name is the quality of arrested development, the potential of maturing into something more nuanced still unrealized. By allowing Ping to use her as his muse, the protagonist engages in a kind of self-objectification not dissimilar to that of Sad Girls. The agreement results in art that strikes the reader as fungible, a "*thing*" tossed around the comically pretentious, politically stunted art world not dissimilar to Sad Girl memes that fetishize and cheapen the criticism of the sociopolitical landscape (Moshfegh 287; Fournier 659). Ever a clever, intertextual stunt, these selfies "do[] not feel particularly complex or interesting" (Fournier 653). No doubt passivity can constitute feminist praxis, but it does not necessarily do so. The frustration that readers widely report is thus twofold, stemming initially from misrecognizing her slumber as surrender before evolving into an exasperation with her imperviousness to the conditions of impossibility and modes of protest that her hibernation diminishes. Why, instead of flaunting her illness and injury like accessories and divertissements, can she not properly contextualize and politicize her pain?

But to expect a "proper" representation of pain or, inversely, to dismiss Sad Girl expressions of pain as mere aesthetic flourish couched coolness is – while neither unreasonable nor undeserved – just as lazy as resorting to the pathologizing impulse. Instead of paranoid reading which, according to queer theorist Eve Sedgwick who coined the term, is a critical mode that maintains distance, preferring the immunity of outsmarting or endlessly deconstructing the subject over the possibility of being surprised by it, perhaps a reparative approach that foregrounds empathy and ethics is in order. A reparative reading of Moshfegh's protagonist entails acknowledging that as despicably self-indulgent as her narrative arc is, she is not entirely to blame for the dramatization of female pain. Rather than penalize young women, even those with racial and class privilege, for their limited expressive capacity, might we explore instead the reasons for its circumscription? In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai reports that art "shifted from the hidden studio to the gallery" during the latter half of the twentieth century (21). Conceptual art, a category for which "intense curatorial activity" is instrumental to the work's successful reception, nudged artists into becoming "middlemen for themselves," carving out a "discursive, media- and/or print-based" space for their work "with the lingo of the public sphere" (Ngai 21). Once born out of necessity, this practice of manipulating and (self-) promoting art to optimize its reach and consumption has since evolved into a reflex under the interpenetration of economy and culture. It has lent itself to today's widespread use of social media, a channel for self-expression whose very format – bite-sized

tweets, micro-blog posts, images arranged into a gridded pattern – encourages an echo-chamber-like space wherein nuance is reduced, tropes are repeated ad nauseum, and stereotypes, reinforced. Little wonder, then, the cult of wounded womanhood is familiar to Moshfegh's readers even before they thumb through the book; little wonder that the laborious, artistic production of the self feels likewise hackneyed.

Moreover, at the same time as they are reviled for hurting, the public is titillated by and glamourizes their self-destruction. Canvassing the literary scene, Leslie Jamison finds "wounded women everywhere," from Miss Havisham to Anna Karenina, Mina Harker to Blanche DuBois, Sylvia Plath to Anne Sexton. "Violence turns them celestial," she writes, "we can't look away. We can't stop imagining new ways for them to hurt" (Jamison). Suffering has shifted from being "an aspect of the female experience into an element of the female constitution" (Jamison). The notion that sadness and sickness makes one interesting emerged in the nihilistic and sentimental nineteenth century alongside a modern notion of individuality. Through stylized accounts of tuberculosis, the suffering of its victims was transformed into the literary and erotic attitudes known today as "romantic agony" (Sontag 20). Debility was recast as "an air of languor that is very becoming" by aristocratic femme fatales and young artists who coveted illness, "a kind of interior décor of the body," the same way they coveted fashion (Sontag 29). The many clichés about the disease were gradually extended to encompass "cultural exhaustion" more generally such that it, too, became an "index of being genteel [and] delicate" (Sontag 31, 28). Still today, frailty is perceived to be a mark of refinement and authenticity, regarded with simultaneous contempt, skepticism, and shameless fascination (Sontag 32). Within the context of this ambivalent reception, the self-objectification of Sad Girls, including the protagonist's, emerges as a desperate – if insensitive and somewhat misguided – attempt at garnering recognition for their affective pain. In other words, they are to an extent simply giving the audience a self-indulgent show in return for some attention, and, as Jamison contends, "isn't wanting attention one of the most fundamental traits of being human"? At issue here is not the airing of traumas by the bourgeoisie but rather the pageantry surrounding it on both sides, sufferer and consumer.

Pain, especially female pain, may be elevated to grotesque heights in Moshfegh's novel, but beyond and beneath the lyricism, "[women] still hurt" (Jamison). And we may be tired of the "hurting woman" cliché, but, again, "that doesn't mean she doesn't happen" (Jamison). With descriptions thereof occupying pages and pages of prose, increasingly a chore for the reader, the protagonist's strategically exaggerated suffering reflects the sad fact that wounded womanhood, as intriguing as the phenomenon was initially, has become predictable and tedious.

The sheer number of words dedicated to the quiet disaffection of the young women in her novel, moreover, reinforces the flawed notion that female pain needs representation to exist. Jamison's reparative thesis amounts to this: female pain, the stereotype of which prevails despite the public's neglect or indeed because of its romanticization and revulsion, should not require cause, resolution, or eloquent articulation to matter; conversely, no matter how "trite," "poorly worded," hyper-stylized, or "plainly ridiculous" its presentation, pain should always matter. Jamison's thesis encourages a more generous analysis of Sad Girl practices, including the protagonist's hibernative fugue, which situates their conflicting investments and effects within an equally ambivalent public at once excessively committed yet indifferent to bad feelings. Living in a world that wears out its citizens – granted, at different rates and to different degrees of severity – is a gruelling enterprise for even those who have at their disposal a wealth of material resources. A logical extension of Jamison's article would be to pose the rhetorical questions: must we hierarchize? At the risk of ending with an anodyne of truisms, what Sick Woman Theory, Sad Girl Theory, and Jamison's article on wounded womanhood all share is a profound belief in vulnerability as the nexus of pain and power. Rather than glorifying or burying it, describing it as a choice or dooming it to character, might we just let pain be? "How much do we choose to feel anything?" Jamison asks. To hold Moshfegh's characters in contempt for their self-destructive choices and compulsions – their compromises – is to fail to recognize that their behaviour is emblematic of the embodied, affective rhythms of survival.

IV. Postfeminist Disaffection and Disdain

Weaving together social analysis with psychoanalysis in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, McRobbie conceptualizes the loss of feminism as an originary violence through which the fiction of identity is achieved. Whereas Freud understood melancholy to be a love that is blind to or otherwise disavows its hostility to the lost object, McRobbie stakes her theorization of gender melancholia in the inversion of this formulation: feminism is kept alive by young women who loathe it, yet couched in their dismissal is an element of unrecognized love for the object of attachment. The inability to recuperate feminist solidarities of old is transformed into an illegible rage which is made apparent in the feeling of powerlessness among women. Rather than harnessed into political action, the anger is directed inwards, inscribed on the body by the subject herself, manifesting as "forms of self-rebuke [that] span a wide spectrum from normative to suicidal behaviour" (McRobbie 119). Confined to the terms of a patriarchal Symbolic yet addressed as though she were the equal of men, the postfeminist subject's sense of personhood is founded, necessarily, on a lack, and thus she "end[s] up reproducing a self as

alienated" (McRobbie 101). She is invited to reflect but only and endlessly on herself as a subordinate object. She is invited to join the public sphere where, failing to realize a socialist, sexual liberation, she is instead "bound up in episodes […] of bargaining" for belonging (Berlant *Complaint* 224). What seems at first like contradictory aspects of an otherwise coherent femininity – regulatory cultural fictions, the post-wounded stance, seemingly causeless self-loathing, the distinctly neoliberal belief in human perfectibility – is resolved when we situate them within the wider context of frustrated feminist potentiality that young women experience melancholically as impotence. The irretrievable loss of feminism is, in short, a source of so much female pain at the same time as it is a prerequisite of femininity.

The illegible pain of a disarticulated feminism finds a metaphor in the protagonist's inability to identify with her mother nor subsequently mourn her death. The estrangement between mother and daughter can be traced to the fraught significance of the "pretty," the basis for kinship among women whose "pointless and self-obsessed" nature ultimately gets in the way of solid, reciprocal relations between them (Moshfegh 70). A beauty queen in her youth, the protagonist's mother grew up evaluating objects and people, including herself, on their superficial qualities – a reflex she passed down to the protagonist, especially during their annual Christmastime trips to the mall. The former browsed clothes, jewellery, and perfume, artefacts of a stereotypical femininity, bestowing mindless opinions about every retail item on the latter who silently observed in her shadow. From the example set by her mother, the protagonist learns to take if not pride then at least comfort in the fact that she is "hot shit" (Moshfegh 144). "Pretty" has become, for the protagonist, her *raison d'être*, a guarantee of social relevance so powerful it "ke[eps] [her] trapped in the world that valued looks above all else" (Moshfegh 35). In one particularly evocative memory, the mother is depicted as "a beautiful fish in a man-made pool," similarly trapped, "circling and circling, surviving the tedium" of life, applying makeup only to withdraw back to her bedroom, recoiling from her daughter and shunning public life (Moshfegh 212). Her myopic attention to the superficial aspects of femininity has an insulating effect, which along with her nightly Chardonnay, isolates her from others and from herself:

> She felt nothing. […] She was brain dead. She wasn't thinking or dreaming or experiencing anything, not even her own death. […] She wasn't resting. She was not in a state of peace. She was in no state, not being. (Moshfegh 151)

The passage chimes with the countless times throughout the novel in which the protagonist claims both to feel nothing and to *want to* feel nothing; the mother's asociality and overdose-

induced coma foreshadows her daughter's misanthropic coping strategies and hibernation project. Both women let "things slow down" so they can "just drift away" while, outwardly, remaining socially intelligible, docile subjects (Moshfegh 204). The protagonist and her mother, cool and collected, are not so dissimilar to the comparatively hysterical Reva after all; all three women are joined by a steadfast reverence for self-effacement as the fundament of social viability. While many sematic and thematic parallels exist between mother and daughter, they could not be more distant; the being-in-sameness with other members of a homogenizing women's culture is not synonymous with mutuality – a fact that this chapter first elucidated through its close reading of Reva in section I. The conventionally feminine preoccupation with material beauty dictates the contours of women's culture; distracts women from the exhaustion and ambivalence of squeezing into said contours; and, as is apparent from the disjointed relationship between mother and daughter, ushers women away from the unfinished project of feminism. The highly egocentric work of the "pretty," in short, diverts women away from the possibility of collectivity, straightjacketing them into a narrow, atomizing grid of specification, while placating them with the idea of being-in-sameness with others.

"I wanted a mother […] to hold me while I cried, bring me milk and honey, give me comfy slippers, rent me videos and watch them with me, order deliveries of Chinese food and pizza," but this idealized figure exists only in the protagonist's imagination (Moshfegh 147). She misses what she never had; just as feminism is lost and unconsciously preserved, her mother's love is an object of melancholic reflection. "'I'm not your nanny,'" the mother often sighed, averse to caring for and bonding with her own daughter who herself matured into a "cold bitch" (Moshfegh 135, 204). The sheets in which the protagonist has slept since childhood, reliably "stiff" and "blank[]," is one of few object of attachments, a symbol of constancy which approximates intimacy (Moshfegh 128). The family house upstate, a "colorless," "eerily spare Tudor Colonial," functions similarly: after both her parents pass, the protagonist insists on

> hold[ing] onto the house the way you'd hold on to a love letter. It was proof that I had not always been completely alone in this world. But I think I was also holding on to the loss; to the emptiness of the house itself. (Moshfegh 127, 64)

Opening a letter from her estate lawyer advising the sale of the property, she conjures up poignant images of the family home, rich with details of normal, all-American family life: a ceramic lamp, dried plum pits, a loose button, crumbled wrappers. "How many of my parents' hairs and eyelashes and skin cells and fingernail clippings had survived between the

floorboards?" she wonders, almost wistful, before realizing that "the nostalgia didn't hit," "[t]hese weren't my memories" (Moshfegh 222). An "oceanic despair" washes over her, but it feels "canned" (Moshfegh 221, 135). The loss of her parents, especially her mother, and the subsequent loss of the house triggers not feelings of emptiness, which connotes a space that was and can once again be filled, but the retroactive apprehension that her life is void, a "nothingness" (Moshfegh 39). In her personal life as in her political one, the protagonist experiences a loss that she struggles to name and therefore struggles to recover, leaving her burdened with pain resistant to closure and action – pain that is definitionally melancholic.

The inability of women to ally themselves with each other is evident, furthermore, in the protagonist's strained relationship with Reva, her only emotional ballast. The two are competitive with each other, passively policing the other's figure and substance abuse, taking satisfaction in watching the other "crumble into [an] ineffectual slob" (Moshfegh 14). Just as Reva makes a fuss about all the (self-)important responsibilities she shoulders, the protagonist lies about being fired from her job. The ego ideal, McRobbie notes, has "take[n] up the role of berating 'critical agency' which is forever castigating the ego for failing to live up to some unattainable standard," rather than being marshalled in a feminist uprising (McRobbie 116). The two women are trapped in a relationship of mutual dependence and disavowal. What rare, tender moments transpire between them are clumsy, bathetic. As conversation partners in French class, Reva asks after her friend following the recent loss of her parents, but the interaction is hamstrung by poor grammar and pronunciation (Moshfegh 155). At the funeral for Reva's mother, the protagonist, in turn, "put[s] an arm around her [friend] as awkwardly as such a thing can be done" (Moshfegh 165). In McRobbie's psychoanalytic terms, the loss of fellow-feeling among women is akin to "the enforced abandonment of same-sex love" such that even when women "turn[] away from male desire, [there is] no perceivable direction" for their love to go (McRobbie 111).

The matter of thwarted protest percolates a humiliating experience that the protagonist encountered at Columbia. Having broken the heel of her stiletto boots, she limps in late to "Feminist Theories and Art Practices, 1960s-1990s" whereupon the professor instructs her to stand at the front, objectified "like a Barbie," serving as a conversation opener (Moshfegh 189). That this happens at Columbia, a prestigious university in the neoliberal capital of the world, is significant: the young, female students in attendance are interested in feminism insofar as it means empowerment for the individual woman even at the cost of another's flourishing – a fact made clear by their ruthlessness ridicule of the sacrificial lamb. The protagonist drops the course and with it her chance at encountering notable feminist foremothers, electing instead a

class on Jacques-Louis David, a painter whose *The Death of Marat*, a depiction of a French Revolution leader's untimely death, becomes one of the protagonist's favourite paintings and one that, I suggest, alludes to the frustrated revolutionary spirt of contemporary postfeminist times. Try as she might to picture in her daydreams "a happy story," or a "different life that would at least be refreshing in its depressions," "it never work[s]" (Moshfegh 40). "What next?" she falters, "I couldn't imagine" (Moshfegh 40). For the protagonist, her mother, and Reva, the ongoing present is just that, nothing more: ongoing. Consciously and unconsciously replicating the gestures of a stale, postfeminist femininity about which they have become fatalistic or – in the case of the protagonist – purposefully uncritical, the women inhabit an impasse that feels permanent, though it should be conceded that they do so with courage. Every fraught attempt at overcoming the disjointed nature of their relationships with one another is hampered by the self-interest that drives the desire for reciprocity. "I *love* you," Reva proclaims every time she sees her friend, and usually it is met with no response (Moshfegh 117). The italicization of "love" conveys both the urgency with which Reva wants the love to be real as well as the labour requisite in cementing that mutuality. Her voice strains, simultaneously vulnerable and demanding, capturing a null point at the heart of postfeminism: women are expected to assert their will even as they hope to come together in friendship as in politics.

V. Ineffectuality of Privatized Feelings

If, as McRobbie reasons, female pain is in part the result of a disarticulated feminism, then to move away from it will require a renewed movement towards the political and towards commonality. While clinical diagnoses are useful in restoring a sense of control for those living through trauma, and whereas postructuralism may be equally helpful in compartmentalizing trauma by labelling it unrepresentable, Cvetkovich insists:

> I want to think about trauma as part of the affective language that describes life under capitalism. I'm interested in how shock and injury are made socially meaningful, paradigmatic even, within cultural experience. […] Moreover, in contrast to the individualist approaches of clinical psychology, I'm concerned with trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses. (*Archive* 19)

Depression – or, more broadly, pain – "is an interdisciplinary phenomenon" (Cvetkovich *Depression* 91). It thus demands the sociohistorical approaches and depathologizing vocabularies of feminist, Marxist, queer, trauma, and critical race theory to bridge the gap between the clinical and cultural. Marshalling these resources in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich challenges a deep-seated "fear that indulgence in too much feeling […] will lead

to selfish retreat from the political" (111). Building on the findings incubated by Feel Tank Chicago of which she was a part, the book mulls over the "excruciatingly *ordinary*" felt experience of exploitation and internalized oppression (*Depression* 16). Combining memoir and critical essay, it reaps the benefits of the first-person perspective while curbing the tendency to sensationalize pain, steering its reader's attention away from the most public, most newsworthy events towards its relationship with moments of quotidian, emotional distress without losing scholarly value along the way. Cvetkovich's work responds to the protagonist's bad feelings, making good on feminism's oldest adage: the personal – the affective and the emotional – is political.

"There was no big drama. Things were quiet," Moshfegh's protagonist muses (154). The modifier "there" dangles, referring to nothing, evoking postfeminism's vague sense of loss. The syntactical simplicity of this statement diminishes its gravity, perpetuating the sad fact that "a finite economy of empathy" will always treat "war [a]s bigger news than a girl having mixed feelings" (Jamison). To topple this gendered hierarchy of trauma requires collective effort in recognizing "how easy it was to get there," how, as Cvetkovich muses, "slid[ing] into numbness [is] an inevitable part of growing up," of living with disappointment (*Depression* 16). In portraying slow decline of a perfectly capable, perfectly self-sufficient young antiheroine into loneliness and listlessness, *Rest and Relaxation* nudges reader towards the disconcerting realization that loneliness and listlessness cannot be warded off, even and especially by those primed for success. Cvetkovich argues that feeling bad is a by-product, too, of "learning to take care of oneself" and nowhere is this more apparent than the protagonist's and Reva's respective techniques of self-management (*Depression* 16). The former copes with her hypoarousal by plying herself with drugs, and the latter manages her gaping hunger for belonging by stuffing herself full only to retch the food back up. What gets labelled as depression or disordered eating are, I argue, affective manifestations of neoliberal biopower which governs by making people feel so small, so out of options that the putative solutions actually perpetuate the problems they feel compelled to resolve. Existing in a "state low-level chronic grief"; failing to "measure up" in will, energy, and imagination; feeling stuck – none of this is as alien as the antiheroine makes it seem (Cvetkovich *Depression* 12). She simply personifies the compromised agency and dull dramas of everyday life under capitalism that readers would rather abhor than acknowledge.

What if we began to see the chronic nature of pain as indicative of a broader, systemic social problem that eludes dialogue because it cannot be isolated as a singular feeling or event? The term "public feelings" has helped Cvetkovich take capitalism as a framework for violence which directly if invisibly harms the population by way of the individual. Because bad feelings

are common – meaning both ordinary and communal – addressing them should also, therefore, be a joint endeavour. Contra the misconception that overcoming malaise depends primarily on the subject's capacity for self-love – a misconception that informs the protagonist's entirely self-administered hibernation project – McRobbie argues that "survival does not take place because an autonomous ego exercises autonomy in the face of a countervailing world" (117). Together, Cvetkovich and McRobbie's work points towards retrieving "the feminist ideal of liberty and equality into which was always incorporated the possibility of love between women" (115). In fact, all the feminist critics mentioned in this chapter whose voices I amplify advocate a revision in the way we think about the ongoing hardships in the current, postfeminist climate: turning them into a basis for counterpublic spheres that are explicitly political rather than merely juxtapolitical, arenas in which "the cattiness of frenemies, the betrayals of your own body, the terror of a public gaze" are no longer privatized, individualized anxieties (Jamison). Teeming with feelings of inertia and despair, these sites of publicity would do the work of therapy while doubling as a form of activism, laying the foundations for a movement-based feminism to come.

Sadly, though, this vision of a movement-based feminism remains but a remote dream in *Rest and Relaxation*. In essence, the novel is a tale about one young woman's quest for utopia, a surreal adventure completely removed from the realist genres of contemporary life. Nowhere is this dissonance more salient than in the conclusion. On the eleventh of September 2001, the protagonist watches a woman who she believes to be Reva jump to her death from the North Tower. "There she is," the protagonist thinks, "diving into the unknown, […] wide awake" (Moshfegh 289). Some immediate parallels emerge between the body in free fall and the protagonist's hibernation project: both scenes are absurd and abrupt, and both feature a woman passing from one dimension to the next. The protagonist describes the earthward plummet to a streamlined "dive into a summer lake" just as, in the previous chapter, she romanticizes her deep sleep as a "floating without a tether" while the "universe narrowed into a fine line," "a clear[] trajectory"(Moshfegh 289, 275). Whereas the protagonist believes that the woman's demise is, like her hibernation, shot through with spirituality – a leap of faith, so to speak, into something radically *beyond* – I argue that it is in fact a horrific spectacle onto which the protagonist projects her blind hope. Having achieved neither moral nor intellectual clarity from her hibernation but instead burrowed ever more deeply in a rapturous state of ignorance, the protagonist misrecognizes the jumper's death as a fantasy of which she is in "awe" (Moshfegh 289).

To portray the protagonist with such wide-eyed optimism and in such sentimental light is a bold authorial move on Moshfegh's part: set in pre-9/11 America yet written in the two decades of its grim aftermath – in the shadow of the attacks that toppled that very optimism, arguably for good – *Rest and Relaxation* replicates the dissociative amnesia for which its antiheroine is, in the context of her drug-fuelled hibernation, deplored. While 9/11 was, for most, the first of many major geopolitical and economic events that jolted America out of dormancy, thrusting her into an age where austerity and precarity are keenly experienced for the first time since the inception of financialized capitalism, for Moshfegh's antiheroine, it feels more like an extension of the "good strong American sleep" from which she never truly wakes (Moshfegh 252). In fact, the protagonist reverts to her old habits, purchasing a VCR so that she can record the collapse of the Twin Towers for posterity, for "a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I'm bored," she explains (Moshfegh 289). She rewatches the footage not out of sympathy nor shock but out of a need to "soothe [her]self" – a remark that brings to mind the early stages of her drug-induced fugue during which she zoned out to films played on loop and, indeed, in Reva's company (Moshfegh 289). The novel ends the way it unfolded: with the protagonist sheltering from bad feelings that hang heavily in the contemporary present.

Rest and Relaxation not only foregrounds, like Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, the prevalence and persistence of existing templates of belonging but also exaggerates, through its surrealistic spin, the impotence and absurdity of what passes for coping strategies. Because, under the novel's satirical lens, normativity is overdetermined – existing conditions of life are impossible to escape even through (near-)death – readers are compelled to reconceptualize the protagonist from something of a contemptibly "laughable," "ridiculous" object into a product of a laughable, ridiculous environment, an object worthy of compassion (Mary, Tatiana). The novel's achievement is thus twofold: firstly, in its capacity to expose the antiheroine's invocation of wellness, community, and serendipity as necessary yet ultimately ineffective in her ongoing struggle against stuckness, and, secondly, in its prompting of readers to situate this selectively blind, indulgently individualist adjustment style in context of contemporary life. "Reva [i]s lost. Reva [i]s gone," and with it, the burgeoning promise of reciprocity – the possibility of "I love you, *too*" (Moshfegh 289, 283; emphasis added). The solipsistic character arc of Moshfegh's protagonist makes clear the inadequacy of affective solutions that shy away from their politicizing potential. Rather than placating oneself with the wish for generic personhood, which for Reva and the protagonist is enough to count as a life, perhaps a more sustainable pattern of life could begin with questioning the obligation and desire to feel good

through narrow, normativising avenues of belonging. Until then, collective, anesthetizing amnesia will remain intact, painstaking maintained by and for individuals, a collectivity founded aloneness.

VI. Conclusion

"What is the relation between feeling detached and being detached from the political, between feeling invested and exercising agency?" Berlant poses in the introduction *The Female Complaint*, formulating what has become an investigative springboard for this chapter's critical inquiry into the figure of the sick young woman (*Complaint* 8). How does it feel to be immobilized by a sense of loss whose origins are opaque, and in what ways is this affective stuckness sustained – meaning both endured and perpetuated? A close reading of *Rest and Relaxation*'s protagonist and her friend Reva alongside the theoretical observations of Berlant, Cvetkovich, Jamison, and McRobbie located three principal strategies used to manage melancholic disaffection. The first, post-woundedness, is an attitude donned by women desperate to stave off accusations of melodrama, triviality, and wallowing. A product of today's hyper-autonomous neoliberal subjectivities, this paranoid self-awareness inhibits personal, ethical, and aesthetic experiences of vulnerability, locking women into endless re-experiences of pain and what seems to be the only permissible reaction to it: detachment. Complaint, the second of three strategies, likewise registers stuckness, and as an examination of Reva's incessant whining has shown, criticism against generic femininity does nothing in the way of disrupting its laws and norms. In fact, complaint calcifies objects of resignation which in turn, disguised as historical givens, lay the foundation for "the only intersubjectivity or practical reciprocity" available today (Berlant *Complaint* 18). Through airing her grievances, Reva – and even the protagonist – can take temporary distance from them while feeling validated by other women who try to disengage from the same bad feelings without any inclination of overcoming it. Enabling ongoingness without seeking redress is the common denominator between the three strategies, the final one of which is formation of habits that spiral into all-consuming compulsions. These compulsions generate a sense of momentum and funnel attention towards the self, fixing it squarely on the individual and the immanent. They are technologies of disappearing, both life-extinguishing and life-saving. Like Reva's ritualistic binging and purging, the protagonist's routine film-watching and pill-popping offer momentary distraction and dissociation from the demands of generic personhood. In taking the notion of zoning out to its satirical extreme, her hibernation makes apparent the numbness requisite for navigating the hyperproductive, overly saturated present.

It is precisely the expectation of hyperproductivity that casts affective detachment not as a chosen strategy for survival but as a sign of abject weakness. Through a close analysis of the antiheroine, this chapter furthermore disputed common reactions to female pain, troubling not only the tendency to pathologize passivity or downplay it as sloth, but also the tacit consensus that it must promulgate an overtly political message to be legitimate. Reading in the reparative mode and from a Marxist-feminist perspective, I challenged the vilification, fetishization, stylization, and hierarchization of wounded womanhood, proposing instead the need to contextualize psychic injury through genres of postfeminist fantasy and political impasse. Following a brief foray into the superficiality of traditional femininity that contributes in no small part, I argued, to the present climate of self-interest, this chapter advocated a more nuanced understanding of contemporary disaffection that resists privatizing pain. Only through an interdisciplinary perspective that attends to the gendered and genealogical of female pain can we begin to see how it spans the private and public, solipsistic and universal. Until or unless we approach illness, injury, and feminism as closely imbricated and fundamentally common, communal experiences, any search for intimacy and reciprocity is bound to falter, trammeled by the reflex to individualize the problem. The novel closes on an ostensibly uplifting note with the protagonist reinvigorated, brimming with hope for and feeling at home in an environment she previously so loathed, leaving the reader to wonder how this utopian vision of affective belonging is meant to last if paradoxically the protagonist both loses and shuns what few attachments she has to the collective.

Reconciliation, Resignation, and Reparation in Sally Rooney's *Conversations With Friends* and *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*

Building on the previous chapters' interrogation of the privatizing and often self-defeating ways in which women live through conditions of unbelonging, this upcoming chapter asks what kinds of subjectivities materialize under the auspices of a culturopolitical order that not only necessitates but indeed celebrates compromise. I read Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, focusing on protagonist Frances's conflicting desires and behaviours in a bid to secure intimacy within a polyamorous paradigm, mapping them in relation to the liberal democratic system of which she is a product. In dialogue with Chantal Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox* and *The Return of the Political*, my analysis elucidates the ways in which contemporary citizens absorb, to their detriment, the laws, ethics, and ideologies of hegemonic public sphere. I then argue that Frances learns to feel empowered in compromised conditions by agreeing to them. Perverting her practiced impassivity into a fantasy of total autonomy and total rationalism is a temporary, pyrrhic victory. Consent neutralizes the pain of subpar circumstances and thus sustains them; "the hegemonic is, after all," Berlant observes, "not merely domination dressed more becomingly – it is a metastructure of consent" (*Cruel* 185).

Political impotence offers a platform through which Rooney's autofictional characters commiserate and connect. Alongside the lofty, radical ideas they spout, these young, white, cosmopolitan characters offer, as class critique, limp admissions of complicity within structurally inequitable global systems, a compromised form of activism that merely cements the status quo while being accepted – even applauded – for its realistic, relatable cynicism. In conjunction with my analysis of *Conversations with Friends*, I read *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* to interrogate the ardent desire for change that starts, Rooney's characters believe, with reciprocal care on the micro level of individuals before extending its reach to benefit society. The dovetailing of this reparative ethic with the romance genre through a shared call for vulnerability and interdependence is most salient in Rooney's feel-good plotlines which promise in their heteroidealist endings the prospect of not only private intimacy but universal relationality as well.

If compromise forms a guiding philosophy for Rooney's characters muddling through liberal democracy's conflicting values, then it also, I argue, lends itself to parsing Rooney's formal and thematic choices. This chapter deduces in Rooney's work a double-pronged function of compromise: firstly, as a culturopolitical principle on which citizens in the contemporary West rely to uphold the happy, progressive image of public unity and private reconciliation, and, secondly, as an aesthetic that allows the author to toggle between two

registers – Marxist and heteronormative – in order to effect the same, specious sense of harmonious coexistence. Building on Rachel Greenwald Smith's conceptualization of compromise aesthetics which discerns in stylistically hybrid works the capacity to both challenge and entertain the reader, I proffer that Rooney's compromise aesthetic allows the reader, in addition, to feel politically awakened. To end, this chapter underscores Rooney's questionable presentation of the marriage plot as not just the ultimate consolation but also a bridge to the utopian beyond. I contend that her orthopaedic aesthetic and heteroidealist message must be dissected just like the fundaments of liberal democracy, highlighting the lack of attention paid to the productive and reproductive labour; the conservative undercurrents in these postfeminist tales; and the limitations of the inherently privatizing romance genre.

I. Affective Unbelonging in Liberal Democracy

Conversations with Friends follows twenty-one-year-old Frances in her final year of university, poised to join adult society. Slotting comfortably into existing social infrastructures and kinship networks has always been predicated on being likeable, amenable. According to Bobbi, her best friend and, previously, her girlfriend, Frances lacks "a real personality": "At any time," Frances tells the reader, "I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that's the kind of person I am" (Rooney *Conversations* 19). Indeed, Frances is all too aware that "playing […] the smiling girl who remembered things " is a matter of survival (19). As the narrator of the novel, Frances's voice is flat, akin to Faye's in the *Outline* trilogy, and like Faye's, it gets muddled with those of other characters through Rooney's elimination of quotation marks. The resultant prose thus formally mimics Frances's learned habit of disappearance as a mode of blending in. By contrast, Bobbi has a firm sense of self – almost too firm, to the point of being abrasive – and a memorable face to go with it. Frances envies Bobbi's ability to build rapport with strangers through sprawling discussions or, failing language, through enthusiastic gesticulation. Before visiting Melissa, a photographer and journalist who has taken a shine to the girls' spoken-word poetry performances, and her husband Nick, an actor whose career never quite blossomed, Frances rehearses compliments and facial expressions she hopes will make her seem charming, more like Bobbi who manages to "belong[] everywhere" (60). So strong is Frances's desire to inhabit Bobbi's life that the prospect of waking up one morning with her friend's face "would be like waking up with a face […] I already imagined was mine," whereas her own reflection is "strange, depersonalizing" (14).

Frances's efforts are in vain, however, as Melissa's infatuation with Bobbi cements Frances feeling of invisibility. The two are seen in the conservatory, their laughter entirely insulated by the subtle yet unmistakeable glass panels separating them from Frances who, feeling inferior, pines after Nick's approval and affection. The two have an affair. Just as she wants to wear Bobbi's face, Frances wants to "climb into [Nick's voice]," to be "suspended inside" another person, an all-encompassing, compensating totality (Rooney *Conversations* 227). And as with Bobbi, Frances strives to "make [her]self into […] someone worthy of praise, worthy of love," going so far as briefing herself on his personal and vocational history through internet searches of him (Rooney *Conversations* 41). In one clip, he plays the father of a kidnapped victim; seeing this primes Frances to sympathize with Nick when he is distracted or withdrawn. Frances cultivates a relation of abasement and gratitude to both Nick and Bobbi, taking whatever is available to feel less like "an item of garbage, an empty wrapper or a half-eaten and discarded piece of fruit" – awkward, always second best (Rooney *Conversations* 93).

The clash between Frances's desire for collectivity and her self-interested nature becomes quickly apparent. Throughout the novel, Frances watches Nick and Melissa orient instinctively towards each other at public gatherings, husband and wife gravitating towards each other "with a kind of pride," which throws into stark relief the clandestine flavour of her and Nick's rendezvous and all their shameful connotations (Rooney *Conversations* 202). As her affection for Nick deepens, Frances feels Melissa "mov[e] outside my frame of sympathy entirely, as if she belonged to a different story," yet she cannot muster the courage to outwardly dislike Melissa, opting instead to avoid eye contact (Rooney *Conversations* 70). When Nick asks Frances whether he should leave his marriage, she declines, even though having to share him – and only when he is available – makes her feel "completely disposable, like a placeholder for something more valuable" (Rooney *Conversations* 286). The question of why Frances feels unable to change conditions in which she feels unwanted is of course connected to the problem of un/belonging, it but would benefit also from an analysis that incorporates Mouffe's insights into liberal democratic citizenship.

II. Symptomology of Liberal Democracy

Frances is a paragon of liberal democratic citizenship in all its complexities and paradoxes which, broadly defined, is a hybrid regime of two different traditions. Mouffe expounds in *The Democratic Paradox* that "on one side, we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other, the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and

governed and popular sovereignty" (2-3). Mouffe draws from Carl Schmitt who was very vocal about the contradiction of the two logics: the former grants every individual self-governing status, dictating that he is born free to pursue his own interests however he wants as long as doing so is legally sanctioned and does not interfere with the rights of others, whereas the latter stresses public-spiritedness, civic activity, and, crucially, a harmonious collective will asserted by those who are welcome in the demos against those who are not. Mouffe, while wary of Schmitt's valorization of democracy – "a substantive normative and social homogeneity" [21] – concedes nonetheless that his work prompts us to think about how the ethos of collectivity in one political order is awkwardly mashed together with the individualistic ethic of another (*Return* 115). In what follows, I offer a brief overview of pluralism, rationalism, and compromise – three key yet conflicting ideals of liberal democracy – as Mouffe describes them. I amplify Mouffe's central concern, namely that the way in which modern political order is stitched together is flawed because its foundational principles of individualism and rationalism are inherently atomizing and exclusionary. These criteria of belonging are failing, unsurprisingly, to foster intimacy and reciprocity among citizens.

Schmitt sees democracy as an idealized unity of the people who identify with a singular, common project. The demos, a homogeneous state, guarantees equality to all who subscribe to it, and that specific equality always entails as its very condition of possibility some form of inequality experienced by those who are exterior to the demos (Mouffe *Paradox* 39). The problem with liberalism, according to Schmitt, is that its conception of the subject as a bearer of natural rights, a utility-maximizing agent who exists prior to society, flies in the face of democracy as something established in relation to others, a larger whole that subsumes certain individuals and not others. Put another way, liberalism, which for Schmitt is the equivalent of "democracy of humankind," is unthinkable because "an absolute human equality, an equality without the necessary correlate of inequality, would, he says, be an equality robbed of its value and substance and therefore quite meaningless" (*Return* 106). Mouffe develops this trenchant verdict further, attending to "line of demarcation between those who belong – and therefore have equal rights – and those who […] cannot have the same rights" because they fall on the other side of the line (*Paradox* 40). She argues that in the contemporary present, the radical indetermination brought on by globalization, postmodern deconstruction, and the absence of top-down power tied to a transcendental authority has left the social fabric dangerously tenuous

[21] Schmitt's provocative thesis on the necessity of homogeneity in a democracy was used later in his life to justify his intellectual support for and personal involvement with Nazism.

(Mouffe *Return* 11). Now more than ever, extreme forms of individualism "jeopard[ize] the civic bond," threatening the possibility of collectivity (Mouffe *Paradox* 96). Mouffe grapples with the dilemma of liberal democracy which presents either unity that hinges on an antagonistic frontier between *us* and *them* or a "pluralism which negates political unity," offering at best a weak *modus vivendi* model of constitutional belonging (*Paradox* 52, 43).

Despite Schmitt's view that liberalism and democracy are two irreconcilable political principles, the West of the contemporary moment largely comprises liberal-democratic states, albeit "unstable, always liable to dissolution, […] insufficient" ones (Mouffe *Paradox* 51). The focus should shift, therefore, from the incompatibility of two political traditions to not only the reality that they have coalesced but also the firmness with which liberal democracy is lodged in the public imagination.[22] If as Schmitt formulates in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* to chilling effect, "democracy requires […] first homogeneity and second – if the need arises – elimination or eradication of heterogeneity," then the question becomes: what is excluded from the demos (qtd. Mouffe *Paradox* 38)? How are relations of inclusion and exclusion, equality and inequality enforced? This question forms a central preoccupation of Mouffe's work, and the answer is particularly evident in the diction with which she recapitulates John Rawls' conception of a well-ordered society. "It tends to erase the very place of adversary," she deduces, "*expelling* any legitimate opposition from the democratic public sphere," "*preclud*[ing] 'unreasonable' views" (Mouffe *Paradox* 14, 24; emphasis added). For Rawls, liberal society comprises "reasonable persons" who exhibit "moral powers to a degree sufficient to be free and equal citizens in a constitutional regime, and who have an enduring desire to honor fair terms of cooperation and to be fully cooperating members of society" (qtd. Mouffe *Paradox* 24). Implicit in Rawls' discussion of political liberalism is therefore the notion that the 'us' is united against a 'them' by a singular, homogenous belief in a rational, unemotional compromise. In other words, impartiality – or, to be more specific, the presumption of impartiality – is the common substance of liberal-democratic society.

Mouffe's reading of Rawls makes clear that just because liberal thinking hides all necessary frontiers of exclusion behind pretences of neutrality, the fact that the public achieved its "univocal model of democratic discussion" by first discriminating between "*permissible* pluralism" and "controversial doctrines" should not go unnoticed (Mouffe *Paradox* 25, 34, 28;

[22] So all-encompassing is liberal democracy that alternative sociopolitical systems are automatically delegitimized. Its dominance recalls Mark Fisher's thesis in *Capitalist Realism*: citizens have resigned themselves to life structure by neoliberal ideology, a "pervasive atmosphere" that hangs heavily over work, education, mental health, and popular culture (16).

emphasis added). Adhesion to liberal democracy is grounded in a type of rational agreement that travels under the banner of Reason while precluding the possibility of contestation (Mouffe *Paradox* 92). The only way to participate in the demos as it is currently conceptualized in relation to liberalism is to espouse its rationalizing and individualizing values – values that, despite claims to plurality, are inherently exclusionary and "linked to the abandonment of a substantive […] vision of the common good" (Mouffe *Return* 120). Herein lies the democratic paradox: the unlikely fusion of two fundamentally antithetical political traditions such that the modern social landscape appears to honour both individual rights and promise communal belonging while, in fact, acknowledging the personhood of only a select group.

To deepen tensions further, liberalism is – though it likes to think of itself as a logic of difference – reliant on a sharp distinction between the public realm of homogeneity and the private realm of heterogeneity. Mouffe, following socialist feminist Iris Young, draws further parallels between the public/private divide of liberal citizenship and sexual citizenship, arguing that the public realm of rationalism and individualism – its unifying values – is made possible only by the relegation of women to the private sphere (*Return* 85).[23] That the universal point of view "made equivalent to Reason and reserved for men" is predicated on an equally essentialist definition of women is nothing new,[24] but it is nonetheless worth revisiting in dialogue with Schmitt's belief that "specific equalities always entail, as their very condition of possibility, some form of inequality" (Mouffe *Paradox* 39). In other words, taken together, the wide variety of sources in Mouffe's work suggests that the liberal conception of equality supposedly for everyone exists only insofar as it sits in contrast to inequality, ditto the sovereign individual endowed with 'universal' citizenship capable of rational exchange and his subhuman correlate unable to tame her instincts.

The tension embedded in liberal democracy between on the one hand, the plurality, emotionality, and heterogeneity of the individual, and on the other, the rationalist, compromise-driven model of government is not resolved but graciously suppressed. Liberal democracy but "*looks* very much like a dangerous utopia of reconciliation," Mouffe warns (*Paradox* 29; emphasis added). Nowhere is this more apparent than in Obama's legislation, which Smith in

[23] Literature on gender dichotomy as it maps onto space abounds. Wendy Brown and Nancy Fraser's insights on the relegation sequestration of women public life are detailed in Chapter 1.

[24] Jessica Benjamin exposes the discriminatory implications which attend the tacitly masculine concept of subjecthood: "the principle of rationality which social theorists since Weber have seen as the hallmark of modernity – the rationality that reduces the social world to objects of exchange, calculation, and control – is in fact a male rationality. Rationalization, at the societal level, sets the stage for a form of domination that appears to be gender-neutral, indeed, to have no subject at all. Yet its logic dovetails with the oedipal denial of woman's subjectivity, which reduces the other to object," an object to be repudiated for its emotionality and cast aside over the course of psychosexual development (184-185)

her book *On Compromise*, likens to "a good sentence or a good song: one that is grounded both in mutual interest and in mutual appreciation. One that both sides will experience as […] logical" (49). Obama, known for his notorious charm and charisma – for his ability to "make people who disagree with him still *like* him" for the most part – aptly personifies the spirit of his campaign which galvanized hope and optimism for the "imagined unification of divided interests among American public" (Smith *Compromise* 48).[25] It is this proclivity for compromise, particularly as a fully formed solution intended to appease all parties, "to eschew extremity in favor of moderation," that Smith loathes because it quells dissenting views and discourages ad hoc alliances that could have ensued (*Compromise* 13). The compromiser is someone who valorizes the virtues of expediency, resourcefulness, and tolerance while disparaging demands for major structural change as undesirable. The compromiser is, Smith denounces, "pathetically moderate" (*Compromise* 5).

Like Smith, Mouffe concludes that "consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations" (*Paradox* 49). Those power relations will not, however, feel coercive since they are exercised within a framework of public reason that everybody endorses (Mouffe *Paradox* 49, 29). Both Mouffe and Smith implore their readers to keep in mind that "the very condition for the creation of consensus is the elimination of pluralism from the public sphere" (*Paradox* 49). Liberal democratic states mistake what is but a group of individuals operating on rationalism and defaulting to compromise for a real, collective community. Liberal democracy conveniently forgets that encoded in the "impartial standpoint which is equally in the interests of all" is the uncomfortable reality that some positions are actually subject to "mechanism[s] of erasure" (Mouffe *Paradox* 87; Smith *Compromise* 131). Having elaborated on the impasse at which the liberal democratic West has arrived, this chapter will now situate the actions and attitudes of Rooney's characters within the contemporary political landscape, one laden with quiet calls for rationalism; a veneration of the individual; a steadfast devotion to compromise; and the tensions which arise between these parameters of sociopolitical belonging.

III. Rationalism and Rationalizing Reflexes

Frances's cool demeanour registers the rationalism that liberal democracy instills in its citizens. Her militant subordination of emotion to Reason promises a sense of power that helps Frances

[25] Smith's evaluation of Obama confirms Mouffe's warning that liberal democracy presents merely an illusion of unity. That consensus and neutrality are ultimately liberal fantasies was made apparent by Trump's electoral victory, which he owed to the large swathes of citizenry historically cast aside by progressive neoliberalism.

survive the disappointing conditions in which she is stuck. Discomfited by her own lust, jealousy, and vulnerability throughout the affair, Frances tries to overcome it through wit. Alternately overstating and understating her love for Nick, she protects herself by implementing an ironic distance between them which doubles as flirtation. The verbal joust following a period of separation, for example, illustrates Frances's brand of droll indifference by which she lures Nick closer:

> I smiled mechanically, and said: oh, for hurting my feelings
> Sure, if you have any, he said. […] What do you want? I could grovel but I don't think you're the kind of person it would appeal to.
> How well do you think you know me? I said. (Rooney *Conversations* 110)

Frances learned not to display emotion early in life as a child subject to the vagaries of an alcoholic father. She recounts stoically to the reader that "I would have let my real face burn[,] too," alongside the shoe he hurled past her face and into the fireplace, yet she managed to remain still, unprovoked and unprovoking (Rooney *Conversations* 49). She continues to "appear[] smart" throughout in her adult life "by staying quiet as often as possible" (Rooney *Conversations* 255). Frances's profound dread of feeling translates to the prohibition of feelings *tout court*. After a brief stay in the hospital during which she begins to mourn a (misdiagnosed) miscarriage, Frances dithers, "I didn't know what to feel about it […] I didn't know how much I was allowed to feel about it, or how much of what I felt at the time I was still allowed to feel in retrospect" (Rooney *Conversations* 177). "Feelings [a]re just feelings, they had no material reality," Frances tells herself to quell her anxiety, echoing Rawls' belief that passions have no place in a rational, just society (Rooney *Conversations* 169). The incantation serves Frances well when confronted with upsetting truths. "I just don't have feelings concerning whether you fuck your wife or not. It's not an emotive topic for me," she intones on one occasion, and when on the rare occasion tears trickle forth, she "just laugh[s] self-effacingly instead, to show that [she] [i]sn't invested in the crying" (Rooney *Conversations* 278, 71). Be it by joking about pain, rationalizing it away, or surrendering herself to it only in private – "it was okay to cry because nobody could see me, and I would never tell anyone about it" – Frances fashions a protective shield for her "inner life that nobody else […] ever touch[es]," a "barrier" between the world to which she would like to belong and what for her is an embarrassing, private self (Rooney *Conversations* 171, 287). She bats away her own feelings as well as the feelings of the people around her in an attempt to be a "very autonomous and independent" self, a paragon of universal liberal democratic citizenship (Rooney *Conversations* 288). Frances's stoicism and compartmentalizing tendencies replicate on a

micro level the principle of rationalism and its mapping onto the public/private divide which structure the macro world of liberal democracy.

For both Frances and Melissa, control and sovereignty, or the illusion thereof, are asserted through language. Several times throughout the novel, Frances is shown drafting, deleting, and rewriting emails and instant messages before finally hitting send. Adapting her prose to tailor a "fun and likeable" character; whittling it down to pithy one-liners in conversations that unfurl with the same "competitive and thrilling" momentum as "a game of table tennis"; guarding herself against insecurity by filtering out the word 'vulnerable' and its synonyms – all these facets of writing offer Frances the sense of domination (Rooney *Conversations* 30, 43, 206). The affectation of both Frances and Melissa's carefully curated words is not lost on either of them. Reflecting on Melissa's email, for instance, Frances concludes that the lack of paragraph breaks is indicative of "the tide of emotion that has swept over [Melissa]" (Rooney *Conversations* 238). Indeed, the formal contrivance on Melissa's part is intended to elicit sympathy from Frances – guilt, even – though it is offset by her cool tone which works to deter pity (Rooney *Conversations* 238). Through her deft use of language, Melissa thus manages to both play victim and hurl taunts like, "always remember who is the writer, Frances," without dipping into vitriol (Rooney *Conversations* 238). In fact, so subtle is Melissa's cruelty that Frances starts to wonder whether she has mistakenly detected unkindness in the email. Melissa would have maintained her measured, almost bemused façade were it not for an outburst later in the novel: "why did you fuck my husband?" (Rooney *Conversations* 296). That this moment of anger and anguish bubbles up during a phone call between the two is no coincidence; real-time conversations foreclose the possibility of editing thoughts into their most polished, most rational format. Whereas language has long been imagined, notably by Martha Nussbaum, to be capable of kindling sympathy and commonality among readers, boundaries between Rooney's characters are all the more fortified through the words. "Editing keeps the message and the contingent outcome of the social interaction within a personal cocoon of control," Demeyers and Vitse sum (53). Language is just another medium through which Frances's rationalism is manifested. And like her emotionally impenetrable façade, language offers an illusion of invincibility that guards against Frances's own insecurity and impotence in the short term.

Whereas, in the public arena, Frances and Melissa deal in their deft use of language, in their private lives the women are less capable of maintaining their rational, sophisticated facades. Both respectively try to monopolize Nick's affection as though hoarding can, in the words of Berlant, secure a "life lived without risk" (*Cruel* 41). Frances broods, "Did he respect

Melissa more than me? Did he like her more?" (Rooney *Conversations* 201). Melissa similarly exasperates, "he says he still loves me, but if he doesn't do what I say any more, then how can I believe him?" (Rooney *Conversations* 236). Whether through collecting details of Nick's life or overseeing his every movement, the women try to realize the fantasy of plentitude, the feeling of power that accompanies magnanimity, which is not to be confused with the joy of sharing (Berlant *Cruel* 41). By hoarding Nick's affection and choosing, supposedly, to donate some to Frances – to convey through her actions, *here, have some of Nick, I have too much anyways* – Melissa casts herself as the omnipotent subject. The same can be said of Frances's behaviour. Nick is a symbol of liberal democracy: a pawn in a game of tug of war. He is both the object of compromise between Frances and Melissa as well as a litmus test of the self-interest they try to conceal. The dynamic between the two women is illustrative of liberal democratic personhood which is staked in individualism as well as the inequality and exclusion that emerge therefrom – all three elements made more pernicious by the veneer of emotional disinterest. Frances and Melissa are products of a political order that dissuades intimacy and emotionality by virtue of its emphasis on possessive, autonomous individualism. Unable to think beyond it, they resort to a range of passive-aggressive neuroses and defensive mental manoeuvres to distill – at the very least – a sense of control, to guard their singular rational and rationalizing sovereignty.

IV. Non-imposition at the Cost of Self-Effacement

Frances's internalization of liberal democracy's ideological tenets is evident in her belief that individuals should be free and that any imposition would thus be a threat to this primary freedom (Smith *Compromise* 26). Her aforementioned habit of disappearing is key to a system whose very essence is, according to Smith, "the absence of dogma, the absence of authority, the absence of bias, the absence of prohibitory power" (*Compromise* 26). To be sure, distinctiveness is not, as Frances confuses, strictly synonymous with dogmatism. Distinctiveness is acceptable – encouraged, even – in line with the ethical principle of liberalism, which asserts that individuals should have the possibility of organizing their lives as they see fit; dogmatism, by contrast, cannot be tolerated since it carries with it the weight of extremity and imposition. Apprehensive that any kind of distinctive personality would be received as dogmatic, an affront to the *you do you* pluralist credo of liberalism, Frances retreats behind a purposefully "plain" façade (Rooney *Conversations* 83). She pays much heed to Nick's every mood, wary of "cornering" him into difficult conversations, and so averse to the idea of "trapp[ing]" him that she actively pushes him away (Rooney *Conversations* 186, 213).

Frances is, her father praises, "never […] a bit of bother" – never an imposition – always helpful yet accustomed to being ignored; this is conveyed in a scene that depicts the group of holidaymakers searching for the car keys (Rooney *Conversations* 284). Frances rises from her spot in the hallway, where already she is at a physical remove "with [her] back pressed flat against the wall, trying not to be in the way" – a wallflower, so to speak – fishes the keys off the hook, and silently drops them into Nick's hand as he breezes past (Rooney *Conversations* 137). A sentiment articulated early in the novel of her "entire appearance" being "gently erased" is applicable, too, to her personhood (Rooney *Conversations* 39). When she is not busy subjecting herself to a "weird sensation of disappearance," Frances suffers the same lingering sense of being "dead" at the hands of Nick and Bobbi when, respectively, they keep the affair "sealed up [from] other people" and "[wo]n't look at [her]" (Rooney *Conversations* 264, 202). She embodies "the detritus and the amputations that come from attempts to fit into the fold," a topic not only foundational to Berlant's oeuvre on surviving unbelonging but also one that harks back to the tacit, originary exclusions upon which a demos is founded ("Intimacy" 286).

The expectation that conflict and alterity will be absorbed into "oneness and harmony," however clumsily, surfaces in ways that Melissa and Frances respectively respond to and behave in the affair (Mouffe *Paradox* 33). "I always said I wanted him to be happy," Melissa insists in her email to Frances, adopting a position of non-interference, albeit with resentment, "even when it looks like this [tolerating Nick's tempestuous affair with Frances which has sprung him out of a depressive rut] I still want it" (Rooney *Conversations* 237). The use of "even" and "still" signal Melissa's begrudgement at the internal trade-off she must make between what she desires and what she is identifies as the best solution for all parties involved. Rationalism facilitates this awkward polyamorous compromise. That Melissa's email ends with a half-hearted invitation to have dinner all together, the four of them, further corroborates the observation that Melissa is primarily motivated by the *idea* of a collectivity. "I know I can't ask him to stop seeing you, although I want to. I could ask you to stop seeing him, but why should I?" Melissa acknowledges in her email to Frances after she is notified of the affair – an acknowledgement that chafes against the possessive, autonomous individualism previously discussed (Rooney *Conversations* 237). Implicit in the message is Melissa's acknowledgment that asking Nick to "pledge himself to [her] exclusively" would be to insult his personhood as defined by liberal thinking (Rooney *Conversations* 277). Her understanding of relationality evokes Smith's formulation of liberalism: a social order rooted in "subtraction" (*Compromise* 26). Both women are devoted to the stability of a system that *feels* fair while also *feeling* free, forgetting that this atmosphere is in fact, Smith reminds us through a Foucauldian

deconstruction of liberalism, an intelligible marker of fulfilling citizenship only because it has been instilled as such (*Compromise* 26). For Frances, likewise, the stalemate in which she has emplaced herself feels like "an incoherent mess of people who aren't listening" to each other but must nonetheless make room for each other, peacekeeping for their own survival and belonging (Smith *Compromise* 4). For both women, carefully honed rationalism prevents them from grasping the inconsistencies between liberal democracy's veneration of the individual, on the one hand, and, on the other, its demand for a homogeneous state cobbled together through compromise – inconsistencies that saturate their private, affective lives.

V. Preserving the Fantasy of Sovereignty through Consent

Frances's commitment to neutrality and to compromise persists despite her acute and recurrent disappointment because she is unable to imagine a different matrix of relationality. "Unconditional love […] can provide selfless care and support," Mary Evans observes in *Love: An Unromantic Discussion*, "equally the expectation (or the aspiration) of unconditional love can underpin and legitimate abusive and violent patterns of behavior" (105). Applied to Frances's predicament, this statement rings especially true if we define 'unconditional' as having no bargaining power. In other words, Frances settles for diminished conditions of possibility due to a lack of a better alternative; she has no exemplar of reciprocity – neither social nor familial – to which to aspire. She resigns herself to living out her own erasure in the hopes that she might find belonging in Nick. She voluntarily silences her most ardent needs and desires for a sliver of the metaphorical pie. In fact, Frances learns to thrive off (self-)effacement. She convinces herself that she chose the liberal, laissez-faire attitude, and that by virtue of choosing to take herself out of the equation for the sake of expediency and compromise, she reappropriates what power is lost in giving up her say. "Go ahead," she says, "live your life," right before Nick ends their phone conversation abruptly to join his wife (Rooney *Conversations* 188). Proclaimed in the imperative tense, which places emphasis on the second person rather than the speaker, Frances's directive performs on a syntactical level what she does on a relational level: foreground Nick. The subject of sentence is Nick, the *you* of "your life," while Frances, the *I*, is only implied (Rooney *Conversations* 188). Yet, at the same time, Frances – and not Nick – is the one giving the order; her directive, firm yet nonchalant, masks her disappointment in having "lost" him once again (Rooney *Conversations* 188). It contrives, as consolation, a sense of control over a situation in which Frances has no real say.

Further corroborating the notion that Frances recuperates power through embracing her erasure is an exchange between the two lovers just prior to the farewell. He poses a rhetorical question – "I have to go, all right?" – to which she mumbles "sure" (Rooney *Conversations* 188). Her acquiescence to a question that necessitated no reply is telling of a desire to assert herself even as she is not only being neglected while also agreeing to said neglect. Frances perverts selflessness into a self-soothing, self-deluding source of power. "No, I'm not in a bad mood with anyone," she says, "clench[ing] [her] teeth," when, much later in the novel, Melissa tries to goad her into admitting otherwise (Rooney *Conversations* 280). Frances despises having to share the two dearest people in her life with Melissa, yet she also yearns to live harmoniously with everyone. She hides her resentment behind her practiced impassivity, replacing emotions with "niceness," but it feels disingenuous (Rooney *Conversations* 297). Her cordiality, especially towards Melissa, is not only hollow but also, as Bobbi discerns, "a kind of stand-in [for power]" (Rooney *Conversations* 297). By telling herself that she consents to compromised conditions, Frances is able not only to mollify the pain that they produce but also to restore some sense of control over circumstances that are anything but.

Frances's self-harming habits can be parsed in the same way as her self-erasure, namely in concert with the self-deluding idea she can "transform [her] suffering into something useful" (Rooney *Conversations* 275). At various points in the novel, Frances hurts herself physically and emotionally: punching and scalding herself; pinching her skin until she bleeds; testing Nick's loyalty by picking fights with him; provoking Bobbi for the same reason. Like most, she treats self-harm as fleeting relief; unlike most, she uses it to "fe[el] a rush of [her] own power" (Rooney *Conversations* 199). Nick Mansfield's book *Masochism: the Art of Power* engrosses in precisely this double-pronged conception of the wounded, self-wounding subject who enjoys states that appear to be painful, tedious, or humiliating. "The essence of masochism," he relays, following Krafft-Ebing's analysis thereof, "is not so much the enjoyment of pain as the 'drama' of subjection" (Mansfield 3). One time in bed, Frances asks Nick to "[thrust] harder, although it hurt a little"; not moments later, she pivots, declaring, "I want[] it to hurt" (Rooney *Conversations* 125, 126). Another time, she impulsively lifts one of Nick's hands and presses it against her throat and murmurs, "you can do whatever you want with me" (Rooney *Conversations* 214-215). "I want you to kill me," she thinks (Rooney *Conversations* 215). Frances derives fulfilment from the denial of her own subjectivity, a denial that she herself orchestrates with Nick as the vehicle. The discomfort – the shame, the self-loathing – that this auto-dehumanization produces is, Mansfield notes, "proof of [the masochist's] success in transforming [her]self into an object of the other's desire" (16-17).

Frances is an active participant in her own unmaking, constituting her subjecthood "as a *nothing*" subsumed by the *everything* that she projects onto Nick (Mansfield 17). Although Frances habitually refuses to see it, self-mutilation and self-renunciation function as paradoxical avenues by which she affirms her agency. Homologous modes of self-erasure, her submission in bed and self-abnegation in public are simultaneously products of and weakly rebellious responses to liberal democracy's conflicting ideals.[26]

Like the antiheroine in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Frances troubles the presumed link between passivity and disempowerment for not only is she the object of suffering, she also directs that suffering unto herself. In her love life as in her political one, she inhabits a position of passivity – a malleable *whateverness* – as a kind of control management. Frances's unmaking of herself is "a mode of subjectivity rather than […] subordination": her helplessness is wielded strategically (Mansfield 87). In bargaining for intimacy, Frances endures conditions that require her to compromise personal ethics and desires – conditions predicated on her self-erasure. Acquiescing to them, whether consciously or intuitively, affords Frances the illusion of agency which is just enough to keep her tethered to a matrix of unbelonging. In her desperation to get along with everybody, and particularly in her insistence that Nick stay with Melissa, Frances makes manifest the philosophical conflict between liberalism and democracy: she tries to be sensitive of everyone's needs and feelings, careful not to violate the sacrosanct autonomy of every individual party. She displays a *you do you* attitude that, in the contemporary present, is meant to promote inclusivity and plurality, but, as the readers becomes quickly aware, this approach of non-interference does not serve Frances in the slightest (Smith *Compromise* 150). The *you do you* attitude actually thwarts her many attempts at securing relations of reciprocity. But liberalism tends to disavow any criticism levelled against it because the supposed pluralism and the freedom on which it is structured is so readily endorsed. "We are better at identifying ideologies that are repressive," Smith explains, "we have a harder time talking about ideologies that are individualizing, those that tell us to be ourselves" with little regard for the collective aspects of social life (*Compromise* 25).

VI. Identification as Brittle Belonging

[26] That Frances's submissive behaviour in public as in private are also coloured, moreover, by her postfeminist environment is explored in the penultimate section of this chapter.

Over time, Frances comes to realize that while her emotional disinvestment, self-abnegation, and will to power help her tolerate conditions of minimal reciprocity, these affective strategies create only intensify her isolation. “I guess you don’t worry,” Nick presumes of Frances, a comment which makes her feel “cold like an inanimate object,” especially in light of several recent health scares which she must now, having established for herself a reputation of invulnerability, grapple with alone (Rooney *Conversations* 274). Frances’s paranoia that “people were always wanting [her] to show some weakness so they could reassure me [and therefore] feel worthy” not only feeds many a pretentious delusion about her character but also obstructs the formation of authentic bonds (Rooney *Conversations* 274). At best, emotional impenetrability serves as identification between her and Melissa, who remains, at least outwardly, unfazed by Frances’s cerebreality and “coolness” (Rooney *Conversations* 45). Even in a rare moment of reconciliation following the guessing game during which, to Melissa’s dismay, Nick’s infatuation with Frances is made excruciatingly obvious, both women are cautious not to show too much feeling, distrustful of the laughter that springs forth from their short conversation. Melissa compliments Frances for being her husband’s type by virtue of their dispositional and vocational similarities, while Frances validates the esteem Melissa bestows on her by implicitly agreeing that Nick has “great taste in women” (Rooney *Conversations* 131). The fact that the singular glimmer of genuine rapport between the two women arises out of mutual flattery which teeters close to narcissism certifies what Elizabeth Abel argued in her article on the dynamics of female friendship: “identification replaces complementarity as the psychological mechanism that draws women together” (415). Whereas Abel views identification as a more substantial and positive foundation for friendship than, say, the commonality of pastimes, within the context of Frances and Melissa’s relationship, the “disinterest” which both “plain and emotionally cold women” exhibit and recognize in the other cripples any potential for real intimacy (Rooney *Conversations* 45, 83).

Both Frances and Melissa covet in the other a curious melange of ruthlessness and composure that they themselves display. They abuse Nick with little forethought or remorse. Frances reveals that she tried to “steal” Melissa’s life, from inhabiting the physical space Melissa shares with Nick to emulating her bourgeois habits (Rooney *Conversations* 297). The tendency to overpower the people in their platonic lives as in their romantic ones is evident, moreover, in Frances’s characterization of Bobbi as a “a mystery,” “a force” that she “subjugate[s]” (Rooney *Conversations* 224). Melissa, likewise, tries to sour the girls’ relationship by sending Bobbi a copy of Frances’s story which expropriates her friend’s life. Although both Frances and Melissa purport to care about and compromise for the idea of

collective wellbeing, the women are in fact guided by a paranoid selfishness. "Part of me wishes I could be friends with you," Melissa rues (Rooney *Conversations* 236). In return, while on the phone with Melissa, Frances retrospects, "I wish I had gotten to know you better and treated you with more kindness" (Rooney *Conversations* 297-298). The best they can manage with each other is a strained relationship reminiscent of the Freudian Electra complex. "Maybe I think of [Melissa] as my mother," Frances ponders fittingly, unable to tease apart rivalry from attachment; speaking with each other is like "rac[ing] each other up a set of stairs" (Rooney *Conversations* 298, 297). Right as the conversation begins to be productive, following the mutual, cathartic confession of their insecurities and acknowledgement of the enmity between them, Frances decides to hang up. She yearns for reciprocity yet struggles to maintain open channels of communication. The traits shared by Frances and Melissa work simultaneously to convene the two in a relation of uncanny identification and to repel the two apart.

As this analysis has shown, even though liberalism, with its principles of fair exchange and public decency, may appear to be evacuated of all injustices, those injustices are still salient in other spheres, namely the affective lives of citizens. Dedicating each chapter of *Ugly Feelings* to a minor, noncathartic feeling, Ngai argues that envy is a diagnostic tool for social disparities, but it unfortunately "lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode [of political critique]" (Ngai *Ugly* 128). The historical moralization and feminization of envy, specifically its conflation with *ressentiment* and hysteria, means that experiences thereof are readily ascribed to private dissatisfactions and psychological flaws, transformed from an affect that foregrounds a clearly defined, politically important object to a state that discredits its subject as deficient and diseased.[27] Ngai notes that the feminization of envy in the nineteenth century was accompanied by the social prohibition of its expression during the twentieth. The gendered "paradoxical injunction" surrounding the ignoble feeling – "femininity entails being naturally or inevitably prone to envy or jealousy, but also never prone to envy or jealousy" – left women "doubly 'dispositioned'" (Ngai *Ugly* 129). Disinclined to express "antiproprietory" feelings for fear that they would be shunned as petty or histrionic, women passively mould themselves to an "antagonism-free" female homosociality forfeiting what could have been productive acknowledgments of their disaffection and its source (Ngai *Ugly* 167). Envy, political inefficacious, is a metaphor for the way in which liberal democracy sequesters injustice to the private sphere.

[27] Bad feelings and their dismissal are extensively discussed in the previous chapter.

I argue that the constraints imposed on (female) aggression as well as the endorsement of "sympathetic identification" between women intersects with liberal democracy's principles of rationalism and compromise (Ngai *Ugly* 33). Frances and Melissa's reluctance to critique the polyamorous paradigm stems not only from their values as citizens of liberal democracy, but also from the gender ideal to which they both subscribe. Making demands – for better policies, for better love – infringes upon liberalism's "do-your-own-thing" spirit and is thus demonized as authoritarian or weak (Smith *Compromise* 154). And no one – neither Melissa nor Frances, especially – wants to be seen as illiberal, or, worse, the feminized equivalent: overbearing, needy, jealous. The affective discipline historically foisted on women, which has in recent decades been reinforced by postfeminism's revival of neotraditional tropes, works in collusion with the fundaments of liberal democratic ideology to suppress potential means of recognizing and forming coalitions against social inequalities. These comorbid hindrances further undermine what limited sense of the belonging is possible by the fragile *modus vivendi* model of citizenship premised on a muddled sense of identification.

VII. Guilty Complicity and Performed Radicalism

The belief that, as Mouffe formulates, "all interests can be reconciled and that everybody – provided, of course, that they identify with 'the project' – can be part of 'the people'" is the glue that has kept Third Way neoliberalism intact (*Paradox* 4). Under the guise of updating democratic ideals, neoliberal thinkers advocated flexibility among citizens such that they would meet each other in the middle. The convergence of self- and group-interest under neoliberal hegemony was presented as radical, promising to respect the autonomy of citizens while facilitating their harmonious coexistence through neutral procedures (Mouffe *Paradox* 5). As the Left shifted closer to the right in the last few decades, euphemistically redefining themselves as 'centre-left,' the left-right antagonism that has historically powered politics dissolved, and Third Way governments have been demoted to "some kind of clearing house," a referee between competing elites whose priority is not the ever-changing wellbeing of the demos, but their own private gain (Mouffe *Paradox* 52). The refusal of confrontation voids the state's "ethical role and its capacity to represent [its] people," and as a result, Mouffe rightly predicted, right-wing populist parties have gained traction because they appear to be the only anti-Establishment force interested in the will of the masses (*Paradox* 116). Mouffe opined, back in the 1990s, that this excess of compromise and consensus would endanger democracy just as much as an excess of discord has in the past imperilled it (*Return* 6). She further

predicted that individualistic yet compromise-driven neoliberal culture would breed apathy among the populace towards political participation.

Mouffe's prediction, while accurate of the post-political zeitgeist of the 1990s and 2000s when technocrats were exclusively in charge of policy, does not ring true twenty years on. Anton Jäger contends that far from being diffident or indifferent, citizens in the contemporary present are hungry for "abstract types of solidarity." From the Occupy movement in the United States to the anti-austerity ruckus in Britain and later the Brexit referendum, the West has seen a resurgence of interest in politics with zealots self-organizing protests whose "curious combination of the horizontal and the hierarchical" have replaced clear, bipartisan party frameworks. What Jäger calls today's "hyper-politics," though highly impermanent and disappointing in their inability to effect tangible, structural change, cannot be characterized as apathetic so much as impotent. The political spirit of the contemporary moment is in fact robust yet ultimately "a feeble alternative to [that of] the twentieth century" (Jäger). The hegemony of Third Way neoliberalism endures due not to a lack of appetite for structural overhaul but, in large part, to the obstruction of our collective imagination and over-emphasis on doing the best one can, given the circumstances, without upsetting others in the process.

Anger, both spawned and dulled by disempowerment, is rife throughout Rooney's oeuvre; her novels capture the hyper-political moment in that they feature characters whose political fervour is palpable yet lame. To evince the pervasiveness of politics in contemporary popular culture and popular fiction, I shall continue my discussion of *Conversations with Friends* while expanding my analytic ambit to include the recently published *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*. Frances and her cohort are fluent in political radicalism, periodically launching into debates about racism, pay gap feminism, mental health, police brutality, and immigration, but all their arguments are mellow, aestheticized and diluted into quips. Self-declared Marxists, they claim to "want[] to destroy capitalism" and concede that owning a house is "troubling" (Rooney *Conversations* 75). The two friends at the centre of *Beautiful World* are of a similar ilk: white, cosmopolitan, on the cusp of thirty, and smitten with leftist ideals, including, of course, with the new, "cool" thing, communism (Rooney *Beautiful* 102). These facts are gleaned from Rooney's spare prose which, in contrast to the free-indirect discourse of *Conversations with Friends*, situates the narrator at much more of a remove. Only through the email correspondence which interleaves the plot proper does the reader catch a glimpse of Alice and Eileen's interior monologues which comprise mainly of digressive musings on "abject poverty," identarian uprisings, the "lurid ugliness" of plastics, and childrearing in a time of civilizational decline (Rooney *Beautiful* 17, 207). For Rooney's characters, politics do not

amount to much more than a performance, a surefire if short-lived way to feel good in feeling righteous.

Despite their frustrations, Rooney's characters surrender themselves to the status quo, the very source of their disenfranchisement. Frances professes a "disinterest in wealth" and "failure to take an interest in [her] own life" yet continues to pursue normative success, securing an internship at an eminent publishing house, fixating on material possessions, and trying to win Melissa's esteem on a professional front despite the tensions in their personal relationship (Rooney *Conversations* 23). Melissa, in turn, caters to her mentor Valerie's every whim, cognizant that the reward is more publishing opportunities thanks to the latter's influence and old money (Rooney *Conversations* 93). Frances, too, experiences firsthand the benefits of seizing Valerie's attention with her first prose piece. Seniority, so hard-won, is relished by the elders: at dinner *chez* Melissa, Valerie makes the girls laugh, "but in the same way you might make someone eat something when they don't fully want to eat it" (Rooney *Conversations* 13). Bobbi's vandalism of a plaster cast crucifix during her secondary school years, moreover, turns out to be but a show of teenage angst by a girl who panders to her father Jerry, a high-ranking civil servant generously excluded from Bobbi's otherwise "rigorous anti-establishment principles" (Rooney *Conversations* 31). For all her independence and colourful character, Bobbi ultimately pines after the approval of her elders like all her peers. She is, like Frances, not rebellious but filial, at once the romantic interest and surrogate "twin" daughter of Melissa and Nick who have assumed a "parent[al]" role, facilitating the girls' debutante into world of millennial adulthood (Rooney *Conversations* 238). Personal ethics and aspirations are subject to compromise, bound by a platitude of liberal pragmatism: *life's unfair*.

The political angst and fatalism, though somewhat charming, are insufficient; socioeconomic problems figure but obliquely in Rooney's novels. In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances's lower-class background reveals itself through only sporadic mentions of her overdraft and the fact that she had never tasted avocado before meeting Nick. In *Beautiful World*, similarly, accoladed and overqualified Eileen's meagre salary as an editor at a prestigious literary magazine is mentioned only once towards the novel's close. Aside from the brief juxtaposition of internationally acclaimed writer Alice's typical work day within the comforts of her "chaotically huge" home and that of her boyfriend Felix, a subcontracted worker for an Amazon-type warehouse, which successfully illuminates the arbitrary hierarchization of labour, or their respective positions in the housing market – having paid off her mother's mortgage, financially wanton Alice spends her money "randomly" whereas Felix has just inherited a house that has ten years still left to pay – which successfully foregrounds

the absurdity of class stratification, Rooney's characters are rarely depicted actually working or struggling (*Beautiful* 18, 254).

They are unlikeable yet familiar for their sense of helpless alienation which is as *au courant* as the topics they intellectualize. Alice ends her excursus on global labour supply chains with a concession: "I feel bad, even for the rest of the week – so what? I still have to buy lunch [from the convenience store]" (Rooney *Beautiful* 18). Eileen likewise concludes from her decade of "achieving precisely nothing" that her younger self was mistaken to think she mattered, that anything she did would matter (Rooney *Beautiful* 209). When confronted with the fact that they merely pay lip service to the values with which they seem besotted, the characters resort to fatalism: "I will probably continue to make poor life decisions and suffer recurrent depressive episodes […] maybe it was always going to be that way, and there was never anything we could have done" (Rooney *Beautiful* 249). *Beautiful World*, and, to a lesser though nonetheless significant degree, *Conversations with Friends* feature young, white protagonists whose acknowledgement of their privilege is the best that they can muster. Cynical self-awareness tainted with self-congratulation is passed off as actual class critique, a compromised form of political activism common among Millennials stuck in an imaginary impasse.

Annabel Barry's is one of many voices that criticize "the gimmicky nature" of Rooney's work which, based on Ngai's definition of the gimmick, designates the use of "overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labor-saving tricks) but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention)" (*Theory of the Gimmick* 1). Barry faults Rooney's staging of political critiques as emails between the protagonists, specifically their sequestration into neat, little chapters that are easily compartmentalized. This formal decision triggers a mimetic relation: like Rooney's characters, readers of *Beautiful World* encounter the political only when convenient and only in piecemeal fashion. Rooney herself seems aware of the shortfalls that riddle her attempt at galvanizing political engagement through fiction. As Alice articulates, fortune and celebrity removes writers from "ordinary life," posing a problem for those whose entire brand is about ordinary life (Rooney *Beautiful* 95). Yet "to put the fact of […] poverty" – the reality of ordinary life – "side by side with the lives of the 'main characters' of a novel" feels "tasteless," "artistically unsuccessful" (Rooney *Beautiful* 96). The implied conundrum here is: how to redress the political impotence of contemporary personhood and that of the novel form? Rooney's solution, I now elucidate, is to combine her desire to promulgate Marxism with her interest in conventional romantic plotlines centered on characters bumbling

through the minefields of intimacy, though, as these final sections shall show, this literary manoeuvre is not without issues either.

VIII. Compromise Aesthetic: Writing and Reading Under Neoliberalism

Rooney's novels engross in the possibility of forging substantial, sustaining attachments within contemporary landscapes which feel irrecuperably atomized for reasons that can be, as this chapter has suggested, attributed to the liberal democratic values inscribed in its cultural matrix. The narrative trajectories of *Conversations with Friends* and *Beautiful World* imply that romance is able to bridge the gap between hyperindividualistic, hyperrational characters such that they start to perceive themselves as part of not only a loving dyad but also a broader collectivity. This upcoming section interrogates Rooney's proclivity for heteroidealist endings that resolve all too neatly the internal contradictions of liberal democracy and thereby relieve her characters of their political and personal conflict. It investigates both the motivations behind these happily-ever-afters as well as their execution. The chapter's penultimate section which follows then challenges this conservative thrust, exposing the oversights and contradictions that riddle Rooney's attempts to integrate an already ambivalently political message with the generic conventions of romance. If the first half of this chapter tracked through its analysis of *Conversations with Friends* the ways in which liberal democracy relies on the ethicopolitical principle of compromise to sustain its progressive image of stability, community, and reconciliation, then the task now at hand is to demonstrate and problematize through a discussion of *Beautiful World* the ways in which Rooney exercises a compromise aesthetic in order to curate the same impression of togetherness on a diegetic level.

Mine is not the only project to study compromise aesthetic. Smith turns her analytical eye to the notion of compromise within not only the context of politics but also the realm of contemporary literature, offering a concise definition and critique of a recently popularized writerly practice that combines experimentalism and realism. Instead of challenging orthodoxies, she explains, these artistic compromises

> are often interpreted by listeners, critics, and scholars as signalling not tension, but compatibility. I call this interpretation of stylistic hybridity – the belief that works of art can reconcile tensions between […] the popular and the avant-garde – *compromise aesthetic*. (Smith *Compromise* 52)

This definition of compromise aesthetic resonates with what Smith calls the affective hypothesis proffered in a previous work, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, namely that "literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits

[…] emotional specificity" (1). Readers, she remarks, tend to latch onto characters whose dramas are likely to reward their affective investments therein in much the same way that contemporary neoliberal citizens tend to cultivate friendships not out of altruism but rather an economic incentivization to network. By consuming books that enable the ready formation of affective ties which supply the anticipated emotional payoff, readers reify the neoliberal agenda of self-enrichment (Smith *Affect* 40).[28] Compromise aesthetic is modeled by writers like David Foster Wallace whose difficult yet seductive work, in allowing the reader to "feel smart *and* be entertained," appeals to a wide audience (Smith *Compromise* 64). Synthesizing Smith's insights from her two books, a congruity between compromise aesthetic and liberal democracy's compromise culture emerges: both try to provide a common ground – a third way, so to speak – that can appease people across sociopolitical lines while retaining some individual flair.

Just as the tendency towards compromise in the political sphere is "bad" because it blocks generative conflict, "by perpetuating the belief that stylistic differences can be easily reconciled, compromise aesthetics can erase what often makes hybrid works interesting in the first place: their performance of disjunction, dissent, conflict" (Smith *Compromise* 11, 52). Compromise aesthetic imposes "a permanent peace," leaving little curiosity for work that tip the scales in favour of messy, potentially disruptive revelations (Smith *Compromise* 11). That complicity with the status quo – liberal democracy, market trends, digestible artistic fare – is not simply "banal and almost entirely automatic" but something actively sought and celebrated alarms Smith (*Compromise* 117, 130). "Of course," she concedes, "literary culture […] has always been attached to the ruling class 'by an umbilical cord of gold'"; as bottom-line rationale began to encroach on publishers whose editorial choices in turn corseted writers into penning work that could be successfully marketed, the notion of an avant-garde became quickly obsolete (Smith *Compromise* 67). To acknowledge the social and economic underpinnings of art is one thing, but to praise works that foreground their capitulation to contemporary market conditions yet temper any interest in challenging them is a different irresponsibility altogether, one Smith cannot abide. And, as the previous section elucidated, it is precisely this kind of work that Rooney produces, populated with characters who cultivate just enough of a political

[28] Smith builds on Jonathan Franzen's essay 'Mr. Difficult' which posits two divergent models of literary value, the Contract model and Status model. She theorizes two modes of feeling: personal feelings, on the one hand, that can be manipulated, circulated, and owned like personal property and, on the other, impersonal feelings that resist incorporation into the market. The feelings that are acknowledged under the affective hypothesis and fortified by compromise aesthetic are largely of the personal domain, carefully curated and easily digestible by readers seeking immediate gratification.

consciousness to be fashionable without veering too close to the unseemly realm of dogma. Mirroring the way in which compromise aesthetic incorporates yet blunts critique for the sake of readerly payoff, preserving the political and literary status quo in the process, Rooney's characters sheepishly yet smugly proclaim their complicity to unjust structures, upholding, through their entertaining self-reflexivity, normative attitudes towards existing lifeworlds.

Widely lauded as "the first great millennial novelist," a spokesperson for her generation, Rooney's owes her cachet to her compromise aesthetic, seducing her loyal readership with the promise of an entertaining love plot while self-reflexively grappling with societal decay.[29] The lucrative adaptation of her novels into blockbuster television series serves as evidence of Rooney's successful balancing act. The prevalence of romance in Rooney's work is explained by her character Alice: fiction reflects and stokes the reader's desire to "care […], as we do in real life, whether people break up or stay together" (*Beautiful* 96). Concurring, Eileen writes that the contemporary novel's preoccupation with sex and friendship derives from the inalienable, intense investment in families, friends, and lovers which grips contemporary life: "that is what I do every day. […] after all, when people are lying on their deathbeds, don't they always start talking about their spouses and children? (Rooney *Beautiful* 111). Characters are vexed as much by their desire for intimacy as their political impotence; indeed, the two preoccupations are tightly imbricated, with the former serving as a heartening distraction in times of miserable inequity and suffering. Rooney offers piercing portraits of the private, psychological register of the times but is, at the same time, careful to spice up her self-described "nineteenth-century novels in contemporary dress" with just enough revolutionary intrigue to be interesting but not off-putting (qtd. Collins). In so doing, she has skyrocketed in popularity and been rewarded financially, appearing to challenge but ultimately maintaining the cultural and literary status quo through her stylistic hybridity.

Heterosexual romance is not just prevalent but inevitable in the novels. All of their female characters approach intimacy robotically, ironically, ambivalently, but their skepticism only bolsters the realism of Rooney's twenty-first-century romance plots, heightening the stakes of the will-they-won't-they dynamics at play. Like other obstacles encountered along the way, their reticence simply sweetens the prospect of coupledom. Rooney's invocation of queerness and nonmonogamy, moreover, may seem at first like a timely, refreshing break from the

[29] Critic Constance Grady observes, "[Rooney] is a signifier of a certain kind of literary chic. If you read Sally Rooney, the thinking seems to go, you're smart, but you're also fun — and you're also cool enough to be suspicious of both 'smart' and 'fun' as general concepts. That's the kind of balancing act Rooney is able to pull off in her books."

marriage plot, but they are ultimately, respectively, unconsummated and underdeveloped. In both narratives, redemption takes the shape of heterosexual unions. For a period following her breakup with Nick, Frances "develop[s] an alternative model of loving each other" with Bobbi (Rooney *Conversations* 299). The girls even resume their sexual relationship, though it remains underdeveloped, lacking all the tantalizing explicitness of *hetero*sexual scenes. In the end, Frances predictably slides back into Nick's arms. Tellingly, *Conversations with Friends* closes with Frances asking Nick to "come and get [her]," a phrase which summons to mind the image of a damsel, rescued (Rooney 336). The parallel marriage plots in *Beautiful World* are more straightforward which points to an increasingly traditional trend in Rooney's work. Nominally bisexual Alice and Felix find themselves, despite his fickle affections and thanks to her generous exculpation of his bad behaviour, in a makeshift relationship; after a decade-long period of pining after each other, coy, capricious Eileen and taciturn Simon finally have their happily-ever-after, one tinged with conventionalism redolent of Austen's feel-good *Emma*. Whereas the analysis of Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy in Chapter 1 demonstrated the enduring investment in heterosexuality even if it is known to be detrimental to flourishing, this chapter discerns through its discussion of Rooney's work the same investment – the same stickiness, the same inescapability – albeit the characters in question here vacillate between heteropessimist and heteroidealist registers. For all their wariness of romantic intimacy, Rooney's novels ensure that it triumphs anyways, delivering the anticipated, universally pleasing love story that counterbalances what few destabilizing frictions are encountered along the way and overshadowing other kinds of relationships, even the friendships around which both narratives are ostensibly centered.

IX. Compromise Aesthetic: Attempting to Politicize Palatable Heteroidealism

Anticipating the attendant guilt of indulging in escapist romance stories, Eileen confesses, in the apologist fashion typical of Rooney's main characters, "it seems vulgar, decadent, even epistemically violent, to invest energy in the trivialities of sex and friendship when human civilisation is facing collapse" (Rooney *Beautiful* 111). To facilitate the circumvention of this guilt, I argue, Rooney gives heterosexual coupledom political purchase. In her article "Consolations of Heterosexual Monogomy," Sarah Brouillette's notes that Rooney's novels pit heteronormativity against the existential threat of purposelessness – "penis in place of the void, if you will" – and that characters across her oeuvre are haunted by a desire to contribute something to the world, preferably something sublimated, be it photography, critical essays, prestige fiction, or progressive policy work. Linking these two observations, Brouillette notes

that the urge to contribute meaningfully is mapped onto the moral imperative of respectable coupledom and childbirth. The novels promote the idea that romance is a productive, worthwhile pursuit – perhaps the only one left.[30] None of Rooney's characters can "offer [a] defence of coercive heterosexual monogamy," yet they believe that "at least it [i]s an effort at something, and not just a sad sterile foreclosure on the possibility of life" (Rooney *Beautiful* 186). Elaborating on Brouillette's insights, I track instances in which Rooney's work strives to reconcile its aspirational Marxist agenda with its romantic plotlines. Her novels reroute a socialist understanding of collectivity of the former through the sentimental logic of the latter, cementing not only romance's practical import but also its political one. If Smith's definition of compromise aesthetic is a bipartite concept, then the compromise aesthetic of Rooney's work specifically is tripartite: literary composites that allow the reader to feel tested and gratified *and* politically awakened.

The characters in *Conversations with Friend* and *Beautiful World* begin to see themselves as part of larger communities through coupling with their respective lovers. Eileen's existential angst abates when she thinks of Simon: "he was present, and Dublin was like an advent calendar concealing him behind one of its million windows, and the quality of the air was instilled, the temperature was instilled, with his presence" (Rooney *Beautiful* 164). Remembering that he and Alice, her love interest and singular best friend, are metaphysically besides her, kindles a gratitude and "openness […] toward the world" that had recently been lost (Rooney *Beautiful* 165). Frances's relationships with others – with the world – likewise take on a porous quality after Nick relents, "I do love you, you know. Of course I do" (Rooney *Conversations* 233). Moved by his words, she unlearns the tendency to rationalize or control the behaviours of those around her – a thorny affair, especially since she previously derived a sense of sovereignty from the illusion therefrom – acknowledging that healing becomes possible only when needs and weaknesses are aired in mutually caring relationships. Only in light of his love does Frances understand that Bobbi's decision to run her a bath, connect her with Nick over the phone, and promptly leave the bathroom such that they could converse privately is not a mark of defeat on Bobbi's part – not a surrender to Nick – but rather a strategic absence that would optimize Frances's wellbeing. Only in retrospect does Frances grasp that "a new relation" is made possible between her and her peers in looking to the side of the competition and domination of liberal democracy, towards love (Rooney *Conversations* 243).

[30] Brouillette further argues that the pressure to engage solely in (re)productive projects and pastimes casts sex work, a motif in *Beautiful World*, as distinctly degrading, exploitative, and unproductive to – and unproductive of – future generations.

This spirit of interdependence climaxes in a hallucinatory spiritual awakening. Suffering an endometriosis-induced cramp, Frances hobbles into a church, where, from the realization that the pew on which she sits was sanded and vanished and installed there by another human being, she extrapolates the connectivity of humankind:

> Who put me here […], thinking these thoughts? Am I myself, or am I them? Is this me, Frances? No, it is not me. It is the others. […] Do I want to be free of pain and therefore demand that others also live free of pain, the pain which is mine and therefore also theirs, yes, yes. […] the cells of my body seemed to light up like millions of glowing points of contact, and I was aware of something profound. (Rooney *Conversations* 294-295)

An indirect critique of popular contemporary values, like autonomy and rationalism, which inhibit recognition of the embeddedness of individual lives, the novel's valorization of commonality and communality is reiterated a few pages later when Frances imparts a truism with deadly earnest: "To love someone under capitalism you have to love everyone" (Rooney *Conversations* 298). It captures the way in which the two, central fixations of Rooney's work are welded together into a radical yet nonetheless approachable message.

The shift away from the atomizing values of liberal democracy towards an enlightened ethic of care which starts bromidically as a boy-meets-girl love story is reinforced by the religious themes in Rooney's work. In other words, just as Rooney's orthopaedic aesthetic tries to conflate the romantic with the political, it seeks also to manufacture a link between the religious and the political. In both novels, God and Jesus are synonymous with love and altruism, an "organized" delusion from which, most of the characters are convinced, society would do well to draw inspiration (Rooney *Beautiful* 82). To performatively "do the right thing on earth" in line with the example set by God who "kind of literally 'is' [beauty and truth]" would be just as effective as "attempt[ing] […] to describe the difference between right and wrong" (Rooney *Beautiful* 330). Religion is as good a fiction as any, Alice concludes, inviting devotees to "love fictional characters"; like other evocative texts, scripture inspires its reader to cultivate a "sympathetic engagement [which] is a form of desire with an object but without a subject, a way of wanting without wanting" (Rooney *Beautiful* 330, 232). This conceptualization of religion's structuring function chimes, moreover, with Alice's meditation on the fluidity of human relationships which, she concludes, need a "preordained shape" – a "vessel marked 'mother and child'" or 'siblings' or 'married couple' – to contain the water that she analogizes to the intangible substance of intimacy lest it "run off in all directions" (Rooney *Beautiful* 92, 93). A system of belief deinstitutionalized and reconfigured into an affective form, religion's primary function in Rooney's novels is pedagogical. A tentative link between

Catholicism and heteronormative romantic coupledom emerges: both are avenues by which the characters educate themselves in caring for one another. Adhering closely to romance's generic conventions, Rooney employs various formal and thematic choices that amount to a compromise aesthetic in order to meet diverse readerly expectations, yield lucrative returns, and – I argue – peddle the utopian possibility of intimacy and reciprocity on the level of both individuals and society. The political engagement of her novels lies in excavating "the deep buried principle of […] love" among individual characters and readers such that it might become available on a broader scale, thus easing existential loneliness and cultural atomization simultaneously (Rooney *Beautiful* 3).

X. Romantic Conventions, Reparative Ethics

Shortfalls in Rooney's compromise aesthetic quickly reveal themselves through, firstly, an analysis of Eileen's love interest Simon and, secondly, the novel's denouement, both of which crystallize the triteness of the heteroidealism on which Rooney's narratives lean. A "beautiful," god-fearing, "extremely polite" advisor to a left-wing parliamentary group who insists self-reflexively that his office job "has nothing to do with helping people" yet, at the same time, dissuades himself from using plastic cups "out of respect for Mother Earth" and admits to having a Messiah complex which feeds his patience as a "champion-of-the-marginalised," Simon manages to resolve *Beautiful World*'s schizophrenic motifs through his personification of them (Rooney *Beautiful* 243, 149, 82, 197). Eileen's idealization of Simon verges on caricaturization, eliding his flaws, in particular the emotionally inaccessibility that has jeopardized many a relationship. In fact, the only other mention of "goodness" outside its equivalence with God is in relation to Simon: validating and contagious, "the goodness of [him] as a person" in Eileen's eyes keeps her afloat through periods of deep depression (Rooney *Beautiful* 276). Simon's neat character arc facilitates the equally neat resolution that Rooney engineers in the final twenty pages of the novel. Comprising an email exchange between Alice and Eileen during the COVID lockdown, the coda side-lines important sociopolitical questions incubated during that lonely, turbulent period in favour of baby-making domesticity. The latter reports that she and Simon take turns cooking, watch television together, and read aloud to each. They envision "a happy family together" and plan to "just buy a house in a less expensive area" to that end (Rooney *Beautiful* 335). Eileen's blithe disregard for the pandemic recession and social unrest permeates Alice's message, too, in which she glosses over Felix's precarious employment situation while joking that lockdown life is familiar to her in its comfortable configuration of remote working. Like Simon, Felix is overcoming his own emotional

unavailability – a gendered fatal flaw – determined to show his love for Alice through his actions. Eileen's saccharine tone is furthermore reminiscent of Frances and Nick's reunion at the end of *Conversations with Friends*, though they at least acknowledge that a caring relationality "ha[s] to be complicated" (Rooney *Conversations* 320). The assurance, at all costs, of cohesion and reconciliation in liberal democracy finds parallel in the tendency towards stilted resolutions in both novels. Personal and political tensions fomented over the course of the narrative dissolve abruptly into the time-tested optimism of heteroidealist ending, exposing the ways in which compromise is, Smith describes, "unsatisfying, awkward, boring, haphazard": "They might be the best we can get, but they do not and should not please us" (*Compromise* 51).

Lambent with empathy, morality, and compassion, Rooney's novels appear to be radical, contemporary parables of responsibility and reciprocity – two themes at the core of the reparative trend in Marxist-feminist theorization, popular feminism, and beyond.[31] In theory, therefore, her work should qualify as feminist, but a *post*feminist sensibility dominates instead. Rooney's typical female protagonist boasts a feminist consciousness but, as discussed, yields enthusiastically to neoconservative pressures, particularly around weight, intimacy, and employment. This character trajectory thus affirms the notion that the most important decisions a woman can make are those which might guarantee fulfilment defined in (hetero)normative terms. Frances hurls herself headlong into situations that may not be joyful but are deemed customary by her peers, including meeting a stranger for a date that culminates in transactional, physically uncomfortable sex throughout which she lies there thinking, "this is normal," (Rooney *Conversations* 208). Upholding her end of the social contract, Frances is rewarded with conventional intelligibility and (an approximation of) intimacy. Paternalism and internalized misogyny – subtle in *Conversations with Friend*, explicit in *Beautiful World* – are perpetuated through male protagonists with saviour complexes and female ones with ingratiating impulses. Frances finds herself luxuriating in Nick's presence, having a "man of the house" (Rooney 249). She dreams about feeling "full and huge" as the mother of his child whom he would caress with "such pride" (Rooney *Conversations* 248). Similarly, in Simon's company, Eileen says facetiously, "I enjoy being bossed around by you," to which he coos, "I

[31] The reparative turn is at the forefront of contemporary public consciousness, a common denominator among, for example, the neoliberal crisis of care; our heightened awareness of self-care as both an activist strategy and disciplinary technology; the perennial feminist discussion surrounding affective labour; heated political battles about universal healthcare; a renewed concern with sustainability and sustenance in the arts; and a similar interest in utopian world-building through the erotic in queer studies.

love that […] you're really helpless and wet, and I'm like, telling you what a good girl you are" (Rooney *Beautiful* 151-152). In another, sexually charged conversation, Eileen conjures, while Simon touches himself, "a little wife," one younger than he and "not too intelligent, but sweet-tempered," who "worship[s]" him (Rooney *Beautiful* 157, 63, 72). The fantasy gratifies Simon though they both agree that in other settings he is an exemplary feminist. Eighteen months later, she has become the little pregnant wife, and "it's so intoxicating to make him happy in that way," she effuses (Rooney *Beautiful* 335). In borrowing formal and thematic conventions from the romance genre to broaden their potential reach, Rooney's novels paradoxically contradict the political radicalism they try to propagate.

Idealizing not only the openings of monogamous partnership, the aptly named 'honeymoon phase,' but also the prospect of motherhood, the ending stops short of portraying the unglamorous aspects of heteronormative life, like debt, neglect, and the uneven distribution of affective labour – aspects that were foregrounded by the precarity at present and specifically by the COVID lockdown which Rooney works hard to include in *Beautiful World*. It thus conveys what is now a popular message, namely the urgent, reparative desire and demand for caregiving, but leaves the idea that politics is based in an indebtedness to others ultimately half-baked, underexamined from both anti-capitalist and gendered perspectives.[32] The unfinished exploration of heteronormative templates – their merits and pitfalls – is most salient in Eileen's drastic, groundless shift in attitude towards parenting: once sour about her fate as an "unfortunate bab[y] born when the world ended," Eileen now sees it as her raison d'être because, she claims, motherhood is ultimately a humanitarian responsibility (Rooney *Beautiful* 94). To have a child, she proclaims, is "to prove that the most ordinary thing about human beings is […] love and care," to have a tangible reason to build a beautiful world (Rooney *Beautiful* 337). Frances' espouses what Janice Radway terms "the servicing function" of women, rendering her the archetypical heroine of the romance genre who "transform[s] from an isolated, asexual, insecure adolescent […] into a mature, sensual, and very married woman who has realized her full potential and identity as the partner of a man and as the implied mother of a child" (94, 134). The culmination of *Beautiful World* in a spontaneously happy ending feels stilted to the reader for two reasons: firstly, in its adherence to the liberal democratic expectation of efficient resolution and, secondly, in its embrace of an archaic sentimentalism that rotely prescribes marriage as the catalyst for feminine fulfilment.

[32] Chapter 1 offers a more extensive exploration of the ethics of care and its slippage into a moralizing, paternalistic, or gendered disciplinary technique – a last-ditch antidote to neoliberal austerity.

The perniciousness of these postfeminist undertones as well as the characters' political insouciance is compounded by the fact that romance as a genre is inherently insulating and inoculating. A private experience between two subjects – a hero and a heroine, an escapist fiction and the escapee reader – romance plotlines flatten structural stratifications, constructing a snow-globe world removed from the one marred by late capitalism. Simon becomes simultaneously a stand-in for Eileen's politics and a distraction therefrom: dating him saves her from choosing between "worrying about sex and friendship," on the one hand, and worrying about the plagues of contemporary life, on the other, since she perceives Simon as both the best qualities and most vital issues of humanity incarnate (Rooney *Beautiful* 336, 276). Marrying him, in other words, allows her to be literally and figuratively proximal to the difficult, political dilemmas on which she has honed her radical vocabulary while affording her the possibility of retreat therefrom. Reminiscent of the email exchanges between her and Alice which engaged with the political intermittently and only ever in theory, never praxis, Eileen's union with Simon allows her to participate in the public conversation around better paradigms of belonging without necessarily fighting for them. Affective security is not the only reward that marriage yields; wedding Simon, the boy who grew up on the neighbouring estate, lifts "peasant girl" Eileen out of the financial precarity, reinforcing the centrality of heteronormative institutions to economic ones, suggesting, at best, that the wealth gap can be closed on a case-by-case basis (Rooney *Beautiful* 311, 248). Notably, Frances becomes similarly rich-adjacent in her affair as well – "a kept woman" who is finally given permission by Nick to have "nice things," sequestered in "posh house" adorned with a Modigliani painting (Rooney *Conversations* 250, 49). The increasingly sanguine quality of Rooney's prose over the course of her career is an understandable response to not only the economic precarity of the 2010s but also the political unrest of pandemic times, but the decision to equate the reparative with the romantic while remaining blind to the privatizing form of heteronormative coupledom ultimately undercuts the utopian vision of social regeneration it advances. Rooney's use of romance conventions to optimize the reach of her Marxist message ironically distracts the reader therefrom.

The pernicious insulating and inoculating effects of the romance genre are evident, moreover, beyond the diegetic level: insulating because, as Radway's ethnographic *Reading the Romance* reports, it "enables [women] to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear"; inoculating because it "convince[s] readers that heterosexuality is both inevitable and natural and that it is necessarily satisfying as well" (93, 14). Operating as a

"cultural release valve," romance evokes protest about gender expectations only to diffuse it (Radway 158). [33] Fears and self-righteous anger usually proscribed in daily life are acknowledged then neutralized by the fantasy of emotional nurturance which the reader experiences vicariously through her identification with the heroine. Romance fiction is both "compensatory" and "safe" in that the ritual retelling of the traditional heterosexuality preserves "a connection that, though not ideal, at least promises [women] the economic protection of patriarchal support" (Radway 95, 160). For a short time, the reader basks in the solicitude of a handsome, powerful hero before returning emotionally replenished to navigate a life where her needs, desires, and wishes are supplementarily met in the fictional realm. This is a common critique levelled against the romance literature: Gloria Fisk similarly describes romance as "a master class in interpretive gymnastics" which "trains the compulsorily heterosexual woman who reads it to accept a patriarchal culture that promises not to change," to "correct[] any feminist impulses she harbors." Despite its best intentions to break the pattern, Rooney's work supplies its largely female readership with relatable female protagonists whose self-reflexive disposition signal a potentially liberatory disillusionment with existing templates of belonging that is ultimately extinguished by happily-ever-afters. Although the "escape response" and "relaxation response" are more subdued owing to the occasional mediation on social attrition, Rooney's novels palliatively "imagines peace, security and ease [where] there is dissension, insecurity and difficulty" by reinstating gender conventions through the backdoor (Radway 90, 15).

Hybridity in contemporary literature often allows those already in power to 'split the difference' and 'remain in charge,'" Smith writes in reference to compromise aesthetic, though her statement applies equally to postfeminism's sway towards the patriarchy – towards those already in power – despite the alternately radical and conservative flavour of its rhetoric (*Compromise* 11). Rooney, pre-empting the criticism that her novels merely peddle heteroidealist quietism in the face of precarity, strives to imbue that heteroidealist quietism with political charge, framing it as the eminent route to utopian relationality. However, her attempt only underscores the discrepancy between, on the one hand, her ambivalence towards

[33] Radway explains that with greater suburbanization during the twentieth century and the continuing, concomitant secularization of the culture at large, networks on which women historically relied for emotional support, like the church and other informal neighbourhood societies, withered away, leaving women more isolated within their domestic habitus. The romance community, "a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers […] and authors […] mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing," is one of many intimate publics – a Berlantian term – lost to modernization (Radway 97). Chapter 2 discusses in detail the trans-spatial, transtemporal comfort that women glean from media that circulates among them, media which validates their frustrations, reassures them of their resilience, and returns them to quotidian life refreshed yet resigned to the patriarchal status quo.

the patriarchal reality to which the characters are alternately resigned and blissfully beholden, and, on the other, the revolutionary politics she and they aspire to have. The mild discomfort generated among readers by the "strange blend of outdated romance and overly up-to-date […] malaise" points precisely to the failing of these novels in their approach towards preaching an ethics of care (Barry). Without conceiving of relationality as a mode of belonging that exceeds the boundaries of the heteronormative couple form and by extension the family, too, Rooney's regressive, feel-good plotlines will always be resistant to the utopian politics that the author tries to promulgate; they will deliver predominantly the sentimental relief that her loyal readership has come to expect, a relief that leaves the late-capitalist, neoconservative status quo intact. Employing heteroidealist shorthands as the default resolution for the personal as well as the political, Rooney's novels placate their readers, compromising her purported goal: to "show the reality of a social condition" and "to say, It doesn't have to be this way" (qtd. Collins). In the same way that her epistolary novel *Beautiful World* features formal elements that are inherently privatizing and thus limiting to its political reach,[34] the romance conventions to which all of her novel subscribe insulates characters and readers alike from the ills of modernity it seeks to highlight.

XI. Conclusion

This chapter opened by surveying the ways in which Rooney's characters in *Conversations with Friends* magnify sociopolitical tensions in a world struggling to juggle individualism and cohesion. My analysis of Frances makes apparent a pitfall of modern liberal democratic societies: affective belonging cannot be ensured based on a joint desire for collectivity alone, especially when that collectivity prioritizes Reason and individual freedom – inherently exclusionary and atomizing ideological principles – above all else. Most dearly held is the ideal of the discrete, autonomous subject who adheres to arbitrary rules and exhibits an eagerness to cooperate. Good, liberal citizenship means doing whatever one wants without stepping on other people's toes. In the place of community is instead, therefore, a *modus vivendi* model of coexistence. Interrogating Frances's withdrawal behind a plain, affectless persona and her habit of defaulting to non-confrontational rationalizations, I argued that Frances compensates for the negation she suffers in her personal life as in her political one by consenting to the necessary but disappointing compromises in which she and her cohort are stuck. Just as the act of

[34] The majority of the pointedly political conversations between Frances and her cohort in *Conversations with Friends* are likewise situated in private contexts, specifically within the bourgeois home and over instant messenger platforms.

consenting to compromises that do not serve her helps to neutralize the violence that those subpar conditions produce, Frances's masochistic tendencies likewise allow her to reap a sense of control from her own negation. Be it repressing parts of herself, acquiescing to emotional injustices for the sake of compromise and consensus, or insisting, on rare occasions, that "I was exhilarated by the seriousness of my pain" with so much zeal it feels contrived and defensive, Frances lays bare the difficulty of finding belonging in a world where inequality and erasure are engrained (Rooney *Conversations* 22). The mutual, envious identification between her and Melissa aptly registers both actual and fantasized inequality that lurks behind the happy image of stability and reconciliation but fails to mobilize efforts to criticize and transform it on the level of the collective.

The combination of awareness and impotence that both women experience in their private lives seeps into their political ones as well. In fact, this is true of all of Rooney's characters across her three novels, the most recent of which, *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* I incorporate into my analysis of their concession to the badness of contemporary life – a compromise of sorts in itself. Without a vision of what shape a viable, enriching collectivity might take, an existential malaise festers, one that Rooney attempts to combat by injecting her work with Marxist themes, going as far, in *Beautiful World*, as interspersing the romance plot with missives on the deterioration of humanity. Implicit in the story arc of Rooney's female protagonists is the notion that care – giving it, learning to receive it – will enable collective thriving. *Conversations with Friends* and *Beautiful World* are thus products of their time in that they emplot not only liberal democracy's many tensions, but also the recent celebration of porousness, vulnerability, and interdependence, concepts which have flourished alongside – perhaps as a counterweight to – atomizing political values. That these elements, central to the reparative ethic of care, appear to overlap with the characteristic softness of the romance genre was not, I argued, lost on Rooney who chose to stoke utopianism among her readership through the pleasant logic of a love story. Embedding a Marxist message within a consumable, stylistically hybrid shape, Rooney wields a compromise aesthetic that guarantees financial reward for her and feel-good stories for her readers without risk of jeopardizing the moral sanctity or cultural relevance of her work.

My discussion ended by challenging the redemptive heteronormativity of Rooney's plotlines which the author synonymizes with reciprocity and intimacy. Focusing particularly on Eileen and Simon's suspiciously perfect relationship, I problematized Rooney's attempts at engineering the illusion of political responsibility while offering sentimental relief from that very responsibility. By adhering to generic conventions of romance, the author compromises

the radicalism she intends. Both narratives end before readers get a chance to see what care really looks like in all its small, unglamorous, and – crucially – gendered iterations. Love in heteroidealist coupledom is expurgated of all physical, emotional, and financial pressures associated with membership of heteronormative institutions. Rooney's narratives therefore convey through their formal admission that care will be provided simply because it is presumed. The private nature of the romance genre on a diegetic level and on the level the reader consuming the fiction further removes the possibility of collective action. And, finally, the neotraditional postfeminism of Rooney's work quells the already diminished desire for flourishing – flourishing that exceeds the couple form – thereby crippling the efficacy of the reparative impulse which is usually formulated in public, collective terms. Rooney's compromise aesthetic is condensed by no other than the character Alice: though "traditional marriage was obviously not fit for purpose, […] it was at least a way of doing things, a way of seeing life through" (*Beautiful* 186).

Compromising to Flourish and Compromised Flourishing: Nonnormative Belonging in Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby*

This final chapter revisits some of the thematic fixations that have hitherto arisen in this project, namely the many privileges afforded by prescribed modes of being especially in times of profound political and personal disorientation, the self-defeating ways in which women wield their agency in the absence of and in a bid for affective intimacy, as well as the fantasy of sovereignty which in previous chapters was always invoked as a political idiom but now takes on a psychoanalytical edge. However, in contrast to previous chapters, this one strives to elaborate an understanding of compromise that is potentially conducive to flourishing through mobilizing nonnormative imaginaries. And whereas previous chapters are peppered with arguments by queer theorists, this chapter engages directly with queer personhood, specifically trans womanhood,[35] as portrayed by Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby*. The novel follows a fiercely maternal transwoman called Reese and her ex-partner Ames – formerly known as Amy – who has detransitioned after living as a woman for some years. Ames contacts Reese from whom he is now estranged after his boss and current lover Katrina discovers she is pregnant, a destabilizing revelation that not only contradicts Ames' belief that hormone replacement therapy left him sterile, but also forces Katrina to revisit her miscarriage, divorce, and biracial family history. Ames proposes that the three of them co-parent the child: the arrangement would honour their most pressing desires, namely by offering Reese a chance at motherhood, ensuring enough support for Katrina such that she could continue to pursue her career, and allowing Ames to cultivate the feminine, maternal presence he still, despite detransitioning, wants to be and wants to be around.

To ground my analysis of the three protagonists, I open with an overview of intellectual debates surrounding the antisocial thesis in queer theory from which two, general positions can be distilled: the antirelational, antinormative stance touted by Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, on the one hand, in contrast to the intersectional and more reparative responses of their colleagues José Muñoz and Lauren Berlant on the other. I turn next to the polemical insights of trans scholars Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager which, deeply ambivalent towards normativity, challenges the romantic narrative steeped in posthuman and poststructural *becoming*. Following Chu and Harsin Drager's interest in attachment to norms, I espouse a more nuanced, more generous theoretical perspective that empathizes with the labour of

[35] Whether trans studies and trans personhood resides under the umbrella of queer is still under debate; the second section of this chapter offers an overview of the overlapping and antithetical manners in which these two terms operate.

staying attached to the norm – "by desire, by habit, by survival," as Chu poignantly writes – to examine the political and affective relation that Reese, Katrina, and Ames exhibit in the face of heteronormative templates. In what ways are their respective desires either swayed towards or blunted by bodily, psychic, and kinship normativity? In what ways do those desires chafe against the narrow confines of their identifiers with which they have both alienating and aspirational relationships: trans, cis, white, biracial, mother, father? My analysis of these characters who want what they should not and largely cannot have challenges putative cultural expectations of (post)femininity, maternity, and masculinity. If the focus of the second chapter was on bad feelings, then the aim of this one is to think through bad objects – contrarian desires and fuzzy politics that do not tally with the evental linearity of antisocial theories, contrarian desires and fuzzy politics that, to use Harsin Drager's phrase, "fail to live up to some kind of 'radical' litmus test" ("After" 109).

The chapter then shifts from investigating individual narrative arcs to discussing the co-parenting dynamic. Enacting the daydream of being and belonging otherwise, Reese, Katrina, and Ames rewrite kinship as a performative bodily practice without – crucially – jettisoning all of the good life's conventional rituals. They improvise their way through Katrina's first trimester as a self-designated "triad," an arrangement which, I argue, stipulates certain compromises on behalf of all three protagonists that undercut the tantalizing security, intelligibility, and belonging it promises (Peters 110). Participating in a family-in-the-making forces Katrina to accept human fallibility in herself and others – to appraise, as Berlant states in *Cruel Optimism*, "the body and a life [as] not only projects, but also sites of episodic intermission from personality, the burden of whose reproduction is part of the drag of practical sovereignty, of the obligation to be reliable" (116). For Reese, co-motherhood accentuates the inconsummerability of her trans body. And for Ames, co-parenthood ushers in similar anxieties around his sex, gender, and the chasmic gap in between. My discussion of *Detransition, Baby* leads me to tender a possible paradigm of care in which gendered dimensions are intimately felt and accommodated by participants who renew their commitment not simply to survival – to getting by – but to getting along. After all, the child that Peters' protagonists are poised to share "is not yet, and yet may not be," a fitting metaphor for the kind of nascent, present-oriented relationality they find themselves nurturing, a relationality that, by virtue of exceeding the skeleton frameworks of living on, might just qualify as flourishing (Peters 337).

I. Queer Theory: Antinormativity, Homonormativity, and Danger of Dualistic Thinking

To preface my discussion of normativity, an aspirational fantasy that plagues the marginalized characters of *Detransition, Baby*, I open with an overview of queer theory which similarly engrosses in heteronormativity and by extension the social order that is protected and perpetuated through reproductive futurism, a dominant ideology closely related to other teleological fictions of jingoistic, bourgeois citizenship. In his seminal *No Future*, Lee Edelman condenses the linkage between the queer, (hetero)normativity, and the fraught figure of the Child exclaiming, "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized[;] fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations" (29). Pledging allegiance to Lacanian psychoanalytic orthodoxy that paints sexuality as the Real, Edelman eulogizes queer as "sociality's structurally determinative violence" and urges queer colleagues to revel in the corrosive jouissance of their sexuality (*PMLA* 821). *No Future* was preceded by Leo Bersani's protoqueer essay "Is the Rectum a Grave" and book *Homos* which celebrate the "revolutionary inaptitude" – the unintelligibility, anti-relationality, and anti- or unproductivity – of queer sexualities (7).[36] Bersani and Edelman are hailed respectively as the inaugural voice and poster boy of what is now known as "the antisocial thesis" in queer theory, a phrase coined by Robert Caserio who moderated an eponymous panel on the topic in 2006: the argument, broadly construed, that all social life is by virtue of its fidelity to heterosexual reproduction hostile to queerness and that the power of (self-)negation should be harnessed for disruptive ends.

Antisociality's bleak anti-assimilationalist politics stands in sharp contrast to a subsection of the wider queer community – in theory and in praxis – that has, for the last couple of decades, veered in a diametrically opposite direction, seeking inclusion within liberal institutions and privatizing formations to which it is historically antithetical. The queer community's reputation has undergone significant rehabilitation. Lisa Duggan coined the term homonormativity for the phenomenon whereby queer sexual politics are enfolded into neoliberalism's heteronormative domesticity and flexible governmentality. Marriage equality, prolific representations of queer-identified citizens in popular media, and the upswing in the pink economy are just a few aspects of a politics in sync enough with mainstream norms to reinscribe other axes of discrimination, like race (whiteness) and class (middle-class affluence). A prime example of homonormativity

[36] Antisociality can be traced as far back to Valerie Solanas' anarchistic *SCUM Manifesto*. Her skepticism about our faith in reprofuturity anticipates Edelman's polemic against the Child and the progressive unfolding of a normative timeline which attends it. "Why should we care what happens when we're dead? Why should we care that there is no younger generation to succeed us?" Solanas vexes (28).

is the normalization of gender fluidity, which, Jack Halberstam discerns, has been commodified, fetishized, and refashioned into an identifier among young people "in hip queer urban settings" who claim to "not like 'labels'" (*In a Queer Time* 19). Once taboo but now a virtue, queerness is a "blanket term" used ironically to express "uniqueness," another widely lauded quality in today's individualistic climate (Halberstam *In a Queer Time* 19). Disruptive, cantankerous energies dissipated with every strategic concession to and unconscious alignment with centrist liberal/progressive attitudes. The homonormative turn has only deepened the dualistic trap between the hegemonic and subversive, each pole defined as a purely negative relation to the other such that queerness is parsed as a game of either/or. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick rightly worries that

> one's relation to what is risks becoming reactive and bifurcated, that of a consumer: one's choices narrow to accepting or refusing […] this or that manifestation of it, dramatizing only the extremes of compulsion and voluntarity. (*Touching Feeling* 11).

It is against the backdrop of these two, polarized paths within the queer community – anti- and pro-assimilationist – in both pedagogical and layman life that the MLA's Division Executive Committee for Gay Studies in Language and Literature convened a panel for a "stocktaking of the antisocial thesis" (*PMLA* 819). José Muñoz made a strong case against the antirelational turn, which he believes is a vituperative attempt by "the gay white man[]" to "distance[] queerness from other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference" (*PMLA* 825). What defines thinkers on either side of the antisocial-social divide is a divergent understanding of negativity: as either a constitutive lack-in-being derived from psychoanalysis of singular import or a host of circumstantial ways in which the subject can be injured, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, economic inequalities, among other structural injustices (Ruti 131). A self-described "kind of anti-antiutopian[]," Muñoz positions negativity as capable of signaling different, imminent kinds of belonging by confronting anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist experiences, particularly ones that involve erotic pleasure (*PMLA* 826). Notably, even though Muñoz objects to Bersani and Edelman's conceptualization of queerness as a thanatopic force, he does concede that unsettling the social is requisite to making space for queer subjectivities and collectivity. Negativity is reformulated in intersectional, affirmative, future-oriented terms.

Like Muñoz, Berlant complicates Edelman's narrow, abortive view of negativity. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, which they co-authored with Edelman, negativity is defined as "psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike," that point to

"nonsovereignty," a term that simultaneously invokes the psychoanalytic notion of self-divided subject and foregrounds questions of autonomy and relationality of a more political flavour (vii). Sex, for instance, is an intensified site of nonsovereignty, an experience that jostles the carapace of atomized bodies and, by extension, the belief in absolute self-knowledge, a fundament to the liberal fantasy of agency. Dialogue is another such site: roiled with interruption and metonymic displacements, it belies the "privilege of the monograph" (*Unbearable* x, ix). That *Sex, or the Unbearable* proceeds as a conversation – with the exception of the preface which is told through the plural pronoun *we* – is, of course, a conscious choice that illustrates on a meta-formal level the experience of negativity's disorienting charge. Dislodging long-calcified scripts surrounding causality and sociality, negativity begets new ways of being in relation, but Edelman and Berlant differ in their prognosis of the phrase "sex without optimism" (*Unbearable* xiv). The former clings to *No Future*'s theoretical position which oozes with tired radicality, whereas Berlant, averse to structuralist hermeneutics and hysterics, rejects the notion that subjects can either be wholly controlled by or wholly deny foundational antagonisms; "simple detachment from what doesn't work" doesn't work (*Unbearable* 11). She attenuates the grandiloquence of Edelman's argument:

> I would […] not describe negativity as Lee just did, as "the shock of discontinuity and the encounter with nonknowledge." That is because I think that subjects are not usually shocked to discover their incoherence or the incoherence of the world; they often find it comic, feel a little ashamed of it, or are interested in it, excited by it, and exhausted by it too, by the constant pressure to adjust that is at the heart of being nonsovereign, subjected to the inconstancy and contingency that they discover in and around themselves. (*Unbearable* 5-6)

Berlant "stay[s] bound to the possibility of staying bound to a world," attending to the marginalization of certain subjects as well as the "loosening" of normative belonging "not later but in the ongoing now" (*Unbearable* 20, 117, 5). Envisioning negativity as a nonmelodramatic out-of-synchness that continuously produces more capacious socialities, they effectively, Wiegman glosses, "retains fidelity to Edelman's antifuturity while tacitly honouring Muñoz's call to attend to the [intersectional]" (231).

Berlant's *On the Inconvenience of Other People* expands on the conceptual heuristic of loosening through which to understand the necessary disturbance in effecting a political vision: "recombining [the world's] component parts" to "induce transformation from within relations of the object" because "you can't simply lose your object if it's providing a foundational world infrastructure for you" (28). I imagine the process to be akin to a combination puzzle in which players slide flat tiles along certain routes plotted on a board to achieve different end-

configurations. The scope of the board is fixed, however, and the tiles are mechanically interlinked thereto, so they can never be lifted off – eliminated from – the rearrangement process. This metaphor with its proliferous possibilities despite its limitations helps to visualize a "heterotopian" existence which Berlant portrays as multiple, conceptually adjacent topos (*Inconvenience* 14). Berlant's theorization of "the long middle" between "a dug-in world" that is too dear to lose and a mosaic of "situations that will never appear […] fully" echoes Sedgwick's mediation on how to think pluralistically (Berlant *Inconvenience* 24, 14, 15). In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick circumvents the "dualistic righteousness of hunting down and attacking prohibition/repression" à la Edelman (10). In the place of *beneath*, *behind*, and *beyond*, prepositions that connote "a drama of exposure," she suggests *beside*, a preposition that accommodates many elements in non-hierarchical relation to each other (Sedgwick *Touching* 8). Both Berlant and Sedgwick, the former heavily influenced by the latter, explore ways around "heroic, 'liberatory'" gestures, believing instead in the intersection of many templates of life within a "heterogeneous system, an ecological field whose intensive and defining relationality is internal as much as it is directed toward the norms it may challenge" (*Touching* 9).

Heterogeneity and nondualism have long appealed to Sedgwick who owes much to Buddhist principles and Kleinian psychoanalysis. In "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," she turns to the Kleinian infant to understand "the excluded middle term" which lies to the side of Freud's dualistic views on omnipotence and impotence (631). Like the Kleinian infant, Sedgwick argues, we do not experience our desire for power as pleasurable; in fact, we dread it for fear of annihilating the self and loved ones. This endogenous anxiety over his own destructiveness compels the infant to split objects into parts that can be seen as wholly good or bad and project the bad onto other people until he stumbles into a different reality. To his relief, this "toxic," "all-or-nothing understanding of agency" abates into a "sense that power is a form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win-win negotiations), the exchange of affect, and […] the middle ranges of agency" (Sedgwick "Melanie" 631-632). The depressive position, as Klein calls it, makes room for the complexity of self and others. Paranoid ideations mingle with the desire to mend whatever wreckage is left behind by our (fantasized) aggression. The paranoid-schizoid defence mechanism, which leads us to see the world in black or white, is tempered with other polyvalent feelings, like guilt, grief, and charity. Shedding an absolutist terms view frees up resources to assemble previously split part-objects into "something like a whole, albeit a compromised one" (Sedgwick "Melanie" 637). Sedgwick's work on nondualism fortifies the philosophical and methodological importance of

attending to ambivalent, labile attachments to normative lifeworlds, attachments that cannot be split into good or bad because they are shaped at once by context-specific iterations of negativity, motivated by objects of cruel optimism, and blossoming from a dogged desire to generate better scenarios.

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, an autotheoretical work that juxtaposes her romantic relationship with artist Harry Dodge, his gender transition, and her pregnancy, was one of the first queer memoirs to do just this. Convinced that "the binary of normative/transgressive that's unsustainable," distantly removed from the richness and requirements of life, the choices citizens make under constraint, Nelson debunks the presumed opposition between queerness and procreation (93). She paints a delightfully graphic picture of the erotic, gestating body: "letting go of the shit would mean the total disintegration of my perineum, anus, and vagina, all at once. […] if, or when, I could let go of the shit, the baby would probably come out. But to do so would mean *falling forever, going to pieces*" (Nelson 16, 104). That she employs the same diction that has commonly been used to describe the dispossessing, destructive pathos of queer sex is of course significant, but she also cautions against revolutionary language which she sees as "a sort of fetish" that fortifies dualistic thinking (33). Pregnancy for Nelson is "queer […] insofar as it profoundly alters one's 'normal' state," carving out a space where there was none before – a phenomenologically alienating process – but, at the same time, she resists the temptation to make pregnancy a lofty metaphor, focusing instead on the messy minutiae of queer family and (homo)normative aspects of motherhood. Debunking the putative opposition between queerness and maternity, she details the "orgasm[ic]" quality of breastfeeding and sodomitical pleasure, a pleasure that exceeds the usual, "instrumental" sexuality grafted onto women's bodies by heteronormative, homonormative, and masculinist queer discourses (128, 87). Like her feminist foremothers, she honours fucking to come, but she also honours fucking to conceive (90). Just as pregnancy is neither a definitively normativizing experience nor definitively radical one, gender transition and family planning will never live up to the "culture frantic for resolution" (65). In tune with contemporary literature on trans ambivalence, which the next section elaborates, Nelson recommends her reader to recognize that "sometimes the shit stays messy" and "this […] is OK – desirable, even," whereas in other times, "it stays a source of conflict or grief" (Nelson 66).

II. Trans Studies: Nonnormativity and the Question of Gender

Transgender studies both amplifies and complicates foundational epistemological rifts in queer theory, particularly binary modes of thinking surrounding antinormativity politics. This next

section outlines the ways in which trans critique has moved away from transgression and subjugation, a trend that reflects the incoherent lived realities of its objects of analysis. Before launching into a brief literature review, however, I should stress the emphasis that trans studies places on questions of embodiment and gender identity, which problematizes the sexuality-focused scope of queer theory and in turn flags "the salience of cross-cutting issues such as race, class, age, disability, and nationality" (Stryker "Knowledges" 7). Susan Stryker's is among the loudest voices testifying to the greater intersectional rigour of trans critique in comparison to queer and feminist critique. All three of these abutting Humanities fields have long marshalled efforts to deconstruct power-knowledge, resist pathologization, and support insurrections against sexual difference, but despite building on an understanding of the body as a product of cultural inscription and interpellation, Stryker maintains that both queer theory and feminism are cis-centric: the former prioritizes as its object of study sexual orientation (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual), forgetting that "transgender phenomena constitute an axis of difference that cannot be subsumed to an object-choice model of antiheteronormativity," while the latter overlooks gender diversity for supposedly more pressing issues, producing a puritanical, universalizing definition of "woman" ("Knowledges" 7). Both queer theory and feminist critique are guilty of mobilizing the same compartmentalizing – and in a sense normativizing – practices they seek to dismantle. By exposing the tensions latent in the mimetic relationship between anatomical sex and the linguistic, social, and psychical experience of gender which apparently riddle even the most interdisciplinary, poststructural fields, trans studies challenge the political and conceptual boundaries of its sister disciplines, restoring some urgency to the multiplicity and multiplicativity of social negativity (Stryker "Knowledges" 9). Troubling disciplinary boundaries was a timely accomplishment, but, as Chu and Harsin Drager argue, this tendency towards disruption dictated the field's epistemological and methodological foundations such that subversion was advocated to the point of stultification and always, reductively as a counterpoint to the hegemonic.

Like the concept of antisociality, the topic of normativity has garnered polarizing opinions among members of the trans community, opinions that have over time dissipated into more nuanced perspectives. Instrumental to the origination of trans studies was Sandy Stone's "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto" which, responding directly to second-wave feminist Janice Raymond's narrow concept of womanhood, entreats fellow trans subjects "to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures […] but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference" (232). She opposes the self-straitjacketing of trans people who pander to "white male medical epistemologies" both pre-transition (to qualify for gender-

reassignment surgery) and post-transition (to pass), idealizing instead the self-authoring, recalcitrant trans subject, bright with "the promises of monsters" (Stone 230, 232). This ideal gained popularity: quickly, the trans figure morphed into an overdetermined construct, synonymized with the posthuman, personified by the cyborg (Stone 232).[37] Trans studies concurrently, according to Harsin Drager, became "obsess[ed] with resistance and radicality," a "project of incessantly trying to prove that we are no longer the medicalized transsexual" (Harsin Drager "After" 107). While Stone's desire to free the trans subject and concomitantly explode the concept of gender was well-intentioned,[38] it ultimately, paradoxically reified more binaries, celebrating trans visibility and gender incongruence as authentic while implying that invisibility by way of conformity was somehow less. And as with the antinormative-normative divide that has steered queer theory, these binaries "have become the core 'problem-space' of trans studies" in the three decades since its conception, Harsin Drager argues ("After" 104).

In their polemical intervention "After Trans Studies," contemporary trans scholars Harsin Drager and Chu recently voiced their reservations about the tunnel vision that has formed around stories of 'radical politics' which disavows the "messiness, contradictions, disappointments, and unexpected outcomes" of trans subjectivities ("After" 108, 107). For them, because the "prefix and verb [trans] has been used as a theoretical shortcut" to refer ad nauseum to all sorts of boundary-crossing – transgender, transnational, transracial, transspecies – it now irritates more than it titillates (Harsin Drager "After" 112). Chu damns "transing [as] queering's unasked-for sequel," inculcating the same reductionistic attitudes around anti/normativity ("After" 105). "Progressive" thinkers still insist on discriminating between good and bad types body modification, applauding the former as supposedly subversive, tactical acts, while anathematizing the latter as symbols of indoctrination and false consciousness (Harsin Drager "After" 101). "It's really sort of incredible to me," Harsin Drager balks, "the vitriol that queer theorists have for phalloplasty. If your body modification looks too much like the original 'transsexual medical genre,' your queer cred is toast" ("After" 101). Scholars and laypeople alike are so bent on using trans figures as mascots for transgression, so quick to deploy trans as a synonym for *beyond* or *post* that, Chu argues, they forget to honour

[37] A student of Donna Haraway during her time at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Stone was deeply influenced by her work, a fact she explicitly acknowledges in "The *Empire* Strikes Back."

[38] Susan Stryker suggests that this shift in trans epistemology towards the rupturing of gender categories emerged at a historical juncture wherein we were simultaneously enthralled with postmodern contestations of conventional views and braced for "the brave new world of the twenty-first century" with its "unimaginable transformation through new forms of biomedical and communicational technologies"; its diasporic and transnational movements which attended globalization; its spirit of diversity, even when tied to a neoliberal politics of identity management; and the general frenzy surrounding the calendrical event of the year 2000, among other disorienting events ("Knowledges" 8).

what trans people actually want which in many cases is to live out the norm, a structuring yet ultimately illusory principle. Chu's distrust of subversion is informed by Judith Butler's landmark work on gender and normativity, intertwined concepts which the latter posits are co-constituted through words and gestures, endlessly repeated and mimed. Because gender does not precede performances thereof, no act can be definitively normative or subversive. In other words, no external standard of gender exists against which to measure the degree of normativity or subversion; embodying the norm is for any subject – cis or trans – but an endeavor, an approximation. Riddled with the same reductionism as that which propels the antisocial thesis, the binary assumption that cis must be synonymous with normativity and, on the opposite pole, trans, with defiance falters ontologically and anthropologically.

Of course, the desire among some trans subjects for normativity is different from the mainstreaming of trans identity into which it is often mistakenly collapsed. Swept up in the contemporary homonormative climate, trans, like queer, established itself first as a buzzword then as a term integrated into "patriotic 'transnormative' citizenship" by Obama's administration; granted recognition by policy changes, like the United Kingdom's 2004 Gender Recognition Act; and popularized by household names, like Caitlyn Jenner (Stryker "Trans* Studies Now" 302; "Knowledges 6). This progressivism has triggered in the past decade paroxysmal rage from neoconservative, Catholic, and evangelical communities across the West whose members fear the deterioration of family values; the perversion of (sex) education into supposed indoctrination; and the recruitment of children by queer people hungry for more to join their ranks. Through its threat of social destabilization, so-called gender ideology is linked to other imagined infiltrations of the heterosexual, historically white national body, namely migration, terrorism, and globalization, stoking, in turn, discrimination and anti-intellectualism. Peters herself experienced first-hand the rift between neoliberal progressivism and right-wing pushback which forms the backdrop of her novel: after *Detransition, Baby* was shortlisted for the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction, a Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) group called the Wild Woman Writing Club penned a public diatribe against the nomination. The progressivist project and the reactionary right have more in common than first meets the eye. Overlapping in their dualistic view of anti/normativity, both political poles are guilty of classifying trans people as either an asset or risk to the status quo. Whether positioned as a "living incubator" for simplistic theories of gender and the posthuman, co-opted by progressive neoliberalism, or ostracized as a phantasmagorically destructive force, the trans subject is, to Chu's dismay, denied their experiences, experiences that "refuse […] the pomp of

antinormativity" yet cannot be said to align with existing definitions of the norm either ("After" 113).

Chu deploys the term "nonnormative" to designate desires and lived experiences which are comparatively "slower, smaller" than antisociality politics ("After" 107, 113). She invokes the case study of a pseudonymous trans woman named Agnes whose strategic masquerading as intersex to access vaginoplasty back in the 1950s won her deification in trans studies as "some kind of gender ninja" ("After" 107). Chu contends that Agnes is a prototypical nonnormative subject not because she was "against" the norm but – to the contrary – "for" it and indeed attempted to live it out in improvised ways ("After" 107). From this reworking of the Agnes case study, two intertwining concepts of nonnormativity emerge: as, firstly, a relational quality that takes into consideration the positionality of the subject in question and, secondly, as a style of manoeuvring through the world that approximates but never straightforwardly reproduces prescribed ways of doing so. In my close reading of *Detransition, Baby*, I leverage nonnormativity as a concept which holds space for aspirational normativity however clumsily or eccentrically pursued, preferring its breadth to the narrow theoretical parameters of antinormativity and homonormativity. The nonnormative, which extends from Chu and Harsin Drager's treatment of trans studies as "a genre about how truly disappointing and sometimes even boring it is to be a trans person in this world" rather than a "story of our victimhood (tragedy) or a story of our resistance (romance)," coalesces with Berlant's hesitancy – itself indebted to Sedgwick's capacious use of *besides* – which further fine-tunes my attention to the irresoluteness and performative making-do in *Detransition, Baby* ("After" 105, 104)[39].

In this literature review, I have outlined a few reductive dualities that handicap feminist, queer, and trans inquiry. Wary of the many theses that presume a reliably intentional subject continually devising strategies of liberation and subversion, this project acknowledges the difficulty and therefore the slowness of self- and social- transformation. Funneling my attention away from the self-shattering and radical contingency promised by eventual theorists, like Edelman, I focus instead on not only episodes that weaken our attachment to comfortingly conventional fantasies but also instances in which "subjectification […] (whether or not recognized as an experience)" to those normative technologies is actually reinforced (Berlant *Unbearable* 6). Only by mulling over periods of drift and indecision in the way that Berlant's

[39] Auxiliary works that further shape my analytical framework include those by Elizabeth Freeman, which formulate queerness as a drive towards rerouting connections across, and those by Heather Love, which investigate instances of failed sociality without "voiding the future" (*Feeling Backward* 22).

pointedly present-oriented, reluctantly utopian methodology encourages can this chapter study the ways in which Reese, Katrina, and Ames manoeuvre around and within – but never beyond – the expectations thrust on them by their various gender identifiers. I take inspiration, furthermore, from Nelson's meditation on the disappointing conventions and conventional disappointments which her family encounters while trying to loosen – in Berlantian terms – existing lifeworlds. Her prose flows from a couple of questions that this chapter takes as foundational to its own discussion of femininity, (co-)motherhood, transness, and belonging: "when or how do new kinship systems mime older nuclear-family arrangements and when or how do they radically recontextualize them […] ?" "Perhaps it's the word radical that needs rethinking […] ?" (Nelson 16, 33). Meandering in what Sedgwick calls "the middle ranges of agency" or what Berlant calls "the muddled middle," the three protagonists individually demonstrate the unlikelihood of defiance in response to the diverse and contradictory demands placed on them ("Melanie" 637; *Unbearable* 5). Instead, to secure affective belonging without succumbing completely to prescribed narratives of selfhood and kinship, they toggle with the good life fantasy, making constant, minor adjustments to their co-parenting arrangement without valorizing nor refuting the "anti" in "antisocial." In so doing, they cobble together from their splintered desires, politics, and vectors of identity – to reference Sedgwick – "something like a whole, albeit a compromised one" both as individuals and as a family unit ("Melanie" 637).

III. Nonnormative Trans Affinity with Postfeminist Sensibilities

The multiple disservices of conceptual binaries converge in the character of Reese, a transwoman whose painstakingly crafted cis-passing femininity not only complicates the will to shun normativity, but also registers the messiness of desire which strays from the confines of one's identifiers and their attendant politics. Reese's womanhood is animated by traditional notions of "nice white Wisconsin" housewifery, an aching maternal instinct, and a misogynistic perception of herself (Peters 8). Although critical of women's culture, a term Berlant uses to designate an affective space of attachment and identification for members in need of a conversation that feels intimate and affirming, Reese is nevertheless determined to belong thereto. Keenly aware of her hypocrisy, she nonetheless delights in "trite" floral bedspreads; parades her pear-shape curves; and covets gender-affirming plastic surgery (Peters 29, 1). She defers to the homogenizing conditions of women's culture:

> Just because she saw that the vagaries of capitalism, patriarchy, gender norms, or consumerism contributed to facial dysphoria didn't mean she had developed immunity to them. […] She would happily cheer on any other woman who flaunted her orbital ridge in the name of challenging cis-normative beauty standards, but she would have the first available misogynist dick of a surgeon burr her skull Barbie smooth. (Peters 198)

Reese's exceedingly "girly" choices are of course decorative and cosmetic, but those choices are also ontological (Peters 5). As Chu notes in her article "On Liking Women," transexual women want bottom surgery because "most women have vaginas," not because they believe a vagina is more aesthetically pleasing than a penis. While Reese has honed a political consciousness on her queer experience, it is at best source of annoyance, making her feel guilty for absorbing deeply ingrained beauty norms she critiques. It rarely fuels anything as passionate or actionable as anger, and even then Reese opts to weaponize her queer identity for the sake of winning personal battles, not collective ones. Reese's "chosen invisibility" is not born out of what Stone decries as "personal dissonance" but bad politics – bad by both queer anti-assimilationist standards and feminist ones (232).

For Reese, the touchstone of femininity is motherhood. The mutually gratifying affective safety she can offer children is of course one motivation, but the allure of motherhood overlaps, also, with the allure of "a very beautiful and solid table," a "marker of […] female bourgeois heterosexual temporality" (Peters 190). Like any child projected to outlive the parents, this "totemic" dining table, expertly build to last, emblematizes continuity, security, stability, and legibility within a state-sponsored timeline – everything antithetical to the principle of queer antisociality (Peters 190). Both child and table invite people to gather around, to give care, to forge kinships that feel sustaining in the present and for generations to come. Her tendency to mother everyone around her, including trans women in their early stages of a "second puberty," is likewise indicative of a desire for collectivity despite – and even in relation to – queer incommensurability within the social (Peters 89). Reese yearns so fiercely to occupy a maternal role that she even perverts the queer practice of bugchasing into impregnation roleplay. The man with whom Reese is having an affair has HIV, albeit undetectable levels thereof, but the fetish is not so much with contracting the virus as the possibility of being "knock[ed] up" (Peters 7). The language and behaviours surrounding the straightwashed bugchasing extends to its prevention, too. Reese calls her PrEP, a pre-emptive HIV medication, "birth control," and even crams her pills into a clamshell-shaped case designed to hold oral contraceptives (Peters 8). Through PrEP, she experiences a rhythm of life usually reserved for fertile women – women with uteruses, women with vaginas – bringing her that much closer to women's culture replete with a sense of community and future.

Freeman's concept of chrononormativity, which I believe is a temporal equivalent to Berlant's spatialized concept of women's culture,[40] is key to understanding why motherhood and oral contraceptives constitute objects of conventional femininity. Motherhood simultaneously individualizes and massifies: it configures the "singular body" into an "atomized subject of liberal rationality" while calibrating the subject's desires and behaviours such that they coincide with narratives of re/production (Freeman *Beside You in Time* 3). Its "operations […] bring out the body's true arrangement, capacities, and functions" – where "true" means intelligible – engendering a sense of belonging between women across continents and generations who, were it not for the gestures they privately but commonly perform, would be strangers (Freeman *Beside You in Time* 3). If birth control is an analogous technique of the self that synchronizes bodies with not only one another but also larger schemae through its temporalizing subjectification, then taking PrEP, like exercising her maternal gift, can be interpreted as Reese's bid for inclusion among women and recognition as a woman in her own right.

As quirky and humorous as the PrEP ritual and her fervor for motherhood seemingly are, Reese's habits and predilections are also a reaction to the lofty theoretical discourse about queerness: she feels no need to celebrate "irony […] and graves" while No Futurism is still the default, especially among transwomen, the "subaltern du jour" (Peters 10, 177). In fact, succumbing to suicide or murder is such a statistical probability that Reese struggles to feel anything – rage, self-pity, perverse exhilaration – towards the trans "state of failure" (Peters 158). She is similarly bored of the concept of queer temporality. For Reese, queer theory mimics religion in that it seems to hold all the answers, but its "glamorous" assuredness neglects not only the compromise of lived experience but also the hope – "wild and wilful" – necessary in *choosing* to live within the normative matrix (Peters 293, 10). She considers the "The *Sex and the City* Problem," the phenomenon whereby women, in the throes of confronting their dwindling youth, scramble to find meaning through one of four paths – partner, career, baby, or art – to be an aspirational one, unavailable to transwomen who are barred from all four options from the outset (Peters 9). It is the option to become bourgeois and recognizably, conventionally feminine – not the expectation of respectively denouncing or distorting them – that feels radical for Reese. Success is to "not to have that choice made for her," the narrator relays, echoing Chu's remark that sometimes "nonnormativity [i]s what wanting to be normal

[40] Chapter 2 provides a more extensive discussion of Berlant's conceptualization of women's culture and the coextensive notion of an intimate public.

actually look[s] like" (Peters 10; "After" 107). Humdrum as straight institutions of marriage, parenthood, and property ownership may seem, they bestow a certain stalwart respectability on eligible subjects, making social belonging more attainable.

Reese wants the world to treat her as a woman so badly that she emplaces herself in compromised conditions. Reese's lovers are "assholes" whose conservative, chauvinistic attitudes and actions towards women throw Reese's "vulnerable, fragile, […] exasperatingly feminine qualities" into reassuring relief (Peters 75). She finds "consensual violence [in the bedroom] lacking real value," but with Stanley, her most recent lover, sadism is not roleplay: he subjugates women by dressing, financing, imprisoning, physically and verbally abusing, and of course sexually dominating them (Peters 60). Like Iris, another studied damsel in distress who likes to think of herself in the passive tense – "being pimped," "owned" – Reese has to surrender the romance of "choos[ing] who you fuck" for "choos[ing] from among those who want to fuck you" in order to affirm her carefully curated femininity (Peters 51). Regarding Reese's ambivalence about her self-pigeonholing, a passage in free indirect discourse expounds: "She didn't make the rules of womanhood; like any other girl, she had inherited them. Why should the burden be on her to uphold impeccable feminist politics that barely served her?" (61). Best mine her knowledge of society's subtle gendering work for strategies of belonging instead. Reese's steely determination to pass as a cis white woman is largely what makes her so convincing as one: both her energetic participation in raunch culture and the weight she puts on choice are coextensive with principles of postfeminism which has come to rule womanhood in the Western contemporary present. Whether in her endeavours to live the good life or in her performance of disempowerment, Reese exudes the kind of brash, overcompensating confidence typical of liberal-capitalist personhood. Reese's backstory demands the reader to not only reframe identity along vectors of desire, but also to reckon with an ethically suspect postfeminist culture which, too, exalts the unrestrained possibility to do as one pleases. Put differently, the reader must reconcile Reese's difficult experience of trans exclusion with the equally fraught means of overcoming it, including the admittedly "traitorously retrograde sense" of femininity that she cultivates in a bid for intelligibility (Peters 198). Reese herself tries to close the gap that forms between the sense of belonging after which she pines and what she misrecognizes as the means of its attainment.

From both queer anti-assimilationist and feminist perspectives, Reese's politics are undeniably bad, a disappointment to the expectations projected onto a character as ostensibly rebellious as she. Refusing to succumb to the negativity of queer theory that dooms its objects to actual and social death appears at first to be a mark of straightforward anti-antisociality, but

Reese's desires and decisions are often incongruent with the neat demarcations of her various identifiers: queer, women, feminine, trans. Reese may be enthusiastic – desperate – about the prospect of fitting in as a cis-passing woman, but she is at the same time keenly aware of the labour and constraints of social intelligibility. She pursues traditional femininity, conscious of the fact that she should not want it yet eager to "succumb to becoming what the world treats [her] as" anyways: a "silly little whore" cosplaying a woman (Peters 36, 179). While Reese cannot be characterized as uncritically 'for' the social, though, she cannot, conversely, be said to embrace "the idea that the 'anti' in antisocial could ever be a politically or theoretically monogamous one" either (Wiegman 227). At the same time, her politics are devoid of the hope that enlaces Muñoz's anti-antiutopian outlook and Berlant's reparative one. Reese is a case study for Chu's tendentious contribution to trans studies, namely that "transness [i]s a matter not of who one is, but of what one wants," and Reese's hunger for belonging propels her not towards radical politics nor – even – the homonormative agenda ("On Liking Women"). To the contrary, it anchors her to normative templates of life which she deems, despite its prohibitions and disappointments, the most expedient mode of living on.

IV. Normative Cis Unbelonging

Katrina, Reese's foil, is beset with a similarly difficult relation with her identity and its attendant social, psychic, political expectations. Whereas Reese's passably cis white femininity is a feat, Katrina's is a given, albeit a troubling one, since it eclipses her Asian heritage, another, unresolved facet of selfhood. In addition to having certain aspects of her identity overlooked, Katrina also, like Reese, takes an active role in self-camouflage by engaging in mainstream pastimes, like Pilates and foodie culture, to divert attention away from her idiosyncratic personality and strange life experiences. Even Katrina's divorce from Danny, a university beau whom she describes as a "shelter" and a Saint Bernard – the embodiment of the good life fantasy – is meticulously managed, pinned on miscarriage, a "get-out-free card" (Peters 20). The scenario in which a couple grows distant and eventually separates due to inconsolable grief is easy to digest. Yet, what Katrina grieves is not, she admits, the loss of a baby but her waning faith in the way life "was supposed to be" (Peters 19). Miscarriage is simply an unassailable cover story for her divorce from Danny, not unlike the façade of "basicness" behind which Katrina hides her "weirdo" self, whereas the actual reason is the "ennui of heterosexuality," an umbrella phrase for all her minor feelings surrounding their canned and claustrophobic relationship (Peters 37, 42, 19). Both Reese's trans experience and Katrina's cis one demonstrate the sheer level of emotional energy requisite in conforming to normative patterns

of life. Where the characters differ, however, is in their investment in existing models of belonging: with a body historically branded as Other, Reese still, despite her skepticism about and hypocrisy around gender politics, dreams of being a "real wom[a]n," motherhood and all; Katrina, by contrast, having never experienced the same degree of incoherence nor ostracization, simply feels deflated by the body and environment into which she was born, a phenomenological experience reminiscent of the heteropessimism[41] that pervades Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (Peters 179). The narrator of the trilogy is in fact comparable to Katrina in her marital status, socioeconomic background, and cis-passing presentation. In their own respective ways, both Reese and Katrina fail to meet the expectations set forth by their trans and cis identities, foregrounding the conflicts that arise from desiring otherwise.

While Reese expresses few qualms about pursuing conventional beauty standards, male chauvinists, and motherhood – "vectors of least resistance" in the game of cis-passability – Katrina displays much hesitation around these objects of femininity (Peters 199). The notion, informed by Chu's insights, that desire and politics cannot be determined by identifiers becomes apparent when we juxtapose Reese and Katrina's respective experiences of embodiment. Well into her first trimester, Katrina admits that her "mama bear instinct […] hasn't kicked in," whereas Reese has always carried this sense of "surety" and demonstrated an instinctive knowledge around infants at the gym creche where she briefly worked (Peters 69). In fact, Reese develops her own mama bear instinct as Katrina's pregnancy progresses, growing possessive over the unborn baby and prematurely mourning its loss as her own after receiving news that Katrina might abort. "Attachments [to the fetus] had formed that had almost nothing to do with identity," Reese insists, so Katrina's comparative lack must equally be said to have nothing to do with identity (Peters 325). Maternal capabilities feel more inborn to Reese than her cis counterpart. The novel decouples motherhood – and by extension womanhood – from morphology while simultaneously legitimizing Reese's desire for the simplicity in the reductive association between reproductive capacity and gender identity. "Everyone acts like moms are real women and real women become moms," she rightly deduces, prompting the realization that bad objects are so only when they diverge from what the subject is supposed to want: the desire for children, a marker to normative femininity, is considered

[41] Heteropessimism, a concept examined in Chapter 1, is a negative attitude towards heterosexuality usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness, performative disaffiliations which does not amount to the abandonment of the straight experience.

perverted for a trans person just as a lack thereof is met with criticism in the case of a ciswoman (Peters 179).

Katrina is troubled by not only the phenomenological experience of motherhood but also the essentialist views that encircle it. "All my white girlfriends just automatically assume that reproductive rights are about the right to *not* have children, as if the right and naturalness of motherhood is presumptive," she clarifies in response to Reese's romanticized, covetous account of motherhood, but "for lots of other women in this country, the opposite is true," alluding to the history of state-sponsored eugenics in the United States (Peters 177). Katrina's grandmother, a first-generation Chinese immigrant, "had to justify the basic desire to reproduce," and Katrina's mother "was made to feel […] that her mothering of me wasn't legitimate" by the white majority local to her home state of Vermont (Peters 177). Therefore, the expectation that Katrina should and will bear children, which is rooted in the public perception that her body is passably white enough for motherhood, reinforces the historic exclusion of ethnic minorities from reproductive freedom. It validates one half of her mixed background and perpetuates the erasure of the other. Fulfilling the expectation of motherhood would of course offer Katrina a sense of chrononormative coherence as a cis (white) woman, but whether it would be accompanied by a sense of legitimacy – empowerment, even – as an Asian-American woman redressing the discrimination suffered by her ethnic foremothers or undermined by feeling that "something [is] lost" in bearing what would be another white passing child remains in question (Peters 38). "I have felt not quite Asian enough my whole life," she rues, and given her reluctance to pursue motherhood which remains a fait accompli for women, she risks in addition not being womanly enough (Peters 22). In challenging both the notion that only cis white women want babies as well as the implicit mandate that obligates them to realize this presumed desire, Peter's novel prompts the reader to re-evaluate the limited avenues by which women make themselves intelligible, worthy of belonging. Reese and Katrina, women of disparate positionalities, struggle against different yet equally difficult constraints, indicating a flaw in the frameworks against which their respective objects of desire are judged, not the objects themselves.

Although Katrina questions heteronormativity with new rigour following her divorce from Danny, her ennui thereof does not awaken a stance of defiance. Like Reese, she allows the centripetal pull of sociable belonging keep her in its tight orbit. And although this post-divorce "teenage angst and […] oh-fuck-it-ness" bleeds into the professional sphere, inspiring Katrina to pitch controversial campaigns at the advertising agency where she occupies a senior position, she keeps it in check; she never lets her ideas get so dark as to deter clients, to

significantly mar the firm's tidy image (Peters 18). In both her vocational and personal lives, Katrina nurses a visceral suspicion of and displays a "tendency to re-narrativize" hackneyed templates of normative happiness, but she gravitates towards them anyways (Peters 19). She literally inhabits "inherited" scripts, renting an apartment reminiscent of the set of *Friends*, a television show that "comforted [her] as a child" (Peters 20). She continues to lead a "cushy" life, populated with educated yet sheltered friends who prate on about kitchen remodels and minor family discord (Peters 289, 285). Perhaps most tellingly, Katrina's first, almost primal instinct upon discovering she is pregnant is to secure "a reliable man" (Peters 231). She demands stability from Ames as a partner and prospective father which in turn is rooted in his unequivocal gender identity. "Why can't you just love me and be who I thought you were?" she entreats after he discloses his past, "Even now, I miss you enough that I just want you to lie to me!" (Peters 93). That she berates herself for sleeping with Ames in the first place – for breaking "so many rules" within the workplace, not to mention the laws of propriety – signifies the extent to which a heteronormative deference to how things are "supposed to be" endures in Katrina (Peters 94). Unable to wean herself therefrom, Katrina is stuck with the good life fantasy, passively enjoying its privileges, but without any of the nerve or verve that allows Reese to take some pride and pleasure, however ambivalently, from her attachment to that very same object.

V. Absent Presence for Convenience, Comfort, and Gender Conformity

In contrast to Reese who exudes a certain proactiveness around womanhood, Ames leans closer to Katrina in that he, too, first contemplates renouncing but ultimately resigns himself to existing templates of life for the sake of survival. Ames has never felt particularly masculine nor strove overtly for femme. His chimerical gender is reflected in his androgynous features as well as his attire: a red hoodie that fittingly faded "close to pink"; a suit that he shoved to the back of the closet, burying with it his pre-transition masculinity, only to fish out to wear every so often as a transwoman; and a full-skirted, "wet dream of a housewife dress" the uber-femininity which reminded him of his own masculinity (Peters 136, 250). Pre-transition, Ames – or, as he was known, James – appeared to be just another unremarkable, pubescent cisman. His successful maturation into heteronormative society, however, was premised entirely on subterfuge. He cites his desire to be a woman or at least be close to women as the primary motivation for having sex with them, and sex, in turn, required that he concoct intricate fantasies of himself as his sexual partner – as a woman receiving the very fucking he had to stage. Sex with a man demands the same cartesian dissociation:

> [Both parties] would take from each other what they could […] Just give me enough of yourself to put me in touch with the part of me that can believe I'm a girl, and beyond that, you can go fuck yourself, in whatever theoretical dimension you need to be in to do that. (Peters 152).

The imperative in his sex life to "go[] far away" in order to exist as a "profiscient facsimile" of a person, normatively defined, is germane to his lived experience more broadly. Be it by fabricating a "suburban-presentable" persona as Amy or working an anonymizing, middling corporate job as Ames, keeping contact with friends "who know him well but not too well," he has always absented parts of himself to blend in (Peters 317). The reader glimpses his chimerical constitution only in rare instances where, say, Ames, zoning out, imagines his face as a woman's before stripping it back down to a man's, a slippage that Peter's prose reflects in its jumbling of feminine and masculine pronouns. It is also evident in his previously rhinoplasty-perfect nose, a symbol for the cosmetic products and procedures that moulded James into a cis-passing woman only to be broken by one of Reese's misogynistic lovers in a fateful fight that precipitated detransition. The nose now lists to the left, a distinctive lineament signaling something slightly off, so to speak. Fittingly, Ames runs a finger down its bridge whenever he is exposed, like the time Katrina outed him at a business dinner, as though to conceal the "murky, half-spoken" past it might betray (Peters 26). Disappearing into the gap between his repressed desires and the public's fantasmatic gaze on him, Ames personifies an observation developed across the four chapters of this project: normative belonging is a possibility predicated paradoxically on self-erasure.

Disappearing, for Ames, is a double-pronged process. In addition to retreating behind a distractingly plain façade to pass, he also distances himself from the psychic pain of being trans. As Amy, he enjoyed, for the first time in his life, a more immediate relationship with his body and emotions, but this vulnerability became so unbearable that detransition was the only option that could "armor" him against past and present trauma (Peters 15). Masculinity is thus both an aesthetic and an affective style that enforces a "separateness from things" (Peters 227; Berlant *Inconvenience* 26). The contradiction inherent in Ames' self-effacement, a strategy that alienates him from others and from himself while also securing belonging, is neatly explained by Berlant:

> creating affective distance in order to make being in relation bearable, good, possible, or just happen is the expression of ambivalent attachment to living on despite, with, against, and in a dynamic relation to [the norm] (*Inconvenience* 26).

Depleted by "the overcloseness of the world," Ames "produces a stillness in relation to stuckness," espousing, as Berlant formulates in her article "Structures of Unfeeling," an "underperformative style" that gives the subject license to use "whatever 'whatever' style […] to maintain relationality in some way, while keeping things apprehensively, hypervigilantly, suspended" ("Unfeeling" 195, 201, 211). "Your reaction has been hard to read," Katrina remarks when he fails to adequately "get his emotions involved," mustering only a weak smile and singular superlative at the official confirmation of her pregnancy (Peters 14). Berlant defends recessive expressivity as a legitimate mode of participation, albeit one that seems disingenuous because it "sneak[s] around the codes of sincerity and intelligibility" ("Unfeeling" 195). She argues that in delegating the responsibility of feeling to others, the subject enacts "refusal from below to reproduce power, or trauma, or confusion" (Berlant "Unfeeling" 198). What she underrecognizes, however, is the gendered aspect of flat affect or, in other words, the fact that emotional opacity carries disruptive potential only in the case of subaltern subjects from whom we expect empathy and openness to the point of fetish. While Ames' withholding, whether deliberate or unwitting, is an understandable response given his mistrust for the social, it does not interfere with gendered norms of dialogic exchange. Rather, it reinforces them. His emotional reticence is just one of many components of the self-fulfilling masculinity behind which he disappears. That he grafts emotions in all their unruly intensity on the feminized body and pits them against the stolid placidity of a masculine one is not without problems. Ames is the gendering of the mind-body dualism incarnate, visibilizing the privilege that is dissociation, the privilege that is evading pain.

Prior to agreeing to a different paradigm of living, namely as part of a co-parenting triad which the following section shall discuss, Ames, like his current and ex-girlfriends, sutures himself to "a cramped and unimaginative space of committed replication" (Berlant *Cruel* 259). The incongruity between, on the one hand, expectations set forth by Ames' chosen gender identity at any one time and, on the other, his desires, politics, and habits which exceed them does not precipitate radical discontinuity but is, rather, suppressed. In fact, the flat affect of Ames' quiet suffering reifies existing conceptions of masculinity that undergird cis life, naturalizing, in turn, capitalist, postfeminist, and heteronormative fantasies. Ames' unresolved, unremarkable dilemmas and stalemates evince the inadequacy of conceptual binaries, like those stipulated by the antisocial thesis. They furthermore complicate some of the conclusions spawned from the *PMLA* roundtable, namely Muñoz's already ambivalent theoretical formulation of the anti-antiutopian: if the anti-antiutopian denotes a resilient, future-oriented framework, then Ames – and for that matter, Katrina and Reese, too – cannot be described as

such since he demonstrates little imaginative range beyond the "logic of a broken-down present" (*PMLA* 826). While the three protagonists do not, as Muñoz fears, embrace today "hamstrung, pragmatic" politics, they do ultimately yield to it (*PMLA* 825).

Of the three protagonists, Reese's desire for normative belonging may seem the most substantial – a hypothesis my analysis has disputed. She personifies the ostensibly empowering cultural climate of the contemporary present that appears to encourage individual expression and unfettered desire, promising readers something in the vein of romance, a genre about triumph replete with recognizably cathartic flourishes. Her brash disposition gives the impression of confidence which in turn lends the novel a specious progressiveness. But to read *Detransition, Baby* as a tale of social reimaging and personal overcoming would be careless given Reese's limp feminist politics. She is aware that the concept of femme is "stupid," "catty," "reductive," and thus "inadequate" yet devotes herself to its conditions anyways since, to her mind, femme is the only rubric by which she can count as "real" (Peters 164). Her quiet frustration with the status quo she loudly covets points to the conscious and subconscious compromise that enlaces her relationship with normativity. Contra the grandiose political agenda the reader initially projects onto her, Reese's ambivalence towards and reliance on existing templates of possibility leans much closer to Katrina's sense of resignation: Katrina, to the reproach of herself and her friends, holds the linearity and racial hierarchies of bourgeois heterosexual life in cynical regard, yet she acquiesces to its oppressive patterns of life anyways. Furthermore, Reese's espousal of gender stereotypes echoes that of Ames who, far from subverting heteronormativity with every gender-reassignment, has either reified it through his physical presentation and masculine-coded emotional (under)responsivity or tried to skirt the issue of gender entirely. In much the same way that an interpretation of Reese's backstory as one of progressiveness would be negligent, electing Ames as the mascot of antinormative queerness would be equally simplistic. Tracking desires in their many intensities, my interrogation of the three protagonists ultimately distilled one aching compulsion, one constant, common denominator among them: to be unremarkably normal or to at least approximate this totemic standard in nonnormative ways that, as a result, leave little energy to campaign for radical inclusion. However, despite their shared lack of faith in a wholesale restructuring of the world, the characters do over the course of the novel inch towards emancipation which is formulated not as a form of transgression but rather as a widening of possibilities capable of accommodating messy attachments – a shift to which this chapter now turns.

VI. Compromising Towards Flourishing

The widening of possibilities begins in *Detransition, Baby* when Reese, Katrina, and Ames agree to raising a child together, a nontraditional arrangement that promises to satisfy the individual desires of all three prospective parents. Shortly after all three parties agree to the triad configuration, Katrina enthuses to Ames,

> I want my career, I want to build and commit with you, and a child is a lovely time-tested way for that. Meanwhile, you want this woman Reese as your family, and she wants a baby and respect and purpose as a mother; and my mom wants to be a grandma; and you and I could be good to a child, I think, and we all want it to be something redemptive. (Peters 110)

What this summary overlooks, however, are the requisite compromises that threaten the very basis of Katrina, Reese, and Ames' desires for security, intelligibility, and belonging. Resisting the discourse of radicality and the binary thinking it stokes, this upcoming section explores the ways in which compromise is both necessary to and in conflict with the fulfillment of desire.

Whereas social and biological reproduction have received much scholarly attention particularly in the field of gender studies, *non*reproduction, which according to Natasha Hurley involves un-imagining the child as property, de-naturalizing of the mother as sole labourer, and improvising around the family form, has been comparatively neglected (256, 258). Her chapter on atypical child-rearing and childlessness, which builds on Muñoz's concept of disidentification, a process that muddles the cultural text and "exposes [its] universalizing and exclusionary machinations," are fruitful to my analysis of Peters' characters who forge alternative social relations during the baby's gestation, a period of flux wherein they are neither childless nor with child, constantly re-engineering their relationship to each other and thereby re-encountering their worldviews anew (31). Co-motherhood pushes Reese to question her competitiveness towards other women particularly when they have so much in common: as she astutely points out, divorce, like transition, forces cis women to "move forward without investing in new illusions or turning bitter" (Peters 167). Having "given up on heterosexuality" yet still attracted to men – and once again becoming pregnant by one – Katrina, in turn, comprehends the tenacity demanded in reckoning with the unruliness of one's attachments, a challenge familiar to Reese (Peters 164). Both women have undergone a transition of their own, a singular but significant point of overlap in the "Venn diagram of [Reese and] Katrina's personhood" that blossoms into an unorthodox affection for each other (Peters 165).

Katrina's mixed heritage is instrumental to her empathizing with Reese, indicating the impossibility of isolating sexuality from other social antagonisms. Sexuality is certainly

important to the characters themselves: one of them struggles with realization that she "[is]n't into the married straight life," while the other tries to pledge herself to only straight-identified men, "explaining it to herself by saying that she was hetero in the etymological sense: "attracted to difference" (Peters 23, 61). But, tellingly, in instances of introspection and introduction, Reese and Katrina see gender and race as defining elements of their identities, too: Reese describes the both of them as two "*almost* cis white ladies," and Katrina makes an off-hand remark which syntactically lumps the two together: "I already know about how women are made to feel," she says, "Chinese, trans, whoever" (Peters 38, 177). That both women encounter Otherness in the other by harnessing its critical capacity within themselves furthermore dispels the notion that negativity is antirelational. To the contrary, it captures a resistance to the "stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on" life while bridging the emotional gap between two outwardly disparate individuals (*Unbearable* xii).

Conceptions of mother-child relations are not the only kind made more capacious as the pregnancy advances. Reese stays over at Katrina's in what will be the nursery, which symbolically cements the association between her, the second mother, and the baby. The morning after the "half sleepover[s]," a "confusing intimacy" permeates their interactions, reminiscient of "post-unconsummated-hookup[s]" (Peters 263). A trip to the baby merchandise store during which the women interlace fingers and huddle together to contemplate breast pumps, is similarly, "confusingly" at risk "bleed[ing] into romance" (Peters 267). "Dyke-coded" as it may seem, the dynamic between the two women cannot be so reductively categorized (Peters 267). Just as their tenderness for each other eludes existing labels for sexuality, the co-parenting arrangement exceeds both homo- and heteronormative templates of family planning without, crucially, rejecting practices usually associated either. Co-mothering is performative in the Butlerian sense: a "doing" (a verb), not a deed (a noun) that is done by a "doer" (another noun) (Butler *Gender Trouble* 33). Running errands and attending scans at the obstetrician's together feel both routine and refreshingly spontaneous, recounted with immediacy and in a tone of revelation. Their decisions and interactions read like improvisation, not only those concerning family planning but also those centered on their burgeoning friendship. Through co-mothering, Reese and Katrina stumble ever-closer to a form of reciprocity, assembling what Berlant calls a "transitional infrastructure" – an affective space best characterized by the adverb *meanwhile* which lets people stay bound to the ordinary while "developing offshoots" (*Inconvenience* 24, 25). The homogenizing affective space of women's culture cannot, the novel shows, support the specificity of nontraditional relationships, but

neither can, as Reese describes derisively, the "radical relationships and polyamory and gender roles" to which queerness alludes (Peters 8).

Reese and Katrina develop skills for adjusting to proliferating pressures of their new arrangement, of an ongoing present that is neither entirely fixed, as in the case of couples who pre-agree to equal commitment, nor entirely contingent, as in the case of, say, outsourced domestic labour. The continuous experimentation – with action, with relation – that starts to cohere into habits without amounting to a tidy story solely about or for the Child is captured in the narrator's language, namely the pronoun "we" which Reese and Katrina cautiously use to refer to their co-motherhood. The pronoun deemphasizes the distinction between the two mothers, underscoring instead the joint nature of their pursuit. The oft-romanticized and, recalling Nelson, already queer idea that pregnancy is a metaphor for split selfhood is further queered here: the mother-child dyad is expanded to include Reese, a non-biological third party who nonetheless expresses, "it feels like mine" (Peters 278). Both mothers-to-be find their previously insular selfhoods intertwined with not just one but multiple others, a phenomenon that recalls Berlant's argument that "to queer something doesn't mean just to stick an antinormative needle into it, but to open up a vein to unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions" (*Inconvenience* 16). A period of suspension in the certainty and integrity of the self, Reese and Katrina's shared pregnancy splinters the notion of the subject as an unwaveringly intentional agent. A period during which lives unfurl in tandem with another – anatomically, logistically, erotically – it continues to inspire the familiar, ethical principle of relationality without privileging nor disavowing heteronormative rituals and notions of development. The women recognize, to quote Nelson, the "slipperiness" of their arrangement and brace themselves for a future that may very well turn out to be biologically or logistically unviable, but at the same time, they welcome "the pleasure of abiding," "of obligation," "of dependency, "of ordinary devotion" (140).

VII. Merits of Coparenting and Conundrums that Compromise Them

Co-motherhood puts Katrina back on track in the production of life with coordinated linearity – shiny university degree, senior corporate role, handsome partner, and now motherhood on the horizon – at the same time as it offers reprieve from those conventions. The possibility to tap into alternative rhythms – to break out of the heteropessimistic rut – becomes so alluring that she begins to identify as queer herself, figuratively setting up camp alongside the historically marginalized, appropriating its space and history. "I'm excited not to do the heteronormative thing," she effuses in front of her cis friends, convincing everyone around the

table “with all the zealotry of the recent convert who has yet to be bludgeoned into weariness and compromise for her ways” (Peters 293, 294). Her aforementioned tendency to re-narrativize, honed on divorce-induced disillusionment, is hard at work in her explanation of co-parenting which she confounds with a pseudo coming-out. She manufactures a satisfyingly neat counterpoint to the amorphous unhappiness of her fallen heterosexuality, joining the self-congratulatory fad of “just mak[ing] up your own rules” (Peters 294).

Katrina’s approach to co-parenting, coloured by “the excitement of a baby, of the newness of being queer,” belies a difficult relationship to empowerment and emancipation (Peters 312). The compromise Katrina must make in order to feel “free” is paradoxically the cession of some of that decision-making sovereignty to her co-parents (Peters 294). Her initial investment in the baby-sharing enterprise, buttressed by the impression that it “makes her interesting” and “cool,” crumbles as the frailty of the venture quickly reveals itself in moments of discord with Reese and Ames (Peters 293, 324). The contradiction of Ames being trans but failing to “do trans” is a source of anxiety for Katrina; similarly destabilizing is Reese’s defiance and erraticness (Peters 98). In the same breath, she “disqualifie[s]” Reese from participating in the triad and speaks about putting down roots for the sake of her and Ames’ family, a two-parent nuclear unit presented “as a fait accompli” (Peters 313). She resorts to heteronormative conventions as self-protection. Over the course of the novel, Katrina is faced with the unruliness of not only her own attachments but those of others and, relatedly, the human fallibility of others as well as her own. How to navigate, on the one hand, the assurance of form – of the family, the atomized self – and, on the other, her “wild” side (Peters 38)? Dabbling in a new kind of relationality culminates in the realization that total autonomy is a fantasy, which liberates as much as it unsettles, bringing her to an impasse in which neither conventional narratives of the good life nor the utopian imaginary of queerness can see her through. In the entropic aftermath of this realization reminiscent of her divorce, she clings to both. She desires – still – to cite *The Argonauts* once more, “the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live,” while demanding – neurotically, impossibly – normative psychic and bodily organization from Ames and Reese: she wants the former to remain an “unchanging constant” and the latter to evolve into a more “gentrified,” even more cis-palatable version of herself (Nelson 66; Peters 318, 307). Co-parenthood initially appears to fulfill Katrina’s clashing desires for form and freedom but ultimately leaves her more disenchanted with both, adrift with even less faith in bourgeois reproduction and liberal-capitalist sovereignty than before.

Through co-motherhood, Reese is catapulted closer to the realm of cis-womanhood, and for a while she dares to believe that she will no longer have to "prove" her femininity nor justify her desire for a child's love (Peters 176). To her dismay, however, the arrangement in which she shares the mother role with cis-bodied Katrina only accentuates her transness. If Reese's job at a gym's daycare facility was "an evil genie's facsimile of her dream life" in which she is surrounded by children who were not hers, then the triad arrangement further displaces Reese from what she perceives to be the biological truth of womanhood (Peters 69). "There can be only one mommy," "the one with the right body for it," she concludes, embittered, and the second mommy, who is subject to "a qualifier," will have to submit to the primary's terms (Peters 232, 230). Never mind that the second mommy demonstrates stronger, more innate maternal intuition. "Mother" and "woman" continue to be honorary titles bestowed upon her; her identity will always be contingent and partial despite the fact she "gave everything" for a chance to feel complete (Peters 231). The treatment of Reese's co-mothering role as "an afterthought" by Katrina's friends reinforces the fear that she is of a "lower" status (Peters 231, 295). That Reese's own, jaded trans friends completely fail to remark on her impending role further bespeaks not just its unfeasibility but indeed its perceived insignificance. Even though, by participating in the triad, Reese is the closest she has ever been to conventional femininity – socializing in cis spaces alongside her guide Katrina, having a say in the gestating body – she continues to be barred from fully enjoying the privilege of motherhood and therefore the intelligibility of cis-womanhood.

Whether Reese can distinguish between her role as the second mommy and the stigma, partly self-enforced, of second-*rate* motherhood hinges on her capacity to look to the side of parenthood. As Sedgwick implores in "Tales of the Avunculate" to counteract the exclusivity and supremacy of biological parenthood requires that we must "forget the name of the Father" and "think about your uncles and aunts" instead (59). This initiative to universalize and communize child-rearing must be expanded to include nannies, assistants, cooks, and cleaners whose work is perceived as dirty or "dirtied by commerce" (Hurley 256). Pitted misleadingly against angelic, white, bourgeois femininity and its supposedly free or natural care, these minor figures in fact make possible the re/production of the family form: they are "both drivers of plot and adjacent to plot" (Hurley 255). Reese is one such minor figure, occupying a space adjacent to the family as it is conventionally conceived; the challenge is to distinguish adjectives, like "minor" and "adjacent," from inconsequential and place them on par with Sedgwick's *besides*. Philosophically and in praxis, Reese's unsolicited contributions are integrated into her and Katrina's co-mothering: after tussling over the addition of a crib to their

joint registry, Katrina's opinion momentarily trumps Reese's. Hours later, though, Reese discovers her suggestion for the child to sleep in the same bed with the parents validated; Katrina has removed the crib, metaphorically indicating a desire for stronger bonds between all parties. Projecting their co-mothering dynamic five years into the future, Reese foresees herself advocating Kraft macaroni and cheese with its jarringly orange, powder-to-paste cheese while her co-mother tries to feed their child only the minimally processed variety, but she trusts that their disagreements will resolve into "hopeful domestic scenes" (Peters 266). As Hurley notes, "the refractive space [to the side of parenthood] is often occupied by pretenders, substitutes, and unbelongers," but it is "not inherently subversive or radical" (260). In fact, what is promising about the triad arrangement is how unprogressive it is – how it tries to keep the nuclear family form and the feminized maternal sphere therein as intact as possible – while redistributing the labour of social reproduction through "sideways relationships" (Hurley 254). To be clear, however, this interruption of reproduction, this displacement of the mother-child dyad and disruption to linear models of futurity, is precisely what reminds Reese of her trans body. Thus, her capacity to look to the side of parenthood is the very compromise she must make to inhabit what the public deems as legitimate motherhood, to approximate the pinnacle of cis-femininity.

The co-parenting arrangement, the brainchild of Ames, allows him to be just that: a parent, a title sans the presumption of gender, as opposed to a father, a masculine-coded role he would have had to adopt were Katrina his sole caregiving partner. With both Reese and Katrina involved, Ames is more able than ever to exist as the woman – the chimera – that he "can't stop being": in the company of the former, with whom he underwent a second puberty into womanhood, "he would always be a woman," and in preserving his relationship with the latter, he can continue to enjoy toppy-femme kink that inverts gender roles, thus allowing him to dip into a private, feminine side even as a detransitioned, cis-passing man (Peters 103, 35). "I'm… I'm as you know I am," he dithers, grasping to no avail at a identifier for a "girl [who] was maybe a boy" and a boy who was maybe a girl. Reese and Katrina "understand where [Ames has] been," so by "borrowing [their] vantage," he feels seen without feeling exposed, liberated from his self-surveillance even if momentarily (Peters 105, 35). He can *be* a transwoman without "*doing*" femininity – without crafting a "demure" "Martha Stewart" persona that incapacitated him (Peters 258, 42). At the same time, he can be a "once-male" as well without reviving a vestigial instinct to protect that, for him, borders on the "indignant […] rage of insulted masculinity" (Peters 254). The co-parenting agreement opens up an conditions of possibility for him whereby, as Nelson elucidates, "feeling real is not reactive to external

stimuli, nor is it an identity. It is a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live," and it "makes spontaneous gesture possible" (17). With Reese acting as "a shield for people she loves," guaranteeing the safety of the child, and Katrina delegating responsibilities to him as his boss and now a co-parent, Ames can escape the traditionally masculine obligation to helm their family unit (Peters 106). Instead, he contributes in more subtle ways, namely through the "astute emotional perspicacity" he acquired as Amy which sensitizes him to the relationship dynamics between Reese and Katrina (Peters 278). For instance, he is strategically absent from prenatal co-mothering activities, allowing the two to bond, and when in their presence, he adopts a diplomatic stance, defusing arguments between the two without inserting himself. A previously anonymizing manoeuvre devised to keep others away, Ames' learned habit of self-absenting is, in the company of his co-parents, refigured into a catalyst for relationality instead (Peters 258).

In an extended metaphor for the violence suffered by trans women and their trauma responses, he tells Katrina about juvenile elephants that terrorized fellow animals and humans because poaching practices had collapsed intraspecies social structures through which young elephants typically learn healthy behaviour. Having witnessed the murder of their caregiving elders, "birth mother, aunts, grandmothers, friends" with whom they would have had a lifelong bond, the orphaned elephants proceeded to wreak vengeance (Peters 100). Trans women, "a lost generation" with no stable community because their elders have perished to HIV, suicide, poverty, or have otherwise disappeared into heavily medicated, stealth lives, not only lash out online at people outside their demographic but also ostracize their own in the same self-righteous and angry manner (Peters 101). These "mommy issues" affect Ames on not just a cultural level but a personal one, too (Peters 245). Having drifted away from his family and incurred the "revulsion" of his mother who rejected his young, questioning self, Ames never experienced "the proper bonding and separation as a woman from female authority" (Peters 245). As Amy, he tried constantly to retrieve this girlhood, first in a mother-daughter-lover relationship with Reese, then by hiring a maternal domme to heal the still-gaping maternal lack. The triad arrangement is an opportunity for Ames to recuperate the maternal bond with two matriarchs whom he respects deeply. Being around Reese and Katrina is for Ames "like coming home" and "liv[ing] up to what they both hoped he could be" (Peters 31, 35). His are not the only matrilineal bonds due repair; Katrina and Reese's maternal kinships are tenuous at best, the former's grandmother having practically disowned her and the latter's mother portrayed as chronically unavailable to the extent that other mothers played substitute. Even unborn, the child has already begun to "relink […] the maternal line" for Reese, Katrina, and Ames by

honouring first and foremost the maternal love that exists in and among them – caregivers and role models in their own right as well as mothers to each other.

To live as "a woman but not" and concomitantly sustain a bond with the two most important feminine figures in his life is to reckon with his originary function within the triad – "fatherhood, that final plume in the cap of manhood" (Peters 35, 17). His masculinity, hitherto a mode of survival, is both the germ of and obstacle to a matriarchal model of kinship, the germ of and obstacle to a space of flourishing. The challenge of accepting this simple yet fraught fact of his male anatomy recalls the emotional hurdles Reese encounters in reconciling, on the one hand, motherhood, a touchstone of normative femininity, and, on the other, her trans body. In contrast to Reese, Ames' femininity is not couched in the maternal role, and he suffers almost no genital dysphoria; his femininity has always been, in contrast to hers, more muted, part of his chimerical identity. But fatherhood proves a much more concrete marker of his masculinity into which his femininity must necessarily be sublated. The demand on Ames to "comprehend the enormous weight of fatherhood and generational lineage" furthermore harks back to Katrina's qualms about motherhood as a woman of mixed heritage (Peters 17). Just as, for Katrina, the societal expectation that a white-passing woman should and will bear children is positioned fricatively adjacent to her own reservations, partly informed by the discrimination she witnessed as the daughter and granddaughter of racially Othered women, Ames is caught between "the data that they clearly show – he is a father-to-be – with the data he stores in his heart: He should not be a father" (Peters 14). Far from igniting a commitment to heteronormativity, detransition left Ames no less disaffected and unmoored, juggling the affective strain of presenting as cis-passing man with knowledge of the practical repercussions should he flipflop between genders while he lives out existing templates of belonging. When finally he concocts an arrangement that promises to meet his desires as well as those of Reese and Katrina, an arrangement wherein gendered dualities are comfortingly suspended, Ames nonetheless finds himself faced with both the essentialness and the essentializing power of his maleness.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter opened with an overview of the Child, an icon of heteronormativity, and the antisocial thesis that developed around it, a thesis which Wiegman rightly classifies as more of "an arena of interpretative battle" (220). Eschewing the rhetoric of transgression and the

melodrama of radical contingency that Edelman champions,[42] I opted for a more generative theoretical framework rooted in Muñoz's intersectional perspective and Berlant's cautiously reparative agenda. With their conceptualization of social negativity guiding my close analyses of characters in Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby*, I attended to the ways in which Reese, Katrina, and Ames individually manoeuvre around and within – but never beyond – the expectations thrust on them by their respective gender identifiers despite a deep frustration therewith. I focused on the characters' desire for and skepticism about ordinary modes of attachment as well as the ambivalence this simultaneity inevitably breeds, an ambivalence which challenges the tidy conceptual binaries set forth by antinormative politics. Regardless of whether they were born in a cis-normative body, all three ultimately move through the world in a narrowly defined one, though the enthusiasm with which they do varies: Reese covets all things cis-feminine, like vaginas, floral motifs, motherhood, whereas Katrina and Ames stake their identities in less material objects of desire. If Mark Fisher's influential idea of capitalist realism describes "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it," then what Peters' characters experience, prior to meeting each other and "exploiting the elasticity of [the world's] contradictions," is a homologue: heteronormative realism (1; Berlant *Inconvenience* 28).

This heteronormative realism softens, however, as the characters embark on a co-parenting endeavor. My exploration of their triad arraignment underscores the compromises each must make to sustain the commitment, intelligibility, and affective belonging this improvised relationality promises. In "No Sex Please, We're American," a review of *Sex, or the Unbearable*, among other books, Tim Dean complains of a tendency in gender studies or queer theory to tether sex-related research to "weightier" issues, like neoliberalism, globalization, and identity politics – a self-aggrandizing tendency that leads to "bury[ing] sex in abstractions," epistemological and linguistic (616). "Abstraction," he slates, "enables the maintenance of a hygienic distance from the messiness of embodied desire" which this chapter strove to rectify by focusing on the actions, including speech-acts, which comprise Reese, Katrina, and Ames' performative family-formation (Dean "No Sex Please" 621). Guided by the insights into normativity culled from affect theory, debates around queer anti/sociality, and those around trans anti/normativity, I noted the ways in which the three protagonists adapt and

[42] Edelman joins post-'68 French (male) thinkers in his mechanical celebration of the death of the Enlightenment subject. Theorists of this ilk all have their own distinctive vocabularies – incoherence, fragmentation, différance, jouissance, deviance, and so on – but the overall goal is same (Ruti *The Ethics of Opting Out* 144).

adapt to the good life fantasy, managing neither to concretize its rigid heteronormativity nor circumvent its chrononormative rituals. Together, the three choreograph a firmly relational paradigm of belonging that is at once heterotopian and rife with negativity, a "durationally extensive space[]," to use Berlant's words, from which attachments to arduous lifeworlds can be rejigged without the trauma or melodrama of radical discontinuity (*Inconvenience* 23). Operating in the middle ranges of agency, disciplining themselves to *not* be consumed by the optimism that usually rose-tints the prospect of welcoming a child, Reese, Katrina, and Ames adumbrate not "what [taking a chance on a family] could mean in the future," but "what it means right now" (Peters 171). This labile process that chimes with Berlant's call to "live beyond survival, toward flourishing not later but in the ongoing now" (*Unbearable* 5).

But this flourishing is blighted by affective discomposure. In Reese's case, the triad arrangement grants her most ardent wish – a wish that gives credence to her other cis-aspirant identity – but simultaneously calls attention to the insurmountable biological difference between her trans body and a reproductive female one. In Katrina's, it promises to balance the reassuring predictability of heteronormative life with the relief of sharing the burdens encoded therein, but it also forces Katrina to surrender to the *un*predictability of this unorthodox arrangement which in turn forces her to reckon with the fundamental unreliability, the fundamental nonsovereignty of her cohort and herself. The triad arrangement rewards Ames with affective safety, inviting him to be the trans woman as whom he still identifies without doing trans again nor reverting to the "anguished dissociated yearning" of his adolescence (Peters 238). It enables him to be figuratively cradled by other women, to bask in the "confusingly sexy and painful and satisfying and awkward" of inter- and intragender love (Peters 89). The cost of being a woman and being around them is paradoxically, however, to sire a child that would cement his intrinsic maleness. "I […] understand how it is to have a body that isn't a home to babies," Katrina confides, and while this statement concerns her miscarriage, it expresses the incoherence encountered by all three characters (Peters 172). The latent sense of alienation and nonsovereignty which has haunted them throughout their lives crescendos as they attempt to bring a child into world. If their individual backstories illustrate a gap between the expectations grafted onto bodies and their individual desires, then the unborn child makes visible the bitterness, inferiority, and incredulity that overwhelm Reese, Katrina, and Ames as they set out to fulfill those desires. In other words, the joy of tailoring heteronormative scripts into a coparenting arrangement that promises them each a sense of intelligibility and reciprocity hitherto withheld is somewhat attenuated by the compromises they must make in the process which reinforces the idea that flourishing, though no longer

deferred, will remain unfinished. “Negativity might not change, but the worlding of it does,” Berlant writes, a statement I take to illustrate the the patterns of adjustment in *Detransition, Baby*, ones born neither of heroic refusal nor compulsive optimism, but signal nonetheless a better life, however scattered, however compromised (*Unbearable* 100).

Compromise as a Means, an End, and a Middle Way

This thesis has developed several conceptualizations of compromise: an affective atmosphere tinged with resignation; a mode of weathering the slow deterioration of the good life fantasy that usually involves self-effacement; a core, conventionalizing tenet of liberal democracy; an aesthetic hybridity that further impedes political imagination; and, finally, a means of testing a new matrix of familial belonging. It adopted a gendered lens through which to investigate why women who by all legal accounts qualify as full-fledged citizens continually find themselves making choices that approximate bargaining. Situated in the contemporary present wherein feminist demands for pleasure and participation have been integrated into a neoliberal agenda that harnesses empowerment for profit-driven ends, my project exposed a circular logic: agency is mediated by structures of domination, compelling citizens to make compromises that offer temporary satisfaction while ultimately fortifying those very structures. A disciplinary technique embedded in market rationality, this exploitation of empowerment rhetoric and by extension the feeling of sovereignty it inspires has not succeeded in improving private-sector employment nor public infrastructure but rather in training citizens to endure conditions of actual and felt precarity. Confronted with survival scenarios, they wield ever-creative strategies to weather a lifeworld that by virtue of its scarcity appears to offer endless opportunities for overcoming.

Affirming existing nondualistic understandings of agency – neither freely given nor fully absented – this project explored materialistic, matrimonial, and maternalist models of normative success for contemporary women. Their cries for freedom appeased with the proliferation of consumerist choice and opportunity to compete in the game of capitalist accumulation, women now nurture not a greater awareness of systemic patriarchal domination nor a sense of solidarity but individualistic desires to climb the power pyramid founded on their very discrimination. My understanding of compromise acknowledges the appeal of self-optimization – of being a model citizen, an "appropriate" woman – particularly when the exercising of individual agency is tempted by and gratified with tangible capital. Even in light of the decades-long recessionary trend which has tested postfeminism's brash optimism, fractured dreams of meritocracy and security have not precipitated a break in the faith invested therein. The postfeminist avatar that conflates the fantasy of omnipotence with the promise of belonging remains an aspirational identifier, compelling the contemporary woman to "act as if her autonomous individuality and her generic identity are the same thing" (Berlant *Female Complaint* 258). As part of her supposed emancipation, she thus performatively solidifies a

status quo predicated on patrial self-erasure – a motif of this project. “It’s hard to say how much you can genuinely, independently like what amounts to a mandate,” Jia Tolentino writes, especially when those things enable the pleasure of being inside a relation, even and especially one crippled by a sense of contingency. Affective belonging costs women the continued adjustment to physical and affective demands – a compromise of the self for the presumed self that calcifies existing templates of living.

Through its close analysis of contemporary fiction and autofiction by women writers in dialogue with political, historical, and affective scholarship, my project elaborated a theoretical understanding of compromise that can be condensed into various definitions culled from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first two chapters developed the heuristic as a verb, meaning to reach an agreement, to adjust, to accommodate; as a verb again, meaning to imperil oneself, one's reputation, credit, or interests; and as an adjective, meaning damaged or discredited. Investigating the practical and psychoaffective advantages of “riding the efficiency of the norm,” as Lauren Berlant puts it, Chapter 1 found justification for political quietism in the face of harsh realities stemming from capitalist exploitation and sexual alienation (*Unbearable* 114). It discussed the centrality of the nuclear family unit to neoliberal policymaking and the resultant debt economy which, having eliminated other social safety nets, pressure citizens into privatized dependence. Alongside other neoconservative values, heteronormative kinship underwent a long renaissance that began with Thatcherite-Reaganite discourse and dovetailed with postfeminism’s gender conventions, becoming not just a criterion of social belonging but indeed an arrangement to survive austerity. I tracked instances of attenuated agency in Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy which follows various female characters who, despite their heteropessimism towards the cult of domesticity, find themselves performing the uncompensated affective labour of sustaining familial bonds into which they slot comfortably, gratefully. Chapter 1 revealed the status quo to be self-fulfilling, orchestrated by quotidian compromises that ferry ordinary citizens through life. The conventionalizing desire to fit into existing social terms foments a sense of resignation which, like its cousin realism, in dulling the capacity to envision life otherwise, reinforces attachments to convention. Compromise, I inferred from my close reading, is the handmaiden of cruel optimism, of wilful misrecognition and repetition.

The compulsion to compromise – to adjust and imperil oneself – for a taste of belonging and, resultant resentment and resignation returned as the central fixation in Chapter 2 which read Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* to understand bad feelings: the will, abjection, and fatalism concerning the unmet call for collectivity. I interrogated self-injurious

behaviours of the antiheroine and her friend, negotiating the life-extinguishing and life-saving dualism of their rituals. Often wrongly slated as frivolous by neoliberal culture that prizes future-oriented self-cultivation, these instances of compromised agency that either offer temporary reprieve from everyday drudgery or help to manufacture a feeling of momentum requisite for ongoingness are in fact, I argued, exemplars of careful self-mastery or at least self-maintenance. Displays of compromising self-negation "express not a failure to be in relation but a failure within it"; rather than criticizing strategies for pain management driven out of public purview by the neoliberal culture of self-sufficiency and pathologization, my project validated the tensions between staying attached to life and defending against the affective incoherence which accompany attempts to do so (Berlant *Inconvenience* 26). Provocative and personal as they are, the trauma and melodrama of Moshfegh's characters are also unremarkable, and it is their commonness that can potentially breed productive action, redressing the collective air of lack and longing. Neither the shared malaise nor the girls' techniques of self-management are conducive to flourishing, individual or collective, however. On the contrary, they compromise wellbeing in both the short term (i.e. cause bodily harm) and long term by further suturing them to the status quo (i.e. stabilize the conditions from which malaise and need for self-management arise). "Fantasy [of belonging] tethers you to a possible world but makes you passive too," Berlant writes, plying citizens with a familiar, normative, punitive lifeworld that too often gets purposefully and subconsciously nominated as something worth compromising for (*Unbearable* 39).

While the necessity of compromise to secure belonging continued to thread through my project, Chapter 3 introduced an additional conception of compromise through its analysis of Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Beautiful World, Where are You*: as a noun, meaning a settlement or concession involving partial surrenders from multiple parties that has, under liberal democracy, been elevated into a central fantasy. In focusing on the feminized realm of domesticity and the psychosomatic effects of physical self-management, the first two chapters were implicitly centered on the body, a highly private site through which to experience and exert power. The latter half of my project developed compromise as a guiding heuristic from within a wider, more relational, and explicitly ideological context, drawing parallels between the tendency to not just accept but indeed idealize diminished conditions of possibility and liberal democracy's brittle *modus vivendi* model of belonging. Expanding my understanding of compromise as that which designates an attachment to life *as it is*, this project turned to exploring the chiastic reversal – life as it is attached to compromise – by which I mean the philosophical commitment to minimizing conflict that appeals to other, speciously

progressive principles, like rationalism, individualism, and neutrality. The faux-realities of contemporary life are thus doubly naturalized: by a self-fulfilling sense of resignation that corners people into complying with the norm, on the one hand, and, on the other, by a culturopolitical order that paints anything other than compliance as irrational, imposing, extreme. Building on the conclusions which preceded it, Chapter 3 argued that compromised conditions of possibility accrue ontological certainty by ennobling compromise into an irrefutable ethicopolitical value, instilling in citizens the belief that compromise can be synonymous with not only compulsion but also respectability. The act of compromise acquires positive valence when presented as not just a means but also a cherished end.

My examination of protagonist Frances in *Conversations with Friends* reiterated an argument from previous chapters, namely that women continue to serve as "mistress[es] of conventionality," modulating their embitterment with sentimentalism (Berlant *Complaint* 226). But whereas the necessity of training oneself into "a socially intelligible form of person whose politico-ethical sensorium is in the right order" is largely met with wariness by Cusk and Moshfegh's characters, Frances tells herself she consents to – even takes pride in – living for others which she understands is a criterion for her to live at all (Berlant *Complaint* 152). She embodies the liberal democratic commitment to minimizing conflict for the sake of an elusive collectivity. Appeasement, the essence of compromise, motivates many an artistic work as well. Like other novels in my archive, Rooney's register the economic and social attrition at present; where hers differ is in their more sanguine treatment of heterosexual coupledom. Mobilizing feel-good plotlines to temporarily dispel a pervasive sense of atomization and impotence among characters and readers alike, her work articulates what she intends as a politically radical interpretation of intimate love pregnant with utopian possibility. An object of resignation in Cusk and Moshfegh's work, the heteroconventional paradigm of belonging is brought under more reparative light by Rooney's characters, touted as the ultimate consolation despite their residual suspicion towards its terms. The inclination towards happily-ever-afters – increasingly palpable over the course of Rooney's career – and their use as triumphant solutions to both individual and social malaise re-entrenches not only compulsory heterosexuality among readers but also the expectation of linear story arcs. Through its analysis of the characters' affective inclination towards interpersonal reconciliation and, analogously, the novels' formal inclination towards narrative resolution, Chapter 3 broadened previous conceptualizations of compromise: both a structuring principle of belonging and a process by which to secure it. However ambivalently exalted or exercised, it has an ossifying effect on social, political, and aesthetic norms, hampering the capacity to identify or act otherwise.

Whereas in previous chapters compromise emerged as a largely individual and dour pursuit, the analysis of Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* in Chapter 4 yielded a more sustaining understanding of compromise that exceeds self-preservation. Echoing the recent pushback in queer theory and trans studies against calls for radical discontinuity, Peters' protagonists are less interested in rejecting the narrow terms of their lifeworlds than widening them through mutually effected, mutually enriching compromise. Perhaps the compromises among Reese, Katrina, and Ames carry more generative potential because they quickly recognize that the traditional templates of romantic and familial belonging will fail to account for the involvement of a third party in their coparenting arrangement. Common objects of aspiration and obligation in contemporary postfeminist culture have not historically been available to two of them, though this fact does not dampen their allure; the defeatist sense of realism among Reese and Ames stems not so much from an internalized stipulation that heterosexual coupledom and the nuclear family form must be upheld but rather from relentless reminders that they cannot be. The three protagonists necessarily, performatively, and paradoxically expand possibilities of sociality in trying to approximate the very structuring fantasy that makes life disappointing in the first place. They arrive at something perennially provisional that bears enough resemblance to established templates of belonging to be reassuring but not enough to be predictable. Notably, *Detransition, Baby* feels both familiar and foreign, reiterative and experimental on a formal level as on a thematic one, too: it features a narrative arc that builds up to a climax yet skirts resolution in its denouement; it weaves together love plots in conventional, Austenian fashion, though these banal, overlapping dramas yield anything but simpler versions of the parties involved. The incompleteness of the triad venture – and it is intrinsically incomplete due to an utter lack of rubric by which to gauge their family's completeness – points to a different way of conceptualizing compromise as more than an conventionalizing ideal, more than a process by which to perpetuate the status quo. Compromise can serve as the engine behind a present-oriented process that nonetheless honours the pleasures of attachment, that neither induces dread of a fixed end nor the threat of its loss.

Detransition, Baby's attention to the ways in which its characters' demands and sacrifices impinge on their personal and collective flourishing underscores the difficulty of teasing apart ambivalent or downright bad objects. The impossibility of extricating ourselves from dull dramas, spineless politics, and guilty pleasures that we affirm and find affirming chimes with the suspicion towards contemporary empowerment rhetoric which has threaded through this project. To live in the intersecting presence of others is, as Alexis Shotwell asserts in *Against Purity*, to be complicit with them, "pre-polluted," "implicated in situations we (at least in some

way) repudiate" (7, 5). "We are compromised and we have made compromises," she continues, invoking macro- and micro-scale instances of boundary-crossing: globalized trade; colonized states; im/migration; the bacterial, chemical and microplastic infiltration in bodies (Shotwell 5). In the face of inevitable ecological and geopolitical entanglement, the discourse of choice which attends the sovereign fantasy falters. As is made syntactically apparent through Shotwell's passive voice, exposure and vulnerability are inevitable, and often they are not volitional either. Analogously, therefore, compromise is not congruent with the imagined – distorted – image of the self who has unwavering control over actions, others, and causality, the self who is interpellated by neoliberalism and the genus of feminism that has prospered since the mid-1980s. Far exceeding set of measures performed on command by the individual-with-intention, compromise is, Shotwell stresses, a passive state, too. Revisiting compromise as a condition of exposure, of (self-inflected) imperilment, a foundational formulation on which my project is premised, while extending the cautiously optimistic note that pulses throughout the final chapter, I end here by tendering that compromise can signal both effortful attempts at and a passive receptivity to change through co-constitution, though, given the difficulty of unlearning what counts as realism, compromise will simultaneously and antithetically denote some continued concession to the pressures of normative belonging. Ushering us away from dualistic presumptions of power and impotence, refusal and oppression, the conceptual heuristic of compromise allows us to juggle, on the one hand, a critical sensibility about scenarios that have felt for too long barely survivable yet serve nonetheless as crutches and comforts with, on the other, an anxious but dogged desire for better.

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