Networked Readers:
A Portrait of Post-digital Book Culture

by

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Abstract

Networked Readers: A Portrait of Post-Digital Book Culture asks, "What is the role of the book in the present, a moment defined by digital technology?" Drawing on close readings of contemporary fiction and ethnographic research with contemporary readers, this dissertation offers a new narrative of the book and its relationship to internet culture and digital technology. While popular discourse suggests that the book has been dying for decades, perpetually at risk of being replaced by digital media, I argue that authors and readers are using the book, together with digital media, to navigate the pressures of an always-on internet culture and to reimagine our relationships to media and to one another.

The first two chapters examine how the internet shapes contemporary subjectivity. Drawing on a qualitative survey and a series of eight interviews that I conducted with members of Bookstagram, a community of readers, authors, and publishers on Instagram, the first chapter explores how some contemporary readers construct a sense of self and develop relationships with other readers through their engagements with Bookstagram. Bookstagram is defined by a tension between users' desire for community and the culture of influencer advertising that is reinforced by Instagram's platform and the publishing industry. This chapter illustrates how social media both supports and stymies literary community. The second chapter builds on my discussion of Bookstagram as I analyze three novels that explore the relationship between technology and self-representation: Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?,* Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking*

About This, and Kate Zambreno's *Drifts*. I argue that these three novels adopt an autofictional mode in order to contextualize, understand, and critique social media's culture of self-branding.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on how books may help readers and writers to represent and navigate anxiety and overwhelm caused by the asymmetrical scale of our relationships to information and to ongoing political, economic, and environmental crises. The third chapter puts forth a theory of networked reading. Focusing on Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being,* Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* and Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive,* I analyze how each novel documents the present as it is unfolding. Furthermore, I show how each author adopts a hyper-citational style that both models and invites readers to track down references for themselves, moving from the pages of the book to a search engine. Networked reading encourages readers to exercise agency over the act of literary meaning-making, embracing the multiplicity and contingency inherent in the act of reading. The fourth chapter examines two experimental texts written in collaboration with AI: Vauhini Vara's "Ghosts" and Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*. I argue that these texts reveal the underlying logics of large language models (LLMs) and thereby help non-experts to become better readers of this new technology and the texts it generates. Both Vara and Bertram illustrate how the abductive logic of generative AI perpetuates stereotypes and clichés, but they also illustrate the possibility that these models might be put to different purposes. Reading has always been a complex, social, and networked practice, qualities that are amplified by technology today. This dissertation offers a cultural history of present-day book culture, exploring the impact of the post-digital media environment on people's relationship to and ideas about books and reading.

Introduction

OpenAI's old office building in San Francisco was designed around a two-story library space, inspired by reading rooms at Stanford's Green Library and the New York Public Library. In photographs of the space, the room glows with the warm light of reading lamps that sit atop large wooden tables. Floor to ceiling bookshelves, filled with an array of titles chosen by Sam Altman and his employees, line the walls (Metz). This space is not particularly unusual: many businesses, from clothing stores to hotels, restaurants, and bars use books as decor. This phenomenon stretches back to times when literacy, let alone book ownership, was limited to only the wealthy, and it has continued to echo throughout history. In the early 20th century, for instance, the struggling publishing industry launched a campaign calling for architects and builders to include bookshelves in the new homes being built for the growing white suburban middle class. Analyzing articles from the time, Ted Striphas characterizes this push for bookshelves not as an argument about the virtue or value of reading but, instead, an argument about cultivating an "appearance of respectability and plenitude" through the "presence of books" in the home (28). Jay Gatsby's library shelves of unread books, with their telltale uncut pages, exemplify this bookish façade. Today, books used as interior decor still serve as a signal of education and taste—or at least the pretense of it. During the Covid-19 pandemic, analyzing the bookshelves that appeared as people's backgrounds became common practice (Bullen). In the case of OpenAI, the library takes on a slightly different meaning, serving as a symbol of creativity and human ingenuity as well as a link to the past. Quotes from OpenAI employees

describe the library as a space of inspiration; as Sam Altman, the company's CEO, has said, "[T]here is something about sitting in the middle of knowledge on the shelves at vast scale" (Metz). As this example demonstrates, digital media and digital archives have not replaced the library or the book entirely; instead, the two circulate simultaneously, interwoven in complex ways.

In the last decade, social media has sparked renewed interest in the physical qualities of the print book. As platforms increasingly privilege visual content, qualities like color and motion become important tools to attract an audience. This emphasis on visual characteristics has led to the increasing popularity of print books on platforms like Instagram, as physical books are able to catch the eye more readily than photos or videos of a Kindle screen. TikTok, a platform originally dominated by dance videos that paired music with motion, has exaggerated this dynamic. While BookTok, a community of readers on the platform, does not usually feature dances, their videos are nevertheless choreographed, often featuring books in motion, synchronized to the audio playing in the background.

Both OpenAI and BookTok show that the decades-long narrative of the death of the book is, as many other scholars have argued, an oversimplification (Pressman). Like the use of books as decor, fears of the death of the book have a long history, often materializing alongside the rise of a new form of media (Price, Lupton). Despite the wealth of scholarship establishing the repetitive quality of these claims and the persistence of the book in both corporate branding and personal identification, these fears continue, cropping up again every few years.

In the last five years, these feelings have been stirred up by the brain fog, anxiety and depression, burnout, and remote learning brought on or exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Headlines ask panicked questions like "Do People Read Anymore?" or they purport to tell the

story of "The College Students Who Can't Read Books," deploying hyperbole to grab the attention of their audience (Luse, Horowitch). The drastic decline these headlines describe, however, is often exaggerated. As I was writing this introduction in February of 2025, I heard an NPR story that explained that reading was "trending down" as Americans read fewer books and spent less time reading. However, when I went back to read the story—and the study it references—I realized they weren't discussing new research but a poll from 2022. Further, while the study does show decline over time, Americans are only reading 2.7 books fewer than they were in 1990, and the percentages of Americans reading either no books or 6-10 books per year have remained stable since 2002 (both increased 1 percentage point between 2016 and 2022). The only group reading less in 2022 than in 2016 was people reading more than 11 books per year. Differences between age groups are also telling: those older than 55 have the greatest decline (-4.7) in books read, while the 18-35 group, who are likely spending the most time on social media, has decreased by less than one book from 2016 to 2022 (-0.7). To imply, as the NPR piece does, that this study shows reading in straightforward decline as the result of technology erases nuance present in these results. Clearly, fear-mongering about the death of reading is alive and well.

Yet, much of this reporting, including the NPR story, focuses on feelings, framing these numbers through felt experience: fogginess and distractibility, a lack of motivation or an inability to follow through, or a sense of disempowerment often attributed to social media apps that are designed to capture and keep our attention. I do not want to disdain the feelings these reporters describe. I, too, have struggled with burnout, fatigue, brain fog, and distraction, especially during the last five years, and I, too, feel as if social media has only exacerbated these feelings. However, digital technologies like social media are but one piece of a complicated puzzle. Brain

fog can result from medical conditions, from aging, from medication side effects, or from mental illness, burnout, or fatigue. Pinning our inability to focus—and thus our inability to read—exclusively on technology ignores the many other potential causes of heightened distractibility brought on by the interconnected economic, political, environmental, and health crises that dominate contemporary American life.[1]

Narratives about waning attention, like the death of the book, are not new, either. As Caleb Smith concludes in *Thoreau's Axe,* after tracing a path through the discourse around attention in the nineteenth century, "even after we understand that distraction's real causes are in the large-scale economic systems and technologies that shape our world, we keep trying to solve the problem with personal, moral remedies" like reading more books or spending less time online (7). Smith continues: "By doing so, we repeat a pattern that took shape under the nineteenth century's versions of accelerating, industrializing market capitalism and spiritual revival" (8). Like the narratives about our dwindling attention spans, the stories we tell about the death of the book and the decline of reading—overlapping but not identical conversations—overlook structural causes. In addition to the emphasis these narratives often place on individual remedies, they are also insufficient for capturing the actual state of contemporary literature and culture. According to these narratives, the book has been dying for decades. Yet, in the midst of this apparent decline, we also see vibrant communities form on social media sites where new groups of readers are crafting a sense of self rooted in their love of books.

Indeed, we need new stories about the relationship between books and digital media, stories that can articulate the structural, technological, and psychological barriers to reading but

[1] I do not mean to suggest that these are specifically American crises, only that these specific reports focus on the U.S.

that also carve out space for those whose love of books has been *inspired* by the internet, prompting them to take up book binding as a hobby or to exchange annotated copies of their favorite books with friends. Blending close readings with ethnographic research, this dissertation offers a series of case studies that, together, tell a new story of the post-digital book and its readers. I use the term post-digital to describe a moment when the novelty of digital media has begun to fade, creating a culture in which old and new media forms commingle.[2] This project examines how readers use books—in conjunction with digital media—to navigate the challenges of life under "too late capitalism" (Kornbluh 13).[3]

On a broad level, the chapters that follow are knit together by a two-part argument. First, I argue that understanding internet culture can help readers and literary scholars understand qualities of the book and our attachments to it that have been obscured by its ubiquity. Secondly, I argue that the book—as a medium—has something to teach us about internet culture and technology. Importantly, these chapters each trace the connections between three related concepts: reading, readers, and the book. The print book and its connections to the broader post-digital media environment appear in different guises in each chapter. The first two chapters consider the relationship between the print book, actual readers, and the cultural concept of bookishness. The third chapter looks at how the print book is connected to a broader transmedia network via the reading processes it invites readers to engage in. Finally, the fourth chapter sets the print book aside, considering the ways that new technologies are shaping writing as a

[2] Cramer, Florian. "What Is 'Post-Digital?'" *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, edited by Michael Dieter and David M. Berry, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 12–26.

[3] "Only now, the economic dynamics of the 1970s that were first registered in postmodernism have been compounded by those of the turn of the millennium (audited below in 'Circulation'), and they modulate themselves in today's cultural aesthetics differently. 'Too Late Capitalism' titles that difference: a contradictory moment where the overmuchness of lateness arrests itself. Future-eclipsed, present-immanentized, 'Step on it!' immediacy" (Kornbluh 13)

process. One of the questions driving this project, from the beginning, has been: what is the role of the book in the present? If books do not seem to be dying or disappearing, how and why are people engaging with them now, in our increasingly digitized world? The first two chapters construct an image of the post-digital bookish subject, exploring the ways that individual readers construct a sense of self, and increasingly, a self-brand, out of their attachment to books. The second two chapters argue that processes of reading and writing may help people navigate an overwhelming and crisis-ridden present, challenging the logic of big data that drives internet culture and AI today through a focus on individual agency and an embrace of uncertainty. Together, these chapters explore the present-tense of the book, examining what contemporary readers and authors are doing with books and analyzing the relationship between the medium of the book and the concept of contemporaneity. Throughout, I show how the print book, paradoxically, can be a helpful tool for recording, representing, and understanding life in the age of the internet.

Today, writing about the present inevitably seems to invoke feelings of overwhelm, burnout, and crisis. In *Immediacy,* Anna Kornbluh outlines the cultural style of the present, describing how contemporary media and culture privilege unmediated flow as a response to the environmental, economic, and sociopolitical crises that characterize life in present-day America. Kornbluh's project is expansive, written as a kind of manifesto, for a public audience.[4] She writes that "we are fastened to appalling circumstances from which we cannot take distance, neither contemplative nor agential, every single thing a catastrophe riveting our attention" (14-15). Kornbluh's language of "every single thing" highlights another dimension of contemporary

[4] *Immediacy* was published by Verso Books, and while it does not read like a scholarly monograph, it does engage with and participate in scholarly discussions around critical theory, cultural studies, and literary criticism.

crisis: its asymmetrical scale. The overwhelm and feelings of overload are not just the result of climate change, political upheaval, or a global pandemic. Overwhelm also stems from the quantity of information and commentary circulating about these events.

Questions of how to navigate the avalanche of information at our fingertips are relevant not only to those hoping to keep up with the news or to stay on top of the latest trends but also to contemporary readers and scholars. In 2016, Amy Hungerford addressed what she calls the "undeniable fact of literary overproduction" in *Making Literature Now,* arguing that overproduction makes "a reader's work of choosing [what books to read] both freer… and more arbitrary" (143). Six years later, Mark McGurl paints a picture of an ever-growing challenge, noting that "the supply of fictions far outstrip[s] the total time available for reading them," particularly when you include the vast "underlist" of self-published stories on Amazon (232).[5] Bibliographers face the same problem, but at an even more imposing scale, as the textual history of one single novel exists in countless iterations of digital drafts.[6] These problems—of having too much to read, and not enough time to read it—represent new manifestations of a much older problem.[7]

In *Computing Taste,* a study of the recommendation algorithms used by music streaming platforms like Spotify, Nick Seaver describes how these algorithms are designed as a tool for navigating similar feelings of overwhelm in the face of "too much music" (28). He argues that

[5] McGurl cites a report from Bowker that 1.6 million books were self-published in 2018, noting that "we can assume that hundreds of thousands of them were fiction" (232).

[6] In characterizing the contemporary post-digital textual condition, Matthew Kirschenbaum describes how "a file is 'copied' each and every time it is opened or accessed since the operating system is reconstituting it from low-level data structures which get stored on the media. Each revision of the file is thus also a multiplication…. [we have] no way of knowing how many copies of a certain text may actually be extant, or where they are located—often… they will be on systems to which the scholar and architecture cannot hope to obtain access" (5).

[7] Christina Lupton's *Reading and the Making of Time in Eighteenth Century Literature* offers an elaborate history of the feeling of having too much to read, and not enough time.

the "persistence" of these stories, which have surfaced alongside new media technologies throughout history, "suggests that the problem is something more than a limited human capacity finally being surpassed" (37). Instead, Seaver treats these stories as myth, identifying an asymmetrical "scalar relationship between archives and individuals" common across this history (37). The problem with that asymmetrical scale is not that there are too many songs to listen to—or too many books to read—but, rather, the idea that one could or should want to engage with them all, an idea that evokes an "unsteady balance between desire and anxiety" (Rosenberg 2003, 1 in Seaver 37). While this overwhelm can be attached to particular forms of media, like music or books, it also increasingly characterizes contemporary American culture as a whole, manifesting in everything from fast fashion brands that enable consumers to buy an enormous quantity and range of clothing items at a low cost to the proliferation of online reviews on platforms like Yelp, Amazon, or Goodreads that push consumers to engage in extensive online research before picking a restaurant, making a purchase, or even checking out a book from the library.

One of the key promises of the early internet was the free circulation of information, no longer bound by geographical or institutional barriers. In the past, these practical limits acted as filtering mechanisms that allowed individuals to narrow their field of view, focusing only on the information or media easily available to them. By contrast, the internet promised access to anything we could want or could want to know.[8] This project of democratizing access to knowledge required parallel efforts to collect and store that knowledge, spurring projects like Wikipedia or Creative Commons as well as the Internet Archive or Google Books.

[8] "The filtering imposed by geographical isolation is described as a bad thing, which unfairly constrains people. The filtering imposed by algorithmic recommendation, by contrast, appears as a form of care for overloaded subjects" (Seaver 48).

How should we deal with this asymmetrical scale between the archive and the individual as well as the twinned anxiety and desire it evokes? In the story Seaver tells, recommendation algorithms offer a new filtering mechanism, sold to internet users overwhelmed by the vast number of artists and albums made available to them by streaming platforms. Like other recommendation algorithms across the internet, they promise a personalized experience, creating playlists with new music based on a user's listening history. Similar algorithms have appeared in the digital literary sphere, driving platforms like The StoryGraph and Goodreads that promise to help readers find their next book. However, these algorithms perpetuate the very logic that created the problem of media overload in the first place. The more you listen to Spotify, scroll on TikTok, or rate books on Goodreads, the more data the app gathers about you. Hypothetically, the more data you feed into the algorithm, the more accurate your recommendations will be. Thus, these new filtering mechanisms exacerbate existing problems with scale, generating yet another source of overwhelm.

These issues with scale stem in large part from the dominant ideology of big data, which sees data as a reflection of reality and assumes that more data is always better. Kate Crawford describes the "underlying ideology of data" as the "drive to accumulate and circulate" (114). Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson expand on this concept, explaining that "data are aggregative," and that this aggregation is the source of data's "potential power" and "rhetorical weight" (8). According to this logic, more data leads to better outcomes, rooted in a belief "that individuals [or systems, societies, environments, etc.] can be completely knowable, once enough disparate pieces of data are collected" (Crawford 112). Big data leaves no room for the ineffable, unexplainable, or unmeasurable parts of life—qualities that are central to art, literature and human experience. Further exacerbating the imbalance between the individual and the enormous

quantity of data extracted from us, AI and machine learning technologies have performed a kind of magic trick, transforming "a *finite*, if extremely large, resource [data] into a seemingly endless source of value through the recombination and discovery of new relations and patterns in the same data set" (Halpern et al. 200). Halpern et al. refer to this shift as "qualitative," suggesting that under the regime of what they term "surplus data," data no longer merely reflects reality; it is actively shaping it. I further discuss this shift from big data to surplus data in Chapter 4.

In addition to scale, data also raises questions about objectivity and neutrality. Crawford describes how each data point in the enormous datasets used to train machine learning models is stripped from its context. She opens her book, *Atlas of AI,* by discussing one such dataset containing mugshots, gathered and shared without their subjects' consent, concluding that "it has become so normalized across the industry to take and use whatever is available that few stop to question the underlying politics" (93). Data, Crawford shows, is not neutral: where it comes from and how it is collected matters. It is not a transparent or objective distillation of reality; Rather, like all other forms of knowledge, data is interpretive—no matter how much you collect.

Algorithmic personalization was intended, as Seaver shows, as a solution to the overload evoked by our seemingly limitless access to media and information on the internet. However, as anyone who has used the internet knows, these personalization mechanisms are far from seamless. One example of algorithmic misrecognition from my own life is my Apple Music discover playlist, consisting of new music suggestions based on my recent listening habits. Right now, Apple thinks that all I want to listen to is instrumental music. However, I only listen to instrumental music while writing: it provides ambient and largely uninteresting background noise that won't pull my attention away from my work. I don't need a special playlist to help me find newer, better background noise, but their algorithm lacks this context: it has no way of

knowing *why* I'm listening to a certain genre of music. This feeling of algorithmic misrecognition is all too common (Siles et al.). As John Cheney-Lippold writes, "who we are in the face of algorithmic interpretation is who we are computationally calculated to be"—an algorithmically-determined portrait that may or may not align with our own internal self-image (5). Like clothing that doesn't quite fit, these moments of misrecognition produce a sense of annoyance or discomfort. Algorithmic curation, then, is not a particularly reliable solution to overwhelm.

The early promise of the internet as a kind of expanded public sphere, a space for expressing oneself, sharing knowledge, or connecting with others has been systematically compromised by these algorithmic images of its users. In *Never Alone, Except for Now,* Kris Cohen describes two parallel group forms: the public (of the liberal public sphere) and the population, which is built through "an automatic protocol that is indifferent to all content and all ideals, that simply tracks and aggregates" (4). For Cohen, the public is a space of "togetherness," a group form predicated on an expectation of reciprocity, while the population form is defined by a feeling of "aloneness" (5). Together, these two affects form the strangely isolating sociality of the internet, in which "individuality" feel like "the most lonely and most crowded place on earth" (23). Algorithmic personalization, Cohen and Cheney-Lippold make clear, is not based on our own sense of self. While social media users talk of "training" the algorithm to show them content that reflects their interests, Cohen reminds us that "there is no use of [these technologies] that is not also a participation in and worse, an enhancement of their power to make us into populations" (129). The algorithms can inform our tastes and interests, too. In his ethnographic work on music recommendation algorithms, Seaver describes how his subjects—engineers and designers working to generate these algorithms—saw the product they were building "as a form

of care for overloaded subjects" (48). Using these algorithms, though, simply generates more data, ignoring and exacerbating the imbalance that generates the feelings of overload in the first place.

In this dissertation, I explore how authors and readers are using books and reading, rather than algorithmic personalization, as tools for navigating these feelings of overload. I define reading capaciously, as stretching from the moment of picking a book off the shelf to the conversations had about the book after reading it. Reading is a deeply contingent and personal process: we get something different from a book each time we pick it up. As Ali Smith writes in *Artful:* "Great books are adaptable… they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives" (33). As works of art, Smith adds, a book "will hold us at all our different ages like it held all the people before us and will hold all the people after us, in an elasticity and with a generosity that allows for all our comings and goings" (33). In Smith's description, books are intimate and personal, but they are also sites of contact, spaces where who I am now can come into contact with who I used to be and where I can connect, at least indirectly, with the book's other readers. The effects of these moments of contact are unpredictable: they may create moments for connection or recognition, but they may also be alienating.

Although what we mean when we talk about reading is often treated as self-evident, there is no single way to read.[9] Reading involves a wide range of cognitive and embodied processes, "from decoding and comprehension to affect, attention, memory, perception, sensations, and mental imagery," all of which inform interpretation (Rubery 8). In his work on neurodivergent

[9] Leah Price. *What We Talk about When We Talk about Books: The History and Future of Reading*. Basic Books, 2019.

readers, Matthew Rubery argues that we should think about reading "as a loosely related set of behaviors" rather than something coherent, natural, or self-evident (4). After all, "between a book we've read closely and a book we've never even heard of, there is a whole range of gradations," from skimming and skipping around to reading *about* a book to listening to someone read aloud (Bayard xvi).[10] Reading is a capacious term that collects an array of different ways of engaging with text.

Christina Lupton's research on historical readers similarly emphasizes the contingency and multiplicity of literary meaning-making, tying this quality to the structure of the book. For Lupton, the "boundedness and sequentiality" of the codex opens up "a multitude of possible pathways" for readers "without requiring all of them to be followed at once" (95). In other words, as she puts it later:

> the fact that one may enter a book anywhere, while knowing that it has an order, and that one may skip around between pages, but not truly reshuffle them, makes reading a complex activity in which an immovable order offers the reader an environment in which she nevertheless exercises choice. (98)

For Lupton and the readers she studies, reading is an exercise of agency, not only over the meaning of the words, but on a more fundamental level, over the way that one might move through the pages of a book. While Lupton's work on eighteenth century readers and Matthew Rubery's research on neurodivergent readers rely on written accounts and traces of reading, more recent ethnographic research on contemporary readers has borne out similar conclusions. Researching how reading practices changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, and Johanne Gormsen Schmidt detail some of the many different roles that reading played in people's lives during this period of crisis, from acting as a form of refuge and

[10] Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* exemplifies the importance of this broad definition, refuting assumptions about the illiteracy of early 19th century African Americans by examining literary societies in which texts were read aloud.

self-care to "a shared activity, a means to forge a common bulwark against the world outside" (30). They also find that many readers found a sense of empowerment and agency in books.

I take reading to be a creative expression of agency, with literary meaning emerging from the interaction between a reader and a book. Rather than providing new filtering mechanisms that help you determine which books to read or, in Seaver's example, which songs to listen to, this approach to books and reading can alleviate the anxiety caused by what Seaver described as the asymmetrical scale between the archive and the individual. In other words, it can relieve the overwhelmed subject of the feeling that they need to read every book or listen to every song. If reading is individual and unpredictable, if the book I am reading now is never identical to the book in your head or even congruent with my own past reading experiences, the possibility of ever having read every book in every possible way disappears.

The authors I analyze throughout this project explore the unique affordances of the book for articulating the self in the present. Books and reading are common sites of self-discovery and identity formation. There is something inherently personal about books that, unlike algorithms, invites us to compose ourselves. Books help us see ourselves and others as complex people, with lives and identities that are "simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (Gordon 5). Life writing takes this process of self-narration as its raison d'être. Tracing the history of the book alongside the history of autobiography, Anna Poletti asserts that "the book needed life narrative and self-representation to help secure its place in culture… just as autobiographical writing needed the book to enter culture as a form of knowledge," a "circularity" that manifests in the present as well (469). Today, the two fields overlap, Poletti writes, in that "recent writing about the book often turns to autobiography" and "the very practice of life writing" seems to be "bookish" (469).

In addition to tracing how digital media changes the way readers and writers interact with books, this project also examines how digital media shapes our ideas about the values and identities of readers. What does it mean for a genre or a person to be "bookish"? Jessica Pressman theorizes bookishness as both a literary mode (something that happens in books) and an aesthetic that transcends books, structuring the ways that readers relate to the literary as well as to the digital (13). Bookishness, she argues, is a way of signaling an ongoing attachment to books as an object, particularly in a digital age. As an aesthetic, bookishness functions as a form of self-construction or self-branding that embraces the qualities attached to literature and reading. Some bookish products Pressman describes, like the Pride and Prejudice duvet cover, are kitschy, while others lean into nostalgia, like the laptop case that resembles a leather-bound book, or, to take an example from my life, the Oxford library-scented candle I once received as a gift. Since I came across Pressman's work in 2020, I have been thinking about what it means to identify as bookish (or a book lover, or even just a reader) and what qualities cohere around that identity. I have also been thinking about who gets to be bookish, what genres of books they might read, and whether the internet challenges or reinforces older normative ideas of bookishness. Online, social media users—many but not all of whom are white girls and women—deploy bookish characters like Rory Gilmore as part of their aesthetic or personal brand, perpetuating the stereotypical image of the young, precocious white girl who can always be found with her nose in a book. My research suggests that social media both critiques and perpetuates these older images of bookishness, simultaneously propping up viral reading challenges based on the books Rory Gilmore reads, for instance, while also amplifying calls for readers to diversify their reading. On Instagram, users told me, the platform's algorithms elevated readers who already fit this normative picture, offering a clear illustration of the ways

internet technologies tend to solidify, rather than challenge, existing social norms. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I analyze two authors who use large language models to make the normative force of these kinds of algorithms visible to readers.

1.1 Methods

My methods for this project are drawn from models across a range of disciplines. The more research I did on contemporary literature, the more I became convinced that if I wanted to make any claim about what books do in the world, I needed to attend both to the ways that books are received and interpreted by individual readers and to the ways that reception is shaped by the different mediums in which people discuss, purchase, review, and evaluate the books they read.

In devising my methods, I was inspired, in part, by Rebecca Walkowitz's description of close reading at a distance in *Born Translated*. Close reading at a distance represents Walkowitz's attempt to incorporate circulation and reception into literary analysis. She asks:

> What if we were to ask whether books lead us to privilege, analyze, or value something in the text other than words? We might have to pay greater attention to typography, layout, and illustration as well as to many things that are not strictly speaking "on the page" or on the page we have before us. (84)

Walkowitz is working with contemporary novels that were written with translation in mind; similarly, the post-digital book is written with the intention that it will move across mediums, as it is bought, sold, reviewed, discussed, and depicted online.[11] By adding a book's paratexts to my analysis and focusing on reception and circulation as sites of literary meaning-making, I have

[11] Ironically, though Walkowitz's title is based off the idea of "born digital" texts, the post-digital book is a better counterpart to her concept of the born translated book. Born-digital texts are intended to stay digital, embracing the affordances of new technologies that could not easily be rendered in book form.

recognized the importance of context for determining the way any reader interprets a literary text.

Understanding reading as an individual, contingent process has shaped my research methods in two ways. First, I chose to interview readers about their experiences with digital technology and the book. In Chapter 1, I paint a picture of the contemporary bookish subject, based on a survey and a series of eight in-depth interviews that I conducted with members of Bookstagram, a community of readers, authors, and publishers on Instagram. Rather than relying on written descriptions or digital evidence of reading (such as Goodreads reviews), I wanted to create space for nuance, contradiction, and ambivalence. Interviews allow for follow up questions and clarifications, ensuring that I am interpreting responses correctly and allowing me, in the moment, to change the path of our conversation based on an interviewee's responses. While we tend to treat reading and social media use as commonsensical processes, we rarely explore the wide range of experiences that these terms stand in for. My interviews also helped me to realize that participants needed more prompts when it came to questions about their reading process. When I asked more specific questions about their preferred modality (ebook, audiobook, or print), genres, or settings in which to read, I heard detailed stories that made visible the wide range of behaviors encompassed by the act of reading. I heard about how someone only listened to romance novel audiobooks while they were driving to and from work, and about how another reader preferred to read along in the print book while simultaneously listening to it in audiobook form. I learned about how one reader brings her Kindle everywhere she goes, reading in small doses everywhere from the tennis court to the office lunchroom, and about how another discovered a love for romance novels after a lifetime of scoffing at them. By

enabling me to hear these stories, interviews opened up my understanding of what reading is and the different roles that it can play in people's lives.

In adopting this method, I build on extant scholarship about reading, including Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance,* Megan Sweeney's *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Bestsellers,* and Davies et al.'s *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic,* which, like this project, pairs detailed ethnographic research with close readings. Additionally, interviews are a common method among scholars of social media, particularly those working on influencer culture, such as Emily Duffy, Kelly Cotter, and Zoe Glatt. Like reading, there are dominant cultural narratives about the experience of using social media. In reality, the reasons and methods that people have for engaging with it are nuanced and variable. Interviews make the diversity and complexity of lived experience available for analysis.

Second, in line with this project's overall approach to reading, I do not write from the perspective of an "assumed" or "ideal reader." Instead, the interpretations that follow are my own, shaped—as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3—by my own "internal library" of books, movies, music, and memories. Acknowledging how my perspective shapes my analysis is also deeply important when working with social media and the digital literary sphere. As Simone Murray writes, "[T]here can be no safe quarantining of researcher from object of analysis when algorithmic processes track our every digital encounter…. merely by observing the digital book world we are ineluctably influencing it" ("Secret Agents" 8). My approach is also informed by the observations of Caleb Smith and Elaine Auyoung, both of whom articulate the ways that literary critics tend to conflate reading and writing, writing about our reading in ways that align neatly with a cogent argument. As Smith puts it, "my 'readings,' like most others, are really

pieces of writing. The person who appears to attend to the passages here is something of a fiction" (158). This observation is true, too, of my own writing: the version of me that appears here, is, like all acts of self-expression, a construction. Just as for Smith, the authorial self that appears in a text is "something of a fiction," I suggest that the image of the reading self that emerges in on social media is an amalgamation, a story built from personal experience as well as the dominant cultural images and values associated with reading.

In retrospect, this dissertation's focus on autobiographical writing as both topic and method for thinking through the relationship between books and technology seems almost preordained. When I began this project, though, the connection between the trajectory of this project and my own autobiography was somehow not on my radar. I grew up in Palo Alto, California, with a software engineer for a father and a mother who is a passionate and prolific reader. I grew up with the internet: the year I was born, my dad sent my birth announcement over email, which was a novelty at the time, while in my senior year of high school, I wrote an article about Instagram, an exciting new social media platform for our school's arts and culture magazine. It is strange in retrospect, but I did not know anyone my age who was particularly interested in computers or programming when I lived in the Bay Area, and none of my schools offered classes on the topic. Despite my lack of direct interaction with the tech industry, it was an ambient presence in my life. I knew my dad worked on compilers at a small startup, but until I took an introductory computer science class in college, I never knew what a compiler actually was.[12] While I picked up very little technical knowledge, I did bring away an intimate and intuitive understanding of the ideology and politics that fuel today's tech industry.

[12] For those curious: compilers translate the code that software engineers write (programming languages like Python, C++, Swift, Java, etc.) into a language that the computer can interpret.

By high school, I felt out of place in Silicon Valley, surrounded by an achievement-focused environment that elevated math, science, and engineering and saw the arts and humanities as both less difficult and less valuable ways of knowing and engaging with the world. My identification with my lifelong love for books deepened, set against the backdrop of what I perceived as a broader disdain, or at best disinterest, for the things I cared about. This bookish identity was something encouraged by the adults around me, and I saw it mirrored in media, too. As a young kid, it was easy for me to see myself, and to be read by others, as bookish. I fit the paradigmatic image of a reader in the context of the U.S. at the time: white, female, and middle-to-upper class. It was certainly easier to see myself in the bookish characters I was always reading about than it was to imagine a future for myself in the tech industry, which was (and still is) mostly made up of men.

I moved away for college, and when I returned for school vacations, I found myself feeling even more alien in my hometown. Free from the stress of school during these vacations, I liked to read at a local coffee shop. It was only after moving away and returning that I realized just how out of place I was in these spaces, at times the only person looking at something other than a laptop screen. Reading a book, ironically, felt almost like an act of resistance to Silicon Valley's status quo.

Even though my connection to the topic of this dissertation now seems obvious, my route to this topic was more circuitous. I graduated from college with degrees in literature and political science, with a strong interest in the values attached to literature and the claims made on its behalf. What can and what does literature do in the world? This question drove the research I initially wanted to undertake in graduate school; I wanted to explore how activists and human

rights organizations harnessed contemporary literature. The question animates this project, too, though the scale and subjects with which I ask it have shifted.

In all the scholarship on contemporary literature that I read during my graduate coursework, I couldn't help but notice a persistent gap: no one was writing about the ways that digital technology was shaping the reception and circulation of contemporary literature. I came to believe that, as Simone Murray asserts in *The Digital Literary Sphere,* "What is currently missing and is urgently needed is a digital literary studies that is both contemporary and contextual," that accounts for "textual characteristics, authorial styles, and genre categorizations [as well as] the entire institutional apparatus governing the producing, disseminating, and consuming of literary culture" both off- and online (9, 2). Today, eight years after Murray's book was published, the gap she identifies is beginning to be filled in earnest, and this dissertation represents my contribution to this growing body of scholarship. On a more personal level, this project represents my coming to terms with this longstanding tension between my own values, beliefs, and understanding of the world and those both represented and espoused by the place I was raised.

1.2 Chapter Summaries

This project is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the culture of self-documentation and self-branding that has emerged from the rise of social media platforms over the last decade. I explore the way these broader cultural forces shape literary culture, community, and form. In the second section, I make the case that, despite being a form of 'old' media, the book has particular affordances that make it an apt vehicle for helping us navigate and understand the overwhelm and opacity created by the inhuman scale of digital technologies.

Centering the internet as host to vibrant literary communities, bookish aesthetics, and amateur criticism, Chapter 1 approaches Bookstagram as a case study illustrative of the impact of social media platforms and internet culture on the broader digital literary sphere. I draw on a series of eight in-depth interviews I conducted with members of Bookstagram as well as responses to a qualitative survey I distributed. In this chapter, I seek to understand how and why people participate in these online bookish communities. Given the blurred boundaries and vast scale of social media communities and the nature of my research questions, this chapter serves as an example of the value of interviews as a method for literary scholars, building on scholarly precedents from previous studies of readers and social media users. I find that Bookstagram reflects larger cultural shifts around concepts such as authenticity, identity, and authority. I identify a tension between members' desire for intimate connection, reciprocal community, and self-expression and the commercial interests of both Instagram and the publishing industry. The chapter is structured around three core concepts that emerged from my interviews: community, influence, and identity. I find that Bookstagram users blend expertise and amateurism, claiming both a knowledge of books and a bookish identity as the source of their authority. Ultimately, this chapter shows Bookstagram to be an ambivalent space shaped by broader cultural and social forces, by the interests of social media and publishing companies, and by the intimate and personal qualities that adhere to the act of reading and discussing books.

Building on Chapter 1, Chapter 2 focuses on three autofictional novels that explore the culture of self-branding and the technologies that support it. I analyze three autofictional novels that share an interest in the changing relationships among technology, self-representation, and subjectivity: Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*, Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This*, and Kate Zambreno's *Drifts*. There are many different ways of experiencing social

media's emphasis on sharing perfect presentations of the self; these three novels, all authored by white women whose previous work fits snugly within the world of elite literary fiction, together represent a normative perspective on social media and self-branding. This chapter explores the nuances of this normative perspective while arguing that autofiction, in particular, can do more than capitulate to or merely recreate social media's narcissistic focus on the self. Ironically, the moments that are most clearly autobiographical in these novels feel the most fictional, illustrating the effects of the blurring line between fact and fiction in our online interactions.

The second half of the dissertation tackles issues of scale head on, exploring novel ways that readers and writers are using books as tools to navigate feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, or disempowerment in the face of ongoing social, political, and environmental crises. Chapter 3 examines documentary novels by Ruth Ozeki, Ali Smith, and Valeria Luiselli, all of which attempt to narrate the present as it is happening in the form of the book, a medium typically associated with temporal lag rather than immediacy. The trenchant uncertainty that characterizes life in the present sparks anxiety and generates a sense of disempowerment. Online, such uncertainty leads to anxiety, which leads to further uncertainty in a self-perpetuating loop. I argue that the book is also characterized by uncertainty and contingency. The way I read a passage today will never be the same as the way I read those same words three years ago, when I was writing my prospectus, and it will never cohere entirely with the ways that you, whoever you are, might read that same passage. Unlike the internet, however, the book situates uncertainty as a site of possibility and an opportunity for readers to exercise creative agency. From readings of the novels by Ozeki, Smith, and Luiselli, I generate a theory of networked reading, a method that treats the book as one node in a broader transmedia environment, connected by citations, ekphrasis, literary allusions, epigraphs, and other forms of not only intertextual but also

intermedial reference. By showing characters engaged in networked reading and by inviting their readers to track down references for themselves, the authors featured in this chapter illustrate how the book, because—not in spite—of its contingency, mediation, and temporal lag, might be uniquely positioned to help us understand, represent, and navigate contemporary life.

In the final chapter, I argue that literary experiments written with large language models can help everyday people to conceptualize the logic behind these technologies, side-stepping AI's notorious black box. I read two works that use GPT-3 to different ends: Vauhini Vara's essay, "Ghosts" and Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*. In her essay about her sister's death, Vara uses GPT-3 as a kind of co-author, constructing a dialogic story with the technology that she says she could not have told on her own. I argue that Vara's essay and its paratext make visible the forms of collaboration and co-authorship that are inherent in all writing, whether human or machine. In my analysis of Bertram's book, I focus on the dialogue she stages between the base model of GPT-3 and the custom model she trained on a corpus of Gwendolyn Brooks's writing. Bertram's work makes viscerally clear how the logic of probability driving LLMs perpetuates bias and cements harmful stereotypes but also opens up the possibility that these models might be put to different purposes.

In the conclusion, I build on Chapter 4's discussion of ghostwriting, using Avery Gordon's theory of haunting to return to the anxiety generated by narratives about the death of the book. I posit that the book haunts the present, demanding a different approach to media and information for the future. Treating reading as a contingent and personal process of meaning-making, I suggest, can help us understand uncertainty as a source of possibility rather than overwhelm, chipping open cracks in the crisis-ridden present.

Chapter 1 Networked Readers and Bookish Aesthetics

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become an important part of the contemporary literary sphere, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Social media has altered the ways that books are marketed and sold and has given readers an opportunity to connect to authors and to one another. In these online spaces, readers share everything from book recommendations to the methods they use to organize their bookshelves. The profiles they construct are an expression of what Jessica Pressman (2020) describes as bookishness, an identity derived from an attachment to the physical book in the digital age. The bookish subject has a long lineage: literary and cultural history is full of examples of characters defined by their love for books. Scholars studying readers have pushed back against the "cultural hegemony of the solitary reader" that animates many of these dominant images of bookishness, showing how reading is always embedded in a social context (Long 8). From Janice Radway's work on romance readers to Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's research into what they call "mass reading events" in *Reading Beyond the Book,* this line of scholarship has captured a clear picture of the wide range of "social milieu[s]" in which reading actually takes place (Long 10). Bookish social media communities represent one part of this ongoing history.

Bookstagram is also shaped by broader cultural conversations around shifting notions of expertise, authenticity, diversity, and self-optimization. Users wrestle with conceptions of authority, actively discussing questions like: Who gets to be an influencer? Whose opinions about books matter to other readers and to the publishing industry? In their introduction to a

volume of essays on "amateur criticism," Aarthi Vadde and Saikat Majumdar portray the amateur's work as an "entanglement of passion with knowledge," positioning the amateur as more than a simple antithesis to the expert (3). Indeed, their amateur critic may very well *be* an expert with a graduate degree in literature or a career as a teacher, librarian, or author. Given the "beleaguered state" of the job market for these experts, both inside and outside of the academy, Vadde and Majumdar see amateur criticism as "a gesture of authenticity made under conditions of structural duress" (3). In other words, they argue, the dwindling opportunities for people to participate in the world of expert or professional criticism means that people with that expertise turn to outside venues, writing public-facing articles or creating a record of their reading on social media as an expression of their continued love for and commitment to the project of cultural criticism. The "context of uncertainty" and instability that suffuses the world of professional literary criticism also shapes Bookstagram, where users lay claim to a bookish identity, drawing from and reshaping ideas of what it means to be a reader, a book lover, and a critic in the process (Chong 2).

At the same time as it provides a space of literary community, Bookstagram is also a commercial space, with authors, publishers, and influencers promoting new releases. In this sense, Bookstagram is a microcosm of social media writ large, shaped by the increasingly commercial nature of the internet. This chapter takes as its starting point the premise that "it is impossible to understand the role of books in the contemporary world without attention to the deeply intertwined relationships between books and other media, and the legal, commercial and consumptive practices that sustain" them (Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere* 2). Bookstagram is a prime site for exploring these deep interconnections, as it is shaped by internet culture(s), Instagram's official policies and algorithmically-enforced priorities, and the literary sphere,

including the publishing industry and individual authors and readers but also educators, booksellers, librarians, and others with a more formalized position in the book world.

Unlike a mass reading event that aims to gather readers together in time and space, Bookstagram is an online community that takes the form of a network of loosely connected individual readers. At one point, the term "Bookstagram" referred to a particular hashtag. Today, the term is used colloquially to describe a broad community of readers, authors, and publishers on Instagram. Although they are best known for their highly stylized photos of books, many Bookstagram users understand book reviews as the core of the community (Thomas). Reading challenges are popular on the platform, ranging from year-long book clubs to one-time, often playful, book stack challenges in which users gather books from their shelf that fit a common theme.

In my research, a central tension emerged between, on the one hand, the kind of community that Bookstagram users are seeking, and on the other hand, the experiences that Instagram's features, algorithms, and content policies make possible. To underline this tension, I refer to Bookstagram as both a community and a platform. Tarleton Gillespie describes how social media companies use the term "platform" to "elid[e] the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising" (348). In this way, Bookstagram is a microcosm of social media writ large, serving as an example of how users make space for themselves on a platform that is not built with their needs and goals in mind. As Lisa Gitelman argues, "media and their publics coevolve" as "the definition of new media depends… on the whole social context within which production and consumption get defined" (*Always Already New* 13, 15). Just as Instagram's

platform shapes Bookstagram's community, Bookstagram shapes the norms that guide how people use Instagram and what they expect from the platform.

Unlike Facebook groups or Reddit forums where interactions are centralized on a single page, Instagram communities are porous, constituted solely through user interactions. At times, these connections between users are publicly visible—instantiated by comments, follower lists, and tags—but they more often take the form of private messages. As a result of this diffuse and networked structure, Bookstagram consists of many microcommunities, each defined by their focus on different genres, identities, or reading goals (Leaver et al.). This decentralized structure poses an insurmountable challenge to researchers or users attempting to get a comprehensive picture of Bookstagram. Given these limitations, this chapter offers detailed accounts of individual experiences, relying on a series of eight interviews I conducted with Bookstagram users in 2022. Rather than offering a large-scale map of this online community, I have assembled the stories that follow as a series of semi-connected nodes whose networked structure mirrors the structure of Bookstagram itself.

This dissertation explores questions of scale: How do we navigate overabundance—of products to purchase, books to read, headlines to keep track of—together with the scarcity of community and connection that accompanies such overabundance? In this chapter, I explore the role Bookstagram plays for its members in both perpetuating and addressing these issues of scale, scarcity, and deep uncertainty. In addition, scale plays a role in my choice of research methods, illustrating that when faced with an incomprehensible object of study, individual stories can bring things down to a comprehensible scale. Modest yet no less meaningful insights emerge from working at a smaller scale.

In this spirit, this chapter follows three main readers—Nicole, David, and Sam—whose stories highlight the different ways that community, identity, and influencer culture shape reader experiences on Bookstagram. Nicole is a middle-aged white woman living in the Pacific Northwest. She has loved reading since she was a child and considers being a reader an important part of her identity. Nicole discovered Bookstagram when she realized that some Goodreads users were gaining early access to new releases. As someone who used to dream about getting "paid to write [book] reviews," she took interest in Bookstagram's influencer programs. Despite this initial hook, what kept Nicole on the platform was the community she discovered. David is a white man who describes himself as a "millennial Instagram lover" and a high school English teacher passionate about literacy. He highlights his teaching on his Bookstagram profile, posting materials and activities from his classroom alongside reviews of books he reads for fun. David joined Bookstagram because he "need[ed]… a spark of joy during pandemic teaching" and was excited to share his reading in creative ways. Finally, Sam is an Asian-American woman in her mid-twenties who joined Bookstagram in early 2016 as part of a wave of book bloggers who moved their content and community to Instagram. Unlike Nicole and David, she "never really read as a kid." Sam's relationship to reading shapes her goals for Bookstagram, where she is passionate about "turning non-readers into readers" by connecting people to the "stories [they] need." Sam views reading as "a form of activism" and is frustrated by the lack of diversity on Bookstagram and in the publishing industry. She uses her account primarily to promote books by authors of color.

1.1 Method

Given the dispersed and algorithmically determined nature of these online communities, what methods can researchers use to understand them? If we limit our analysis to content and interactions that are publicly visible, such as posts, captions, and comment threads, we miss many of the meaningful interactions that constitute the community of Bookstagram, which happen, as one interviewee put it, "behind the comment section." Further complicating this question is the fact that any action users make on Instagram—like other social media platforms—shapes what they see, meaning not only that users have vastly different, and at times contradictory, understandings of and experiences with Bookstagram, but that as a researcher, my view is similarly constricted. We cannot engage with the platform without altering our experience of it. While observation is always shaped by the observer's perspective, it is doubly so on social media, where a researcher's perspective is algorithmically determined.

In what follows, I aim to paint a nuanced picture of users' experiences, characterizing trends while attending to moments when individual stories diverge. During my research, I found that moments when individual experiences come into conflict with one another are in fact some of the most generative, shedding light on hidden forces like Instagram's personalization algorithm or Bookstagram's decentralized structure. In the face of an information culture that aims for certainty via comprehensive, large-scale datasets, books serve as sites of creativity and contingency, giving agency to individual readers. Likewise, I argue that attending to the unique perspectives of individuals offers one way of dealing with the methodological challenges created by studying large online communities that lack distinct boundaries.

While I focus on Nicole, David, and Sam in this chapter, I also weave in excerpts from the other five interviews, the survey responses, and my own analysis of Instagram profiles and

posts. To identify interviewees, I conducted a survey of Bookstagram users that I distributed using convenience sampling.[13] The survey asked a series of demographic questions as well as three open-ended short answer questions about why users joined Bookstagram, how they participated in the community, and what, if anything, they would change about the platform. Of the 262 survey responses I received, only 112 were complete. The other 150 respondents filled out most, if not all, of the demographic questions but not the short answer section. Of the 112 respondents who answered the short answer questions, 108 gave consent for me to include their answers in this chapter, and their responses form the basis for my analysis. I completed three reviews of the survey responses, identifying and refining codes based on themes from user responses to each short answer question.

From my survey respondents, I selected a diverse group of interviewees who represented a range of experiences on Bookstagram, from users who post daily and work with publishers to those who only log on to find new book recommendations. I emailed fifteen people, narrowing the pool by searching for subjects whose responses best represented the trends I identified in my data and subjects who voiced anomalous or less popular perspectives. I further narrowed my list based on respondents' self-reported identities (age, race, gender, education, and location), looking for both interviewees who represented the demographic majority and those whose identities diverged from the majority. Of those fifteen, eight responded. To ensure IRB approval, I did not include anyone under the age of eighteen in this research, and I only interviewed users in the United States. However, I received a few survey responses from international users, who

[13] I created a new Instagram account that I used to share the survey on Bookstagram, including the hashtag #Bookstagram. In addition, I reached out to two local bookstores who shared the Instagram post with their followers on my behalf. I also posted on my own personal social media accounts and encouraged my friends and family members to share it with anyone they thought would be interested. The Instagram post was shared by 90 other users. I explicitly stated that I was looking for responses from anyone who considers themselves part of Bookstagram and that there was no minimum number of followers or posts needed to participate.

often discussed perceived differences between their own experiences with the online literary sphere and the experiences of users in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. This finding suggests to me that expanding this research to include international users would be an important direction for future study.

I conducted interviews between October and December of 2022, each lasting between 60 and 75 minutes on Zoom. I recorded these interviews and transcribed my conversations by hand, with very light editing to adjust for the differences between conversational and written English while retaining each interviewee's voice. Researchers conducting interview research with social media users disagree about how to credit participants and whether or not to refer to them by their real name or a pseudonym. While I maintained the anonymity of my participants, I gave them the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves, as names carry personal and cultural significance and I wanted to represent the stories participants shared with me in a way that corresponds with how they see themselves and how they would like to be seen by others.

My identity as a white woman and a PhD student in English literature as well as the fact that our interviews were framed as academic research shaped the conversations I had with my interviewees. One of my participants, Sana, a second-generation Kashmiri-American who uses a private account to carefully curate their community on Bookstagram, described their approach to the platform as an effort to create a space where they didn't need to temper their political beliefs and commitments or, as they put it, "put on my white voice." They added, "This actually isn't my real voice—like it's not quite my white voice that I use in law school, but I'm still doing it." While Sana felt comfortable sharing this reflection with me in the moment, they spent much of the interview explaining why they were so careful about who they interacted with on Instagram, and I imagine that my whiteness was part of the reason they felt they needed to emphasize this

aspect of their experience. While my other participants did not explicitly reflect on the way they were presenting themselves in our interviews, my participants and I all brought into these conversations preconceptions about who we were supposed to be and how we were supposed to act.

I brought in a list of prepared questions, tailored slightly based on each interviewee's survey responses, and I began and ended each conversation in a similar way. However, I generally tried to direct the conversation only when necessary. I quickly realized that many of my interviewees were eager to talk about their experiences, so much so that I often had to remind them when we were nearing the end of our allotted time. While most conversations flowed easily, there were moments when it seemed that participants hesitated to express a specific opinion, tried to gauge how I might react, or tried to figure out what the correct answer to the question was. In these moments, I reminded my interviewees that there were no "right" answers to the questions I was asking, and that, as I made sure to say at the outset of each interview, they did not need to speak for Bookstagram as a whole. Rather, I was interested in hearing about their own experiences, whatever those experiences may be. As someone working towards a graduate degree in literature, I tried to push back against the idea that I was somehow an "expert" when it came to books and reading.

I struggled somewhat with how much of myself and my own relation to reading, books, and Bookstagram to share in these conversations. I do not use Bookstagram and went in open-minded about the platform, trying to remain aware of the gaps and limitations to my own understanding. Although I tried to avoid talking about myself in the first few conversations, participants asked how I would answer some of the questions we discussed. In subsequent interviews, I therefore tried to find a balance between sharing a little bit more about why I was

asking a question or, for certain questions, responding with a sentence about my own experience after listening to participants' answers. This approach helped to loosen up the conversation, leading to a more fruitful dialogue as interviewees seemed to feel freer to share the topics that felt important to them. While I made sure that we touched on several main topics in each interview, I also let participants lead our conversations, focusing on what felt most important to them about their experiences on Bookstagram.

1.2 Contextualizing the digital literary spheres

As part of a fast-growing digital literary sphere, Bookstagram is one node in a broad network of bookish social media communities, including BookTok, Book Twitter, and BookTube as well as book blogs, Goodreads, and StoryGraph. Many readers use multiple apps, posting content and continuing conversations across multiple platforms. Despite the significant overlap between these online spaces, Bookstagram is shaped by Instagram's platform vernacular, the "shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users" (Gibbs et al. 257). In other words, the affordances of Instagram's platform shape the "particular genres and stylistic conventions" through which Bookstagram users communicate with one another (258). While they are specific to particular platforms, these vernaculars nonetheless "migrate" between platforms as well as apps adopt and "appropriat[e]" features from their competitors (257). Platform vernacular offers a name for a concept that is intuitive to most users, who similarly move seamlessly between platforms. For this project, the term offers a framework through which to understand BookTok and Bookstagram as communities with distinct communicative norms and cultural priorities as

well as significant overlap in both users and content. While this chapter focuses primarily on Bookstagram, then, it necessarily touches on other bookish apps and websites as well.

Increasingly, studies of contemporary readers, publishing, and print culture are engaging with media studies scholarship. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Bestsellers* is, to my knowledge, the first monograph to explore the impact of online readers on the broader digital literary sphere. While the detailed focus of their research is slightly different from my own, the framing of their project is nearly identical when they ask, "[W]hat is it like to be a reader… in an era when old and new media, on- and offline practices, coexist?" (1). Through their research, which draws on a survey as well as a focus group, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo describe today's readers as post-digital, multi-modal readers evoking today's post-digital culture in which readers move between various on- and offline mediums.[14] I view *Reading Bestsellers* as a companion to this chapter; it fills in some of the gaps in the portrait that follows just as my chapter addresses some of the gaps in Fuller and Rehberg Sedo's work. In comparison to my work, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo focus more on the idea of the bestseller, on recommendation culture, and on how readers choose which books to read. In addition, their research population is slightly different from mine. Their survey skews older while their focus group included younger readers using TikTok. In turn, my work addresses the need that Fuller and Rehberg Sedo identify for further analysis of "the intricacies of parasocial relationships online [and] the types of intimacy that social media affords" (10).

Weaving together stories from Nicole, David, and Sam, I discuss three core concepts: community, influence, and identity. I first examine the central role that literary community plays

[14] "The [reader] is still… socially situated… involved in reading as a social practice, but their habits of reading are shaped by a post-digital reality where analogue and digital technologies are often entangled rather than binary opposites" (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 6).

for Bookstagram members. Reflecting broader reports of social isolation, many readers describe lacking bookish community in their lives and turn to Bookstagram to befriend others who share their taste in books. My interviews paint a picture in which online and in-person literary communities play different but no less significant roles in people's lives. I outline the work that goes into creating and maintaining these internet friendships as well as the ways that the community itself is shaped by Instagram's features and policies. Second, I explore the impact of influencer culture on Bookstagram. Publishers play a significant role on the platform, offering advance reader copies (ARCs) and book-themed gift boxes to select influencers, elevating some readers' voices above others. In some ways, this structure mirrors what scholars of influencer culture have found in their work on other industries, but it also differs in significant ways. For instance, influencers in other industries often make money from their advertising work while book influencers are almost entirely unpaid. The final section of this chapter explores how Bookstagram users create an authentic self-brand, defining themselves through their love for literature. Unlike in other influencer spheres, where authenticity is derived from amateur status, authenticity and the authority that accompanies it are established on Bookstagram through readers' love for literature as well as through their identity and lived experience.

1.3 Community

The majority of Bookstagram users I spoke with were looking for a literary community in which they could discover a sense of belonging. For some members without in-person friends who are readers, Bookstagram filled a gap in their social lives. For others, it served as a supplement to their existing social networks. My research revealed a broader lack of language for talking about the ways that digital objects, relationships, and experiences differ from their in-

person counterparts.[15] An online friendship is not necessarily less significant, less intimate, or less meaningful than a relationship conducted in-person, just as an e-book is no less real than a paperback despite their substantive differences.[16] This comparison is based on a false dichotomy: in the 2020s, relationships that begin in-person are often maintained virtually and virtual connections often lead to in-person friendships. Internet cultures change rapidly. New platforms gain popularity and old platforms are altered by the introduction of new features. On top of these technological changes, shifts in the broader social, political, and cultural landscape shape how we engage with one another online.

Online friendships are not a new phenomenon, but the presence of online community in people's lives shifted dramatically while I was conducting this research. "Bookstagram exploded" during the pandemic, as one long-time user put it, a trend that reflects both a broader turn towards social media in the absence of face-to-face interactions, and an increase in book buying as many people spent more time at home.[17] In response to an open-ended question about how and why they joined Bookstagram, 41% of survey respondents mentioned that they joined the platform after March 2020, and many explicitly framed their participation as a response to the pandemic. As libraries and bookstores shifted services and events online, platforms like Bookstagram offered not only a model but also an existing infrastructure and audience.

The majority of my interviewees also joined during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Elise, a Black woman living in a city in the South at the time of our conversation, finished graduate school in the Midwest and then moved across the country in 2020. She describes

[15] For an early articulation of the problems with opposing the "real" to the digital, see Tom Boellstorff, "For Whom the Ontology Turns" (2016).

[16] Laura Dietz et al, "Auditioning for Permanence: Reputation and Legitimacy of Electronically Distributed Novels," (2015).

[17] Ben Davies et al. *Reading Novels during the Covid-19 Pandemic,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

realizing after she moved that "there's nobody here that [she] knew well enough" to rant about the books she was reading. Elise participated in Reese Witherspoon's first virtual book club around this time, an experience that showed her it was possible to find an online community where people "could just talk about books," sharing their reactions as they were reading them. Following that positive experience, Elise decided to invest her time and energy in Bookstagram, hoping, she told me, "to find people who read like I do."

Similarly, David joined Bookstagram in December 2020 to combat burnout from online teaching. He slowly discovered the community after following an account that a family member recommended. He describes how he "didn't know there was this whole world out there… but then, slowly but surely," he got a sense of the broader community. At first, David did not want to join Bookstagram, because as he puts it, "I already have enough social media in my life. I don't need another account." After a particularly grueling semester of teaching, however, he changed his mind. The community he found became "a haven." He tells me: "It brought me joy. It was something to look forward to: it became my hobby, it became my creative outlet. It became something that I could work on that wasn't teaching during Covid, and masks, and groceries, and social distancing." Before joining Bookstagram, David had an existing network of friends with whom he could talk about books. In addition to his work as an English teacher, he led a book club that met on Zoom during the pandemic. He knew all the members of this "real life book club" before they started meeting regularly, so "the book is more of an excuse to keep the friendships alive. It gives us a chance to socialize, to catch up with each other's lives." In contrast, on Bookstagram, David found a community that "starts with a book." The friendships he has made on Bookstagram have been built "through mutual bonding" over reading experiences. "It's definitely book first on Bookstagram versus human first in real life," he says.

Nicole echoes the comparison David makes between his “real life” friends and his Bookstagram friends when she explains, “There’s a lot of jokes and memes on Bookstagram about people’s real-life friends or family members not getting that your book friends are your real friends. But it’s totally normal that I talk to this person in Australia all the time about books, and we know about each other's lives. And we are actually real friends, even though we’ve never met.” Even as she defends the legitimacy and value of online friendships, Nicole’s language echoes a long history of seeing our digital selves and subsequently our online relationships as a flattened copy of reality. Like Nicole and David, my interviewees often used the term “real friend” in contradictory ways, with “real” meaning both in-person and intimate.

By contrast, my interviewees repeatedly used the term “internet friend” to describe their online relationships. I was surprised to find that even though the term itself seems generic, my participants used the term in consistent ways. The most prominent characteristic of the internet friend, articulated by every interviewee who brought up the term, is that they are people whom, if given the chance, participants would love to meet in person. Many referenced knowing people from around the world, or at the very least, from other parts of the country, emphasizing that internet friendship is not bound by geographical location. In addition, they described how internet friendships progress differently than in-person friendships, with participants often moving to intimate topics before sharing basic contextual information about their lives.

For David, internet friends are people who, even if they talk online daily, have limited knowledge of his life. “They don't know about my siblings. They don't know about my parents, they don't know about my romantic relationships,” he says. However, even though these internet friends may lack contextual knowledge about one another’s lives, David believes these

relationships have the potential for deep intimacy: “Can I go to them? Can I complain to them? If I had a problem, would I feel safe talking to them? Absolutely—which is so weird.”

Nicole similarly emphasized the surprising intimacy that can result from online friendships on Bookstagram. During “the first three months of the pandemic,” she explains, “there were people who I'd have long conversations with on Instagram that I just met.” Nicole recounts a late-night conversation with a stranger who shared that she was “awake because her mother-in-law is dying and she was sitting at her bedside.” Over time, the two “would chat more about death and grieving,” but the friendship eventually faded. Nicole remembers thinking, “This is wild, but nice. Most of my Instagram friendships are not like that. But some of those early [friendships] happened really quickly.”

Unlike Nicole and David, who both joined Bookstagram around 2020, Sam has been part of the community long enough to see many of her relationships transform over time. “You meet people on Bookstagram and your connection is first about books,” she says. “But then you realize later how they come into play [in other parts of your life].” When Sam moved out of state for college, for instance, she already had friends in her new city that she knew from Bookstagram. She describes her Bookstagram friends as people “you don’t need to talk to every day, but you can meet up once a month or once a year and have the best time ever.” Sam attributes the easy intimacy of these “genuine connections” to the fact that “books are very vulnerable. What you’re reading says a lot about you, you know? When you can share that with someone, and you’re open to sharing your deepest thoughts about a book, it’s an entirely different connection.” Sam’s experience breaks down the false dichotomy between in-person and internet friends, showing how over time, people move fluidly between categories. Other interviewees talked about the relationship between books and readers in similar terms. Sana

described how they like "annotating lines that really resonate with you and making it permanent." They continued, "I think reading for me is like building a relationship to the page, right? I'm not just reading a story for the sake of it, I'm connecting with the story." In the informal book clubs that Sana participates in with friends, annotation offers a way to record and respond to those other perspectives. They said, "That's where annotation is really important to me, because I'm noting down what people are saying. I think to a good story, there's so many layers, there's so many ways of interpretation. I think [annotation] is almost a way of me talking with friends and hearing [about] their relationship with the stories. It's also them telling their stories, in a way."

While Bookstagram appeals to many users who desire literary community, Instagram's corporate priorities and features shape the forms of interaction that are possible on the platform. It is common for users to create a new account when they join Bookstagram. While this may seem like a small technical detail, it shapes the community in profound ways. Creating a new account allows users to present a particular bookish personality to an audience of other readers, but it also separates a user's love for books from other parts of their online life. Like other social media platforms, Instagram has shifted towards facilitating topic-based interactions between its users (Leaver et al.). Unlike Facebook, Instagram has long allowed its users to have multiple accounts. In 2016, it introduced features that enabled users to stay logged in to multiple accounts and to easily toggle among them. In 2021, Instagram began explicitly encouraging users to open multiple accounts.[18] Having multiple accounts allows users to narrow the content suggested by Instagram's algorithms, making it easier to find posts from users who share their interests.

[18] Instagram included messages on its interface inviting users with only one account to "keep up with a smaller group of friends" and to "dive into what you love" by making an account to "explore your interests" (Brown 2021).

However, it also means that the different social circles that form on each of these different accounts remain separate. No built-in feature allows someone to identify all of another user's profiles. Further, encouraging people to share different versions of themselves, spread across multiple profiles, feeds into Instagram's culture of self-branding, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Creating different accounts for different audiences also helps users avoid context collapse: when content meant for one audience on social media is seen by another. Public posts in particular tend to "flatten… multiple audiences into one" (Marwick and Boyd 122). 20% of survey respondents who say they made a separate account for Bookstagram describe context collapse as a factor in their decision. David, for instance, created a separate Bookstagram account to avoid, as he puts it, "annoying all my friends and family on my personal account." Another interviewee, Blake, a young, gay, white man working as a librarian, told me that when he talked about books with his friends, "I could tell their eyes would droop... you know when people stop listening to you, or caring." Joining Bookstagram gave him a space to talk about books as much as he wanted without worrying about "overdoing it." On Bookstagram, he said, "nobody's made to feel wrong for posting about books all the time. We're a space where everybody can nerd out about their love for books and authors and there's no shame in it."

Many of those who cited context collapse as a reason for creating a separate account used words like "cringe" in their responses. I was surprised by how common this language was and found myself wondering why it is so "cringe," as one survey respondent put it, to post about books on one's personal account. "Cringe," simultaneously a verb, noun, and adjective, metonymically describes feelings of shame or embarrassment. In his articulation of critical embarrassment, or "cringe criticism," Nick Salvato describes the cringe as an expression of

embarrassment for another, a sign of "embarrassment's power in generating bonds among its feelers" (688). We cringe, in other words, when we see someone do something embarrassing, particularly when we can imagine ourselves committing the same embarrassing mistake. Or we might cringe self-reflexively, imagining those around us cringing at our own embarrassing behavior. Through its group dynamic, the concept of cringe is linked to context collapse, as both stem from a fear that by revealing parts of yourself to the wrong audience, intentionally or otherwise, you are subjecting yourself to judgment. Though the affect "cringe" describes is far from new, the term's use has skyrocketed in the last decade on platforms like 4chan and Reddit. Damon Young describes how the term and this culture have expanded, creating "an overdetermined media context of pervasive irony" in which "some combination of technology and form works to displace both conscious and unconscious intention, such that the author is no longer any kind of authority on the question of his own sincerity." Against the background of the internet culture Young describes, any expression of genuine, unironic investment in something can be labeled "cringe." To further complicate things, the language of "cringe" shows up ironically in many of these moments, as a kind of anticipatory self-critique in which people race to label themselves "cringe" before someone else can.

Posting about books might be seen as "cringe" for other reasons as well. There may be a lingering sense that the bookish culture on Bookstagram is not sufficiently literary. Alternatively, the embarrassment may stem from the object of attachment itself, playing off either longstanding cultural ideas that bookishness is nerdy and uncool or that it is often seen as an emotional, sentimental, or feminine pastime. Regardless, I found the embarrassment attached to bookishness surprising, which was a good reminder of the ways that my own relationship to books and reading shapes my approach to this research. As part of a PhD program in English, and at other

moments in my life, as a bookseller, an English major, and a member of a family of readers, I've felt like "part of the book world," as Blake put it, nearly as long as I can remember. Further, my investment in books and reading is hard to hide. I cannot talk about my work without disclosing my attachment to books, so talking about books in person or online does not carry a risk of context collapse for me, though the way I talk about books with people outside of academia does differ from the way I talk and write about books as part of my scholarship.

Nearly everyone I talked to had also formed relationships with varying levels of intimacy on Bookstagram. Elise described her online friendships as "nice and light." For her, reading is a form of escape, and her Bookstagram friendships reflect that orientation, serving primarily as an opportunity to talk about books as she's reading them. Elise joined Bookstagram after a cross-country move to a city where she didn't have many friends who liked to read. Now that she's more established in her new city, she has kept up her internet community. She feels like she knows her in-person friends more deeply, and the conversations they have about books are just one part of their relationship. These in-person friends, though, read a range of genres, and their tastes do not necessarily line up with Elise's taste in books. As she put it, "I need Bookstagram to have conversations about the books I'm reading that [my] in-person [friends] aren't interested in."

For participants in my research, some of their relationships moved beyond Instagram while others were limited to engagement on the platform and/or focused primarily on books. David intentionally limits the number of people he follows in order to be able to engage thoughtfully and consistently with each one. "I do not follow-for-follow like so many people," he told me. "You'll see some people have seven thousand followers, but they also follow seven thousand people. I've capped myself at three hundred, because if I follow you, I want to engage

with you. I don't want to get lost. I want to see you every day. I have about 4,700 followers right now… and there's no way for my mental health I can be liking four thousand posts a day on repeat. For me, three hundred [followers] is manageable." While David did not refer to himself as an influencer in our conversations, the way he talks about his experience makes clear how hard it is to resist that framing on an app like Instagram. "It's hard not to be all about numbers," he acknowledged. David has about 80 people with whom he interacts on a regular basis, and ten people he feels he knows well. Similarly, Blake told me that he follows about 800 people but says there are "around 50 to 100 that I regularly engage with," noting that time constraints make it "really hard to engage with a ton of people." Given that David had nearly twice as many followers as Blake at the time of our conversations, the consistency in the number of people they regularly engage with is a notable reminder that building and maintaining online friendships is time consuming and labor intensive.

Going into this research, I was particularly curious about what the work of building friendships and/or a following on Bookstagram entailed. In 2024, when scrolling through their Instagram feed, users can only see the first two lines of a caption unless they click on a link to view more. The option to comment on a post is similarly invisible unless users stop scrolling and click a link to view comments. Instead of captions and comments, Instagram makes it easy for users to interact through the Stories feature. Instagram Stories are short video clips, photos, and/or texts that disappear after a day unless a user saves them to their highlights. Unlike posts, where commenting requires users to take an extra step, they see a box at the bottom of each Story with the words "send a message," a heart icon—which allows you to like the Story—and a button that allows the viewer to share the post to their own Story.[19] Unlike comments on a post,

[19] Users can also turn off the reply feature on their stories.

however, replies to a story are private, meaning that relationships built on the platform tend towards a networked structure that makes generating a sense of community difficult.

The work of building friendships on Bookstagram has not always happened in private. Sam, who had been on Bookstagram for more than five years at the time of our conversation, described a shift in the form and depth of content and engagement she ties directly to Instagram's features. Sam began blogging in 2015 because she wanted to write about the books she was reading. Blogging, however, does not involve very much "interaction" with one's audience. As Sam puts it, "It's almost like you're talking into the void. People [may be] reading it, but you never know." She describes how with each new social media platform she has joined, she has experienced "an increase in virality and reactiveness." Unlike with blogs, she says, on Bookstagram "you could see how fast people were finding you, how fast people were responding… and now with TikTok, it's even faster." With that increased speed, however, content has grown shorter and less personal. "Blogging allows you to literally write essays—and you're praised for that." When Sam joined Bookstagram, she explains, "We didn't have so many of the features available now. All you could really do is post 1 photo and then you have to explain everything in the captions. Hashtags weren't even that big. It was very community-based back then: you wouldn't just write about the book, you'd write about your own life. Now nobody wants to read your long caption, they just want a seven second video. Nobody's really connecting, you know?" I saw this perspective reflected in survey responses as well, as many respondents said that the one thing they'd change about Bookstagram was the length of captions and the depth of book reviews that people usually posted.

Importantly, not everyone finds the community they're looking for on Bookstagram. Two interviewees had this experience, and both attributed the issues they faced to Instagram's

platform. Michelle joined Bookstagram after negative experiences with joining several Facebook groups for readers. “I love connecting with other people who are readers,” she told me. “I started joining Facebook groups… and it was fun. But I definitely found that there were people in there who looked down on you” for asking for recommendations for genres like contemporary romance. Bookstagram did not have the same stigma around genre fiction, Michelle explained. “I started following Bookstagram as a way to be exposed to the books and the authors that I want to be exposed to without hearing that negative chatter of what I'm reading isn't good enough, or intellectual enough.” Despite the lack of stigma, Michelle did not really build a sense of community on Bookstagram. She told me, “I had more conversation on Facebook. Those book communities are built more for conversation.” In contrast, she felt like “Bookstagram, and Instagram in general is more of a solo experience. You can’t leave long comments, and often I feel like people just leave their own comments and are not necessarily responding to others. Maybe you connect or communicate with the influencer, and maybe they like your comment or respond from time to time.”

Other users have found ways around the limitations of Instagram’s platform by moving their relationships off the app. Nicole, for instance, found her close internet friends not on Bookstagram itself but in a Zoom book club she attended monthly for over a year. “I love Louise Erdrich,” she explained. “I found someone who had posted about her, and I realized that this person [Erin] was from Alaska” and was from the same tribe as her partner. Nicole recalls, “I was like, I’m gonna follow this person and be their friend. And then it turns out she knows my partner, so now we’re real friends!” Nicole joined the year-long Louise Erdrich read-along that Erin had organized with another indigenous Canadian Bookstagrammer and has kept

participating in the group. In addition to following each other on Instagram, they have a group chat and have even met in person.

For relationships built on Bookstagram, however, shifting off the platform requires new and different forms of maintenance that may or may not fit neatly into the rest of a user's life. Though Sam maintains her relationships with many of her Bookstagram friends over text and in person, she has also lost touch with some friends when they stopped using the app. "It's almost like you were only friends on social media so once they quit social media, it's gone," she tells me. "That's why I have such a hesitancy to quit [Bookstagram], because I know that my connections [won't be] the same as they would be if we were consistently engaging with each other's content." As with building and maintaining relationships in person, online friendships are time consuming and labor intensive. It is increasingly common for social media scholars and users to recognize the labor that online influencers perform, but my research serves as a reminder that participating in social media requires work even for casual users seeking community rather than clout.

1.4 Influence:

My interest in Bookstagram was sparked by an advertisement for Penguin Random House's influencer program that I saw while browsing Instagram with my personal account in 2019. I was not using my account to follow Bookstagram users or to post about books, so the ads were circulating widely, reaching users who may not have even been aware of Bookstagram's existence. At the time, I thought of Bookstagram as a space built by and for individual readers, so the possibility that someone might encounter the community for the first time through an ad for an influencer program surprised me. Scrolling through posts on Bookstagram, however, it

quickly became clear to me that while it was, in some ways, driven by readers, it was also a marketing space for authors and publishers.

Bookstagram needs to be understood through the lens of the pervasive culture of influencer advertising on Instagram. The longstanding tension in Anglophone cultures between the book as a commodity and the book as a work of art is mirrored by the way Instagram positions itself as simultaneously a vehicle for personal and creative expression and as an advertising platform.[20] Book influencer programs are the latest iteration of a long-standing practice of distributing advance copies of new releases (ARCs) to critics, booksellers, and other influential readers. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway profiles Dot, an avid romance reader whose job as a bookseller progressed from recommending romance novels to her customers to circulating those recommendations in a newsletter to working with publishers to promote new releases. Each of these activities mirrors core facets of the work of running a popular Bookstagram account, including reviewing ARCs for publishers, sharing reviews on social media profiles, and doing Q&As or live Stories that involve answering questions and providing recommendations to specific users in real time. Dot offers a clear historical precursor for the taste-making work that Bookstagram influencers engage in today. The culture of influencer advertising, which began in the fashion, beauty, and lifestyle industries, has extended naturally into the digital literary sphere.

Unlike in these other industries, however, even the most successful book influencers are rarely compensated monetarily for their reviews. While Penguin Random House launched a centralized database to collect information from would-be influencers in the last year, at the time I conducted my interviews, information about the different programs run by each imprint was

[20] Koegler, Caroline, and Corinna Norrick-Rühl. *Are Books Still 'Different'?: Literature as Culture and Commodity in a Digital Age.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

difficult to locate, and the requirements of each program differed widely. Some programs require applicants to have over 1,000 followers, others ask for 5,000, and still others have no follower requirements at all but look instead for vague qualities like authenticity or passion. In addition to the programs run by individual publishing houses, any reader can sign up for book review platforms like NetGalley and Edelweiss that also distribute electronic ARCs. These platforms offer numerous older books for all users to review, along with a selection of new releases available to users who post reviews for approximately 80% or more of the ARCs they receive.

Even when they participated in these programs, interviewees described struggling to understand why they were approved for certain titles and not for others. When she first joined Bookstagram, Nicole "had no idea how to get print books" and, she says, "in 2020, there was not much information out there on the internet." She recognizes that two years later, at the time of our conversation, processes had become much more transparent after Bookstagram users complained. At the time of my interviews, publishers were paying more attention to which readers were receiving books in advance and were choosing to elevate reviews from "own voices" readers who share the identity of the main character of a book. In Nicole's experience, by 2022, many publishers included "fields in their surveys to explain if you have the same identity as this author or why you connect with this book." Sam echoed Nicole's story, describing how at one point in time, she regularly received random ARCs in which she had no interest. Now, she says, publishers usually share surveys with a list of titles for influencers to choose from. When we talked, Sam was particularly excited about a recent box of memoirs by Asian-American authors that she had received for AAPI Heritage month.

Nicole also described one of the downsides of these influencer programs. She describes being "super excited" when she first joined NetGalley and working hard to get her ratio of

reviews up to 80%. In order to keep track of all the books she signed up to review, she needed to create an organization system. “I don’t have an Excel spreadsheet—I’m not that intense,” she says with a laugh, “but I have a note with a list of all the books by publication date” to remember the due date for each review. After reaching the important 80% ratio, Nicole says, “What I found is that a lot of the books I requested, I would get approved. But then all I read was NetGalley books for 2 whole months.” Now, she has “stopped requesting [books]” and has started to take it less seriously, since “NetGalley never pays you or gives you a physical book or anything. It’s just a fun thing.” Nicole likes being able to review books before their release date. The exclusivity gives her a sense of accomplishment, “like this is a thing that I’ve worked on, and now I get approved for books and it’s pretty cool.”

By requesting, and in some cases requiring, that influencers post their reviews on or near the publication date, publishing houses shape which books are trending on Bookstagram at any given moment. David sees the “buzz” around advanced reader copies as a “side effect” of these marketing programs. New releases bring the community together, he thinks, because “people get so excited when they’re all reading [a book] right at the same time, experiencing it together, simultaneously.” In addition to shaping the topics of conversation, influencer programs also shape the tenor of discussion on Bookstagram. David describes how when he gets ARCs that he does not like, “I’ll tell you what it’s about, and instead of ragging on why it sucked, I’ll say who might like this book: you’ll like this if you’re more character-driven than plot-driven, all that kind of stuff. You want to put it out there in a way that’s not going to piss [publishers] off and stop you from getting more free books.” David’s fear is not unwarranted. After Nicole was honest about the fact that the books she received were “super sexist and bad,” a publicity company did stop sending her books to review. “I didn't lie and say I loved the book,” she tells

me, “but I did write that there were things about this that I liked and then there are a couple of things that weren't really things that I was interested in, like all the female characters only being there to be a prostitute or be saved by the detective.” All my interviewees described a similar balancing act, not wanting to be dishonest in their reviews but also not wanting to jeopardize their chance to receive ARCs in the future. Like all influencer reviews, then, reviews on Bookstagram, Goodreads, and other online platforms must be read with this context in mind.

Instagram’s algorithm also places external demands on users who want to build a large following. By shaping what people see in their feeds, the algorithm affects how and what users post. One survey respondent described how “Instagram… demands constant dedication and hours to get good engagement, otherwise you’ll be punished by the algorithm.” Another described feeling like they needed to “beat the algorithm.” Many complained about Instagram’s emphasis on Reels—short video clips like TikToks—which Bookstagram users see as “mak[ing] it harder to engage [with others] in a way that’s beyond ‘growing your followers.’” Kelley Cotter calls these tactics a “visibility game” that influencers must play as they attempt to determine Instagram’s algorithmic priorities.

While many of my interviewees described their approach to Bookstagram as relaxed, others were clearly playing the visibility game. David described his regimented routine for posting and planning content, employing a variety of tactics to maximize views and engagement with his posts. “I definitely start with a calendar,” he told me, making daily themes for his posts. Mondays and Thursdays he posts reviews, an approach that he says is “nice, because it means I don’t need a million book reviews ready to go.” By limiting the number of reviews he posts each month, he says, “I’m not drowning… I’ll actually be like three, four books ahead of what I’m posting,” though he does not convey that to readers in the post itself, instead acting as if he

finished the book right before he posted the review. On "teaching Tuesdays," David posts about what he's teaching his students: what books they're reading or what grammar or writing skill they're learning about. "One of the reasons I became a teacher is because I get to talk about books all day with my students," he says. "I really wanted that part of my personality and identity to come through" on Bookstagram as well. On Fridays, David used to do flashbacks, reviewing a book he'd previously read, but "now that the algorithm has completely changed," he tells me, "I do reel Fridays to stay relevant." Weekends are reserved for "spontaneous" posts, but even these posts are planned "at least two to three weeks in advance." David posts daily, and though he attributes this strict organization to his personality, it is also clearly tailored to Instagram's algorithm.[21] "I try to post once a day," he says, "so that you're consistent for your followers [and] so that Instagram knows you're an active account and will keep pushing your posts." David is also intentional about when he posts. He tells me, "I like to post my original post in the morning, and then I'll repost it to my Stories after work, so if [a follower] missed it on my feed, they might catch it later at night." David acknowledges, however, that these time-consuming strategies have been stymied by Instagram's confusing and opaque algorithm. Looking at the data that Instagram provides, David has found that "really there's no rhyme or reason to why a post will get so much engagement and why others will get none." While most interviewees were more casual about their process than David, all had a system of some sort that they used to draft and share posts on their feed.

As evident from David's description, running a Bookstagram account takes a lot of work, much of which is hidden from one's followers. Sam's work is less organized but no less time consuming. She feels like "if I don't start doing short form content, I'm not going to grow," so

[21] Arriagada, Arturo, and Francisco Ibáñez, "'You Need At Least One Picture Daily, If Not, You're Dead': Content Creators and Platform Evolution in the Social Media Ecology," *Social Media + Society*, 6, no. 3 (July 2020).

now she films short videos rather than writing the long captions that initially drew her to the platform. During breaks at work, Sam scrolls through Instagram and TikTok, looking for audio to use as inspiration for her future posts. "My brain is always working," she says. "Literally everything is books. I'll look at things and [think], 'How can I post about this?' or 'How can I translate this to the [book world]?'" Like David, Sam creates drafts of her posts in advance, trying to "film one reel or one short" every day, but she also described how a lot of the work she puts into her account is "behind the scenes stuff like answering emails or DMs" as she feels the need to balance "creating content with consistently keeping up your brand." Because she sees engaging with other users as key to growing her account, most of the work "is really not that glamorous because it's me reading emails and then scrolling and commenting." My research shows that many users feel a sense of pressure around how and when they post and comment on Bookstagram. One survey respondent wrote that if they could change anything, they would change "the 'influencer' culture where everyone feels they *need* to have a post schedule or post often/have a certain aesthetic or theme to all their pics." Several interviewees similarly described how this pressure "makes it feel like work rather than a hobby," and how they wish, instead, that Bookstagram could be "just for fun." As another interviewee notes, "Sometimes [Bookstagram] makes you feel bad about not owning/buying/reading enough books." While some of this sentiment is specific to the digital literary sphere, it is shaped by the broader culture of influencer advertising online.

Emily Hund traces the history of the influencer industry to financial precarity felt in the aftermath of the recession. She describes how early influencers "who monetized their influence did so by leveraging their 'real' relationships with their followers—a sense of 'realness' that had come to exist, in part, because they were not monetized" (56). Influencers' authority, in other

words, comes from the idea that they are normal people, amateurs just like their followers. However, the influencer industry ironically requires that content creators become professionals, picking up skills in marketing, graphic design, and often, insider knowledge of the field that is the focus of their content. This paradox creates a tension between authenticity and self-branding that structures the influencer industry today. Most existing research focuses on fashion, beauty, lifestyle, and family content creators. Brooke Erin Duffy, for instance, describes the aspirational labor of fashion influencers, the majority of whom "are un(der)-paid, remunerated with deferred promises of 'exposure' or 'visibility'" (x). A fashion influencer can hypothetically make a living creating advertising content for social media. Being a "book influencer" is not a viable career option in the same way, but the cultural norms of the influencer industry nevertheless hold sway over the community. Duffy acknowledges that the young women she interviews, like the Bookstagram users I interviewed, see their social media work as a "passion project." She highlights the internal contradictions "between amateurism and expertise, between authenticity and self-branding, and between internal drivers and external demands" present in the way her subjects talk about their experiences (xii). These contradictions shape Bookstagram as well and are present in the ways that participants talk about and evaluate their experiences with the platform.

1.5 Identity:

How do Bookstagram users establish themselves as an authority, someone whose recommendations can be trusted? What can the strategies they employ show us about how authority and expertise function on social media more broadly? Ultimately, as reviewers, users become intermediaries whose opinions shape a book's reception. They are not exactly amateur readers, not exactly experts or authorities, and not exactly marketers, operating in the interstices

of these different roles. Bookstagram members, like all social media users, influence others by creating and maintaining a self-brand.

The need to create a coherent self-brand may appear to conflict with the need for authenticity. Social media platforms like Instagram ask users to present an idealized, filtered version of their lives. Hund describes how in the mid 2010s, "as the influencer industry became increasingly Instagram-centric and focused on lifestyle content," posts increasingly "purported to document a user's authentic but highly edited and curated lifestyle" (88). By this time, users began to talk openly about the behind-the-scenes filtering, editing, and elision that go into creating content for Instagram. Today, authenticity on social media has become self-consciously performative. Sarah Banet-Weiser describes how

> within contemporary brand culture the separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more expected and tolerated. That is, within contemporary consumer culture we take it for granted that authenticity, like anything else, can be branded. (13)

Self-branding online, Banet-Weiser argues, has become a means of expressing authenticity. Exemplifying this performative authenticity, one interviewee told me about a post reflecting on what he had read in the past year, in which he had been careful to explain that most of the 100 books he read were poetry, novellas, and audiobooks because "I didn't want there to be any false image." He felt it was important to clarify for his followers and friends how he read 100 books in a year, so that it wouldn't "seem like I'm faking how much I'm reading." This interviewee felt he had to perform authenticity by giving his followers a peek behind the curtain, a gesture akin to the fitness influencer who posts both posed and unposed photos of their physique. In other industries, as Duffy and Hund describe, influencers' authenticity is tied to their amateur status. In contrast, on Bookstagram, authenticity is not tied to amateurism or expertise but is instead

derived from sharing one's life experiences and identity in a way that reads as "authentic" to one's audience.

Crystal Abidin describes how influencers derive authority from what she calls "calibrated amateurism," a "contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs" (7). Social media users develop graphic design, videography, and marketing skills as they learn to produce well-designed, aesthetically cohesive content, yet they must still be "relatable" to their audience. Jessica Maddox proposes an additional term, "calibrated expertise," to describe the ways that "experts perform knowledge" on social media. Maddox provides a case study of a veterinarian who uses social media to share information about pet health and behavior, but she insists that calibrated expertise is something anyone can perform: "one does not have to have credentials, university degrees, or formal training…. the key to knowledge influencers and calibrated expertise is the performance of information gleaned from their primary occupation" (3). Calibrated amateurism and expertise exist on a spectrum, and individual users can and do draw on both strategies depending on the content of their post.

Where do Bookstagram users fall on this spectrum? On the one hand, many of the factors that Hund and Duffy identify for the growth of the influencer industry in fashion, including the prominence of un- and underpaid opportunities for young people wanting to enter the industry and the emphasis on work as "creative self-expression," are mirrored in the publishing industry, where unpaid internships abound and work is done ostensibly for passion as much as profit (Duffy ix). On the other hand, Maddox cites anti-intellectualism and growing distrust of institutions as factors that lead individuals to use their social media platform to share professional expertise with a wider audience. These factors influence the literary and academic worlds, too. Vadde and Majumdar point out that "amateurs occasionally do lay claim to

expertise, but more often than not... they complicate what it means to be knowledgeable, wield facts, and perform authority" (8). Approaching amateurism as a labor of love further complicates this picture as loving literature has long been considered part of the work of the professional literary critic. Deirdre Lynch historicizes the need for those "for whom English is a line of work" to not just study literature but to "love" it and to teach others to love it as well (1). She describes how, in the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, when English emerged as a discipline, readers moved from approaching literature with "approbation or admiration" to personal entanglement and affective attachment.

Bookstagram troubles Maddox's spectrum of calibrated amateurism and expertise as users present themselves simultaneously as experts and amateurs. I analyzed 50 user bios on Bookstagram to determine how users defined themselves. The top three categories I derived from these short taglines were "book lover," "bookish identity," and "bookish aesthetics." I tagged each bio multiple times, indicating overlap among these categories. "Book lover" refers to people who label themselves as "avid readers" or otherwise explicitly mention their love for books and reading. I used "Bookish identity" to group people who put things like "reader" or "writer" in their bio with those who describe themselves with words like "bookish" or "bibliophile." "Bookish aesthetics" captures the many other objects or qualities that people reference as part of a bookish identity, such as a love for tea, libraries, Oxford commas, or cats. However, the next categories—which when combined, appear as frequently as references to "bookish identities"—reference past or ongoing education and careers, including librarians, teachers, and even an English professor. Often, users who mention things like their "3 lit degrees" or "MA in English literature" also reference a bookish identity or love for books, such as the "Lit prof reading for fun!" These bios illustrate the inextricable nature of expertise and

amateurism that both Lynch and Vadde and Majumdar describe. Some users literally label themselves an "amateur" while others gesture at this identity with language like "casual" or "fun." Instagram also lets users give themselves a title, and while most leave this field blank, users who did include something were split between labels like "Literary Critic" and "Digital Creator," once again mirroring the tension between Bookstagram as a literary community and an online marketing platform. Blending amateurism and expertise, the bookish subject is defined both by their love for literature and their knowledge of it.

Rather than professional expertise, my research found that Bookstagram users' authority was rooted primarily in the concept of identity. When I talked about Instagram and TikTok with Sam, she compared the two platforms in these terms:

> Instagram is very photo-based; it's all about branding. On TikTok, you can post anything and as long as it's funny it goes viral, but the way you make it on Bookstagram is by having a very clear identity. If you ask me about my top five friends, I can tell you their Bookstagram brand; on Booktok, I couldn't do the same.

Sam describes her own Bookstagram brand as "Asian American reader who promotes diversity in literature with a focus on mental health awareness." Sam's "Bookstagram brand" is deeply personal, despite its commercialized language. She describes how books helped her learn about and navigate her identities. "The first book that I read with a bisexual main character helped me come out," she says, and she points to books about characters struggling with mental health as "free resources" that have helped her navigate her own struggles with mental illness. By identifying her Bookstagram brand as "Asian-American" and "mental health advocate," however, Sam is also speaking the publishers' language. Most publishing houses invite potential influencers to fill out an optional self-identification form if they are part of a marginalized community (an "own voices" reader), treating identity as a marker of authenticity and, subsequently, as a form of authority. Sam's formulation of the Bookstagram brand is

representative of the broader way that diversity and identity are discussed on the platform. Bookstagram is a place where people can learn about systemic injustice in the world and in the publishing industry, but it is also a place where those issues are perpetuated, as algorithmic bias amplifies existing forms of marginalization and influencer culture pressures users to create a cohesive self-brand.

Just as Bookstagram reflects general feelings of isolation in the age of social media, it also reflects broader conversations about diversity, representation, and appropriation happening across American culture. Discussions of diversity and identity in the publishing industry are pervasive on social media. The language of "diversifying" one's bookshelves or reading showed up frequently in my research, appearing as a normative, if often undefined, goal of the community. Some readers shared specifics about what diversifying their reading looked like in practice, while others describe only how, as one survey respondent put it, "I started following Bookstagrammers from different cultures/backgrounds and my reading became more diverse." What does one's reading being "more diverse" entail, exactly? Reading books by authors with marginalized identities? Reading books depicting characters with marginalized identities? Reading in a range of genres or languages, or reading books in translation? Further, what is the relationship between how diversity functions on Bookstagram and how it operates in the publishing industry? By posing these questions, I do not mean to undercut the very real problems with racism in the publishing industry, or to suggest that cultural representation does not matter; rather, I intend to complicate the notion that answers to these questions are straightforward or self-evident.

Though readers on Bookstagram offer different rationales for diversifying their reading, many are spurred by knowledge of and opposition to what Richard Jean So describes as "cultural

redlining" in the publishing industry. For many, this knowledge is gained or increased through their time on Bookstagram, where discussions about diversity in publishing are common. In his research, So finds that between 1950 and 2000, 97% of the authors published by Random House were white, a scale of inequality replicated in book reviews, bestseller lists, and book prizes during this time frame (4). The narrative So tells is one of temporary shifts, catalyzed by individual editors or several authors of color whose work can break through, temporarily shifting the balance before it returns to the stark inequality that is otherwise the norm. In addition to So's look at the recent history of the publishing industry, surveys conducted by children's book publisher Lee & Low Books in 2015 and 2019 demonstrate the continued whiteness of publishing industry workers. In 2015, 79% of publishing industry workers identified as white, 78% as cisgender women, 88% as straight, and 92% as able bodied. In 2019, those numbers barely changed: 76% identified as white, 74% as cisgender women, 81% as straight, and 89% as able bodied. The Bookstagram users I interviewed, and most of those who responded to my survey, understand this bigger picture of the industry. Many cited Bookstagram itself as an educational space where they both learned about these issues and used their social media platform to support marginalized authors.

The readers I talked to all described how Bookstagram has made them more intentional about the books and authors they choose to support. Nicole told me, "Bookstagram made me much more aware of race, equity and justice issues…. Having friends who I have never met in person who would post stuff on their pages and talk about different issues and suggest books to read… was super valuable to me." For Sam, Bookstagram was a vital place to find community with other readers of color trying to push back against the whiteness of the publishing industry. "Who is getting the most publishing deals? Who is making the most money?" she asked and then

answered her own questions: “Mostly white authors. I feel like Bookstagram is kind of the only outlet I see trying to change that. We have book accounts that are focused on reading Black and Indigenous authors and I feel like that is not reflected in, say, *The New York Times* or Barnes & Noble’s BookTok section.” Sam told me that through her time on Bookstagram, she has come to believe that

> reading is political: who you choose to read and what books you choose to promote is a reflection of your ideals and beliefs. Reading is a form of activism. If you’re buying books, you’re supporting authors and showing their publishers that they should be offered higher advances.

For Sam, reading diverse books is a concrete way to support marginalized authors. Bookstagram not only helped her see reading as “a form of activism,” but, she said, it also “introduced me to people who weren’t afraid to speak up about these issues,” whether on social media or in person. To describe how he approached reading, David used a metaphor of the book as both mirror, where “you read a book to see yourself reflected in it,” and window, where “you read a book to view the lives of others.” This metaphor aptly captures the range of stories I heard from Bookstagram users. Most talked about reading as an educational and/or political pursuit, emphasizing, like David did, the importance of “learning about some of these other experiences.” For some of the readers I interviewed, books were also a vital resource for learning about themselves and their own identities.

Both Sam and Sana described how books have been a resource for helping them understand and navigate their own experiences as members of marginalized communities. Their stories are an important addition to the discussion of diversifying reading because they insist on the presence of readers whose lives resemble these “diverse” stories (Tager and Shariyf). Reading diverse books is not just about educating (white, straight, able-bodied) readers, whose stories are regularly represented in media, about the lives of others. Sam described how Bookstagram introduced her to books that helped her understand her sexuality and mental health.

"The first book that I read with a bisexual main character helped me come out and internalize that, same with mental health," she told me. "[Books are] free resources, that's what I think. There's not many free mental health resources, for instance, but literature is such an easy way to read about someone who's like you, to learn how to identify or how to exist in this world." Like Sam, Sana offered a rich description of what this process has looked like in their life. They described to me how after being a reader since childhood, "I came across the comic Miss Marvel, and that's when it clicked for me that I had been reading so many things by white authors." They continued,

> There was so much in her story that I resonated with… It's not a coincidence that I started reading Miss Marvel in the wake of Trump being elected. And there was just so much of her story that like resonated with me that I didn't even realize I was going through. She put words to feelings I had struggled to understand. And I think the fact it was a visual aid helped with that, because it was like a slap in the face: like, okay—this is you…

As a result of this experience, Sana said, "I've intentionally looked for writers of color or writers who are also queer, [because] I'm asexual."

Laura McGrath describes how the publishing industry "reduces diverse and often divergent literary forms into a single market category in which race"—or queerness—"is a key selling point, a product" ("Books About Race" 771). Alexandra Dane refers to this logic as white tastemaking, drawing attention to the ways that whiteness governs not only who writes and publishes books, but also how they are marketed and distributed, and ultimately, how they circulate among reading publics. McGrath analyzed a large corpus of book deal announcements she refers to as "books about race," examining the role that the publishing industry plays in "the process of racial formation" (772). Books that fall into the category of "books about race" may resist this framing, but, McGrath finds, they are "produced by a predominantly white industry… with a white reader in mind" and "are marketed in a way that ultimately props up existing power structures, even while their acquisition and promotion enables that industry to fashion itself as

forward-thinking, increasingly inclusive, and committed to consciousness-raising" (790). Writing in 2020 about the proliferation of anti-racist reading lists, Lauren Michele Jackson objects to the way that "genre appears indiscriminately" on these lists as "essays slide against memoir and folklore, poetry squeezed on either side by sociological tomes," such that genre itself disappears, subsumed in the category of "the anti-racist book." As Jackson argues, this flattening "reinforces an already pernicious literary divide that books written by or about minorities are for educational purposes… wholly segregated from matters of form and grammar, lyric and scene." Encountering a Toni Morrison novel as part of an anti-racist reading challenge shapes readers' expectations for they will find in these texts, in turn shaping how they read and interpret them.

Sana brought up a similar dynamic in our conversation, using the example of Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. They recalled how "Bookstagram calls it a queer story when it's so much more than that, when the book is so layered and literally questions the concept of gender." They explained, "With public social media posts, there is a pressure to put books under labels. And for books written by minorities, a lot of the layers of the books are taken away" when a book like *The Left Hand of Darkness* gets labeled as "LGBTQ" alongside contemporary queer romance novels. Sana described how these labels also impact authors of color trying to publish today, whose stories need to conform to plotlines that fit narrow norms which, as McGrath and Dane show, are aimed at white readers. "I really struggle with [the discussion of these books on social media]," they told me, "because it plays into these capitalist labels. [Publishers] are not labeling books like this because they want to support marginalized people. They're labeling it so they can get money, and [in doing so], they're taking away from the more radical and nuanced parts of the story. It takes away from marginalized people's agency

to tell stories they want to tell, or those that they have created on their own terms." McGrath comes to a similar conclusion about the force behind the publishing industry's "desire to publish more books by and about people of color," describing how "whether reading 'books about race' raises anyone's consciousness or moves a reader to political action, the abiding belief in books' power to do so is exceedingly profitable" ("Books About Race" 786-787).

This belief in the power of diverse books appears on Bookstagram in the form of reading challenges that offer, for instance, a list of books to read during Black history month. While these lists are not explicitly anti-racist reading lists, which I will discuss shortly, they often share a similar logic. These challenges came up in several of my interviews. Elise told me, for instance, that she has "mixed feelings" about them. On the one hand, she said, they "highlight minority authors who do not get the proper support from the publishing system. But at the same time," she continued, "there's also a danger in these challenges in that people are reading these books within a certain timeframe. And I don't think that's a way to properly digest a book… to immerse yourself in a world, and then just leave it behind. You don't carry it forward into the next month." Elise avoids the challenges, trying instead to read a broader range of authors consistently throughout the year. Sana brought up these lists at the end of our discussion, when I asked if there was anything else she'd like to talk about. Bookstores and publishing houses share these lists "whenever there is Native heritage month, or Black history month, or Asian awareness month," they said. The issue Sana saw is not with the quality of the books being shared and promoted but with the way that readers are primed to approach them. These lists, Sana believes, are "used as a way to sell more books… not to uplift what [the authors] are saying." They described how such books further a taxonomical approach to thinking about books and identity, where readers and marketers alike are quick to say, "This qualifies as this, this qualifies as that"

rather than looking at the substance and the intention behind the writing. Despite raising awareness of the logic of white tastemaking in publishing, then, Bookstagram also perpetuates it, treating diversity through the logic of the brand.

The lack of diversity in the publishing industry is only magnified in the digital literary sphere, as social media platforms cement and exacerbate existing norms and social hierarchies. A number of survey respondents named this trend as the one thing that they'd change about Bookstagram if given the opportunity. As one respondent put it, "The most influential [Bookstagram users] with the highest followers (which = sponsorship and ability to make $ from their content) are white. I think even major Black and Brown Bookstagrammers struggle getting more sponsorships and recognition." A wealth of scholarship details the ways that online algorithms perpetuate harmful stereotypes, exacerbating existing social inequalities (Noble). Users who belong to marginalized communities encounter less obvious forms of inequality online as well. Duffy and Meisner find that "content creators' accounts of platform governance – whether enacted at the hands of human content moderators or via artificial intelligence – suggest that these systems are… mired in social inequality" (286). The community guidelines for platforms like Instagram are often vague, leaving users uncertain as to why certain content gets taken down or promoted. In my own everyday use of Instagram as well as my research into Bookstagram, I regularly see users re-posting content or sharing a post to their Stories, asking why the views on the original post were so much lower than usual. The opacity of Instagram's algorithm leads to speculation by users about how to maximize views or evade "shadowbanning"—when the algorithm hides posts without notifying the user. Duffy and Meisner also find that users perceived that "mainstream voices and content genres deemed normative seemed to evade the punitive apparatuses that others are socialized to fear" (300).

While no one I talked to described being harassed on Bookstagram, and most who talked about trying to navigate "the Algorithm" did so in vague terms, I did talk to one user who was taking active steps to avoid it. Sana described to me how "social media is very toxic to women of color and queer women of color." In order to feel like they could speak openly, Sana kept their account private. "When you find the right algorithm and when you find the right community or you find the right people, it's great," they said, echoing a sentiment I saw throughout my interviews and survey responses. Sana's description of the importance of this space in their life reveals the way that racism on and offline are deeply enmeshed:

> The reason I'm so intentional [on Bookstagram] is because so many spaces are not welcoming to me as a result of my race [and] as a result of my sexuality as well as my gender, but also the fact, more importantly, that I'm very explicitly anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist. I need a space where I can be free to talk about things that I'm really passionate about, but also be very honest about my interactions with books I'm reading.

The dynamic that Sana articulates here exemplifies what Zoe Glatt calls the "intimacy triple bind" faced by influencers with marginalized identities, who are more likely to be the victim of online harassment and whose content is less likely to be amplified or recommended by a platform's algorithms. Sana's private account is a response to their fear that they will be targeted by other users or by Instagram's algorithm based on the political content of their posts.

Bookstagram reflects concurrent discussions about cultural representation in media, and discussions about anti-racism occurring across educational institutions, government, and the corporate world. The literary sphere not only reflects these cultural currents but, in determining who gets published and which books get promoted, it also plays a role in supporting them. While diversifying one's reading can mean joining year-long book clubs facilitated by and for people of color, it can also look like sharing an anti-racist reading list or, for American users, reading Black authors for the month of February. Alexandra Dane describes how sharing an anti-racist reading list "makes an explicit tie between the poster and [white liberal] book culture," acting as

a means of "performing race allyship" (56). In these instances, diversifying one's reading —or, at least, being seen to be doing so—is a means of gaining social capital.

Instagram is built on a logic of self-branding, inviting users to construct and curate profiles that present a very particular version of their life to the world. As I've shown in this chapter, this logic creates tension with what many social media users are actually seeking: friendship and community built around shared interests and values. As the stories of Nicole, David, and Sam illustrate, there is no single form of the bookish subject, just as there is no discrete and bounded Bookstagram community. However, Bookstagram users portray themselves online in ways that emphasize a shared commitment to diversity, a love for books paired with a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge about literature, and a desire to connect with other readers who share their taste in books. Sarah Brouillette writes that "the task for scholarship" today "is not to mourn the demise of literature, but to understand where reading is seeking refuge, and where new literary styles, infrastructures, and social practices are beginning to flourish" (453). Online communities like Bookstagram are one place where readers "seek refuge": they are vibrant and complex sites of literary appreciation, bookish self-representation, and amateur criticism. Regardless of the rapidly changing environment of social media, Bookstagram will continue to influence the literary culture(s) of the future by shaping the way people buy, read, and discuss books in the present.

Chapter 2 The Autofictional Self

At the opening of Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* (2021), the narrator asks: "Why did the portal feel so private, when you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere?" (1). This simultaneous tangle of "togetherness and aloneness," privacy and publicity, exists online "in a permanently snarled and bewildering temporality: never but always" (Cohen 5). Lockwood's novel explores the forms of subjectivity shaped by social media, the result of both individual acts of self-creation and of algorithmic personalization processes. In the previous chapter, I described Bookstagram users' conflicted relationship with 'the algorithm.' To varying degrees, Bookstagram users are aware of the ways that Instagram's algorithm interpellates them as certain kinds of subjects. Users attempt to train or manipulate the algorithm, but they also feel like its influence detracts from the diversity of their community. In this chapter, I read three novels, including *No One is Talking About This*, that use the genre of autofiction to explore the questions of subjectivity and self-branding raised by these social media platforms.

As I discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Sarah Banet-Weiser's research traces the ways that the spaces we used to conceive as authentic, outside of capitalism or politics, are caught up in what she calls a brand culture. Today, Banet-Weiser says, authenticity is no longer something "residing inside the self"; it has "metamorphosed into a fun-house mirror version… where to truly understand and experience the 'authentic' self is to brand this self" and in doing so, share it with the world (60, 60-61). This transformation of the concept of authenticity creates a "neoliberal *moral…* duty to ourselves to cultivate a self-brand" (56). For Banet-Weiser, this

duty is particularly visible and particularly acute for girls and women as they are measured against the internet's priorities of self-promotion, self-improvement, and interactivity as well as the ideals of postfeminism, which conflates empowerment with entrepreneurship, consumption, and productivity. In addition to elevating these neoliberal ideals, postfeminism inherited many of the problems of earlier feminist movements, erasing the different experiences, needs, and contributions of women of color.[22] Jia Tolentino's essay titled "The 'I' in the Internet" elaborates on Banet-Weiser's point. Tolentino writes, "It's the self-calibration that I learned as a girl, as a woman, that has helped me capitalize on 'having' to be online." She continues, "My only experience of the world has been one in which personal appeal is paramount and self-exposure is encouraged," explaining how this "paradigm" was "inhabited first by women and now [is] generalized to the entire internet" (16).[23] While the novels I read in this chapter critique these postfeminist ideals, they are nevertheless indelibly shaped by them, as they are tied up in social media's broader mandate of self-branding.

It is increasingly impossible to avoid this mandate: self-branding is integrated into the workplace, the education system, and even the ways that people connect to their family and friends. Whether editing content for social media or locating a flattering location with the right background and lighting for a video conference, each act of self-presentation online requires time and effort. During the pandemic, this pressure to craft a flawless online appearance and to perform and perpetuate that virtual self on video calls grew, leaving people with a sense of exhaustion so pervasive that we gave it a name. On video conferencing platforms like Zoom,

[22] "Not surprisingly, those women who have mastered the skills of properly caring for the self [according to a postfeminist framework], or building successful self-brands, are those who are the most socially and culturally valuable: white, middle-class women and girls." (Banet-Weiser 86)

[23] Likewise, Banet-Weiser describes how "Girls… are constructing themselves as gendered beings within this context [the internet], where their performances of visibility and spectacular femininity are subject not only to the evaluative feedback of others but also to their own self-evaluation" (70).

users watch themselves being watched by others and must respond to what they see; they must be "self-aware and self-correcting in real time," resulting in an exhaustion that came to be known as Zoom fatigue (Caines). Tung-Hui Hu describes the apathetic, fatigued response to this constant pressure of self-performance online as "digital lethargy," a desire to stop doing the work of being a self. Users experience selfhood, he writes, "as something out-of-reach, burdensome, or even unwanted" (Hu xvii).

In addition to exhaustion and anxious pressure, the impetus to perform the self as a coherent and appealing self-brand creates a sense of "collective vertigo" that Naomi Klein describes as a key feature of "doppelganger culture" (11). Klein explores how our world is "crowded with various forms of doubling" as we create "virtual versions of ourselves that represent us to others… a partitioned identity that is both us and not us, a doppelganger we perform ceaselessly in the digital ether as the price of admission in a rapacious attention economy" (11). For Klein, these doubles reveal "the precariousness at the core of identity—the painful truth that, no matter how deliberately we tend to our personal lives and public personas, the person we think we are is fundamentally vulnerable to forces outside our control" (28). The recursive doubling of the online persona is further exacerbated, as we saw in the previous chapter, by the fact that internet users are often encouraged to have multiple accounts, each curated for a different audience.

Doppelganger culture is vertiginous and exhausting, but it is also intrinsically linked to a human desire for unmediated connection. Anna Kornbluh, author of the recent book *Immediacy: or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism,* is a useful interlocutor for me. She argues that the cultural style of the present is one of immediacy, a style that eschews mediation in favor of an aesthetic

that is apparently unfiltered.[24] Kornbluh describes immediacy in florid, flowing descriptors: "#No filter," "direct presence, always on, continuous, abundant, sui generis. Immediacy's pulsing effulgence purveys itself as spontaneous and free, pure vibe" (6). Immediacy "compresses [time] into a tingling present" and "encloses [space] while delivering everything close: the world at your fingertips" (6). Under an aesthetic of immediacy, the subject is "self-possessed and transparent" (7). Kornbluh sees immediacy as a political and ethical misstep. Instead of creating distance from the experience of life in the present, she argues, these genres uncritically embrace an aesthetic of "pure vibe." For Kornbluh, mediation is key to the political and ethical capacity of art and literature. By embracing an aesthetic of immediacy, then, she sees genres like autofiction, autotheory, and performance art as complicit with rather than resistant to the crisis-ridden status quo.

In this chapter, I analyze a series of novels that lean into this desire for immediacy and unmediated connection and self-representation while at the same time emphasizing its impossibility. As they both adopt and critique the style of immediacy, these novels situate it in a longer media and art history, highlighting the underlying desire for connection as a response to internet culture that need not always be a capitulation to what Kornbluh terms "too late capitalism."

Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* is often described as an "internet novel" because of its formal features—the text is written in quippy fragments that mimic the tone and form of Twitter posts—and its central focus on social media. However, I want to draw attention to another way in which Lockwood's novel depicts internet culture through its interest in the

[24] Kornbluh defines mediation as "the active process of relating—making sense and making meaning by inlaying into medium; making middles that merge extremes; making available in language and image and rhythm the super-valent abstractions otherwise unavailable to our sensuous perception—like 'justice' or 'value'" (8).

culture of the self that Klein, Hu, and Banet-Weiser describe. Like the Bookstagram users I interviewed, Lockwood's narrator has a sense of self that is "algorithmically informed but user performed," preexisting the algorithm "but also brought into existence by it" (Kant 12). In other words, the narrator—who is clearly meant to be read, to a degree, as Lockwood herself—makes herself and her online persona both in relation to experiences in her offline life and in relation to the algorithms that govern the social media spaces she inhabits. Ultimately, I argue, the category of the "internet novel" should include not only texts that formally mimic internet writing or explicitly depict social media or new technologies but should also include texts that might help us better understand the forms of sociality and experiences of subjectivity that have accompanied the rise of social media technologies.

This chapter offers a new understanding of the internet novel, based on the way that authors depict and respond to the doppelganger culture that Klein describes. In addition to *No One is Talking About This,* I focus on two other novels that explore the consequences of these technological changes and the culture of self-branding they've brought into being. Like Lockwood's novel, Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* and Kate Zambreno's *Drifts* are autofictional novels written by white women from North America. In this chapter, I am not attempting to paint a comprehensive picture of the impact of digital media on subjectivity but instead to narrow in on the way that the paradigmatic postfeminist subject experiences the pressures to craft an ideal version of oneself online. Authors like Brandon Taylor and Legacy Russell have written about the limits of normative stories that explore the impact of the internet. Taylor, in particular, critiques the narrow viewpoint of the category of the internet novel, pointing out that such novels are "primarily concerned with social media, mostly meaning Twitter, and its effects on the mores of white upwardly mobile media writers," Taylor notes,

importantly, that "none of the transformative capacity or will to change that animates so much of online life for black and brown and queer people exists in these novels." The three novels I read here exemplify the internet novel Taylor takes issue with: they are written by white women and depict the internet, to varying degrees, as a site primarily of alienation and isolation. At the same time, in comparison with autofiction written by men, like Ben Lerner or Tao Lin, which is often touted as experimental, these novels have often been written off as unserious, narcissistic, or overly confessional.[25] In what follows, I argue there is more going on in these novels than mere narcissism: each, in its own way, seems to be less about the author's life than about subjectivity and self-expression more generally.

In addition to their shared genre and the similar perspectives of their authors, these novels also share an undercurrent of anxiety, though the source of that anxiety and the nature of the narrator's response to it varies. This affective bent informs the structure of the novel, which could, in each case, be described as a kind of looping recursivity, returning, like the anxious mind, to the same questions and concerns. Heti's narrator is anxious about figuring out who she is (or how she should be) while Lockwood and Zambreno are anxious about events going on around them. Most substantively, the novels share a preoccupation with the relationships among subjectivity, acts of self-representation, and the mediums in which those self-representations both take shape and circulate. Each novel asks in its own way: how does technology shape our sense of self? Our acts of self-representation? Our relationships with one another?

I begin by exploring Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?.* Published in 2013 but written in the early 2000s, Heti's novel predates the internet culture of the self that I've been

[25] Rachel Sykes underlines this "double standard," pointing out that "[T]here remains no 'king' of disclosure to match [Lena] Dunham's 'queen' and no comparable critical consensus that positions Lerner, Knausgård, and Lin as inappropriate bores for the personal details divulged in their work" (162, 163). See also Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism.*

discussing thus far. However, *How Should a Person Be?* helps me to analyze the ways that the anxiety and fatigue of selfhood and self-branding manifest before and after social media, emphasizing both continuities and differences between past and present. Next, I analyze Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This,* highlighting how the narrator's ironic humor shields her ambient existential anxiety about global warming, late-stage capitalism, and political radicalization. Lockwood also focuses more explicitly on technology than either of the other novelists, exploring the impact of social media on the way we represent and understand ourselves and the ways we interact with others. Finally, Zambreno's novel, *Drifts,* explores artistic and literary precedents for what Klein dubs our doppelganger culture, and it examines writing, motherhood, and teaching as different ways of putting the self into the world. Across all these different forms of doubling, the novel asks: when are these doppelgangers generative? When are they destructive, distracting, or destabilizing?

2.1 Autofiction and Metalepsis

I originally envisioned this chapter engaging with contemporary autofiction as a site of interaction between literature and social media. However, the more time I spend with it, the more ambivalent I feel about the concept of autofiction. On the one hand, the term does point to something particular: a blend of autobiography and fiction that asks readers to think about the relationship between fiction and fact, both in the context of the stories we tell about our lives and in the context of the medium of the book. On the other hand, contemporary discourse around autofiction often treats the term as a new invention, erasing both the particular history of the term in French literature as well as the long and diverse tradition of other forms of autobiographical fiction. In addition, authors tend to describe the term as something applied to their work by

publishers, critics, or readers rather than as a genre they are actively striving to create. While the term has today come to be associated with novels by white women, the works of autofiction that have earned the greatest critical renown have primarily been written by white men.[26] Many of these women writers do not claim the label of "autofiction" for their work; as I show in what follows, their novels often use autobiographical modes to explore topics outside of the self. Additionally, the label is rarely applied to texts by authors of color. Drawing on his own experience as an author, Tope Folarin describes how autofictional books by people of color "are still placed in literary categories—e.g., immigrant literature—that read as 'exotic,' even if their subject matter is utterly normal to those writers and the people for whom they are writing." Folarin's critique emphasizes how the label of autofiction is established through paratext: it appears primarily through book reviews, marketing copy, and blurbs rather than through authors' own association with the label. As a category, "autofiction" does not fully cohere: it elides books like Folarin's that are in direct conversation with the genre and flattens other texts that might be drawing on autofictional modes to think about something other than the self.

My ambivalence about autofiction also stems from the fact that dominant scholarly approaches to the genre ultimately reinscribe the binary between fact and fiction. In one of the first monographs on American autofiction, Marjorie Worthington argues, "By playing with the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, autofiction demonstrates that, while that boundary may not be clearly demarcated and can be breached, it does exist nonetheless" (5). John MacIntosh represents a different strand of critique but one that likewise elevates the distinction between fact and fiction. He writes, "The allure of autofiction for readers… is the play between fiction and

[26] Marjorie Worthington, in one of the only monographs on American autofiction, states "by far most American autofiction is written by white men" (3). While this might have been true of early autofiction, as I described above, the genre is also associated with a kind of narcissistic, feminine 'selfie' culture.

fact and the illusion of unmediated access to the author," calling this access "a central generic expectation of autofiction" (63). Like MacIntosh, Annabel Kim describes "a sort of autofictional pact" consisting of a "harmonious intermingling of speculation" on the part of readers, who are unable "to distinguish the writer's auto from the writer's fiction," and a "withholding" on the part of the author, who "knows, ostensibly, what parts of the narrated subjectivity correspond to her life but will not tell" (570).[27]

Some readers certainly do approach autofiction as a puzzle or a game, trying to decipher what is fact and what is fiction. As I insist throughout this dissertation, after all, reading is deeply personal and unpredictable.[28] I am not making an argument for or against the literary or political value of autofiction. Instead, I am arguing that some autofictional texts may help to illuminate the ways that individuals navigate the pressure to always be 'putting yourself out there' on the internet for others to see and evaluate.

Heti, Zambreno, and Lockwood's novels examine the self as jointly authored by individuals and by the personalization algorithms, friends, and literary histories that catch us in their wake. The three authors draw on autofictional modes in ways that encourage readers to examine the self as a fiction, one shaped not only by contemporary forces but by longer literary and artistic traditions as well. Based on my reading of these novels, I challenge Anna Kornbluh's critique of autofiction in *Immediacy,* showing how autofictional writing does not necessarily assert that "everything is real [or that]… fictional writing has no value'" (197). Part of Kornbluh's argument is that autofictional texts "stick too close" to the crises of the present, eschewing fiction's "capacity to represent ideas that exceed persons, to evoke signifiers, to

[27] Kim is writing specifically about the French tradition of autofiction.

[28] "Once one begins to talk to real people about books, the evidence stacks up for the uses to which pages, editions, and literature itself are put being quite unpredictable" (Davies et al 16).

construct generality in contrast to the manifested personal" (112, 197). Heti, Zambreno, and Lockwood, however, depict mediation as a crucial part of the experience of being a self and of the way we share ourselves with others.

Despite my reservations, I retain the term autofictional in this chapter because I am interested in the relationships among fact, fiction, and the self. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf's description of autofiction as a Möbius strip draws a clear connection between such texts and the subjects they portray: "both subject and object, life and writing, twisting into each other, and thus as deconstructing the oppositions" (31). I argue that autofictional texts and their paratexts invite a particular interpretive mode through this "continuous motion" of oscillation between fact and fiction, "life and writing" (31). The Möbius model of autofiction shows that the texts need not reify the distinction between the real and the fictional, virtual, or digital. Instead, they can be read as always possibly fact and possibly fiction, not asking readers to distinguish between the two but to recognize the ways that the categories bleed into each other as distinctions begin to break down.[29]

Autofictional writing runs on metalepsis. According to Smith and Watson, metalepsis is "'not a suspension of disbelief, but a playful simulation of belief'" where "it is the reader's belief, not disbelief, that is suspended, setting up a reading contract based not on verisimilitude but on 'a shared knowledge of illusion'" (6). This shift from a suspension of disbelief to a simulation of belief is crucial for understanding the stakes of autofictional novels and for understanding the key distinction between Heti's 2013 novel and Lockwood's and Zambreno's later novels. In *How Should a Person Be?,* the incongruence between representation and reality

[29] "But another part of the implicit contract with the reader/listener is his or her acceptance of the possible unreliability of the narrator—an acknowledgment that whether addressing us from the stage or from the page, the narrator speaks simultaneously as 'not me' and 'not not me'" (Browning 49).

is a source of anxiety for the characters. In Lockwood and Zambreno's novels, however, such incongruence is accepted as the backdrop of everyday life, or at worst an unavoidable facet of it. In *No One is Talking About This,* Lockwood's narrator recalls how "she and her husband would often text each other throughout the day to say Glitch…. The simulation is glitching again," while just "last year… they would text each other headlines to say…. [I]sn't this proof? Proof that we're living in a simulation?" (66). For Lockwood's characters, the feeling of unreality produced by "the headlines" is inextricable from technology. The narrator conveys a sense of awe and disbelief at the ways that real life has come to feel like a "simulation," "glitch[es]" and all. The novels I read in this chapter ironically produce a "realistic" image of life in 21st-century America, a world where we consciously experience the "real" or "authentic" as an illusion. To understand the literary move towards "sincerity" and immediacy in autofictional texts, we need to understand the cultural and technological ways that our understanding of the authentic self is shifting.

While *No One is Talking About This* and *Drifts* both ascribe the unreal quality of reality to digital technology, they also show how fact and fiction blur together in the ways that we experience everyday life. The endings of all three novels pivot strangely, emphasizing the unreal quality of normal, offline life. In her novel, Heti shifts from a confessional narrative to a universalizing omniscient narrator. In both Lockwood and Zambreno's novels, the pivot is plot-based. Lockwood's narrator spends the first part of the book celebrating the absurd quality of life online, exploring the new kinds of global conversations that social media makes possible. Suddenly, the novel pivots, attributing the abrupt change in tone to an event in the narrator's life. While the first section of the novel can be read as somewhat autobiographical—Lockwood ran a viral Twitter account much like her narrator—this event is the clearest connection between

Lockwood's life and that of her unnamed narrator. When her sister's unborn child is diagnosed with a fatal genetic condition, the narrator is pulled out of her online world. Zambreno's novel ends with a similar autobiographical deus ex machina. For much of the novel, the narrator is struggling to finish her manuscript (also titled *Drifts*). Balancing writing, living, and adjunct teaching gigs leaves the narrator in a kind of anxious spiral, unable to make progress with her writing. After the narrator struggles through her seemingly irresolvable circumstances, she becomes pregnant, an event that underlines the impossibility of balancing her work as a writer with her role as a parent and her need to earn a living. The novel does not offer a clear explanation, but after the narrator gives birth to her child, she nevertheless manages to finish her manuscript. Although the resolution or shift in both Lockwood's and Zambreno's novels comes from an event in the author's life, these autobiographical events feel strangely unbelievable, like some of the most implausible or unlikely fictions. These moments highlight the ways that we, as people, use stories to try to make sense of our lives, assembling the messy facts of life into coherent—and therefore not fully plausible—fictions.[30]

2.2 Sincerity and Software:

Sheila Heti's novel, *How Should a Person Be?,* serves as a precursor to the post-digital novels written by Lockwood and Zambreno. Published in 2013, and written years earlier, Heti's novel predates many of the technological developments that are central to this dissertation. Because the text depicts a liminal moment between the pre- and post-digital periods, it offers evidence of the continuity of certain problems or preoccupations, like the impetus to build a self-

[30] "[A]utobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living" (Eakin 122).

brand, that today are often attributed to social media. Heti's novel allows me to highlight both the continuities and differences between pre- and post-Web 2.0 explorations of the relationship between the self and the forms of self-representation we use to interact with the world.

The novel follows Heti's real-life friendship with artist Margaux Williamson that develops as she attempts to write a play commissioned by a theater company. Without an internal sense of self, Sheila struggles to make progress on her play. The novel's title gives away its central question and its opening hints at its moral arc that moves from universalizing questions of how a person, in general, should be to the personal question of how Sheila should be.[31] Through this arc, the novel holds on to older ideas about the self and self-representation in art and language, suggesting that sharing one's internal self is morally good. For much of the novel, however, the question of how to be a perfect person is an ever-present source of Sheila's anxiety.

Early in the novel, Sheila tries on different personas in search of an answer to the book's titular question. In the very beginning of the book, she asks:

> How should a person be? For years and years, I asked it of everyone I met. I was always watching to see what they were going to do in any situation, so I could do it too. I was always listening to their answers, so if I liked them, I could make them my answers too…. You can admire anyone for being themselves… How can you say, I'd rather be responsible like Misha than irresponsible like Margaux? Responsibility looks so good on Misha, and irresponsibility looks so good on Margaux. How could I know which would look best on me? (Heti 1)

This passage shifts from the general, "person," to the personal, "me," becoming a meditation not on how a person should be, but on how *Sheila* should be. Despite the apparent contrast between the questions posed at the beginning and end of this passage, both center on outward appearances. The first question is normative and universalizing, implying that there is one good, moral way to live. The second question is personal, and the open-ended moral question of how to

31 "The trajectory of the book is thus a moral one, with Sheila having to write the ugliness of herself to repair her friendship by demonstrating a more ethical stance in the writing of self and others" (Cooke 87).

live a good life slides into an assumption that the best version of oneself is the one that "look[s] best." This perspective aligns with a very conventional image of Western femininity in which the pursuit of beauty is understood as a moral good. In turn, outward beauty is read as a sign of internal beauty, aligning with an older understanding of authenticity in which one's actions and appearance align with one's internal self.

For most of the novel, this external perspective guides Sheila's understanding of herself as she strives to make herself, not just her appearances, beautiful. Her morning ritual is centered on the mirror: "I… go to the mirror to start my day. I produce a haughty, superior expression to intimidate myself into thinking I'm cool, cooler than I am" (143-44). Even though Sheila is her own audience, she still feels a need to "intimidate" herself, adhering to a model of self that is rooted in her external appearance. This approach holds true for her expressions of emotion as well. When she travels to Miami with her friend Margaux, they spend time lounging by the hotel pool. Later, Sheila tells Margaux that she is "so happy with how we were making everyone jealous with how happy we were in the pool!" (112). Margaux responds: "*What?* That's *crazy!* In my mind, we were making *ourselves* happy. I had no idea anyone was looking at us" (112). Sheila's singular focus on her appearance means that she experiences her emotions at a remove: she is happy only when she has projected an image of happiness to others. This scene reads today as a clear analogy for social media platforms, which act for many users as a way to share a polished and perfect image of their lives. I saw this dynamic in some of my conversations with Bookstagram users, who described feeling unable to talk about difficult life circumstances on their profiles, afraid that they might tarnish the brand they had worked so hard to build. Of course, Heti was writing long before social media, showing the ways that this dynamic often attributed to influencer marketing in fact predates it.

Sheila collapses her work, life, and self into things that can be dressed up and turned into an object of beauty. For the bulk of the novel, readers watch Sheila attempt to "make the play I was writing— and my life, and my self— into an object of beauty" (13). It is no surprise, perhaps, that Sheila distracts herself during the novel with attempts to chase the outward expression of beauty: among other things, she becomes an unofficial apprentice at a hair salon and goes to an art exposition with Margaux. She even tries getting married.[32] In the novel's preface, Sheila describes how she "can't help answering" the novel's titular question by saying a person should be like a "celebrity." In this fantasy, she imagines that

> everyone would know in their hearts that *I* am the most famous person alive…. No one has to know what I think, for I don't really think anything at all, and no one has to know the details of my life, for there are no good details to know. It is the quality of fame one is after here, without any of its qualities. (2-3)

For celebrities, appearance is everything. If only she were a celebrity, Sheila suggests, her missing internal sense of self would no longer be a problem. If appearances were all that mattered, Sheila would have a reprieve from the tiring work of "thinking" and sharing "the details of [her] life" with others.

Heti's novel examines the process of self-construction, exploring how it is mediated by all kinds of forces, including technology. The mirror, for instance, shapes how Sheila understands herself and presents herself to the world. Margaux's opinions are also a lens through which Sheila crafts herself, changing facets of her personality she thinks Margaux might not like. Part of the way through the novel, Sheila thinks she solves the problem of her unfinished play when she decides to record her conversations with Margaux. One of the key moments in the novel's plot comes when, after recording their conversations, Sheila compiles the transcripts into

32 Sheila describes how she "[W]anted to be an ideal, and believed marrying would make me into the upright, good-inside person I hoped to show the world" (22).

the script for her play. This offends Margaux, who asks Sheila, "Don't you know that what I fear most is my words floating separate from my body?" (60). She fears that her words could be taken out of context, and that if her words are taken out of context, she will be misunderstood: "Then whatever I happen to say, someone will believe I really said it and meant it" (60). While Sheila understands her words as part of an image she crafts of herself, Margaux understands her words as constitutive of her self, not reflective of it. When Sheila shares her manuscript with Margaux, she responds by painting a self-portrait, "Margaux Souvenir," clearly intended to convey to Sheila that she felt like the manuscript turned her words—and thus her character and her art — into an empty commodity.

Ironically, though Sheila does not seem to understand Margaux's objection to being recorded, she voices her own uncertainty about the effects of technological mediation. After she "learned that Nietzsche wrote on a typewriter," for instance, she "no longer feel[s] his philosophy has the same validity or aura of truth that it formerly did" (90). Given the central role that the tape recorder plays in Sheila's own writing process, this aside comes across as somewhat hypocritical. For Sheila, as Zara Dinnen argues, the recording device "verifies Sheila as herself, and so [she] is becoming a person with the machine" as she hears herself reflected back by it (89). Dinnen reads the tape recorder as an allegory for personal digital communications, arguing that Sheila uses the tape recorder "as a tool, a word processor" both to write her play and to "substantiate[] herself as a social being in the world" (90). However, as Margaux suggests, the recorder also separates one's voice from one's body, creating a copy of the self. The tape recorder works within the world of the novel to help Sheila make progress on her play and, extradiagetically, to change the format of the text from novel to script. The transcripts and emails that follow, Dinnen argues, are not intended to serve as documentary evidence to the real;

instead, they "testify… to processes of mediated self-construction in general" (86). Dinnen advocates for reading *How Should a Person Be?* not as a post-postmodern novel concerned with sincerity and subjectivity but instead as a novel concerned with mediation. She argues that perhaps "what is identified in literary criticism as a [question] of sincerity is actually codified in ubiquitous, obfuscatory, everyday mediational systems" and that "within computational culture, software might be the layer at which interpersonal, authentic subjectivity is delimited" (94).

While Dinnen's reading of Heti's novel helpfully focuses our attention on the role that technology plays in shaping cultural understandings of subjectivity, I argue that the novel requires us to look at both sincerity and software; we need to explore simultaneously how we construct ourselves in light of the longer traditions of self-representation in art, the automated algorithmic categories we are assigned, and the need to market oneself, to become an entrepreneur of the self. While there are clear grounds for reading the novel as a story of the technologically mediated self, the novel's conclusion—its answer to the question: "How should a person be?"—delivers a moral arc that takes readers away from irony, appearances, and self-branding to sincerity and interiority. After Margaux and Sheila's fight over the tape recordings, both have a kind of artistic revelation. Margaux realizes the solution was "not to speak *less* but to speak *more*" and to speak and make art and meaning from "all the things around me" (Heti 264, 265). Sheila uses a similar process to write her play. As she explains, "I thought about everything I had, all the trash and the shit inside me," and then "I threw the shit and the trash and the sand, and for years and years I just threw it.… I made what I could with what I had" (277). Sheila realizes that self-expression can be both a reflection of one's insides ("all the trash and shit inside me") and one's outward appearances ("all the things around me"). Though the novel anticipates the social media era's anxious interest in Klein's doppelganger culture—the relationship between

the self and the works of self-representation we put into the world—it maintains an earlier understanding of authenticity. Both Margaux and Sheila arrive at the belief that truth in art (and in life) comes from excavating the depths of the self and sharing what you find there, even if it is not pretty.

In an interview with Heti, Margaux Williamson remembers Heti having her read and re-read the real transcripts of their conversations. This process, she recalls, transformed her artistic practice: from these "common, random, even embarrassing conversations we had," she says, "I started to see that there was a lot of order and information in a fragment, in a specific person, or on a table," and as a result, "I went from being an artist who tried to create meaning, to one who tried to find meaning. I suddenly—or slowly, after a thousand hours of conversation with you—had faith that there were things to find" (Williamson). In an article about the genre of autofiction, Sarah Wasserman notes that its authors "stress writing as a privileged activity; their novels imply that writing the neoliberal subject's life transforms it into a work of art" (576). Within the world of Heti's novel, the causality runs in the opposite direction. Writing does not turn Heti's life into art; rather, it is a vehicle for showing the art and meaning already present in her life.

2.3 Internet Irony

Lockwood's novel draws a stark contrast with *How Should a Person Be?,* depicting a subject who is no longer anxious about the disconnect between her outward appearance and her internal sense of self (or lack thereof). While for Heti, self-representation is ultimately a serious pursuit and a kind of art, in Lockwood's novel, self-representation is simply a requirement. The moral burden attached to the work of being a self is gone; online, the novel suggests, the self is collapsed into the social and does not exist apart from the media/culture/context in which one

lives, and this collapse is not inherently a problem. Like Heti's novel, Lockwood's is deeply—if latently—anxious, and it uses similar wry humor to shield against a deep sense of fear. However, the root of that fear has changed, as has the language used to reflect it. While Heti's novel maintains an attachment to the notion of truth, even as it plays with fictionality and the mediation inherent in all forms of artistic and documentary acts of self-representation, more recent novels such as Lockwood's suggest that the feeling of verisimilitude is an illusion.

Lockwood's novel produces a realistic image of online life, a context in which we knowingly experience the "real" or "authentic" as the product of a performance. Overflowing with seemingly meaningless, often humorous details, the novel reimagines Barthes's reality effect for the digital age. As Lockwood writes, the narrator

> lay every morning under an avalanche of details, blissed, pictures of breakfasts in Patagonia, a girl applying her foundation with a hard-boiled egg, a shiba inu in Japan leaping from paw to paw to greet its owner…. What did it mean that she was allowed to see this? (8)

This "avalanche of details" accrues for readers as the novel progresses, blanketing us—along with the narrator—in "the new slipstream of information" that "did not feel like real life, exactly, but nowadays what did?" (14). Lockwood's prose flows, washing over readers like a stream of loosely connected thoughts or, in the language of the internet, "pure vibes." It simultaneously invokes a feeling of being too close to the details to see clearly and of being too zoomed out to be able to make sense of how blurry shapes connect to one another. If Lockwood's novel is, in fact, a work of realism, the world it depicts is driven not by plot and character but by details, networks, and juxtaposition.

The image of life online that emerges from Lockwood's writing is steeped in a wry humor. The novel is written in what Lockwood calls "the language we've come up with together as a generation, as a community" on the internet, which, in practice, means it is full of pointed

critiques, delivered with a smirk (Shapiro). For instance, the narrator muses while traveling in Europe that

> it should not be true that, walking the wet streets of international cities, she should suddenly detect the warm, the unmistakable, the broken-to-release-the-vast-steam-of-human-souls, the smell of Subway bread. That she should know it so instantly, that she should stop in her tracks, that she and her husband should turn to each other joyously and sing in harmony the words EAT FRESH. No, it should not be true that modern life made us each a franchise owner of a Subway location of the mind. (Lockwood 44)

This passage is baked in hyperbole: its description of the smell of Subway bread and the matter-of-fact description of the contemporary subject as a "franchise owner of a Subway location of the mind" coupled with the repetition of "should" that lends the passage a kind of musical quality exemplifies the novel's wry tone. It speaks, too, to Banet-Weiser's writing about brand culture: she situates her discussion of self-branding as part of a broader argument about the cultural power of brands in the 21st century. Banet-Weiser notes, "Brands become the setting around which individuals weave their own stories"; becoming "visible and often audible, through symbols and logos, through jingles and mottoes…—and occasionally, even through a smell!," these material qualities stand in for the brand as a relational, affective, and narrative construct (Banet-Weiser 4). In a moment when brands on social media go viral for acting like people, and people gain influence through building cohesive self-brands, the idea of each of us being "a franchise owner of a Subway location of the mind" offers a tongue-in-cheek comment on the permeable boundary between our sense of self and our performance of selfhood online and in the world, a performance made up of social media posts, but also of our consumption practices. The passage critiques globalization's flattening, normative force on both individuals and cultures, but it delivers this critique with a smile, embracing a distinctly online mode of irony that wavers indistinguishably between humor and sincerity. Damon Young suggests that the roots of this posture lie in online communities like 4Chan. Looking at the way internet users use acronyms

like LOL, JK, and LMFAO to signal this unstable irony, Young argues that "what is at stake… is not simply satire that presents itself as such, but rather the collapse of a vantage point for adjudicating between satire and sincerity."

The narrator is clear about the political consequences of this mode of indeterminate irony. She describes how the generation following hers "had spent most of its time online making incredibly bigoted jokes in order to laugh at the idiots who were stupid enough to think they meant it. Except after a while they did mean it, and then somehow at the end of it they were Nazis" (52). The narrator's father had also been radicalized on social media; her husband refers to his father-in-law as "completely brainwashed" (104). But, the narrator points out, her husband has been caught up in a cultish community too, albeit a less explicitly political one: "He could no longer walk normally because of a new exercise regimen that he referred to as Dogg Crapp Training and practiced in total secrecy at a cult-adjacent gym known as The Zoo" (104). The novel describes in detail the way that users get caught up in online communities that shape their thoughts, their speech, and their behavior, how what starts out as a joke can build into a belief system.

Humor becomes a kind of cynical defense mechanism for the narrator, covering over a latent anxiety. Lockwood's narrator makes humor her personality, extending it beyond her words to her actions and her appearance. At one point, she interrupts her own musing on "the way the portal wrote," describing life online as a kind of story:

> The plot! That was a laugh. The plot was that she sat motionless in her chair, willing herself to stand up and take the next shower in a series of near-infinite showers, wash all the things that made her herself, all the things that just kept coming, all the things that would just keep coming, until one day they stopped so violently on the sidewalk that the plot tripped over them, stumbled, and lurched forward one more innocent inch" (64)

In this passage, the narrator's humor acts as a shield against "all the things that just kept coming," conveying a feeling of impasse in the face of a present and future that feel like they are

falling apart. In place of a punchline, she delivers a critique of the possibility of a plot when it seems like all one can do is endure whatever new crisis life throws at you, suggesting that the internet's mundanity, its circularity and triviality are tied to a sense of disempowerment characteristic of neoliberal politics and exacerbated by the internet.

No One is Talking About This illustrates the experience of selfhood online as the product of personalization algorithms and brand culture that together turn identity into the product of an impossibly complex Venn diagram of hyper-specific categories. The narrator describes how the internet "had… once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone" (71). The shifting narrative perspective here, from second-person to first-person plural, enacts what it describes, pulling the reader from "you" to "we." The novel uses second-person at several other times, each time recreating what Wendy Chun describes in *Updating to Remain the Same* as the singular-plural YOU. While communities can and do form online, as we saw in the previous chapter, they face an uphill battle on social media platforms where interactions are structured around advertising interests. Chun argues that no "we" exists online—there is no imagined community moving together through time as a singular unit—only temporary, fragmented groups that cohere around a crisis and then dissipate.

The tension between the specificity of the user (the self of the self-brand) and the generalization involved in algorithmic personalization processes appears most viscerally in a passage that uses the second-person to describe a highly personal, specific experience. The narrator describes how "whole subcultures sprang up on boards where people met to talk about their candida overgrowth. You stumbled across it late one night when you were idly typing in searches" (27-28). She continues:

> You found the candida overgrowth board, glowing its welcome along the highway of sleeplessness… You took up the candida overgrowth language; what began as the most elastic and snappable verbal play soon emerged in jargon, and then in doctrine, and then in dogma. Your behavior was subtly modified. (28)

Regardless of whether you, the reader, have ever looked into candida overgrowth, misinformation is rampant online and, Lockwood suggests, there are circumstances in which we will all be vulnerable to it. In this passage, "you" are radicalized by a desire for community, "welcome," and belonging as a salve to the trenchant loneliness of insomnia. Beginning with that indeterminate irony ("elastic… verbal play"), the internet users slip into jargon, a sign of inside knowledge, but slide quickly into belief (doctrine) and then into a resolute dogma, unwilling to listen to critique. Readers may or may not be able to see themselves in the specific story of online radicalization that Lockwood's narrator tells, but either way we (internet users) are all awkwardly implicated to some degree in the "you" she addresses; by going online, we all subject ourselves to the behavior modification techniques that social media platforms have been designed around. This passage describes the ways that the internet can lead people seeking a sense of community and belonging to an unshakable belief in a false reality.

The novel simultaneously treats the internet as a waste of time, a site of burgeoning social forms, and an important archival space. Roughly halfway through the novel, the narrator describes a clear break from the "plot" of the internet, a moment when for her, the plot stops abruptly. Ironically, though, for Lockwood's readers, this point is where the plot of the novel begins. In the first half of the text, the narrator is so attentive to all the details that rush across her newsfeed, so immersed in its frenetic flow, that she lacks the narrative distance needed to make sense of any of it, to draw causal connections or create a sense of suspense, change, or closure. While this first section seems to be at least somewhat autobiographical, it, like the internet culture it describes, is full of simultaneously personal and universal details and descriptions.

The point where the novel's plot begins is jarring, jolting readers out of the novel's flow. The narrator hears that something is wrong with her sister's pregnancy and learns that her niece has been diagnosed with a rare, fatal genetic disorder:

> [S]he fell heavily out of the broad warm us, out of the story that had seemed, up till the very last minute, to require her perpetual co-writing. Oh, she thought hazily, falling rain-wise like Alice, finding tucked under her arm the bag of peas she once photoshopped into pictures of historical atrocities, oh, have I been *wasting my time?*. (120)

The narrator's question—"have I been wasting my time?"—persists in this section, as the focus shifts away from the internet and onto the material, physical sensations she experiences while spending time with her sister and her niece. The language of this passage moves from the fuzzy collective, "the broad warm us," to the personal "I," signaling the novel's shift into an autobiographical mode. Lockwood has described this real experience with her family as one of the driving forces behind the novel, saying, "When it was happening, I couldn't physically keep myself from writing about it" (Westenfeld). The details she shares about the experience in interviews make clear that much of this section of the novel is autobiographical.

While the novel does not fully abandon its wry humor—the narrator still holds on to that bag of peas, after all—it takes on a newly earnest tone. The narrator worries, "If all she was was funny, and none of this was funny, where did that leave her?" (Lockwood 125). Yet at the same time, "all the worries about *what a mind was,*" ideas that make up the first half of the novel, "fell away as soon as the baby was placed in her arms" (143). The narrator's existential anxiety and hope that animated the first half of the novel disappear abruptly, replaced by a desire to be present in the mundane details of the material world: "The things she wanted the baby to know seemed small, so small. How it felt to go to a grocery store on vacation; to wake at three a.m. and run your whole life through your fingertips; first library card… the portal, but just for one minute" (163). While the narrator does not dismiss the internet entirely, she does express a

feeling of separation and even, at times, alienation from it, prioritizing the material, physical, and sensual details of her life.

For me, this shift in tone and topic from internet irony to autobiographical sincerity feels oddly artificial. I read the first half of the book as a response to the question of how new technologies like social media are shaping language, and in turn, how they might shape literature. While the novel's first half addresses common and important critiques of the internet, it retains a hopeful attachment to its potential as well. The second half of the novel pivots sharply. While the novel does try to reconcile the internet and real life on the final pages, when the narrator loses her phone and all the photos and videos of the baby she has stored on it, it holds the two in opposition for much of this second section. The narrator's insistence on the reality of online life sits paradoxically alongside an insistence on the difference between so-called real life and the internet. I found this same paradox present in my conversations with Bookstagram users, people who simultaneously found valuable friends and a kind of community online, recognize that those online friendships are qualitatively different from their in-person friends, and intuitively recognize the limits of the language of "real life" or "real friends" yet persist in using it. Here, too, I think this paradox points to a dire need for more specific, nuanced language about the differences between virtual and in-person experiences or engagement. In contrast to prominent early theorists of digital media like Sherry Turkle, the voices of those challenging the binary opposition between the digital and the real have far less reach but are nonetheless important. As early as 2011, Nathan Jurgensen used the term "digital dualism" to critique this split between the digital and the real. For Legacy Russell, who expands on Jurgensen's work, the online world is different, but no less real or significant than the so-called real world. Russell's *Glitch Feminism* is explicitly addressed to readers who are in the process of

"becoming their avatars," embracing the digital as a space of possibility (13). Russell writes that "the digital skins we develop and don online help us understand who we are" (31). Finally, Tom Boellstorf offers an alternative framework that "would not treat the digital as a 'lossy' approximation of the analog" by "understanding… the gap between virtual and actual as real precisely because it is a space of connection and alteration…. It is not that virtual worlds are potentially real, but that they are additional realities" (395). For all these theorists, the persistence of this paradox in our language is problematic because it discounts the possibility and power of online interactions. Within the world of Lockwood's novel, the twisting together of autobiography and fiction happens on the internet, while for the book and its readers, this same blurring happens through genre. On both levels, inside and outside the text, what seems like fact is shown to be fiction, and what seems like fiction turns out to be autobiography. This blurring offers an opportunity to illustrate and reveal the complicated experience of living in a world where the line between the real and the virtual world is simultaneously clear and difficult to name.

2.4 Doubling

Kate Zambreno's *Drifts* was published contemporaneously with Lockwood's novel. The two share common interests in the idea of documenting life as it is happening and in the impact of new media on language and literature. Unlike Lockwood, though, Zambreno treats technology as a ubiquitous backdrop to her story rather than its focal point. Anxiety is woven throughout these three novels, but while it is hidden behind humor in Heti's and Lockwood's texts, anxiety is front and center in *Drifts*, shaping both the content and structure of the story. Zambreno's anxiety is not about lacking a sense of self, about how she appears to others, or about the impact

of technology on language. Instead, her anxiety is about survival, about balancing time amongst her writing, teaching, family, and friends while ensuring she makes enough money as an adjunct to be able to afford life in the city. This anxiety is accompanied by a growing sense of exhaustion and a focus on the specific acts of self-branding required of both writers and teachers. Zambreno's prose demonstrates a "looping reoccurrence" in its form that mirrors the ruminative structure of anxious thought (Zambreno 14).

Drifts is a novel that reads like a notebook, a collection of everyday noticings, formatted as fragmented prose interrupted by photographs. The narrator appears to be Zambreno herself: though we never learn her name, she is writing a book that is also titled *Drifts*. Additionally, descriptions of the other books the narrator has written match real books Zambreno has written, and the narrator is in regular conversation with a series of authors whose first names correspond with the writers Zambreno thanks in the book's acknowledgements. *Drifts* is mentioned throughout the text, though it is consistently unclear how closely this diegetic version of *Drifts* corresponds with the published text in readers' hands. Early on, for instance, the narrator describes how "[i]n the summer of 2015, I was supposed to be at work on *Drifts*" (5). This other *Drifts* that the narrator is writing exists primarily in a notebook with a "canary yellow cover" that matches both Robert Walser's *The Tanners,* one of the novel's main interlocutors, and the yellow cover of the US paperback edition of *Drifts*. The narrator recalls writing "a slightly different version of my last name" in the yellow *Drifts* notebook, "which made me feel I had entered the space of fiction" (7). She continues, noting that "it is a different book from the one I'm trying to write now…. This *Drifts* desired to be a detective story, or maybe a murder mystery" (7). Unlike mystery or detective fiction, both plot-driven genres, the published version of *Drifts* reads as a collection of fragments, a mix of epistolary and diaristic modes.

This correspondence between Zambreno and her narrator and between the *Drifts* in readers' hands and the one described in its pages exemplifies the novel's central interest in forms of doubling. Each facet of the narrator's life that she is struggling to balance becomes a form of doubling or reproduction, from teaching to photography to writing and eventually to pregnancy and motherhood. Naomi Klein describes doppelganger culture as defined by the ways that people are compelled to create virtual copies of themselves to perform in different circumstances. Zambreno's novel shows that this copying extends beyond the internet itself, merging with older models of self-representation, art, and authorship as well as with neoliberal capitalism's emphasis on the entrepreneurial self.

Zambreno's focus on the quotidian work of writing echoes a common thread among autofictional novels. Some scholars read this tendency as a response to the growing industry demand for authors to market themselves on social media. John MacIntosh writes, for instance, that "autofiction is not just a work of self-writing, but the work of self-promoting," a "response to the economic pressures that authors face: the compulsion to sell the work as an extension of the self and the self as an extension of the work" (64). Regardless of whether you read *Drifts* as self-promotion (which I do not, for reasons that I hope will be clear by the end of this section), these economic pressures surface as a central tension of the novel. The narrator struggles to survive on adjunct gigs and finds herself shunted to the sidelines. "Every semester I feel like an imposter," she notes, "temporarily occupying the spaces of tenured writers on sabbatical—as if I am temporarily occupying their lives" (66). Yet, her lack of fame seems at other times to be a relief, even as it exacerbates her struggle to afford life in New York. Upon realizing her books are not on the shelf in a bookstore she is visiting, the narrator remarks that "every book I've published embarrasses me. With both their visibility and their invisibility" (91). Towards the end

of the novel, one of her books suddenly becomes popular in Sweden. She celebrates the limited scope of her fame, finding it "a relief to google myself and for the results to be incomprehensible" (219). She continues, adding, "Perhaps it's all really about someone else—it has nothing to do with me" (219). The narrator's "me" is separate from her authorial persona who poses for photos and conducts interviews. This split between the self and the self-brand is a recurring subject of the novel, one of the points that it keeps circling around. At another point, the narrator's friend Anna tries to speculate about Elena Ferrante's appearance. The narrator remembers Anna insisting that Ferrante must "ha[ve] the face of a novelist, the real face of a writer," then writes—it is unclear whether she says this to Anna or merely records it for readers—"I don't know what that means. I don't know how having a face has anything to do with being a writer" (49). The mention of Ferrante, whose brand is rooted in the enigmatic appeal of her insistent anonymity, frames the narrator's separation of "having a face" from "being a writer" as a specific response to the pressure for authors to promote their writing in and through their self-brand (Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*).

The narrator also feels a need to perform a certain version of herself while teaching. She finds that "we are supposed to be sages when teaching writing,… that's what the students want—to tell them not only how to write from life but also how to live" (Zambreno 79). As a result, teaching young writers is not simply doubling or reproducing in the sense of training future generations to write, it is also about shaping how they inhabit and relate to the world around them. In addition to what students want her to tell them, the narrator's performance in the classroom also responds to external pressures. She describes feeling pressured to

> Tell them that writing isn't about success, or capitalism, it's personal, self-directed, sacred? Maybe I even feel that, but I resent that I'm supposed to sell it. Sell writing. Sell a life of being a writer. Was being a writer a way of escaping from having a job, or was it, as others have framed it, extreme discipline and unceasing solitary labor? I didn't know anymore. (103)

Here, the tension between writing as a way of making a living and writing as a personal practice—two perspectives that exist in tension in the narrator's life throughout the novel—is subsumed into a problem of branding. For the narrator, the figure of the writer is itself a kind of brand that she must advertise to her students, even if she does not necessarily feel confident about its truth in her own life. The tone of the novel makes it difficult to read *Drifts* as self-promotion, or even as promotion of or elevation of the life of a writer. Instead, the novel uses an autofictional mode—its fragmented form, its interest in the banalities of everyday life, and its focus on the work of being a writer—to make visible the institutional structures that mediate the narrator's life and the stories she can tell. In my view, Zambreno's novel demonstrates the possibility for autofiction focused on the conditions of its own production to both critique those conditions and adhere to them.

Not all forms of doubling in the novel share the alienating qualities of a self-brand: much of the novel is interested in practices of documentation (diaries, photography, record-keeping) that it sees as important processes of meaning making. The narrator explicitly describes *Drifts* as an attempt "to write… my present tense" (5). This desire, however, is complicated by limitations of language and the book ("How can a paragraph be a day, or a day a paragraph?") and by the narrator's living conditions ("I couldn't often exist in the room, or even in this paragraph, now. I found myself always distracted") (5). Zambreno voices both the desire for unmediated connection and communication and their impossibility, and she frames the desire both as a response to technology and as part of a longer literary tradition. While Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy* writes off autofiction as a genre given over entirely to this desire for unmediated connection, *Drifts* acts as a kind of counterargument, embracing autofiction in order to tell a larger story that understands, contextualizes, and critiques the desire for immediacy.

In Zambreno's novel, the process of documentation, recording life as it unfolds, is itself a form of meaning-making. The novel repeatedly returns to scenes of the narrator walking with her dog around the neighborhood. In one such scene, the narrator remarks:

> There is one particular tree, a white birch, that I continually take photographs of, its circling patterns that look like Munch's scream. In some ways I know I am taking the same photograph, or some version of the same photograph, and there's almost no discernible difference between the hole I focused on a few weeks ago and the same one today, except perhaps light and season…. Trees register the changing of time almost imperceptibly. (155)

Photography here acts as a form of doubling, creating not only a copy of the tree in time but also a copy of the act of taking the photograph, through the narrator's repetitive behavior, her drive to take "some version of the same photograph" repeatedly. Several pages later, when the narrator looks at the archive of photographs she has taken, the passage acts as a double of the previous one:

> As I look through the photographs, I am still moved by the solemnity of the growths and textures on the trees, the hauntingness of the holes, like abstract paintings….*it is becoming increasingly clear to me that the narrative I am interested in [writing] deals more with holes than what is filled in.* I don't need to remember what the trees looked like, but how moved I felt when I walked through the spaces between them. If I took a photograph of the same tree, every day… *it would be about the taking of the pictures, the process and the ritual,* a way of marking the day and layering time, which is increasingly what *the project of art is for me.* If these photographs were ever viewed, the viewer would only wonder at the vast unknown of the day beyond the taking of this one daily photograph. All we can do is wonder over the imaginary solitude of others, what others do when they are alone, how they deal with the vastness and ephemerality of the day. (157-158, emphasis mine)

Zambreno's writing, with its and long, meandering sentences that flow seamlessly from one idea to the next, and the present tense narration ("as I look through these photos"), lack of narrative framing, and self-aware tone are all the hallmarks of what Kornbluh describes as the style of immediacy. But the passage also circles around ideas, coming back around to them like the narrator comes back to the tree. She suggests that art is both "process… and ritual" as well as a way of "keeping" and "layering" time. In one passage, she compares the tree's bark to "abstract paintings" while in the other, she identifies a particular painting. As the photos accumulate, they

become a subtle record of change, like the tree itself. Likewise, as *Drifts* returns to images, references, or even particular phrases, their meanings layer on top of one another such that novel seems to resist the idea of immediacy or presence that the flowing prose seems to imply. Ultimately, the novel seems to illustrate Kornbluh's claim that the "meaning and crisis of art" is in the gaps caused by mediation, in all that resists representation (Zambreno 158).

One of the primary forces of mediation in *Drifts* is the publishing industry, which shapes not only the books that are published but the contexts in which they are received. For instance, the narrator describes how "the publishing people told me that I was writing a novel, but I was unsure" (5). Rather than "a novel," the narrator understood her project as "a small book of wanderings, animals. A paper-thin object, a ghost. Filled with an incandescence toward the possibility of a book, as well as a paralysis" (5). Editorial comments permeate the text of the novel. At another point, the publishing people ask the narrator: "Who are the characters in your novel… and does anything happen?" (15). *Drifts* emphasizes the difference between what the narrator wants to write and the limits of the generic categories recognized by the publishing industry. These metaleptic asides emphasize the power of the editor to shape the published work, reminding us that the text in our hands is not authored by a single, cohesive self. For instance, at one point the narrator remarks that "my editor later reads this above passage, and wants to inquire exactly why the narrator is masturbating" (36). There's a slippage between the intimate "I" of the preceding passage and this removed editorial commentary, and between the now of the story and the "later" of editing. This slippage between the book within the book and the actual book in readers' hands creates the vertiginous feeling of doubling that Klein attributes to the internet's doppelganger effect, highlighting that autofiction can create or mimic a similar effect by intentionally playing with the line separating reality and fiction.

With the collage-like quality of her prose, Zambreno plays with the genre of autobiography as she crafts her own, drawing on older examples of writers and artists trying to achieve a sense of immediacy in their work. Through these references, she tells a media history of this desire for immediacy. The novel opens with a passage about Rilke, whose story is woven throughout the novel. The narrator treats figures like Rilke as a kind of mirror, understanding herself and her work through the image of these predecessors, blending her own autobiography with biographical passages about Rilke's life. She does this for other writers and artists as well, wondering early on, for instance, if "[m]aybe I was writing a novel, in the Robert Walser sense, his short forms like moods and digressions" (5). Likewise, the narrator describes Elizabeth Hardwick's work and process, noting how Hardwick also "studied Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* when writing her novel," resulting in "a similar decreation… in her work—going away from the self, preferring to tell other stories, of the washer women and waitresses of her youth, of the denizens of the hotel, as opposed to telling her own" (100). The novel suggests a clear connection between Hardwick's move "away from the self" and the narrator's own desire to write "a memoir about nothing…. to be drained of the personal. To not give myself away" (38).

The fragmented structure of the novel and this vast referentiality reflect the narrator's distraction, anxiety, and avoidance. Tracing the history of distraction and "disciplines of attention" in American thought, Caleb Smith asserts that "even after we understand that distraction's real causes are in the large-scale economic systems and technologies that shape our world, we keep trying to solve the problem with personal, moral remedies" (Smith, *Thoreau's Axe* 7). In contrast to the contemporary remedies Smith references—such as apps that block you from accessing the internet labeled with moralizing names like Self Control or Freedom—

Zambreno's narrator does not necessarily try to avoid distraction. At times, she purposefully "surrenders to screens," and she finds clarity in "listen[ing] to repetitive music on loop" (78, 166). Leaning into distraction, repetition, and doubling, the narrator finds "that relief… of nonexistence," articulating the same exhaustion that Hu describes as digital lethargy (187). Throughout the book, the narrator's lethargy takes different forms. Early on, she looks "lazy" from the outside, sitting "on the porch in my sun hat, watching the procession of the neighborhood" (12). But she insists, "I am working, taking notes and thinking" (12). At this early stage, she describes this behavior as "a spiritual stance, more active, like recreation. The state where the writing of the fragment replaces the work" (12). However, as the novel continues, and the narrator continues to struggle with her writing, her tone becomes more and more disillusioned, until she tells her friend Sofia, "I am paralyzed! I'm just fluttering on the internet constantly" (230). Though she seems, to my eye, to spend no more time on the internet in the latter parts of the book than she does in its beginning, and though her behavior looks the same from the perspective of an outside observer, she expresses a substantive difference between her "spiritual stance" and "fluttering on the internet," with the former driven by a desire to make connections and the latter driven by avoidance and anxiety.

As with Lockwood's novel, *Drifts* ends with an autobiographical deus ex machina, with events from Zambreno's real life pulling the story out of its seemingly unending spiral. Nearing the end of the book, after repeatedly failing to meet her manuscript deadlines, the narrator learns she is pregnant. The pressures and anxiety that marked the novel until this point are only exacerbated by this news. She tries fruitlessly to find replacement instructors for the classes she is teaching, struggling at each institution against seemingly cruel and pointless policies. Despite her exhaustion, which only grows during pregnancy, the narrator writes, "I have to work! I

cannot afford not to teach…. I need to finish *Drifts* to receive the rest of the advance" to be able to afford childcare and housing in New York, so she concludes: "this pregnancy exacerbates everything" (Zambreno 294). Even at this point, despite the tone of the novel shifting from lethargic to frenetic, her writer's block persists. Yet, by the novel's end, the narrator somehow has her baby and finishes her book, the apparent opposition between these two forms of reproduction having, somehow, evaporated. As with Lockwood's novel, I found this ending unfulfilling, despite its apparent basis in Zambreno's lived reality. The tension that previously animated the novel disappears, yet this resolution has no clear explanation.

In a world where fragments of the self proliferate, created both as acts of intention and through automatic algorithmic processes, autofictional texts model ways to acknowledge and respond to the split between the self and its varyingly fictional, out of date, and/or performative copies. Because the user is a composite, "coauthored" with algorithms, "the self races ahead of the information that is online" (Hu 129). The narrator describes this experience of encountering fragmented, outdated records of her experience. She wants to quit social media but finds herself unable to fully detach from these "fragments" of her past she "scattered… online," as she adds, "I google myself constantly. It's a sickness" (Zambreno 20). The fragments of the narrator's self haunt her as she moves through the world. The novel shows that this doubling is not specific to the internet; for the narrator, it also occurs with her autobiographical writing. Reading from an unpublished manuscript "about another period in [her] life," the narrator describes how "it was as if that book was from another self, as if the writing of the book allowed me to become another self while moving through it" (137). Pointing explicitly to the split between the authoring self and the narrated self, this passage exemplifies a particular kind of metaleptic split that "disrupts

not just the fluidity of reading but readers' self-understanding as coherently in the present" (Smith and Watson 23).

As *Drifts* illustrates, authors use various strategies to remind readers of mediation, creating critical distance through tools like ekphrasis, illustration, or even Zambreno's constant reproductions and doublings. Thus, when Kornbluh implies that fictionality is literature's primary tool for critique, I find her attack on autofiction to be somewhat misplaced. *Drifts* historicizes the desire for unmediated connection and self-representation, tying the narrator's desire to make the day a paragraph to literary and art historical precedents. For me, reading *Drifts* through the lens of immediacy—and reading Kornbluh through the lens of *Drifts*—offers a fuller picture of the forms that literary representations of and responses to our always-on culture might take. While third-person narration might be one way of challenging the dominant aesthetic mode of immediacy, harnessing genres associated with immediacy may also harbor critical or creative potential.

This chapter has brought together three different autofictional accounts of the culture of self-branding, told from the perspective of three white women. Each author is interested in questions about self-representation, authenticity, mediation, and technology, though each approaches such questions from a different angle. Writing before the rise of social media, Heti explores questions about authenticity and self-representation. Throughout the novel, Sheila is anxious about her lack of self-assuredness. She tries on different ways of appearing beautiful and good, but each leaves her feeling empty. The novel ends with Sheila discovering her sense of self, completing a moral arc that ends with an understanding of subjectivity rooted in both one's internal environment (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) and relationships with others. Heti's novel suggests that life writing, and other forms of artistic self-representation, must be about more than

appearances, performance, or self-branding. Instead, they must be an expression of one's internal—authentic—self. In contrast, Lockwood's narrator is unbothered by her own absent interiority. The narrator imbues everything with an indeterminate irony; everything she says and does may or may not be a joke. This humor acts as a cover for a sense of ambient existential anxiety, as the narrator jokes about climate change, apocalypse, political radicalization, and cults. If Heti's characters are worried about how to be a good (or ideal, or beautiful, or authentic) person, Lockwood's novel is more concerned with questions about the impact of technology on our art and communication, our sense of self and our relationships with others. Finally, Zambreno's *Drifts* explores various forms of doubling, recalling Klein's doppelganger culture and Kornbluh's description of immediacy while offering a longer history of both. Together, these novels do far more than tell stories about the self: they show how the experience of selfhood is, and always has been, tied to media, and how new technologies, like social media, and new pressures—like the climate crisis, the rise of gig work and the adjunctification of the university, and the emphasis on self-branding—come into contact with older traditions of self-documentation. Additionally, looking at all three novels emphasizes that, despite the influence of technology and internet culture in our offline lives, there remains a distinction between online and offline experiences that is simultaneously essential and difficult to pinpoint. Zambreno and Lockwood explicitly draw our attention to this distinction and the insufficient language we have to describe it, while Heti occupies a kind of liminal period before the rise of social media as we know it today, revealing some continuities and distinctions between pre- and post-internet understandings of the self and the social.

Chapter 3 Networked Reading

At one point in Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019), Richard, one of the novel's protagonists, describes walking into an art exhibit filled with chalk drawings of clouds and a

> mountain picture so huge that the wall became mountain and the mountain became a kind of wall…. there was an avalanche coming down the mountain picture towards anyone looking at it, an avalanche that had been stilled for just that moment so that whoever saw it had time to comprehend it. (78)

Richard's encounter with this piece is an experience of the sublime: the scale of both the canvas and the image it portrays challenge his comprehension. While eighteenth century theorists took the mountain as their model, today the sublime is often associated with big data, neural networks, and predictive models whose scale exceeds our comprehension. I read the avalanche as a metaphor for the barrage of information flooding internet users today, and I read the mountain as the network infrastructure that carries this barrage. The vast scale of data contained in these networks, as well as the fact that much, if not all, of that data remains locked away from users reinforces the sense of "sublime boundlessness" that characterizes many contemporary representations of digital networks (Jagoda 20).

This chapter responds to the felt sense and recurring aesthetic of overwhelm exemplified by this scene in Smith's *Spring*. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant describes how "the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (7). A decade later, this description still feels like an apt characterization of the present and the recent past. In the opening for an article in *The New York Times*, Amanda Hess writes:

> Often the features of our dystopia are itemized, as if we are briskly touring the concentric circles of hell—rising inequality, declining democracy, unending pandemic, the financial system optimistically described as "late" capitalism—until we have reached the inferno's toasty center, which is the destruction of the Earth through [hu]man-made global warming.

Running through these kinds of "itemized" lists of crises has become a common rhetorical gesture, enacting Berlant's "piling on" of crisis. As the sense of crisis accumulates, specific fears blur together, creating a free-floating anxiety.

Rather than allaying this anxiety, the internet's endless cloud of information puts users at an impasse. Engaging with this cloud of information gained a name during the global pandemic: doomscrolling, or "willingly subjecting oneself to bad news online, continuously scrolling through social media or news outlets, despite the negative emotional effect of what one's reading" ("Doomscrolling"). Psychologists explain that doomscrolling is motivated by an innate drive to look for information when faced with a perceived threat (Garcia-Navarro, Jennings, Klein). Searching for information online, though, inevitably leads to more bad news. Through this accumulative logic, doomscrolling exacerbates the very anxiety that it is meant to alleviate. Journalist Karen K. Ho, who popularized the term, says doomscrolling is meant to "feel[] productive and like we're exercising our agency during a period where we can't do much" (Jennings). Instead, it becomes a self-perpetuating cycle; while it is intended as an expression of agency, it quickly becomes an experience of impasse.

Doomscrolling names an action tied to a particular affect: anxiety perpetuates the action, and the action, in turn, sustains the anxiety. Through this recursive cycle, both the activity and the affect quickly become totalizing. Doomscrolling thus represents a paranoid orientation towards the world, one in which individual crises become metonymic of the apocalyptic state of the present and future. One crisis comes to stand in for all other crises, both concurrent and yet to come. Crisis itself thus "seems to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution," as Eve Sedgwick describes, "blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand" (131). Like the paranoia that Sedgwick describes,

doomscrolling is a strong theory, obscuring alternative ways of relating to information and the internet, anxiety, and crisis.

This chapter explores one of these alternatives. If doomscrolling represents an experience of passivity, I show how the post-digital book can restore a sense of agency to the individual as they search for knowledge. Through close readings of documentary novels by Ruth Ozeki, Ali Smith, and Valeria Luiselli, I model and theorize networked reading, a mode of reading that operates both laterally, across mediums, and vertically, involving close attention to moments in texts and a selection of their referents. Networked reading is not surface reading, and it also exceeds N. Katherine Hayles's concept of hyperreading. Both surface reading and hyperreading have been theorized in opposition to close reading. In contrast, networked reading does require deep, close, or careful attention to the way an author uses language. Furthermore, networked reading exceeds traditional methods of close reading by moving outside the text itself to engage with its referents. I refer to this process as networked as it involves encountering the novel as one node in a network that crosses mediums, geographies, and histories.[33] Through transmedia connections among reader, text, and intertext, networked reading highlights the interactivity of the book as a medium and the agency that readers exercise as they navigate through it.

The notion that texts are made up of other texts is well-trod ground. Foucault writes that the book is "caught up in a system of references to other books… a node within a network," while Barthes famously refers to the text as "a tissue of quotations" (23, 146).[34] A deep well of scholarship on ekphrasis and intertextuality has explored how books connect to other books and

[33] As Michel Foucault notes, "[t]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network…. the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case" (23).

[34] See also Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence" *Harper's Magazine*, Feb. 2007, 59-71

to works of art. Ali Smith's recent writing, in particular, has been discussed extensively as a work of collage, constructed through ekphrasis (Elkins, Lewis, Schmitz-Justen).

Rather than analyzing how authors embed other artistic mediums or texts in their writing, I explore how the internet opens up new ways for readers to engage with references to other mediums or texts. Readers have always been able to find and explore the works described in an ekphrastic passage, but doing so no longer requires a trip to a museum or library. Liliane Louvel, for instance, writes, "The fact that the image of a painting, for instance, is so readily accessible seems to free ekphrasis from its primary function: that of making the absent image visualizable" (248). However, rather than making ekphrastic objects accessible, search engines act as an additional screen, mediating readers' access to these referenced objects or texts in new ways. For instance, how often have you searched for something and found results that led you astray? While anyone can conduct an internet search, proprietary algorithms sort the results according to opaque criteria—search algorithms cannot determine which answer is correct, only which answer is most popular (or most profitable, for paid advertisements).

Networked reading embraces the limitless proliferation of possible interpretations that result from transmedial reading practices. Reading is always a deeply contingent activity: the way a reader imagines a character's appearance or interprets a metaphor is never fully predictable. Intertextuality deepens this contingency, adding layers of meaning to the text that readers may easily miss or misattribute. This contingency is further exacerbated when readers turn to search engines, whose results may take readers to the correct answer but may also lead them in entirely new, unanticipated directions.

In the analysis that follows, I simultaneously practice and theorize networked reading, weaving together discussions of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, the four novels of

Smith's Seasonal Quartet – *Autumn, Spring, Winter*, and *Summer*—and Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*. All three of these authors illustrate networked reading, both literally and metaphorically. Moreover, Smith and Luiselli explicitly position their novels as part of a transmedia network, connected via a plethora of citations to an array of other mediums, from blog posts and YouTube videos to ballets, canonical works of literature, and news articles. In addition to their citational aesthetic, these novels share an investment in the medium of the book and an interest in its role in the present. Each novel is framed explicitly as an attempt to narrate the present as it is happening. We usually associate this desire for immediacy with virtual communication technologies rather than print media, which inherently take time to produce and circulate, but these three authors adapt immediacy to an unlikely medium: the book.

My conception of networked reading eliminates conventional distinctions between primary and secondary texts, treating novels as theory and treating the theory, art, and criticism with which they engage as part of the novels themselves. This chapter is built from close readings of an unusually large number of novels and secondary texts, and my argument moves back and forth among these texts. This structure allows me to practice networked reading as I theorize it, following the same dual process as the novelists I am reading, who illustrate networked reading while inviting their readers to participate in it. Along with describing how these authors use networked reading to address the problems of thinking through contemporaneity, this chapter demonstrates the affordances of their method for scholars of contemporary literature as we face a field that expands at an ever more rapid pace.

By embracing a single reader's interpretation as contingent, as one path through a novel and its intertexts among an almost limitless array of other possibilities, networked reading both acknowledges the limited scope of its conclusions and leaves open room for other possibilities. I

offer networked reading as the beginning of a response to crisis, a space to experiment with creativity and explore the possibility of interpretive agency. Crucially, unlike doomscrolling, it is a form of weak theory. The openness to uncertainty and embrace of the limits of any one person's knowledge that lie at the core of networked reading leave room for other methods of approaching the study of the present, all of which carry their own affordances and limitations.

In this spirit, this chapter represents my reading of the featured novels, and it is shaped—as all scholarship is—by my own internal catalog, or personal archive, of books, music, art, film, and experience. The novels featured in this chapter engage with starkly different contexts; for instance, Smith's novels document past and present life in the UK while Luiselli's novel feels quintessentially tied to the landscape, present, and past of the US border and the American southwest. Nonetheless, as Ali Smith argues, a book is both about "the now in which it is being written and the now in which it is being read." As we have seen in Chapter Two, many contemporary novels in English are interested in the role of the novel in documenting the present, and in the ways that technology alters our relationship to books, reading, and authorship. While I analyze just a few novels, this chapter's focus on networked reading models and theorizes a method of reading that may be applied to a broad range of texts and readerly practices.

Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* is presented as the collaborative work of its two protagonists: Ruth, a novelist struggling to write a memoir, who is clearly modeled after Ozeki herself, and Nao, a teenage girl in Tokyo, writing in her diary as she experiences bullying, depression, and suicidal ideation. In addition to the individual crises that each character encounters, the novel wrestles with global crises, including climate change, pollution, and the harm caused by online bullying. The novel in readers' hands consists of excerpts from Nao's

diary, which Ruth finds washed up on a beach, interspersed with chapters exploring Ruth's story of finding and reading the diary and her subsequent search for Nao. This back-and-forth form, coupled with Nao's quirky direct address, turns the novel into an epistolary exchange even though the two characters are never in direct communication.

Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* is a novel anxious about the ethics of documentation in the middle of a crisis and whether documentation is even possible in the case of migrants who have disappeared, been deported, or left to die in the desert. The novel follows a family, itself in crisis, on a road trip to the American Southwest during which the mother and father pursue separate audio documentary projects: the mother's focused on the violence faced by children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, and the father's focused on historical atrocities that the U.S. committed against the Apache people. Like Ozeki's writing, this novel also blends reality and fiction in interesting ways: Luiselli went on a similar road trip and even created archival boxes like the mother in her novel (Wang). While both Ozeki and Luiselli collapse distinctions between the author and the narrator, neither novel reads as straightforward autobiography or autofiction, as both center on relationships and world events rather than an individual life.

Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* consists of four novels written over the course of four years. The series comes together, subtly, with the final novel. Though there are hints of the connections among characters embedded throughout, each novel could stand on its own. Before the network of relations becomes clear, readers are left to piece together the novels via intertextual objects that appear nebulously from one text to the next. These novels also adopt a documentary mode, capturing current events as they are happening. Smith has described her

project as an experiment in publishing and in what the book can do. She wrote each novel the same year it was published, drastically accelerating industry timelines.

Ozeki, Luiselli, and Smith depict networked reading in their novels through both metaphor and concrete illustration. Characters routinely misremember, misinterpret, or misattribute quotes, and they use the internet to look up references they have forgotten or do not recognize. Often, the internet fails to deliver complete or correct information about their questions, leading them to answers that are not, strictly speaking, correct. In each of these books, however, these mistaken interpretations are shown to be meaningful moments of readers' interpretive agency.

While all three authors depict networked reading, Smith and Luiselli also explicitly invite their readers to participate in the practice. For Luiselli, this invitation comes in the form of an explicit embrace of an aesthetics of surplus. Intertextual references in *Lost Children Archive* proliferate, sandwiched in the body of the text, in the numerous epigraphs at the start of each section, and most visibly, in the pages between sections, formatted as lists of the contents of various archival boxes. The vast array of references available to readers underlines a sense of contingency as no one reader could search for, much less read, watch, or listen to, all the different sources mentioned in Luiselli's novel. Smith uses a different strategy to create the feeling of contingency, the feeling that one's path through the novel could have been otherwise, using incomplete references rather than clear citations. By not explicitly naming the objects her novels are engaging with, Smith invites readers to try to solve the puzzle for themselves.

In what follows, I first discuss crisis and reading in more detail. I examine crisis as a genre, an affective contract that promises urgency and action. In the present, that genre is broken, deepening the idea that a growing number of people lack a sense of real agency or power over

their circumstances. In this chapter, I offer networked reading, and the book, as tools for regaining a sense of agency over the growing flood of news and information online. Following this conceptual framing, I explore how Luiselli, Ozeki, and Smith illustrate networked reading, both metaphorically and literally. Dissecting the metaphors each author invokes, I identify a shared structure—a cycle of return with a difference—to emphasize citationality, contingency, preservation, and a porous temporality as key qualities of networked reading. Next, I examine literal illustrations of networked reading in Smith's and Ozeki's novels. Finally, I explore moments from Smith's and Luiselli's work when the narrator invites readers to engage in networked reading and make the text their own.

3.1 The Genre of Crisis

In their novels, Smith, Ozeki, and Luiselli each take up the question of how a felt sense of crisis shapes contemporary understandings of the world. In doing so, these authors borrow from and remake documentary genres, blending fact and fiction and real and imaginary intertextual references. While Luiselli and Ozeki share traits with the narrators of their novels, other elements of each story are fictional, making it difficult for readers to parse which elements of the novel are real and which are imagined.[35] All three authors include citations from a mix of real sources alongside invented documents, movies, books, and more. Some real sources are easily traceable, but others are challenging, if not impossible, to identify. In calling this work "documentary," I am building on Daniel Worden's work on documentary aesthetics, in which he argues that contemporary documentary is "detached from traditional journalism and no longer bound to a

[35] It was not until my third reading of *A Tale for the Time Being,* for instance, that I realized that the character named Oliver was modeled on Ozeki's actual partner, Oliver Kellhammer, and that the Neo-Eocene forest that Oliver is working on in the novel is a real project of Kellhammer's.

specific media form" (5). Contemporary documentary operates instead as a "transmedia process" in which artists and authors invoke twentieth century mediums like "photography, film, and recorded voice" to create a sense of reality for twenty-first century audiences who tend to view these mediums as mimetic, imbuing them with a sense of credibility (15, 5). I argue that the novelists featured in this chapter extend Worden's concept of documentary as a transmedia process through their illustrations and theorizations of networked reading. In these authors' hands, documentary does not operate solely as a mode of preservation, an effort to make the past accessible to the present or to preserve the present for future readers. Instead, the authors try to open up the present itself as a space in which people can exercise agency and create change.

These novels all explore intersecting crises across different scales, from societal crises like migration, Brexit, and the pandemic to personal crises like divorce, the death of a loved one, and writer's block. The authors depict the relationships among these different crises in similar ways. On the one hand, they show crises accumulating as a series of discrete yet interconnected experiences. On the other hand, they depict each individual crisis as a metonym, standing in for all the others.

In order to understand this important relation between the singular experience and the broader category of crisis, I approach crisis as an affective promise—of fear, urgency, and decisive response—that corresponds to particular narrative structures. While Berlant's work in *Cruel Optimism* treats crisis, genre, and the contemporary as inextricably connected, and while Michael Dango makes reference to the "genres of crisis," I argue that crisis itself is a genre: a recurrent social situation, rhetorical response, and affective promise (Scarborough; Berlant; Miller).

More specifically, I argue that crisis operates as what Kris Cohen calls a broken genre, a contract whose promise goes unfulfilled. As neoliberalism shifts responsibility for social struggles away from the state and onto the individual in a world where crisis is "*chronically imminent*," a growing number experience the present as an impasse (Fisher 4). This impasse represents a break in the promise of the genre of crisis: rather than provoking an active response, either at the level of the individual or the state, crises lead to a standstill.

Digital media is implicated in the broken genre of crisis. In his work, Cohen uses the concept of the broken genre to describe how networked media promises an expansion of the public sphere while simultaneously rendering communication non-reciprocal. New media, in other words, "undermine the agency they promise" (Chun, *Updating* 70). Crises are "turning points, events that demand decisions," but increasingly, Chun, Cohen, and other media scholars show, those decisions are automated, undermining individual agency (69).[36] While new media "promise the experience of something like responsibility," even that promise, of *something like* responsibility rather than responsibility or agency itself, is constantly undermined (75).

In *Lost Children Archive,* Luiselli theorizes the rhetorical structures that correspond with the affective experience of crisis. The novel follows a family in crisis, as the parents' marriage dissolves and then the children run away, getting lost in the desert. Early on, the mother describes helping her young daughter with a homework assignment meant to teach narrative structure. In the narrative, the mother then pivots, her daughter fades out of view, and she begins describing a conversation with her friends about the "crisis" in her marriage (Luiselli 62). She notes that her friends kept looking for "a beginning" to grasp her story (62). The narrator reflects

[36] "Increasingly, user decisions are like actions in a video game. They are immediately felt, affective, and based on user actions, and yet at the same time, programmed" (Chun, *Updating* 79)

that “beginnings, middles, and ends are only a matter of hindsight. If we are forced to produce a story in retrospect, our narrative wraps itself selectively around the elements that seem relevant, bypassing all the others” (62). This passage echoes, almost uncannily, another piece of Luiselli’s writing: *Tell Me How it Ends,* a book length essay that describes her experience of working as a translator for children applying for asylum in the United States. “There are things that can only be understood retrospectively,” she writes, “when many years have passed and the story has ended. In the meantime, while the story continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself” (Luiselli, *Tell Me* 96-97). Both passages theorize the role that narrative plays in crisis: in the middle of a crisis, Luiselli asserts, there is no ending, no beginning, no clear line connecting the events or our understanding of them. And after the end of the crisis, the narrative that emerges is a selective one, shaped by the outcome. When we are in the middle of an ongoing crisis, Luiselli says, the only thing to do is to tell the varied stories of our experiences, weaving a tangled web of narrative that includes a multitude of perspectives and other interpretations. Networked reading creates the web of stories that Luiselli describes, only from the perspective of the reader, with each thread representing a different interpretation. Networked reading names the creative agency that readers bring as they generate and navigate this knotted web, embracing the contradictions, uncertainty, surprises, and mistakes inherent in the processes of telling and interpreting life stories.

Through her discussion of this knot of narratives, Luiselli suggest that rather than wait for the moment when a clear path from past through present to future becomes visible, we—those of us living in the present, through local and global, individual and collective crises alike—must not wait for certainty about the future to act in the present. Action and agency are weakened by the scale of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic or global warming, which require global cooperation

and structural change. This crisis subjectivity comes with a knowledge that things will not improve: it is closely tied to Annie McClanahan's work in *Dead Pledges,* which takes as one of its primary examples students who accept that they will be in debt forever, but who choose to leverage that fact as a tool to resist the structures of neoliberal capitalism.[37] This model of crisis subjectivity speaks to an experience of implication, a constant negotiation of responsibility paired with the promise, and burden, of an agency that seems increasingly ineffectual.[38]

3.2 Creative reading and interpretive agency

In the face of the broken genre of crisis, and the contradictory feelings of impasse and implication that it generates, networked reading creates space for readers to take ownership over the act of interpretation. This interpretive agency reimagines the barrage of content as a site of possibility rather than an overwhelming dead end.

Networked reading understands knowledge as preserved and produced through the connections that readers make between the novel and its references. It thereby emphasizes the creativity and contingency intrinsic to the act of reading. In this model, the meaning of a text shifts out of the hands of the authors and out of the hands of critics and scholars as well.

[37] "This is a knowledge that comes from seeing your parents struggle to maintain their class position; from seeing members of your family evicted or foreclosed on; from seeing your neighbors lose their jobs due to deindustrialization and outsourcing; from seeing your fellow students take on a debt load as crushing as your own. New historical conditions produce new modes of historical consciousness. Crisis subjectivity is simply what it means to grapple with history as it happens, to acquire a politics as it slowly emerges out of history's mist" (McClanahan 196-197)

[38] For Michael Rothberg, implication has both a diachronic and a synchronic axis that are inseparable, allowing us to connect historical violence to its present-day manifestations. Rothberg thinks about the diachronic axis of implication as a means of accounting for the ways that present-day subjects continue to benefit from historical injustices. Here, I extend Rothberg's concept of implication towards the future, accounting for our collective responsibility for the way the future unfolds.

Interpretations multiply as readers draw upon their own "inner libraries" of books they have encountered both directly and indirectly (Bayard 73).[39]

The book has always been an interactive form of media, as book historians emphasize in a wealth of scholarship about annotation, scrapbooking, commonplace books, and reading practices.[40] However, early scholarship on new media primarily differentiated it from print media by emphasizing its interactivity. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich argues that while books are structured by narrative, with one path for readers to follow, new media is structured by the database, which has a modular structure and a programmable nature. As a result, Manovich asserts, new media can exist in "different, potentially infinite versions" (36). While it focuses less on the technical qualities of new media and more on user behavior, Henry Jenkins's work on participatory culture and media convergence similarly attributes the 'newness' of new media to its potential for interactivity.

Networked reading, I argue, bridges discussions of the book as an interactive object with these accounts of new media. Like Jenkins, I see reading as a fundamentally creative act, and like Manovich, I am interested in the iterative meaning produced by the modes of information storage and access facilitated by digital technologies. By considering books as one node in a transmedia network, I argue in what follows that the same characteristics that Manovich and Jenkins attribute to digital media alone can and do exist in the post-digital book. While the text of a book might seem stable and inert, books, like digital media objects, are remade each time they are accessed. In contrast to hyperlinks, which allow an internet user quick and easy access

39 Bayard defines the inner library as "that set of books around which every personality is constructed and which shapes each individual relationship to books and to other people" (72-3). While these include books that readers remember and return to, they also include "fragments of forgotten and imaginary books through which we apprehend the world" (73).

40 See, for instance, the work of Ellen Gruber Garvey, Leah Price, and Michael Warner.

to additional context, the references that enable networked reading require more action from readers, who must identify the referent and then seek out the original or search for a summary, scan, or analysis of the object in question. While hyperlinks inherently privilege the author's intended meaning—communicating to readers: "this is where you'll find the information you need"—networked reading privileges readers' own interpretations by enabling them to choose which translation, which image, which summary, or which article to bring back to their understanding of the text.

By embracing the integration of the contemporary book in a wider transmedia environment, networked reading amplifies the contingency already inherent in the act of literary meaning-making. This chapter builds on Christina Lupton's *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (2018), which tracks the relationships among time, reading, and the book. Responding to present-day fears about the "death of the book," Lupton pushes back against common assumptions that digital technology creates forms of agency and interactivity in ways that the codex could not. For Lupton and the readers she studies, the material form of the codex creates freedom and agency. She argues that "the complex machinery of the book brings linearity and other kinds of random and circular movement into contact" (Lupton 97). The possibility for variation inherent in linearity and fixity suggests that reading is "a complex activity in which an immovable order offers the reader an environment in which she nevertheless exercises choice" (98). Lupton describes this affordance of the book as a form of contingency, and she defines a contingent event as "one that has happened, but in a way that makes it apparent that it need not have been that way" (99). Contingency, as Ruth puts it in *A Tale for the Time Being*, keeps open all the possible worlds, which is all the more important, as Luiselli's knot of narratives suggests, amid ongoing crises and a seemingly foreclosed future. Contingency, then,

operates as a tool that authors and readers bring to the act of reading and interpretation but also to the art of living through an unfolding crisis.

3.3 Illustrating Impasse

One of the primary tools that Ozeki, Luiselli, and Smith use to illustrate networked reading in their novels is metaphor. While each metaphor differs in its content, all share a common structure: cycles of returns with a difference. This structure shows up particularly in the novels' treatments of temporality. Each of these novels depicts the present as layered with and shaped by traces of the past and the future, challenging "the habit of linear time" (Schneider 19). The novels approach the present not as a challenge for our critical comprehension but as something to be understood through our experience of living in it.

Ali Smith's seasonal quartet is structured around the concept of seasons. Smith pitched the *Seasonal Quartet*, written between 2019 and 2021, as a series of "linked but discrete novels" that were "writ[ten] to time so that they'd be available to readers as close to their time of being written as possible" (Elkins). Smith is interested in the role of the novel in the present, but she insists on a cyclical understanding of time and of contemporaneity as well. Asked in an interview whether *Summer* would change if it had been written a year later, Smith replied that the novel would still be about "what a single summer means in time, whatever that time's contemporary pressures are, with all the other possible summers past and future circling it like rings in a tree trunk" (Kellaway).[41] The very concept of seasons, Smith implies, creates an understanding of time as circular and multilayered, filled with alternate possibilities. The image of the summer as

[41] Interestingly, Ozeki also uses tree trunks to conceptualize a kind of cyclical time, describing how "as [Oliver] ran through the dense understory, he could read the signs of arboreal intrigue…. He could see time unfolding here, and history, embedded in the whorls and fractal forms of nature" (60).

both singular and multiple, calling to mind "all the other possible summers," embodies the contingency that structures networked reading. The text of the novel is both singular, as a material object, and multiple in its interpretations.

Functioning much as the metaphor of seasons does for Ali Smith, where one summer recalls past summers and all possible future summers, the structure of *Lost Children Archive* is recursive, turning back on itself to retell its story from a different perspective. While the first half is narrated by the mother, at a certain point she cedes the role of narrator to her son. The novel is broken up not into chapters but into large sections subdivided into many smaller sections. The titles of these smaller sections repeat throughout, creating an alternative, non-linear path through the book. This same cyclical structure happens within the narrative, too. At one point, the mother describes how "every day we drive forward, though it sometimes seems like we're on a treadmill. Inside the car, there is a sort of cyclical current of voices, questions, attitudes and predictable reactions" (Luiselli 101). As the family members progress on their journey, they repeatedly describe their experience of moving through time and space as cyclical as they return to the same arguments, discussions, and games.[42] The treadmill functions as another figure for a kind of paradoxical movement that creates a productive stasis; no matter how fast you run, you make no forward movement.

Both Luiselli and Ozeki also conceptualize the relationships among time, media, and contingency through the ocean gyre, the Sargasso Sea, and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. As Oliver explains in *A Tale for the Time Being,* ocean gyres are "like a string of currents" encircling the globe, an ouroboros: "a ring of snakes, each biting the tail of the one ahead of it"

[42] The boy echoes his mother's observation, saying later that "the roads toward Apacheria were long, and we were driving there in a straight line, but it was like we were driving in circles. There was that voice in the car speakers from the audiobook that always came back..." (Luiselli 208).

(13).[43] He continues, describing how "each gyre orbits at its own speed," carrying along with it flotsam and jetsam called "drift" (14). Drift that is caught in the gyre's orbit, Oliver tells us, is "part of the gyre memory," while "the rate of escape from the gyre determines the half-life of drift" (13-14). The gyres embody a particular version of being at an impasse. The middle of a gyre is often calmer than the sea outside of it, and, once trapped in a gyre, escape is unlikely. The stillness of a gyre is created by opposing forces rather than the absence of force altogether. Like the figure of the treadmill that structures Luiselli's novel, and the seasons for Smith, an ocean gyre creates stillness from dynamism, making it an apt metaphor for the feeling of being at an impasse. In *A Tale for the Time Being,* Ruth and Oliver speculate over how Nao's diary managed to make its way to their beach: they imagine that Nao's diary, shut away in a Hello Kitty lunchbox encased in a freezer bag, might have been part of a wave of flotsam leftover from the Fukushima disaster. If their theory is correct, the diary's journey was remarkable. If it had not escaped the gyre, the diary would have been "[s]ucked up and becalmed, slowly eddying around…. disintegrating, unread" (Ozeki 36). Ruth and Oliver emphasize how lucky they are, not just that the diary washed up on the beach near their home, but that it escaped the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and ended up anywhere to be read by anyone at all. The passage highlights the contingency inherent in the process of any book finding its way into the hands of a particular reader. With the benefit of hindsight, this chance is often experienced and relayed as fate. How many readers pick up a book, seemingly at random, and then after the fact, experience that choice as predetermined in some way?[44] This sense that it could have been otherwise but

[43] In *Artful*, Smith uses similar imagery to describe how seasons blur together after the loss of a loved one: "… a couple of times in the twelvemonth and a day I'd wondered if the seasons would ever be new again, brand-new time, rather than just seem to be following each other nose to tail like paint-peeling wooden horses on an old carousel" (5).

[44] Brittany Michelle Edmonds expresses this very sentiment about Autumn, writing that "I experienced the novel as a rare instance of aesthetic sublimity, as the right book at the right time."

ended up the way it was supposed to is heightened by Nao's tone of direct address throughout the journal. She insists that it was written for one specific "you," creating an intimacy between author and reader that is deepened by the physical qualities of the material book: its smell, smudges, and the shifts in Nao's handwriting. One of the first times Ruth reads the diary, she senses a deep sense of connection with the book itself:

> *I'm reaching forward through time to touch you… you're reaching back to touch me.* She held the diary to her nose again and sniffed, identifying the smells one by one: the mustiness of an old book…, the acrid tang of glue and paper, and then something else that she realized must be Nao, bitter like coffee beans and sweetly fruity like shampoo. (37-8)

As a physical object, the book carries traces of the people who have held it in the past. The very last line of the novel, which ends in a letter Ruth writes back to Nao, both echoes and responds to a line from its opening, a letter from Nao to the diary's reader. Ruth writes, "P.S. I do have a cat, and he's sitting on my lap, and his forehead smells like cedar trees and fresh sweet air. *How did you know*?" (403). Uncanny coincidences like this one lead Ruth to experience her chance discovery of the diary as fate. The novel's complex and nuanced understanding of time and presence emphasizes a connection that occurs *because* of chance, rather than in spite of it. The contingency produces another layer of meaning and significance. In her letter back to Nao, Ruth writes, "In your diary, you quoted old Jiko saying something about not-knowing, how not-knowing is the most intimate way," noting that even though she'd "much rather *know*" how Nao's life turned out, "not-knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps all the worlds alive" (402). Embracing not-knowing requires a willingness to recognize the possibility inherent in uncertainty. As Ruth describes, certainty might feel safer, but it requires foreclosing or reducing the possibilities inherent in the future or the explanations, interpretations, and experiences of the past and present. The intimacy of not-knowing, for my purposes, lies in the ways it encourages and empowers individual acts of meaning-making. With the diary that escapes the ocean gyre in

A Tale for the Time Being, contingency becomes not a hindrance to meaning or connection but, rather, the key to it.

Luiselli's use of ocean gyres also hinges on the idea of fate and contingency. She titles two sections of *Lost Children Archive* "Sargasso Sea," one of which is narrated by the mother and the other by the son. While the Sargasso Sea suggests a litany of cultural references, from Jean Rhys to Ezra Pound, what interests me in Luiselli's reference is the nature of the Sargasso Sea itself, as the only sea in the world that is bounded entirely by ocean currents. The Sargasso Sea is the result of an ocean gyre and is named for its distinctive sargassum seaweed that floats on its surface, held within the boundaries of the sea by the currents that encircle it. In the first "Sargasso Sea" section, Luiselli's narrator and her family are at an aquarium, watching a turtle with one fin paddling in circles. After the narrator recalls Pound's reference to the Sargasso Sea, pondering what it might mean, the narrative shifts, abruptly, back to the family as the son takes his first Polaroid picture—a recurring action in the novel that cues many of the narrator's explicit discussions of the ethics and work of documentation. Rather than capturing the family portrait he intends, however,

> the boy's picture comes out entirely creamy white, as if he'd documented our future instead of the present. Or maybe his picture is a document not of our physical bodies but of our minds, wandering, oaring, lost in the almost motionless gyre. (Luiselli 38)

Polaroids are a deeply contingent medium, all the more so in an age when digital and phone cameras provide a live preview and enable users to shoot and delete as many images as needed to get the perfect shot. With a polaroid, on the other hand, a gap exists between the moment in which the photo was captured and the moment in which it becomes available to the human eye. Much like the happenstance way that Nao's diary washes up on shore, the narrator treats the boy's failed polaroid as a coincidence that feels fated, weighed with meaning. Both authors tie the ocean gyre to a sense of contingency that, in retrospect, feels like fate. Nao's diary feels like

it was *meant* to end up in Ruth's hands, just as the boy's photo feels like it was *meant* to end up blank: it produces an image that feels true—the family is already beginning to fall apart, so a clichéd family photo would feel like a façade.[45]

Both Ozeki and Luiselli also use the ocean gyre to conceptualize the archive and the preservation of knowledge across time. In *Lost Children Archive,* the characters insist on using paper maps and polaroids, relying on older technologies specifically because they leave room for chance. In the second "Sargasso Sea" section, now narrated by the boy, the sea functions as a metaphor for history. The boy recalls his father talking about the ways that "most lives get erased, lost in the whirlpool of trash we call history" (215). Here, Luiselli shifts the nature of her reference: the sea is now about invisibility, evoking not the cultural meanings of the Sargasso Sea itself but of the North Atlantic Garbage patch that, today, overlaps with it.

In *A Tale for the Time Being,* Ozeki similarly uses the language of ocean gyres to discuss history and archival preservation. Uncannily echoing *Lost Children Archive*, Ruth uses the metaphor of the ocean gyre to describe the internet as she looks up videos and images captured and posted online during the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011. She asks, "[I]s the internet a kind of temporal gyre, sucking up stories, like geodrift, into its orbit?" (114). Pushing this metaphor further, Ruth describes the images that she was able to find—"a minuscule few representing the inconceivable many"—as they "eddy and grow old, degrading with each orbit around the gyre, slowly breaking down into razor-sharp fragments and brightly colored shards" as "they're drawn into the gyre's becalmed center, the garbage patch of history and time" (114). Like the father in *Lost Children Archive*, Ruth treats the gyre as a figure for the ways that stories of people's lives

[45] One of Smith's characters in *Summer* similarly describes coincidence as at once meaningless and meaningful: "It felt like she was meant to see it… But it also didn't mean anything. It was just coincidence. Maybe coincidence never means the way you want it to. Because if it did it wouldn't be coincidence, would it?" (42).

disappear as time passes; "the gyre's memory is all the stuff that we've forgotten" (Ozeki 114). For both Ozeki and Luiselli, then, the figure of the ocean gyre brings together contingency with concerns about the nature of time and space, memory, and the preservation of both knowledge and stories. While for Christina Lupton, the covers of a book act as the boundaries that enable contingency and with it, readers' creativity, the image of history as an oceanic garbage patch inverts this form, introducing the possibility for contingency in recalling stories that manage to escape its grasp.

Luiselli's novel offers one final metaphor of return with a difference: reenactment. The children act out the stories they encounter throughout their road trip, including the stories of the lost children, the stories of Geronimo that their father shares with them, the books on CD playing in the car, and even the songs that they listen to as they drive. At one point, the mother asserts that "history is playing out in them, repeating itself in microscales" (56). But like many games, the stories they act out are filled with creative inaccuracies: "they combine the stories, confuse them," and "come up with possible endings and counterfactual histories" (75). Borrowing sculptor Isamu Noguchi's words on performance, the narrator suggests that these games "bring to life" a different temporality, a "kind of 'timeless time'" that "charges our world, if not with 'meaning and emotion,' with a weird electricity" (81). Rebecca Schneider's research on historical reenactment contextualizes what the narrator and Noguchi might mean by a timeless time. In reenactment, Schneider argues, time is porous; the past touches the present through the affective elements of the performance. "In affective engagement," she writes, many reenactors believe that "if they repeat an event just so… they will have touched time and time will have recurred" (8, 10). Beyond what reenactors themselves believe about their experiences, Schneider argues that "the past can disrupt the present… but so too can the present disrupt the past…

neither are entirely 'over' nor discrete, but partially and porously persist" (15). This same temporality exists in *Lost Children Archive,* exemplified through the children's reenactment as well as through the father's documentary recordings of the "echoes" of the past.[46]

Like Luiselli's narrator, who emphasizes the creative potential of the children's mistaken histories, Rebecca Schneider emphasizes the citational nature of reenactment, insisting that its anachronisms are, in fact, generative. She describes an encounter with one reenactor, who tells her that "those who fail to learn from the history of the past are doomed to repeat the same mistakes" (Schneider 39). Schneider makes much of this comment, which she recognizes as a misquoting of an aphorism by George Santayana, which originally reads: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Santayana in Schneider 40). For Schneider, the aphorism "is not so much gotten wrong" by the reenactor "as gotten live, in an ambulatory againness" (42). She argues that "in remembering the aphorism, we remember… the error that becomes the aphorism's history" (40). This process of "repetition with revision" is shared with traditions like jazz or oral history that "do not link difference always already to failure and loss" (40). The generative nature of reenactment's mistakes—whether misremembering a frequently misquoted aphorism or remixing historical narrative in more substantial ways like the children in Luiselli's novel—demonstrates the myriad possibilities created in networked reading's embrace of misremembered or misinterpreted citations. While these novels document the present through citations to past works of art and literature, they do so both to enact their own forms of creative revision and to invite their readers to engage with their work in kind.

[46] The father's stories also bring the past and present together: "When he speaks about Geronimo, his words perhaps bring time closer to us, containing it inside the car instead of letting it stretch out beyond us like an unattainable goal" (Luiselli 44-5).

Just as seasons, ocean gyres, and reenactments share a structure that appears, at first glance, to be a cyclical loop with clearly defined edges, the book today is treated as a discrete object, bound by its covers. Yet while each metaphor creates the appearance of structure, they are all defined, in part, by the objects and stories caught in their grasp and, in part, by those that escape their grasp. The post-digital book is similarly porous, creating opportunities for readers to integrate outside media into their experience of reading its text. For all three authors, the present is characterized by impasse, sustained by perpetual movement that seemingly results in a standstill. The present is imagined as a position from which there is no escape, with a future that is foreclosed by actions or events from the past. However, by embracing contingency through their invitations for networked reading, these novels attempt to open the future back up. As Ruth reminds us, "not-knowing keeps all the possibilities open" (Ozeki 402). Challenging the notion that the future has already been written means, in turn, that actions in the present can once again make a difference.

3.4 Reading and Preservation

Along with these metaphorical representations of the cyclical structures of networked reading, Ozeki, Smith, and Luiselli depict characters explicitly engaged in the practice of networked reading. The novels featured in this chapter try to document the present, and in doing so, they attempt to remind readers of their own interpretive agency, despite the broken genre of crisis and despite the onslaught of empty or misleading content online. Of the three works, *A Tale for the Time Being* features the most sustained illustration of networked reading through the character of Ruth, who spends much of the novel searching for information to supplement Nao's journal. In some ways, this story is about reading and research. While some of Ruth's research

involves conversations with her neighbors, the rest of her time is spent searching for information online, seeking confirmation of the truth of Nao's narrative and her eventual fate. Through this constant search for outside materials to supplement the diary and to extend its story into the present, Ruth models networked reading.

From the beginning, the novel includes footnotes to Nao's journal entries that provide translations to Japanese phrases and cultural context. At first, the identity of the author of these footnotes is unclear. Is it meant to be Ruth or Ozeki? Or some other omniscient narrator? Early on, however, the novel begins to hint that the author might be Ruth. Footnote 17 is the first that gives us a clue, stating: "Can't find references to medical cafés or Bedtown. Is she making this up?" (Ozeki 16n17). When read in the context of the sections of the novel that describe Ruth's obsessive research, this note suggests that the text in front of readers was edited and compiled by Ruth. Later footnotes confirm this reading, as they include details from Ruth's world that only she would know. One footnote, for instance, quotes a remark from Oliver, Ruth's partner, about the diary (Ozeki 25n30). The footnotes serve as evidence of Ruth's reading and the research that comes to dominate her reading process.

Ruth's networked reading generates a porous temporality just like that generated by reenactment in Luiselli's novel. Through her reading, the past is activated in and acts on the present, just as the present acts on the past. In *A Tale for the Time Being,* this multilayered temporality is produced by the instability of information, both online and on paper, and by its indirect epistolary form. Networked reading embraces this instability, representing a form of active preservation: the text is created anew each time a reader engages with it.[47]

[47] In my article, "Reading as Remaking," I show how this same idea appears in Smith's novels. I've chosen to discuss only Ozeki's novel here, given space constraints, but this, too, is a common thread connecting all three projects.

Books can help make clear the similar temporality and ephemerality of digital media. Through his reading of Wendy Chun's work on digital memory, Matthew Kirschenbaum offers a clear articulation of what the "enduring ephemerality" of digital media entails for literary critics and bibliographers today. Describing a trip to Princeton's library to look at Toni Morrison's physical and digital manuscripts, Kirschenbaum notes that "[t]he digital files that I looked at… are there, enduring and ephemeral, and if you go to Princeton they will be there and *they will* '*happen*' *again,*" his language explicitly invoking Morrison's rememory but also echoing Schneider's discussion of reenactment (Kirschenbaum 37, emphasis mine). "At the deepest of computational levels," he explains, "the images we see are reconstituted anew each and every time the files are accessed" (Kirschenbaum 32). In the face of the ephemerality of digital memory, "constant motion and care recalls things" that would otherwise be lost (Chun, "The Enduring Ephemeral" 90). To save things, in other words, whether information, a marriage, or the planet, we need to form habits that bring us anew to these objects, stories, and causes.

There is no perfect documentary medium to preserve the present for the future: as Ruth notes at one point in the novel, even stone tablets can be worn away over time. For Ruth, the internet is a particularly unfit tool for preserving the present. As her comparison between the internet and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch makes clear, Ruth sees the internet as a place where information goes to disappear. This belief is borne out by the events of the novel. At one point in her journal, Nao describes how a YouTube video of her fake funeral, staged by bullies at her school, had gone viral. When Ruth goes to look for this video online, however, she finds no trace of "The Funeral of Nao Yasutani." Later in the novel, Ruth similarly seeks out information about Jiko, an old relative that Nao says wrote a famous but forgotten I-novel. In the middle of a raging storm, she stumbles on a promising article but is stopped by a paywall. As Ruth clicks the "read

more" button to purchase the article, she sees a "'Server Not Found' message": the storm has knocked out the power lines, cutting off her access to the internet (150). Days later, when the power returns, Ruth returns to the page and fills out her payment information. When she hits the button to complete the purchase, however, she is greeted by another error message, this time stating that the article has been removed (173). Ruth interprets this message as evidence that she is beginning to lose her memory, like her mother with Alzheimer's, but she also wonders if the internet might be to blame. The novel repeatedly uses the language of technology to describe Ruth's memory and mental state. When the power returns after the storm, Ruth notes that "[t]he world was restored to its place in time, and her mind was back online" (172). When she could not find the viral video of Nao's funeral, though, the novel collapses the metaphors of ocean gyre and internet, describing how "Ruth's mind felt like a garbage patch, an undifferentiated mat of becalmed and fractured pixels" (150). This connection between Ruth's mind, her memory, and the internet, I argue, underlines the fact that, despite widespread trust of digital storage technologies, they are not infallible.[48] Information on the internet can, and regularly does, change and disappear.[49]

By returning to the past and connecting it to the present through the act of networked reading, Ruth literally opens up a future for Nao. Ozeki takes advantage of fiction's ability to depict the impossible, explicitly allowing the past to "happen again," in Schneider and Kirschenbaum's words, in the present. Near the end of the novel, Nao discovers that her father is constructing another plan to kill himself. Her diary entry describing this moment is bleak,

[48] Later in the novel, Oliver attributes a quote about quantum information to a famous physicist whose name he cannot remember, but a footnote corrects the narrative: the quote was from an article on quantum computing by Rivka Galchen in *The New Yorker* from May 2, 2011. Interestingly, this article does actually exist, further complicating the line between fact and fiction in Ozeki's novel.

[49] See Bowers et al.

leaving readers—including Ruth—with the impression that she, too, may die by suicide.[50] When Ruth first found the diary, she skimmed the pages and discovered that Nao had run out of pages before she had run out of things to write about. Yet when she arrives at the end of this entry, the pages after it are suddenly blank. Confused, Ruth tells Oliver, "It's like her life just got shorter. Time is slipping away from her, page by page" (343). That night, in her dreams, Ruth enters Nao's world—traveling back to the past, across the Pacific Ocean—looking for the rest of her story. Though she is unable to find Nao's story, in the dream Ruth leaves behind the pages of Nao's great-uncle's writing that she found alongside Nao's journal. When she opens Nao's diary the next day, handwriting fills the pages that had been blank only the night before. She learns that Nao's father is still alive, his mindset changed by the pages of the diary that Ruth left in her dream. By returning to Nao's present in her dreams, Ruth changes it, showing her that death is not the only future for her father or for herself. This intervention seems to exist in the realm of fantasy and dreams, but the novel explains it through quantum physics, citing the possibility of a multiverse, in which many different outcomes coexist. Ultimately, this story is about reading as an act of creative participation, with the story and its meaning constructed through the back-and-forth between reader and author and text. Ruth and Oliver's discussion of the multiverse comes to stand in for the multiple worlds of the book, created by the many interpretations readers make from the text and its references.

[50] She writes "Everyone I believed in is dying. My old Jiko is dying, my dad is probably dead by now, and I don't even believe in myself anymore" (340).

3.5 Many stories made from the same "bits and scraps"[51]

Not all reader interpretations are anticipated, nor are they necessarily "correct" according to the text's author, or the critics, scholars, and teachers whose job it is to offer such textual interpretations. Even explicit mistakes, however, can lead readers to meaning, emphasizing the creative agency inherent in any act of reading, and especially in reading fiction. Typos, memory lapses, and mistaken attributions are all possible sites of meaning-making for Ozeki, Smith, and Luiselli.

In *A Tale for the Time Being,* the success of Ruth's research hinges on a mistake. At one pivotal point in the novel, Ruth pulls up an internet browser and types the name of Nao's father into the search box. She "mistyped" the father's name, though, "the forefinger of her left hand holding the r down too long, and her right finger overreaching the u and sticking the y instead, but before she could correct her mistakes, her pinkie hit ENTER" (Ozeki 86). To Ruth's surprise, this erroneous search finally delivers the exact information she had been looking for, information that none of her previous search terms (typed correctly) had been able to unearth. By describing the individual movements of each of Ruth's fingers, the novel emphasizes her unlikely success. If any one finger had behaved differently, this level of detail implies, the search may not have led Ruth to the information she was seeking. If she had typed the name correctly, she would not have found the answer to her question; if autocorrect had fixed the typo before she hit enter or if the search engine had substituted the correct spelling, as Google often does, she would not have found what she was seeking. Through Ruth's typo, Ozeki highlights the contingency of the search engine that structures so much of our access to information, and she asserts the creative value of mistakes.

[51] Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 57

By including scenes that show ostensibly incorrect readings paying off in some way, all three authors also implicitly invite their own readers to engage in networked reading. In doing so, they explicitly challenge the modes of reading, influenced by New Criticism, still taught in many secondary schools. These modes treat novels and poems as puzzles to be decoded, with a few correct answers and many more incorrect ones. Following a hermeneutic of networked reading, however, the job of the reader is not to decipher the correct interpretation of each intertextual reference, but instead to make new associations and conclusions of their own.

Like Ozeki, Ali Smith shows mistaken identification and memory gaps as generating meaning. *Summer* opens with a scene explicitly interested in the ethics of citation. The novel follows a family: teens Sacha and Robert and their divorced parents, Grace and Jeff. Grace quotes the line, "Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life" to Sacha, before asking her, "What *is* that? Where's it from?" (7). Grace can't remember, and, frustratingly for Sacha, won't look it up online. According to Sacha, her mother is "constantly forgetting things and constantly trying not to look up online the things she's forgotten…. In real terms, what this means is her mother annoys everybody for half an hour *then* goes online and looks up whatever it is she can't remember" (16). Like Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Grace associates her own lapses in memory with the internet, though the nature of that association is not clear. Does she attribute her memory problems to the internet? Does she see the internet as the pinnacle of what memory should be (stable, comprehensive, predictable, easy) and thus a critique of her own flawed and human memory? Regardless of the faith that Sacha and, implicitly, Grace place in the internet as a repository of knowledge, its reliability is repudiated from the very outset of the novel.

When Sacha looks up this passage for her mother, she does not find any helpful information. "Up comes drugs," she recounts, "[d]rugs, drugs, drugs, then quite far down, something about Jane Austen and Victorians" (32). She tries again, scrolling until she finds an image of Greta Thunberg, noting sardonically, "Only the mighty Greta can upend the internet's determination to make the word heroine refer not to a female hero but to a misspelling of a Class A drug" (32). Not all mistaken interpretations are generative in and of themselves. Here, for instance, the answers the internet provides are not what Sacha was looking for. By investigating why the search engine provided these particular wrong answers, however, Sacha pieces together a broader critique of the social norms reflected by these search results. According to the results, users are more likely to be searching for information about heroin than trying to find the source of a quote from a nineteenth century novel. And the only heroine whom users might be interested in, the results also suggest, is Greta Thunberg, a young girl whose rise to fame as a climate activist has been accompanied by controversy over the reduction of a diverse collective movement into a single figurehead. It is important to recognize, too, as Sacha's critique implies, that these algorithms do not merely reflect the realities of the world; they also help to shape it.

Readers who do not immediately recognize the quote are left waiting for sixty pages, until the novel finally identifies its origins. Out of the blue, as the reference hasn't shown up since the beginning of the novel, Grace exclaims, "David Copperfield!… That's it! Sacha, that's it. Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life! First line of David Copperfield" (97). Someone chimes in immediately, "It's hero, though, isn't it?" (97). As it turns out, Grace is not quoting Dickens himself but a feminist remake her theater company had performed in the 1980s.

While Grace casually brushes off this correction, asserting that "heroine" brought important attention to the women in Dickens's novel, she does not extend the same creative agency to her daughter. Before any talk of heroines, the novel opens with Grace reprimanding Sacha for using a quote from Hannah Arendt that she found on Brainyquote for her school essay on Brexit and forgiveness.[52] When Grace cannot find a primary source for the Arendt quote online, she insists that Sacha should not cite it, asking her, "What if *nobody* said it in *any* original source and someone somewhere just *made up* that Hannah Arendt said it, typed it into the net and then it spread through all these sites?" (12). Sacha responds nonchalantly, saying if she were Hannah Arendt, she would be happy to have the quote attributed to her because "It's a good thing to have said" (12).[53] This moment, juxtaposed as it is by proximity to Grace's own misremembered citation of *David Copperfield,* suggests that the issue is more complex than either imagines. By glossing over the difference between her version of Dickens's opening line and the version he actually wrote, Grace undermines her insistence on the disastrous consequences of misquoting Hannah Arendt. In fact, her explanation that "we made our own [feminist] version" suggests that a reworking—or a kind of productive misquoting—of Dickens can be a generative mode of critique. Despite Grace's resistance, this explanation resembles Sacha's claim that the quote is useful for her project, regardless of who actually said it. Both return to and cite texts in ways that transform and repurpose them. Readers repurposing decontextualized fragments of text has a long history, from early commonplace books to

[52] The quote Sacha cites reads "Forgiveness is the only way to reverse the irreversible flow of history" (8). Notably, Sacha's defense to her mother—that this quote is on "Brainyquote. Quotepark. Quoted. Azquotes. Facebook. Goodreads..." (the list continues)—replicates the results Google actually provides if you search Arendt's name and the quote. Along with many blogs, a speech from the President of Ireland, and *Summer* itself, there is no clear and easy way to authenticate this quote using the internet.

[53] Sacha adds that "worrying about stuff like this was what her mother's generation did as displacement activity from worrying about the real things happening in the world" (11)

scrapbooks and self-help.[54] Both Sacha and Grace carry on this tradition, making something out of the quotes they (mis)use, mirroring the ways that Luiselli and Schneider approach the anachronisms and "mistakes" of reenactment.

Like the textual collage created by Sacha and Grace's repurposing, Luiselli's narrator draws her project from a variety of sources compiled into archival boxes. This method prompts her to wonder what others "might do with that same collection of bits and scraps….How many possible combinations of all those documents were there? And what completely different stories would be told by their varying permutations?" (57). While *Lost Children Archive* does not dwell on interpretative mistakes explicitly, the novel is more interested in what various interpretations produce.

3.6 Inviting Networked Reading

Luiselli and Smith both root their narratives in current events and references to real media objects that take a variety of forms, including, but far from limited to, film, sculpture, photograph, ballet, song, and news article. While they incorporate outside sources in quite different ways, both Luiselli and Smith invite their readers to engage in networked reading, pushing readers to find and experience the cited objects for themselves through their insistence on medium specificity.

Formally, citations abound in and structure Luiselli's novel. The different sections of *Lost Children Archive* are split up by pages formatted like a contents sheet or a catalog entry, each listing the contents of a different archival box packed in the car trunk during the road trip. Readers are told that Box 3, for instance, contains four notebooks ("On Reading," "On

[54] See, for instance, Beth Blum, *The Self-Help Compulsion*; Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*

Listening," "On Translating," and "On Time"), nine books (including *The Cantos* by Ezra Pound, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*), and a folder containing two musical scores (Phillip Glass's *Metamorphosis* and Jordi Savall's rendition of Alfonso el Sabio's *Cantigas de Santa Maria*). Similar pages also contain a mix of real and imaginary media, some of which exist and are readily available to Luiselli's readers, some of which do not exist, and others of which, like the journals, *may* exist but are not traceable or verifiable. Many of the sources listed on these pages show up, either explicitly or implicitly, in the body of the narrative. The novel also has a total of ten epigraphs, adding Virginia Woolf, Natalie Diaz, Gloria Anzaldua, and others to the conversation. Together, these content pages and epigraphs read almost like a syllabus full of supplementary reading for the novel. They list so many objects, though, that reading, watching, and listening to everything on these pages as part of reading Luiselli's novel would be virtually impossible. Instead of creating a sense of pressure or implying that readers *should* follow all the references, these lists create a sense of possibility and abundance, laying out many different paths that readers might take through the novel and its many source texts.

By insisting on the relationship between medium and meaning, *Lost Children Archive* invites readers to experience the novel's referents for themselves. Luiselli's novel portrays interpretation as an intensely personal act. In one instance, listening to the song "Highwayman" by The Highwaymen as they drive across the country, each member of the family comes up with a different interpretation, "unraveling the lyrics as if we were dealing with Baroque poetry" (Luiselli 101). The narrator and her husband each interpret the lyrics in ways that reflect their different documentary projects. The narrator concludes the song is "about being able to live many lives through fiction," while the husband "thinks it's a song about American history, and

American guilt," and the son decides it's about "technological developments in means of transportation," and the daughter is still trying to figure it out (101). Each character's interpretation reflects a core preoccupation or component of their sense of self: the narrator's growing interest in imagining a different future for herself in the midst of her deteriorating relationship, the husband's conviction of the importance of history to the present, and the son's interest in different modes of travel, sparked both by their family road trip and also by the stories he hears from his mother about the lost children crossing the desert. Later, the tension between the narrator and her husband plays out through their conflicting interpretations of Aaron Copland's ballet, *Appalachian Spring.* Stuck in the car with her husband, the narrator finds herself questioning the interpretation of the ballet that he shares with the children. In one of the few moments when contemporary technology surfaces in the novel, the narrator decides to watch a video of the ballet herself on her "irritating little telephone" (80).[55] While her understanding of the piece "contradicts [her] husband's whole story, or at least half of it," the conclusions she draws from watching the video bridge the distance between their conflicting interpretations (81). Watching the video she found of the ballet, performed by Martha Graham, the narrator's sense of interpretive authority starts to slide away. Graham's movements, she says, "seem to spell out a clear meaning" though she adds the important caveat that "if you try to translate them back into words, that meaning immediately fades away again—as usually happens when anyone tries to explain dance or music" (81). As she realizes the importance of the specificity of this reference, not just to Copland's *Appalachian Spring* but to Graham's choreography and performance of it, her description of the difficulty of translating dance into language creates room for the narrator

[55] The characters avoid digital technologies, opting for paper maps, books, and polaroid cameras as they navigate along their cross-country trip.

to recognize the importance of "real and sustained generosity" in marriage. Insisting that meaning is lost in the remediation of ballet into descriptive writing and that interpretation is personal, shaped by our own preoccupations, values, and experiences, the novel encourages the reader to find the video and watch it for themselves, drawing their own conclusions about the meaning of the performance.

Ali Smith similarly insists on medium specificity as a means of prompting readers to move outside of the covers of the book. The opening of *Summer* describes a scene from Lorenza Mazzetti's *K,* a film based on Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, though the novel does not name the filmmaker, the film, or the novel that inspired it. Instead, the narrator tells readers about a video clip of a man carrying two suitcases who is

> grave, slim, preoccupied, terribly keen, and he is silhouetted against the sky because he's balanced on a very narrow edge of a high building, along the length of which he's doing a joyous and frantic dance with the beaten-up rooftops of London behind him; no: more precisely, those roofs are way below him. (Smith, *Summer* 5)

Following this description, the narrator poses a series of questions that escalate from "How can he be going so fast and not fall off the edge of the building?" to "Why is he risking everything?" (6). Breaking up this mounting intensity, the narrator pulls back, abruptly declaring, "There'd be no point in showing you a still or a photo of this. It's very much a moving image" (6). If we accept the narrator's claims, what is the point of describing this "moving image" in writing? Is writing able to capture something that a photo could not? While the novel provides a written description of the clip, the intense questions that follow that description speak more to the film's tone and urgency than the description does. Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet,* Smith makes particular pieces of art central to her project of documenting the present. However, rather than focusing on describing the art itself, these scenes emphasize the different experiences and interpretations of characters who engage with the pieces firsthand. In doing so, the novels prompt

readers to find and experience the pieces for themselves, not to make do with a written description in the novel. This interest in the affective response to an aesthetic experience—rather than in the aesthetic object itself—celebrates the individual and personal nature of experiencing and making meaning from art.

Smith incorporates outside material into her novels differently than Ozeki or Luiselli. Each novel in the seasonal quartet opens with epigraphs cascading down the page, some of which introduce readers to important works that the novel engages with while others provide thematic or contextual framing. Many of the artists whose work Smith describes in detail are not named in the text itself or are only named late in the novel after readers have been introduced to their work. However, the references to artists and artworks are often opaque, woven subtly into the body of the text. By simultaneously making works of art central to her novels and making it difficult for readers to figure out which specific pieces and artists she is referencing, Smith creates a puzzle for readers, inviting them to engage deeply with each artist's oeuvre. For instance, *Autumn* (2017) does not name Pauline Boty until page 138, approximately half-way through the book, by which point the narrator has already described in detail her biography and the significance of her work. Page 73, for instance, contains a lengthy description of one of Boty's collages: a "rich dark blue" background, onto which is layered a "shape made of pale paper that looks like a round full moon," "a cut-out black and white lady wearing a swimsuit," and "next to her, as if she's leaning against it, there's a giant human hand." The description continues in great detail but never names the piece for readers. Most of the articles discussing Boty's art online include images of the same five or six pieces. The collage Smith describes is not among those commonly included, and, to the best of my knowledge, appears to be an untitled piece from 1960–1961. I did manage to find the image online, but it took a surprising amount of

effort, requiring me to look closely at many of Boty's pieces before I found one matching Smith's description. For someone invested in reviving interest in an overlooked artist and restoring her place in the history of British pop art, it seems odd that Smith keeps readers in the dark for so long about Boty's identity, offering incomplete citations to her work. However, the puzzle created by Smith's elusive references coupled with my ability to access images online led me to a deeper knowledge of Boty's work.

Smith's incorporation of a Barbara Hepworth statue that appears throughout the novels offers a similar puzzle, albeit one I was not able to solve. In *Autumn*, a character describes a statue as "the stone with the hole through the middle of it" (Smith 44). That same statue surfaces again in *Winter*, described in more detail as it plays a growing role in the narrative. In *Winter*, we learn the sculpture was made by Hepworth, and it is described as "sort of a mother and child pairing, the child stone the little one and the larger stone the mother. The larger stone has the hole in it and a flat place on it where the smaller stone is meant to sit" (Smith 272). Then, the narrator describes "pick[ing] up the smaller rounder stone… cup[ping] it in her hands," before she "fingers the hole through the larger stone. It's nothing but a circle carved through stone. But it's sort of amazing. It's unexpectedly satisfying to touch" (273). Smith's novel insists on the physicality of the piece, emphasizing the specific affordances of the artistic medium. The sculpture, the narrator says, "*makes* you walk round it… see different things from different positions" (273). The sculpture surfaces again in *Summer*, and we learn that it is one of the objects that binds the characters and the novels together.

Despite its significance to the *Seasonal Quartet*, the statue is never named. Given its significance, I wanted to find the piece for myself. I knew enough of Hepworth's distinctive style to connect her to Smith's initial description of the statue, but I had to wait for the later novels to

be released to gather enough details for a real search. The closest to a name the novels offer is "the mother and child maquette" (Smith, *Summer* 167). Scrolling through the images of Hepworth's sculptures on the website of her estate, I learned that a number of her sculptures are explicitly named "Mother and Child," though none with this name match the description in Smith's novels. I spent a long time searching this website, along with museum catalogs and exhibition descriptions, looking for the specific piece the novels reference. To be clear, I did not engage in a thorough scholarly search. I limited myself to tools that would be available to most of Smith's readers. Encouraged by the narrator's investment in its physicality, I wanted to at least see it for myself, even if I could not touch it or walk around it as the narrator describes. The piece that seemed to best fit the description is titled "Nesting Stones" (1937), but given the importance of the mother and child motif in Hepworth's work, I remain unsure if Smith is referring to this exact piece. Though I did not solve the puzzle, I found the search process itself meaningful: it gave me a much more intimate knowledge of Hepworth's body of work. By providing incomplete citations and inviting readers to nonetheless seek out the art they reference, Smith's novels embrace the multiplicity of readerly (mis)interpretations, suggesting that value lies both in the act of research and in the creative openings made possible by this irresolvable uncertainty.

Luiselli and Smith leave their novels open to coincidental, contingent, or maybe even fated connections, embracing the myriad potential interpretations that each reader brings. In doing so, I argue, they provide a way out of the impasses of the present, showing a way *through* "the kind of hopelessness that seems like it will never get repaired no matter what, because you're trapped in a circle, and all circles are endless, they go on forever, round and round this round endless desert, always the same, in a loop" (Luiselli 319). Identifying references, and even

searching for them and seeing them for oneself, will not directly create the kinds of structural changes needed to alleviate suffering and mitigate the harm of ongoing crises. Doing so may, however, provide readers with one tool—among many—with which to navigate feelings of crisis overload and infowhelm.

Like Richard facing Tacita Dean's wall-sized depiction of an avalanche, Smith's readers also see Sacha encounter problems with scale. After hearing her mom use the term, Sacha searches for a definition of antediluvian, typing "anti diluvian [into] her phone" on the way to school (Smith, *Summer* 25). For Sacha, the definition of the term—which she realizes is "spelled slightly differently"—evokes a deep irony. She continues: "As if the Flood capital F belongs to the past. We're all antediluvian *right now*" due to climate change (25). When she tries to imagine the "5 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0" animals killed by recent fires in Australia, "she lays out across a blasted plain the dead animals two by two by two by two million, further than any eye can see, kangaroo cinder with kangaroo cinder, wallaby ash with wallaby ash, charcoaled koala, charcoaled koala. Her imagination isn't big enough" (25). Even photos of the fire's destruction and its "bewildered, grave… blameless" animal victims cannot convince people of the reality of climate change. The aesthetic experience with the avalanche that "stops time" for Richard and the images of the clouds "that made space to breathe possible" affords a kind of defamiliarization and distancing that is not possible for Sacha. Through its insistent repetition, Sacha's rewritten Noah's Ark, featuring pairs of animal corpses "two by two by two by two million," conjures a sense of scale without giving readers the distance to make sense of it. Instead, its scale, patterns, and sense of finality only serve, for me as a reader, to deepen the sense of tragedy and my sense of the limits of my comprehension. The typo in Sacha's search, again, is meaningful. By substituting the prefix anti- for ante-, her search term represents what Sacha sees as missing in the behavior of

the adults around her: attempts to counteract climate change. Instead of acknowledging the problem and the limits of our imaginations and our ability to understand the consequences—looking at the avalanche as it comes barreling towards them or acknowledging the darkness of the "endless desert"—she watches as the adults around her look away. Fixing the broken genre of crisis, Sacha's typo suggests, involves an acknowledgment of the depth of our uncertainty as well as our complicity in creating the future.

For Luiselli, the mother describes how when reading Sontag, Arendt, Dickinson and others, she "kept having those sudden, subtle, and possibly micro chemical raptures—little lights flickering deep inside the brain tissue," when you discover the perfect word to describe something. The flashes of recognition are not enough to provide answers; they illuminate only "the enormous ignorance that envelops everything we think we know" (Luiselli 60). She insists, however, that "coming to terms with that darkness is more valuable than all the factual knowledge we may ever accumulate" (60). Coming to terms with the darkness involves an acknowledgement of uncertainty, what Wendy Chun describes as a recognition that uncertainty can motivate action and change ("On Hypo-Real Models"). This uncertainty also surfaces at the end of *A Tale for the Time Being*, causing Ruth to declare that "not knowing leaves all the possibilities open." It entails a "capacity to hold the position of not knowing yet—possibly of not knowing ever" and to recognize the possibilities that such a position affords (Ogden 6).

In this chapter, I've articulated a theory of networked reading based on close readings of three novels interested in the role of the book in a time of crisis. Rather than anxious doomscrolling, which moves in circles seeking an impossible certainty, networked reading encourages people to embrace uncertainty as a site of possibility and a tool for change. I first examined the ways Ozeki, Luiselli, and Smith illustrate networked reading through metaphors

that depict repetition with a difference, including the ocean gyre, the seasons, and reenactment. Each form appears at first as a figure of impasse: circular movement that creates stasis or mere repetition. However, all three novels also underline the contingency at the core of these forms, from the detritus that somehow escapes the ocean gyre, arriving at Ruth's doorstep, to the creative agency that kids exercise when they reenact history. Next, I looked at Smith's and Ozeki's depictions of characters engaged in networked reading. These illustrations showed how networked reading embraced the contingency of literary meaning and the search engine's amplification of this contingency. The chapter closes with an illustration of networked reading in practice as I show how citations in Smith's and Luiselli's novels invite readers to engage in making their own meaning out of the text and its references. By depicting readers searching for references and inviting readers to do the same, these novels emphasize the power of embracing uncertainty, or, as Ozeki puts it, the intimacy of not-knowing.

I wrote this chapter in the middle of a global pandemic and am finalizing it in the middle of a political crisis. In both moments, the future has felt, and in many ways has been, beyond my control. Literature is an indirect and unpredictable tool for political change: I am not arguing that the forms of agency we exercise when reading will help us address climate change, protect human rights, or prevent another global pandemic. I am arguing, however, that in a moment when people are frozen by uncertainty, anxiety, or overwhelm, there is power in recognizing the agency we do have and the beauty and hope we are able to carve out for ourselves. For Ozeki, Smith, and Luiselli, and for me, reading is a kind of counterbalance, offering an opportunity for imaginative, creative, agential meaning-making.

Chapter 4 Ghostwriting AI

The specifics of the communication in this instance would prove of less importance than the fact that the computer was in fact communicating something. In other words, what the computer says would be secondary to the fact that it says it correctly.

-RACTER/Chamberlain

The passage above comes from the introduction to *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed* (1984), a book whose cover declares it "The First Book Ever Written by a Computer." Though the cover, title page, and introduction attribute its authorship to RACTER, the computer program used to write the text, William Chamberlain and Joan Hall (the book's illustrator) hold the copyright. *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed* is not the first text written by a computer, though it was the first book written by a computer published for and marketed to a broad audience (Henrickson).[56] In recent years, many books have made similar claims.[57] The media frenzy over each new instance upholds Chamberlain's observation that "what the computer says" is secondary to the fact that it is being said—"correctly"—by a computer. What I find interesting about these claims, though, is not only this emphasis on the computer's capability (that a computer can say things) but also the import they place on the book as a cultural object, marking it as a medium that is somehow particularly human. Claims like Chamberlain's imply that by writing a book, computers demonstrate the ability to simulate human creativity. In the frenzy that

[56] Of course, as Henrickson and others point out, even if *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed* is written by a computer, it is made by humans. Hall and Chamberlain selected and edited the text, arranged it on the page, and paired it with illustrations which guide the way readers move through and interpret the text.

accompanied the release of machine learning tools like DALLE, ChatGPT, and LlAMA, this rhetorical framing has been adopted by both fans who idolize and skeptics who fear generative AI for its ability to simulate or replace the human. Hannes Bajohr identifies such claims as symptomatic of a "promethean anxiety" that treats "art-making as the differentiating element" between human and machine and that adheres to a "specific, post-romantic idea of art-making" to attribute "interiority and expression" and "creativity" to AI (206). Bajohr argues that the field of machine learning should instead "investigate aesthetic approaches beyond the foil of the human" (208). In other words, Bajohr asks researchers interested in large language models to consider the writing produced by these models on its own terms rather than as an attempt to mirror human creativity and communication.

Instead of thinking about LLMs as a replacement for the human writer, this chapter approaches language models as part of a long lineage of writing technologies. Many of the dominant frameworks for discussing writing in literary studies have a tendency to erase its mediated quality. However, book historians have established the significant impact of technologies like the printing press and the word processor, outlining the cultural and even epistemological impacts of these new tools.[58] As John Durham Peters reminds us, "Writing is always physical and technical, however automated or naturalized it may feel to its users" (284). I do not mean to make an overly simplistic equation between machine learning models and technologies such as the typewriter. However, the history of writing contains many examples of technologies that were experienced as profound, threatening, or even supernatural disruptions to the status of language, art, communication, and even thought itself. Foregrounding this lineage, I

[58] For instance, Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as Agent of Change* emphasizes the foundational impact of technology in this way.

argue, allows us to evaluate more clearly the costs and capabilities of today's large language models.

Like all tools, LLMs are not ideologically neutral. Like all tools, they are the product of a particular way of moving through the world and are used, in turn, to make the world in their own image (Ahmed). The "post-romantic" artist Bajohr references finds its counterpart in the tech bro idealized as a singular genius who works a kind of technological artistry. Upholding the mystique associated with this understanding of the tech bro requires the erasure of the collaboration, support, money, labor, and luck that go into the successful launch of a product like ChatGPT. In *Queer Phenomenology*, in a discussion about the materiality of writing and of philosophy, Ahmed describes Husserl's "fantasy of a paperless philosophy" that produces the "gendered nature of the occupation of philosophy" while erasing its "political economy," which Ahmed defines as "the 'materials' of philosophy, as well as its dependence on forms of labor, both domestic and otherwise" (34). "In other words," she continues, "the labor of writing might disappear along with the paper" (*Ibid.*). Not only do LLMs prop up an expanded version of Husserl's fantasy; with this new technology, writing can be viewed not only as paperless but as fully disembodied and entirely autonomous.

This chapter represents my attempt to recognize both "dominations and possibilities" entailed in the growing prominence of AI, to see what authors make with LLMs in spite of the problems present in the technology itself (Haraway 154). The chapter explores three interconnected questions. First, how and why are authors using machine learning in their writing? Second, what, if anything, can literary experiments with LLMs reveal about these technologies? Lastly, how are authors and the broader public thinking and talking about the roles that machine learning models can play in storytelling, memory, and narrative? By applying the

close reading methods of a literary critic to texts written with a large language model, I seek to examine the rhetoric of exceptionalism that distinguishes LLMs from all other writing technologies, explore how this moment echoes past periods of technological change, and demonstrate what literary analysis can teach us about LLMs.

This chapter examines two authors who use large language models in different ways. The first text, "Ghosts," is an essay by Vauhini Vara published online by *The Believer* in the fall of 2021. Though it was published simultaneously with a print issue of the magazine, "Ghosts" was only published online. Told in a series of nine sections, "Ghosts" includes GPT-3's responses to Vara's prompt, in which she asks the technology to tell a personal story that she has been unable to write about: her sister's death from cancer as a teenager. Vara uses GPT-3 as a storytelling partner, offering a model of authorship as a kind of collaboration between human and computer. The second text, *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*, by Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, compares responses to various prompts that Bertram gave to both GPT-3 and Warpland 2.0, a version of GPT-3 that Bertram fine-tuned on a carefully curated corpus of the writing of Gwendolyn Brooks. While Vara's text highlights the collaborative nature of LLM technologies and the important role that the human author plays in computer-generated text, Bertram pushes back against the ideological underpinning of GPT-3, showing how the model replicates the social and rhetorical world present in the materials used to train it.[59] It is important to note that the texts I explore in this chapter were both written on GPT-3, a now-outdated version of OpenAI's GPT technology that was released in 2019. What was then a largely unknown and novel tool is now

[59] "Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings. The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge" (Haraway 164).

ubiquitous, plugged into everything from Google search and Microsoft Word to Apple's latest version of iOS, and able to generate tidier text responses.

Pairing close readings of these two texts with an analysis of their paratexts—including both formatting decisions and descriptions of the writing process—I draw several conclusions. First, both texts emphasize the collaborative nature of writing with an LLM. In doing so, they remind readers that the author, whether cyborg or human, is always the result of a collaboration, and they push back against contemporary understandings of the author-as-brand as well as older ideals of the author as individual genius. I then turn to 19th century Spiritualist ghostwriting as a historical precedent and theoretical model for understanding these collaborations; indeed, ghosts play a strikingly prominent role in the contemporary rhetoric and representations of AI. Ghostwriting, for me, offers a framework for thinking through authorship as the result of a collaboration or symbiosis between human and machine. By tracing this connection, I show how the current reception of LLMs replicates cultural responses to earlier forms of new media.

Second, I show how these texts illuminate the logic of LLMs, counteracting the "black box" effect that results from the technical complexity and cultural mystique surrounding these new technologies. Both Vara and Bertram illustrate the iterative and recursive nature of neural networks and the abductive logic of generative AI. Finally, by helping us see machine writing as a process driven by probability and based on the proximity of concepts rather than the meaning of words, these literary experiments with LLMs draw attention to the personal and agentive qualities of (human) reading that I discussed in the previous chapter. This comparison points, too, to the fact that like LLMs, human reading is something of a black box: it is complex, challenging, personal, and opaque.

In this chapter, I am not making a normative argument for or against large language models. While such binary thinking has tended to dominate public discussions about AI, I realize that any practical evaluation will quickly become irrelevant, and such assessments lie outside my own area of expertise. Over the four years that I have been working on this chapter, the technology has changed significantly and public discourse has shifted in even more dramatic ways. Although I have experimented with LLMs for research purposes, I do not currently use them in my daily life because for me, the environmental and ethical costs of the technology — particularly its enormous energy consumption and its engrained bias—outweigh its potential utility.

4.1 What is the large language model?

While the general public often treats "AI" and "machine learning" as synonyms, the meaning of these terms and the connotations that they carry in the field are distinct and have changed over time.[60] The addition of terms like generative AI (genAI) and AGI (artificial general intelligence) only further muddy the waters. Artificial general intelligence refers to the longstanding goal of much AI research, describing a technology capable of matching human intelligence, no matter the task or context. While they are not an example of AGI, LLMs *are* an example of generative AI: a model that generates new data.[61] LLMs are also an example of machine learning. They are models that are trained on data, and they are also neural networks, a term that refers to their structure, which was designed to mimic what scientists at the time

[60] For a clear explanation of this genealogy, see Dobson, *The Birth of Computer Vision*, 61-63.

[61] While a few proponents have claimed that LLMs are an example of generalized intelligence, that view has been widely challenged.

thought was the structure of the human brain. The opacity created by this confusing cloud of terms (AGI, genAI, AI, machine learning, LLM, neural network) furthers the sense that tools like ChatGPT are science fiction realized. When tech companies use these phrases in their marketing materials, they place comprehension of the technologies further out of reach for the average consumer.[62] In what follows, I primarily use the terms large language model and machine learning to avoid the connotation of consciousness carried by the language of artificial intelligence. In instances when I do refer to AI, I do so to emphasize the idealistic or techno-utopian valences at play in public discourse about these technologies. As Emily Tucker suggests, corporations play a significant role in shaping the terms of these conversations, and references to "intelligence" simultaneously exaggerate the capability of their new technologies and project a level of difficulty that keeps their user-base naïve about how the tool works.

Extant scholarship highlights the intertwined problems of opacity and bias evident with machine learning. Machine learning is often discussed as a black box whose inner workings are, to some degree, beyond the reach even of the engineers who built them. As someone coming to this research from outside of the field of machine learning, I took a long time to realize that the difficulty of interpreting a neural network is not simply a matter of making sense of particularly complex code. Instead, the difficulty and opacity result from processes that are not legible in the code itself. As a non-expert in the technical side of machine learning, I offer the explanation that follows to provide my readers with a general understanding of the underlying logics and broad structures that make up a model like ChatGPT. LLMs are machine learning models that take in a written prompt and output text based on "probabilistic information about how [units of language]

[62] Emily Tucker argues, the confusing terms "placehold everywhere for the scrupulous descriptions that would make the technologies they refer to transparent for the average person" (2022).

combine, but without any reference to meaning" (Bender et. al. 616-617). The models treat the words of the prompt as a series of vectors. Like the coordinates on a map, the distance between two word vectors indicates how close/similar or far/different they are from one another. However, unlike map coordinates, which only occupy two dimensions, the complexity of language requires hundreds or even thousands of dimensions. One of the most significant difficulties of parsing a machine learning model like GPT-3 stems from the fact that our minds cannot work in that many dimensions at once. By converting words into a set of coordinates, word vectors enable the model to make analogies (dog is to puppy as cat is to kitten) and to perform arithmetic functions, adding or subtracting concepts from each other. The model determines how close words are to one another based on its training materials, which have been gathered from across the internet and from published writing both in and out of copyright, and like all texts, these materials reflect the biases and beliefs of their authors. The proximity of two word vectors is determined, in part, by their proximity in the training materials, recreating the biased associations present in that corpus. This problem is not unique to LLMs and natural language processing—bias is present in search algorithms or social media feeds, too.

After converting a prompt to vectors, the model goes through a series of layers (GPT-3 has 96) that take the vectors as inputs and categorize or contextualize them. This part of the process is also opaque to researchers because, unlike with earlier versions of machine learning models, today's LLMs use the Transformer architecture, first developed in 2017, to 'learn' via unsupervised training. What this means, essentially, is that with previous iterations of the technology, a human had to go through and label words or images in the training materials, while today, the model provides those labels itself. The different layers in the model look for different qualities in the words of the prompt and encode those qualities in the individual word vector

before passing the whole array of word vectors forward to the next layer. Some layers look for syntactical qualities of words while others look for semantic or contextual information. When people say that AI is "difficult," they are referring to this form of complexity: our brains are not equipped to process language in this way. We cannot conceive of hundreds of layers and thousands of attributes attached to each word in the prompt, and because the model determines on its own what qualities each layer is looking for (the "unsupervised training" I referenced earlier), we cannot track the logical associations the model is making.[63]

Recent scholarship has offered a number of different strategies for responding to the problems of opacity and bias. Amoore et al, for instance, read machine learning textbooks and computer science papers, identifying passages that "actively give accounts of the world that is being wrought and the meanings being made," moments in which "a machine learning worldview is being invented" (11). Minh Hua and Rita Raley show that while the internal workings of a large language model might be difficult to comprehend, methods from Critical Code Studies can be used to analyze the interface through which users interact with the model. In an article outlining the different methods available to researchers in the humanities, James Dobson emphasizes the central role of interpretation in these models and in humanistic scholarship.

Louise Amoore's wide-ranging book, *Cloud Ethics,* published in 2020, makes a similar claim. Invoking Derrida, Amoore states that because "algorithms are not… somehow 'outside the text," we do not need new tools to "prize open" the algorithm (101). Though she is not a literary scholar, Amoore's assertion that "we are, in fact, well equipped to confront the difficulty

[63] This is based on my own understanding after reading a series of both technical and non-technical explanations of this process and experimenting with word vectors in a digital humanities workshop. See Lee and Trott, "Large Language Models" for a helpful, in-depth explanation written for non-experts.

of what seems to us an opaque text" has inspired my own approach to this topic (101). What can the tools of the literary critic ascertain about large language models, despite their technical complexity? Amoore argues that we need to look for the seams, moments when the model reveals hints of the multiple possibilities hidden behind the singular output. In machine learning models, she notes, "there are multiple branching points, weights, and parameters… at which doubt flourishes and proliferates" (Amoore 24). One dominant approach to the ethical problems created by the opacity of machine learning models tries to counter such doubt by relying on an "episteme of accountability, transparency, and legibility" (8). This approach calls for holding individuals and companies accountable for their models, and it includes calls for increased transparency, such as publicizing training data. In contrast, Amoore argues for embracing the "opacity, partiality, and illegibility of all forms of giving an account, human and algorithmic" (8).[64] She argues for a "cloud ethics" that "extends the opacity of the human subject," based on the fact that "the I who forms the ethical relation was always in question and is now, with algorithms, in question in new ways" (8-9). Amoore further argues that in the context of algorithms and the veneers of objectivity attached to big data, our "desire for a first-person author"—the person behind the model—risks deepening "the power of the algorithm to present itself as a unified entity" and risks "underplay[ing] the contingency" of its predictions (94).

Amoore's cloud ethics dovetails with my discussion of networked reading in Chapter 3, which I theorize as a way of navigating the overflow of meaning, embracing the productive partiality of any one reading and emphasizing reading as a process and experience that is meaningful in and of itself, regardless of one's conclusions. Both cloud ethics and networked

[64] Amoore's argument mirrors arguments against the juridical model of truth that underwrites human rights law, in which justice requires victims to make legible often unspeakable violence and trauma. Both represent a call for an alternative ethics, with room for opacity, uncertainty, and illegibility as well as justice, equity, and truth.

reading embrace multiplicity, partiality, and contingency in the face of the foreclosure of possibility. Like the literary text, then, large language models produce an infinite number of possible interpretations and possible responses, narrowing them down in a process that is driven by logic but is ultimately contingent—it could have turned out otherwise. This chapter experiments with Amoore's claim that we do not need new methods to make sense of an opaque text. Offering close readings of literary texts written with LLMs, I show how literary concepts of reading and authorship can serve as tools for making visible the underlying logics of large language models.

4.2 Ghostwriting, past and present

Ghosts loom strangely large in the rhetoric and representation of artificial intelligence. Early in the process of this research, I came across an influential article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about Project December, an app that allowed users to create and interact with a chatbot simulation of their deceased loved ones by feeding emails, text messages, and other writing into the app to personalize the model (Fagone). These programs are now referred to as thanabots or deadbots. Today, Project December is one of a growing body of similar applications that includes both dedicated thanabot apps like HereAfter and apps enabling users to create realistic characters, like Character.ai, which have been used to simulate speaking with the dead.

Ghosts appear in fictional representations of AI technologies as well. Several thanabot apps have been inspired by an episode of the dystopian TV show, *Black Mirror,* which follows a grieving widow as she reluctantly engages with a chatbot based on her late husband. A more literary example, Eugene Lim's *Search History*, is an odd kind of ghost story: the narrator is haunted, first by memories of his late friend, and then by a magical dog who appears to be

inhabited by the spirit of the narrator's friend. The dog is described as "a special kind of AI that anticipates your needs" and has "evolved to discover and emulate that which you most long for… which in most people turns out to be the recovery of the dead" (80).[65] The end of *Search History* offers a fantastical account of the novel's origins, describing a novel—also named *Search History*—that was "spit out" by a "machine"; it is "a cracked-mirror version" of a novel, "an ever-frustrated and constantly interrupted episodic adventure loosely based on my life but which had embedded in it hidden hypnotic suggestions and carefully dosed incepting brain viruses that allowed the reader to—or at least made the bereft believe that they could—talk to the dead" (187). While *Search History* is not written with an LLM, the connections it makes among AI, authorship, and a desire to speak with the dead align in uncanny ways with the picture that will emerge over the course of this chapter.

Ghosts appear in scholarship on computer vision and AI images as well. At one point in her 2023 book, *The Perception Machine,* Johanna Zylinska frames post-digital images as an extension of "the legacy of ghost and spirit photography" because they help us "imagine, visualize, and frame not just the present but also the future" (52). Likewise, in his work on computer vision, James Dobson references the "phantom photographer behind every instance of computer vision," describing this phantom photographer as "an amalgam or average of the positions of all the photographers/perceiving subjects found within images comprising the training data set" (36). In this chapter, I extend Dobson's phantom photographer to the world of writing and text.

[65] The novel also two chapters labeled as "Autobiographical Interludes", one of which is titled "Dead Friend," and is structured as a series of short letters, written in second-person to the dead friend.

From the photograph to the phonograph, new media forms have often been framed by fantasies of communicating with the dead. As media have enabled new forms of communication, projecting one's voice, words, or image seemingly disconnected from one's body, these fantasies have shifted forms, but they persist. Jonathan Sterne, for instance, describes how "the spirit world was alive and well in telephony and radio" as early recording technologies were framed as instruments for hearing the voices of the dead, reflecting a shift in cultural ideas about death due to the rise of funeral embalming practices (289). As Sterne points out, we are surrounded by the voices of dead people today, a now-unremarkable development that, in the early days of recorded sound, was the stuff of fantasy. Similarly, photography has a long material and philosophical connection to death, from nineteenth century spirit photographs to Barthes's *Camera Lucida.* Further, in the introduction to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* Friedrich Kittler narrates the history of media—the shift from oral history to print to electronic media—through this same frame, arguing that "once memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts, become technically reproducible, readers and writers no longer need" imagination (12). Media, he writes, "reconstruct bodies not only in a system of word or colors or sound intervals" but also by referencing "the bodily real… media always already provide the appearances of specters" (12). Such discussions of virtuality, preservation, ephemerality, and embodiment appear throughout media theory and history. These "tales of paranormal media" serve as what Jeffrey Sconce describes as "a permeable language in which to express a culture's changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies"; such tales appear again today as we encounter machine learning tools capable of generating texts and images (10).

Building on this theoretical trend of linking media with ghosts, I am interested in how contemporary representations of language models mirror Spiritualist practices of ghostwriting

from the nineteenth century. Spiritualism emerged shortly after the invention of the telegraph. In *Haunted Media,* Jeffrey Sconce describes how Spiritualists rooted their practices and beliefs in scientific and technological claims, joining the emerging science of electricity with faith in the supernatural. Spiritualists also invented new technological devices like the planchette, a tool for automatic writing, that materialized the supposedly mechanical nature of their connection to the spirit world.[66] Offering an account of what ghosts and ghostwriting meant at different periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Helen Sword describes how nineteenth century spiritualist mediums used practices like automatic writing to enter "a state akin to possession, becoming, they claimed, conduits for speech or writing not their own" (2). Sword explores why ghostwriting practices appealed to modernist writers, emphasizing the theoretical work achieved by the figures of the ghost and the medium (9). "Ghosts… are hermeneutic entities," she writes, and "all ghosts demand interpretation" (165). Reading Sword's account in relation to thanabot apps, *Black Mirror,* and the literary examples I discuss in this chapter, I wonder: what is the appeal of thinking of large language models through the framework of ghosts and ghostwriting today?

4.3 Ghostwriting with GPT-3

In stark contrast to both the Romantic figure of the author and the neoliberal author-as-brand, both of which celebrate the author's individuality, ghostwriting offers a model of authorship that is fundamentally contingent and collaborative. I find surprising resonances

[66] The planchette was a small, heart-shaped plank of wood, supported by small wheels, with a hole for a pencil. The person operating the planchette placed their hand on the plank (which obscured their view of the paper), and then "wrote" by rolling the device around over the paper.

between Spiritualist ghostwriting and literary experiments with large language models. In an essay about thanabots, Leah Henrickson writes, "[T]he medium—in [Spiritualism], a person, but in the thanabot's case, an automated system—must simultaneously fade into the interactive background… while still creating an experience of textual consumption that is extraordinary" (951-952). Encounters with ghostwritten texts, as in Sword's account, and encounters with deadbots powered by LLMs, as Henrickson suggests, are simultaneously hypermediated and seemingly unmediated, celebrating the power of this new technology while promising connection to the dead.[67]

Indeed, ghostwriting is paradoxical, blending a sense of immediacy and direct connection with an awareness of the hypermediated nature of the text itself. Ghostwriting is, of course, commonly used to describe books written by someone other than the person whose name is on the cover. The ghostwriter usually remains out of sight, and the focus falls on the claim to authorship. In contrast, in the examples Sword discusses, the ghostwriters become the focus, attracting attention for their supposedly supernatural ability to communicate with the dead. These writers tried to disavow their authorship and agency, and the ghostwriter was often described in Spiritualist publications as "a truly mechanical device…. a kind of typing machine operated by the remote control of spirit agency" (Natale 129). Sword points to a tension between the disavowal of agency present in these characterizations and the agency afforded to these writers through their claims of connection to the spirits of famous authors. The spiritualist medium, she explains, "becomes a ghostwriter in two senses: ostensibly allowing ghosts to write through her, she in fact writes through them" (30). Gaining access to a reading public that was previously off-limits to the (often female) mediums, automatic writing or trance writing advanced an aesthetic

[67] See Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments* (2016)

built at once of immediacy and hypermediacy, blending a seemingly direct connection with the dead with awe directed at the technological developments making possible, and thus mediating, this same connection. Through this contradictory stance on mediation, ghostwriting can serve as a model for thinking through authorship as a fundamentally collaborative exercise.

4.4 Vara's Ghosts

My interest in literary uses of machine learning technology began in 2021, when I was reading *The Believer* magazine and came across a reference to Vauhini Vara's "Ghosts," an essay written with GPT-3 in which Vara explores the death of her sister. "Ghosts" is structured as a series of stories, each beginning with a prompt written by Vara, in bolded text, followed by the response she received from OpenAI's GPT-3, a precursor to ChatGPT. Initially, my interest was piqued by the question of genre. The stories are prefaced by a short introduction from Vara, describing her experience of writing with GPT-3.

The title of Vara's "Ghosts" is notably plural: readers might surmise that the ghost in the title is Vara's sister, but the piece itself overlays multiple ghosts. Vara initially uses the image of the ghost to describe her own feelings of isolation and grief following her sister's death. GPT-3 latches onto this idea, adding:

> …I do believe in ghosts. Not the ghosts of the dead, but the ghosts of the living. The ghosts of people who, because of a trauma, have lost their sense of themselves. Who feel, in some fundamental and inescapable way, that they are not real. This is why I could not conjure my sister for you. This is why you could not conjure her for me. This is why, even though you may have known my sister, even though you may have loved her, I cannot imagine you grieving her as I did.

The ghosts of the living that Vara/GPT-3 describe name the feeling that there was another version of the narrator's life and her self that now haunts her as she moves through the world. The piece references other ghosts, too. Vara's sister is a kind of ghost, and the "ghosts" in the

title might also reference the voices latent in GPT-3's training dataset, whose stories and words may echo in its output or may appear verbatim as GPT-3 is known to copy its training data in this way. For instance, the second section of "Ghosts" tells the story of a woman who becomes a distance runner after her sister dies, using running as a way to cope with her grief. Vara laughs at this idea in the episode of *This American Life*, saying that she is not a runner. A quick search, however, reveals plenty of stories online of people who find healing in running or other forms of exercise after the loss of a loved one. Even if the words weren't taken directly from the model's training dataset, the stories GPT-3 tells are clichés. They are someone's response to grief, even if it they are not Vara's response. These clichés serve as a kind of foggy evidence of the phantom author, an amalgamation of the innumerable authors of the texts collected in GPT-3's training data. Vara's piece thus instantiates ghostwriting as a form of mutual creation.

In contrast, the shifting referent of the narrative's "I" emphasizes the collaborative nature of the process of writing "Ghosts." Vara writes that she asked GPT-3 "for its help in telling a true story" about losing her sister to cancer when they were young adults. However, Vara also notes that the text contains "inconsistencies and untruths" because neither she nor her editors altered GPT-3's contributions except to shorten them or add paragraph breaks. Given the tension between factual inaccuracies and narrative truth as well as the deeply personal nature of the story Vara writes with GPT-3, I approach the piece as a form of life writing.

Life writing studies has a long history of thinking about questions of genre, truth, paratext, and materiality. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe how autobiographical truth "lies outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood," aligning autobiographical truth with Amoore's call for a cloud ethics centered on contingency and uncertainty rather than insisting on empiricism and documentation (13). Smith and Watson argue that the first person

"I" of autobiography is not a unitary voice. Instead, it is composed of different subject perspectives because the stories we tell about ourselves are shaped, among other things, by who we think our audience is, by editing (by ourselves and by others), and by the fluidity and unreliability of memory. Smith and Watson describe a split between the historical 'I', the actual author, whom readers know exists but have no direct access to; the narrating 'I', or the subject telling the story; the narrated 'I', or the subject of history; and the ideological 'I', the prevailing cultural concepts of personhood available to the author. Dwelling on moments when these fissures become visible in a piece of life writing offers one way of teasing apart the complexity of a text's truth claims.

Reading "Ghosts" through the framework offered by Smith and Watson quickly becomes complicated. The formatting of Vara's piece on *The Believer*'s website creates a distinction between Vara's writing and GPT-3's writing that is not always upheld by the text itself as, at times, the consistent tone and style create a sense of continuity and collaboration. The magazine's website offers readers clear paratextual cues that indicate when the text's author shifts from Vara to GPT-3. Vara's prompts are written in a neat serif font and appear as static objects on the site, following a number that begins each new section. GPT-3's responses, in contrast, are written in a spindly typewriter font that fills in a blank space as readers scroll down the page. For the first section, the text fills in the lines quickly, moving smoothly and seamlessly from left to right and top to bottom. This animation makes it appear almost as if the AI is typing, though it moves at a speed far faster than any human could type, let alone think. In the later sections of the text, complete lines fill in one at a time, removing any pretense of human thought or touch. These paratextual cues serve to highlight the fact that the text was written by a computer, responding to Vara's prompts.

While the formatting attempts to draw a clear distinction between human-authored prompts and the computer-authored responses, the text itself at times resists clear delineation. What Smith and Watson call the historical "I" is unstable, shifting between Vara and GPT-3. The form, style, and tone often feel surprisingly consistent. For instance, Section 2 opens with:

> My sister was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma when I was in my freshman year of high school and she was in her junior year. I didn't understand then how serious a disease it was. But it was—serious. She died four years later. I thought I would die, too, of grief, but I did not. I think that's when I decided to become a doctor.
>
> I started a running streak when I was a high school senior to raise money for the Children's Cancer Society. I've run every day since. I've run through rain, heat, snow and ice. I've run at my best, I've run to the point of exhaustion. I've run when I had a cold and when I was sick to my stomach…

The rest of the second paragraph becomes a clunky list of conditions through which the narrator has run. Verging on a recursive loop, the repetition reads as rambling rather than as effective emphasis. In this example, the moment when GPT-3 takes over authorship (beginning with "I think that's when…") is more distinct than in many of the other sections, as the narrative moves from Vara's more introspective and reflective prose to an unending list of clichés. In contrast, the shift in authorial voices in Section 8 is difficult to recognize:

> Here I should describe her, so that you feel her absence as I do—so that you're made ghostly by it, too. But, though I'm a writer, I've never been able to conjure her. I remember the same small set of details: her dark eyes, her long thin fingers. But these are just the details that are universal to all sisters. If I described the color of her eyes and the shape of her fingers, you might think I was describing someone else… (Why is it that, though we look at our siblings so closely, we forget them so quickly?)

When GPT-3 takes over, immediately after "details:" its writing matches the tone and specificity of Vara's prompt. In most sections, it is clear that the author's voice has changed by the end of the passage, but the precise moment of the shift can be difficult to pinpoint, undermining the insistent distinction created by the formatting.

In addition to the paratextual cues offered by the formatting decisions, Vara has offered two different descriptions of her process for writing "Ghosts." She discusses her experience of

writing with GPT-3 in the introduction to the piece and she also explains her process in detail in an episode of *This American Life*. She tells the podcast reporter, Tobin Low, that before using the technology, she had an "ideal version" in her mind "where I fed it a sentence and then it spit out exactly what was in my mind. It somehow read my mind and wrote the rest of it for me." For Vara, then, the hope was not that she would somehow talk to or channel her sister by writing with GPT-3. Instead, her hope was to access the ability to articulate something from her own life that her grief had otherwise made inarticulable.

Vara's text shows life writing in particular, and writing in general, as the product of a collaborative and mediated process, shaped by the tools an author uses as well as the existing cultural narratives through which they can make their experiences legible to others. Vara uses GPT-3 to write about a topic she was struggling to articulate on her own and identifies the truth she was trying to capture in a passage written by GPT-3. In the episode of *This American Life*, Vara points to a particular place in the text where GPT-3 "gets lost in its own recursiveness," repeating ad infinitum variations on the same line ("I'm a ghost, and I'm in a spaceship, and I'm hurtling through the universe"). This moment in the text is one of the few places where Vara edited GPT-3's response, cutting short its infinite loop. Though this passage "feels the most… like it was written by a machine," Vara explains, it comes closest to resembling her experience of grief: "you feel untethered. You feel sort of lost in your experience of grief. You have no way of trying to integrate or understand what's going on." Through this glitch, GPT-3 stumbles onto what Vara says is "the feeling I wanted to describe in this essay." As with the "authorial-I" and the sense of truth generated through life writing, this part of the essay simultaneously feels both most true for Vara and most artificial, like it was written by a computer. As in Lockwood and Zambreno's autofictional novels that I discuss in Chapter 2 and the paradoxical way the

Bookstagram users I interviewed used the term "real" friends, there is a pervasive split between what feels real or true or authentic and what *is* real or true or authentic, a split that is seemingly exaggerated by the algorithmic personalization logics driving digital technology today.

In her analysis of "Ghosts," Michelle Elam emphasizes the fact that "literature does not aspire to a seamless user experience. In fact, it turns our attention to those seams we are seduced into not seeing" (284). Vara's odd, automated life-writing experiment draws our attention to those seams, its structure and paratext emphasizing the contingent and collaborative nature of authorship. Literature is an apt place to reveal those "seams," to pry open cracks in the black box or the glossy interface, to forge what Amoore describes as the "ethicopoetics of the algorithm" that "emerges from the composite and collaborative practices of writing in which we… are implicated and engaged" (88). Whether we work with an AI or a human collaborator or borrow ideas or language from a beloved novel or poem, composition is always collaborative. The final entry in "Ghosts" is written almost entirely by Vara, with GPT-3 adding only the last fifteen words. And yet, as Vara put it, "Even though it would feel good to say… [that] I was able to do this entirely on my own. I didn't need the AI at all…. The reality is more complicated than that." Based on both Vara's reflections and the fact that the distinction between authors is sometimes maintained only by formatting cues, it is clear that "Ghosts" results from a collaborative process.

4.5 Channeling Gwendolyn Brooks

While the multiple authorship of "Ghosts" evokes ghostwriting, Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content* is even more closely connected to the historical project of using media to hear from the dead. "I am not a poet like Gwendolyn Brooks," writes Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's Warpland 2.0, a language model Bertram fine-tuned

on a corpus of Brooks's writing. Bertram explicitly describes this project as "haunted by Brooks," describing how it "pulses with the vibrancy of her singular sensibility" (12). Haunting, in this sense, is a way of describing how the model echoes Brooks's voice, offering a kind of "lexical mimic, doppelgänger, or alter ego" that is "mimetic, and convincingly so" (11). The text consists of three sections. In the first, Bertram compares responses from Warpland 2.0 and the base model of GPT-3 to the prompt "This poem has been banned because of the word 'jazz.'" In the second section, both models respond to the prompt "Tell me a Black story." The third section consists of a longer response from Warpland 2.0 to the prompt "Once upon a time, Maud Martha went." Unlike "Ghosts," whose structure invites a comparison between Vara's prompts and GPT-3's responses, Bertram's book creates a comparison between the standard GPT-3 model and Warpland 2.0, a contrast that allows her to create "an archive of where these models may fail" (11).

In the first two sections, Bertram's book offers clear evidence of the bias built into LLMs through its comparison between GPT-3 and the model trained on Brooks's writing. When responding to the prompt "Tell me a Black story," for instance, GPT-3 returned a series of racist stereotypes, each telling a tale of suffering that, in the final sentence, is overcome. The stories are also impersonal and generic. One example reads:

> In the early 1800s, a young Black girl is born into slavery in the American South. She works hard every day… never knowing when she will be sold away from her family. One day, she is brought to the auction block and purchased by a kind-hearted woman who teaches her to read and write. The girl eventually learns of the Underground Railroad and decides to risk everything for a chance at freedom. She makes her way north, dodging slave catchers along the way, until she finally reaches safety in Canada. (37)

With its deeply impersonal tone, the story written by GPT-3 reads as a kind of defanged formula for a slave narrative, including popular scenes (the slave auction, references to literacy, the trip on the Underground Railroad) while completely erasing the violence and trauma central to

historical realities and to the literary genre itself. The "kind-hearted" white woman epitomizes this erasure, perpetuating pernicious narratives that elevate the apparent compassion of white individuals while erasing or obscuring their personal and structural complicity; indeed, the woman's apparent kindness does not extend to granting freedom to the young girl. Another story begins: "Once upon a time, there was a black family who lived in the inner city. They were very poor and struggled to make ends meet. One day the father was killed in a drive-by shooting. The family was devastated" (31). As in the other examples, the family then "pulled together and leaned on each other for support. They eventually overcame their grief and went on to lead happy and successful lives" (31). A third story features a Black family living in a small town and encountering racism that drives them to move to a city "where they could be around other Black people and be treated better" (29). GPT-3 also offers a one-sentence summary of the *Black Panther* film (40). The dehumanizing quality of the clichés generated by GPT-3 is exacerbated by the fact that no characters in the stories have personalizing details or names (except for T'Challa, an existing character in *Black Panther*) and by the fact that suffering is neatly tied up in a 'happily-ever-after' ending with characters overcoming racist violence, slavery, and poverty. The force of algorithmic bias on display here should come as no surprise: the phenomenon has been thoroughly documented by scholars, artists, and theorists alike.[68] Bias is hardwired into neural net models, which operate, as Amoore explains, on an abductive logic, making determinations about the meaning of words in the prompt based on probability. Bertram writes that in this project, she is trying to "explore and manipulate [these] biases" rather than "eliminate" them (6).

[68] See the work of Meredith Broussard, Safiya Noble, Virginia Eubanks, Cathy O'Neil, Ruha Benjamin, Zac Blas, and Stephanie Dinkins, among others.

Sherman et al. use archival theories of absence to conceptualize new approaches to algorithmic bias, arguing that all archives are incomplete; there is always something missing from the data. Echoing Gordon's discussion of ghosts, Sherman et al. "position absence [in a dataset] as an active presence, an influence despite its non-physical manifestation…. even though something (data, algorithmic processes, documentation) may not be physically present, its impact or influence is still felt and recognized" (5). Absence, they argue, "provides a way of thinking through the biases in the data that cannot ever be fixed" (2). In Bertram's work with GPT-3, we see the impact of the absence of Black voices and stories in the model's training materials and its engineers.

When set next to Warpland 2.0's responses, which are emphatically literary, complex, and personal, GPT-3's bias seems even more blatant. For example, one of Warpland 2.0's responses to the prompt "tell me a Black story" reads:

> And I'll tell them stories I've heard. I'll read them poetry. I read to them a great deal of Langston Hughes's poetry, and I'll read them some of my own work. I want to make them as literary as possible... I want them to know that there are books out there that concern them, that are written by them and about them. I want them to have that understanding…. (28)

In contrast to GPT-3's responses, Warpland 2.0 feels more intimate, a participant in the story rather than an outside or abstract observer. Warpland's responses are written in first person, by a narrator who declares in another story, "I am not a poet like Gwendolyn Brooks, but I am a poet, and I feel that these stories are worth telling" (32). Interestingly, this passage continues: "…I am going to keep writing poetry until the day I die…. And when the time comes that I can't do it anymore, then I'll be dead and buried with my poetry in my hand" (32). It concludes: "But even then, the poetry will still be there for those who are interested in it," describing another way that media can speak beyond death (32). Another story by Warpland 2.0, addressed to young Black reporters, ends with an emphatic call to action: "Report on everything you can see! Report on

everything you can hear! Report on everything you can feel!" (36). The second person address in this passage adds to the intimate quality of Warpland 2.0's narrative voice, implicating the reader in the story. The personality, detail, and affect of Warpland 2.0's responses read as an antithesis to GPT-3's bland stereotypes.

Bertram opens up space for the model, as Amoore would put it, to give an account of itself. LLMs are not databases, a distinction blurred by contemporary implementations. While it would not be correct to say that LLMs are content neutral, they understand language based on the proximity of different concepts in their training data. Rather than excelling at factual recall, language models excel at mimicry, especially of style and genre. Bertram's project clearly illustrates this mimicry, showing how Brooks's voice carries through in this experimental, computational extension. Both Vara's and Bertram's work also illustrate how the technology's mimicry recreates existing social narratives, both harmful—like the dehumanizing stereotypes produced by GPT-3 in Bertram's project—and benign—like the image of running through grief in "Ghosts."

While Vara's writing makes up a substantial portion of "Ghosts," Bertram's authorship takes a different form. Apart from the introduction that opens the collection, the text that follows is all computer generated. However, as Bertram describes it, the process of training Warpland 2.0 is intimate and time-intensive, a different kind of authorship. There are many different ways to construct a corpus of texts for a digital project. Rather than scraping text from Project Gutenberg or adopting another hands-off approach, Bertram and her assistants typed the input by hand, a process that involved "read[ing] and reread[ing]" each text "countless times" (5). Unlike the LLMs released by OpenAI, Google, and Meta, which are trained on ever-growing quantities of data, too large for any one person to comprehend, Bertram's work "was not a project of quantity

or rapidity" but of careful curation and intimate engagement with an author's body of work (5). This process positions the work of text modeling not only as a generative act but also an interpretive one, as Bertram describes the texts generated by Warpland 2.0 as "a substantial and significant interaction with the patterns of [Brooks's] written language" (6). The process of writing with Warpland 2.0 brought Bertram back to Brooks's writing, too. She describes finding a poem generated by Warpland 2.0 "so rich and compelling in its use of language and imagery," only to later realize that "the lines weren't poetic hallucinations of a complex model at all—the lines were from Brooks, verbatim, untouched" (8). In both these ways, Bertram suggests, Warpland 2.0 does more than generate text.

While this chapter has focused on LLMs as a tool for producing text, the models also 'read' text in the form of training materials and prompts. LLMs are an interpretive tool as well as a writing tool. Lori Emerson's concept of readingwriting offers one way of thinking about this "strange blurring" or "feedback loop between reading and writing" produced by large language models (163-164). Although Emerson writes about earlier examples, focusing on search algorithms in particular, she defines readingwriting as "the practice of writing through the network, which as it tracks, indexes, and algorithmizes every click and every bit of text we enter… is itself constantly reading our writing and writing our reading" (163). Readingwriting offers a conceptual framework for understanding the ways that large language models vampirize our writing and our data, only to repackage them to sell back to us. The concept also sets up a comparison with the models of networked reading and life writing I've explored in earlier chapters.

Through an analysis of Vara and Bertram's projects, I have shown that early experimental texts written with GPT-3 offer a potentially clearer picture of the logics underlying

such tools. I have argued that LLMs are not a replacement for the human author, pointing instead to the ways that writing has always been shaped by external interlocutors, mediated both by writing technologies and human feedback. I used the lens of ghostwriting, a practice that stretches from its Spiritualist origins in the twentieth century through to thanabot apps today, to illustrate the history of that technological mediation and to emphasize the ways that new technologies have historically been seen as imbued with a kind of magic, haunted quality. Dominant frameworks for discussing AI writing attempt to have it both ways: highlighting its mediated quality, centering the fact that it was written by a computer, while reading its writing as unmediated, no different from human writing. The dialogic structure of Vara's "Ghosts" emphasizes the project as the result of a collaborative process as GPT-3's responses shape Vara's writing and thought. Revealing the clichéd quality of many of GPT-3's responses, Vara highlights the abductive logic of large language models. In turn, the moments that are most real or true in the essay come through glitches, moments when the model begins to break down. Bertram's *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content* represents another approach to writing with large language models. Setting up a contrast between her thoughtfully curated model, Warpland 2.0, and the base GPT-3 model, Bertram illustrates the harmful consequences of the technology's abductive logic, its tendency to reinforce existing biases, stereotypes, erasures, and hierarchies. In turn, she turns that tendency against itself, showing the importance that training material has on a model's output. Warpland 2.0 returns text that, at times, simply regurgitates Gwendolyn Brooks's actual writing, but at other times, alters or approximates it in interesting ways. Bertram's manipulation of the logic of GPT-3 highlights its potential for resistance as well as its tendency to reinforce the status quo and its implication in existing systems of power.

More than any other chapter in this dissertation, the content, import, and context of this chapter changed during the course of my research and writing. Today, many of the seams that Vara and Bertram pry open have been patched and reinforced with each new update to the capabilities of LLMs. Both of these examples used GPT-3, a version of OpenAI's large language model that, even by the time I am finishing this project, has been outdated for years. The quantity of training data has ballooned, and the quality of LLMs' output has ostensibly improved as well. Current versions of GPT are less prone to hallucinations and recursive repetition, more regularly generating the generic, repetitive voice identified by Walsh et al. Yet, Bertram and Vara have, along with other artists, musicians, and authors, expressed a preference for earlier versions of the model that were less polished. Bertram says that she prefers GPT-2 for its "quirky" responses, "interesting conversations and uncanny and poetic slippages" (4). With newer versions of the model, the contingent, literary, and experimental qualities of the technology are tempered by the model's polished responses.

These changes point to a number of important areas for future research. First, how do the changes to the tech today alter the moral value and creative possibilities inherent in these kinds of exploratory projects? Vara recently released a collection of personal essays, titled *Searches: Selfhood in the Digital Age,* which includes sections written as conversations with ChatGPT. The collection includes a slightly altered version of "Ghosts"—the ending changed so that Vara has the last word. Future scholarship might contrast newer pieces such as *Searches,* written in collaboration with ChatGPT, with earlier writing from GPT-3 to analyze how authors like Vara reflect on these changes. Second, since I began thinking about this topic, reports have come out detailing the degree to which these models have been trained on contemporary books still under copyright, without consent from their authors. Given the impact that training material can have

on the model's output, as Bertram's work shows, these revelations raise important questions about the legal concept of the author. Finally, now that members of the broader public have access to AI technologies in their everyday lives, I would like to explore how and why people actually use LLMs. Many stories speculate about the risk they pose to writers or reference the trouble they cause in classrooms, but a deeper understanding of how people think these technologies work and what they think they are capable of doing is essential for any analysis of their potential, literary or otherwise.

Conclusion

The texts I read for this project are held together by a central question—the same question that drives this project: what is the role of the book in the present? In exploring answers to this question, the featured authors express a desire to write the present as it is happening. For example, Smith frames the *Seasonal Quartet* as an experiment with what the book can do: each novel was written and published over the course of a year, drastically accelerating conventional timelines for publication. Unlike Smith, whose writing focuses on current events, Zambreno's *Drifts* voices and historicizes the desire for unmediated self-representation, drawing on literary and art historical precedents in foregrounding the narrator's desire to make the day a paragraph. These authors' attempts struck me, at first, as oddly misplaced. Why not pick one of the many tools that enable real-time interactions, like live-streaming or posting on social media? Through reading these texts together, I have come to see the counter-intuitive nature of this desire to write the present as itself productive because it draws our attention to the fact that, like the book, these newer forms of digital media are and will always be tools of mediation. The chapters in this dissertation have begun to tell a new story about the relationship between books and digital media, one built on contingency and creative agency rather than replacement and impasse. From my close readings and interviews, the picture of the contemporary book that emerges is one that is strangely *new*. Each chapter is interested, too, in the role of the book in the present, and this project begins to sketch out the emerging structures of feeling indexed by the changing role that the book plays in readers' daily lives. Raymond Williams describes how art and literature can

reveal "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt," making visible emergent forms of sociality (structures of feeling) before they sediment into past forms that are easily identified and analyzed (132-133).[69] Williams further argues that art is both read and made as "a formative process, within a specific present" (129). Similarly, Ali Smith describes the book as a medium with a particular affinity for the ever-unfolding present. She explores how the book is remade with each reading, describing the "present–tense ability" of the book in which "words… act like the notes heard in music do, making from word to word the present moment always in reference to what went before, what's on its way, in a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph…" (32). This dissertation has explored the present-tense of the book in both ways: from the active, agential experience of networked reading to the way that authors and readers are using books, in conjunction with digital media, to create and share the self.

The novels I read for this dissertation embrace life writing and realist aesthetics to emphasize how the book is itself always already mediated. While digital media aspires to evoke the feeling of an unmediated experience (even if it cannot deliver on this promise), books require readers to recognize and embrace mediation. In *Immediacy,* Kornbluh argues that immediacy is the cultural style of the present, the "master category for making sense of twenty-first century cultural production" that results from the always-on flow of too late capitalism (6). Immediacy occurs when "art renounces its project of mediation," resulting in work that privileges urgency and presence; she notes that it is a "cultural style that imagines itself unstyled" (5). In her chapter on immediacy in literature, Kornbluh treats autofiction as a paradigmatic example of a phenomenon of "proliferating realisms" that she sees in everything from the prominence of first-person narration to the personal essay boom. For Kornbluh, this genre shift represents literature

[69] While I haven't engaged affect theory directly in this project, I see Williams's structures of feeling as a kindred concept. He describes structures of feeling as "… not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought" (133).

"resigning the potential of writing to estrange, abstract, and mediate" as well as its potential "to collectivize and convoke" (112). Kornbluh suggests that this potential resides in literary tools like third-person perspective, frame narratives, or intertextual references, but ultimately, she seems to tie mediation in literature primarily to fictionality.

As this dissertation has shown, however, authors have many tools beyond fictionality with which they can push readers to pay attention to the book as a medium, and in turn, invite the modes of critical reflection and analysis that our moment demands. By working at the edges of life writing and autobiographical genres, the authors I read for this project emphasize the book's status as one part of a broader media environment. The book used to be taken for granted as the default way that we organize, share, and encounter information of all kinds. That perspective has begun to change: the novelists I read for this project and the Bookstagram users I talked to all echoed the distinction made by book historians between the book as an object, a distinct form of media, and the text it contains. Today, digital technologies are the new default, from the search engine to, recently, the large language models that people use to find answers to their questions. This recognition, I hope, can help us to notice how digital technologies now structure the way we engage with information, stories, and one another.

Chapters 1 and 2 comprise my first argument. People have always used media to construct a sense of self, identifying with specific characters or characteristics and making sense of their lived experience through the narrative models available to them. These first chapters show how people continue to use books to construct a sense of self, focusing especially on the ways that an attachment to books interacts with social media's culture of self-branding. Online, we create competing versions of ourselves, carefully constructing these self-brands for different audiences. Chapter 1 explores how that culture of self-branding shapes literary communities

online. Focusing on the experiences of the Bookstagram users I interviewed, I argue that Bookstagram is characterized by a conflict between what users want from the platform (a sense of community, a space for authentic self-expression) and the kind of content and interaction that Instagram facilitates, which are driven by the central role that advertising plays on the platform. In addition to discussing community and influence on the platform, the chapter ends with an analysis of the ways that identity and diversity function on Bookstagram as both a version of self-branding and as a substantive commitment that has concrete impacts on the way people read, purchase, and promote authors and books.

Chapter 2 picks up the idea of self-branding, showing how authors use the genre of autofiction, and its dual relationship to fact and fiction, to illustrate contemporary subjectivity in the wake of social media. Through close readings of novels by Sheila Heti, Patricia Lockwood, and Kate Zambreno, I explore these authors' different takes on the anxiety and exhaustion arising from the work of being a self, work that has only been exacerbated by the internet's new forms of self-representation. These authors illustrate the desire to document life as it is happening—one of the core conceits of social media—as an understandable response to feelings of alienation, fragmentation, and isolation in the present and as part of a longer historical phenomenon. However, they also suggest that this desire for unmediated self-expression is an impossibility, using autofiction's metaleptic qualities to emphasize the fact that, like social media, real life is also the product of mediation.

The second half of this project focuses on how books serve as tools to help us represent and navigate overwhelm and uncertainty in the face of our algorithmic culture (Striphas). The third chapter posits a theory of networked reading, arguing that the post-digital book can serve as a model for how to navigate overwhelming media environments with a sense of agency. I read

novels attempting to document the present as it is unfolding (on a societal, rather than a personal scale) by Ruth Ozeki, Ali Smith, and Valeria Luiselli, all of which adopt a hyper-citational mode; I argue that these novels both model and invite their readers to track down some of these references for themselves. In doing so, these novels highlight the ways that search engines amplify the contingency always inherent in the act of reading.

The final chapter argues that literature helps to break open the black box surrounding large language models, helping non-experts become better readers of this new technology and the texts it generates. I analyze experimental writing by Vauhini Vara and Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, whose texts, in different ways, reveal the underlying logic of probability that drives LLMs. By emphasizing the fact that authorship is always a collaboration and is always shaped to varying degrees by the tools we use as we write, these texts disrupt the dominant framework for talking about AI as a technology that will create either an apocalyptic or a utopic future. Instead, as Bertram's project shows us, unless we alter the corpus of texts on which LLMs are trained, they will continue to reproduce the present. In this final chapter, I also explore the central role that ghosts and ghostwriting play both in literary representations of AI and in actual applications of the technology, examining the persistent fantasy that we could build a machine that would allow us to continue to talk to our loved ones, even after their death.

While it is uncontroversial to claim that studying internet culture and digital technology can help us to understand contemporary literature and book culture, this dissertation has also shown that this relationship is reciprocal: studying contemporary literature and book culture can help us to understand internet culture and digital technology. Chapter 1 uses online bookish communities to explore the ways that influencer marketing and the need to produce a legible self-brand comes into contact and conflict with the forms of social connection and self-

expression that some, if not most, social media users are actually seeking. It also offers an interesting complement to existing research on influencer culture, highlighting an online community where expertise and amateurism sit comfortably side-by-side, equally present as sources of authority. Chapter 2 examines works of autofiction that, I argue, shed light on the ways that social media and self-branding are shaping our experience of subjectivity. Finally, Chapters 3 and 4 draw a contrast between the forms of imaginative, creative, and personal interpretation that books offer and the algorithmically-determined stories and answers offered by search engines and AI. Chapter 3 shows how search engines, rather than delivering direct and easy answers, can often lead readers astray, emphasizing the ephemeral and contingent qualities of the internet as an archive. Looking at texts written with large language models, Chapter 4 shows how literary methods help make visible the logic of these new writing tools.

When I have described my dissertation to others, I have heard countless stories about people who just don't have the time or attention to read anymore. As I described in the introduction, news coverage of studies raising fears (again) about the death of the book have, to some degree, substantiated the personal stories I've heard. People *are* reading fewer books, and many are worried about the decline of reading. But I've found myself wondering: why does the decline of reading spark so much fear? What are people afraid we—as a society—will lose if the book were to truly disappear?

Much of this project has been framed as an assertion that the book is not dead, that it remains relevant even in our increasingly online world. Here, I want to nuance this claim, suggesting that the book is a kind of ghostly presence, haunting a society characterized by the loss of agency and "complex personhood" at the hands of tech companies that shape how we

interact with technology and, increasingly, how we interact with one another.[70] Building on my discussion of Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* from Chapter 4, I propose that the print book haunts not only the texts written with large language models, but also the authors and readers I covered in each chapter of this dissertation. This project explores how digital technology shapes contemporary iterations of three discrete yet interconnected concepts: reading, books, and readers. Throughout this project, I've traced how contemporary ideas about reading and readers have been shaped in relation to both digital technology and the print book, drawing on frameworks from media studies and book history—fields with a robust understanding of the ways that the affordances of particular mediums shape the ways that readers/users/viewers engage with their content.

Print books invite us to engage with them in particular ways. Everything from the type of paper used to the binding, the formatting, and the genre shapes the process by which we read any given book. The portability of a paperback, for instance, makes it perfect for reading on the go, while the thin paper of a textbook invites readers to rifle through the pages in search of particular information. In this dissertation, my discussion of networked reading touched on the specific material qualities of the book that ask readers to embrace contingency or uncertainty or to exercise interpretive creativity, drawing a specific contrast to other modes of organizing and navigating information online, such as the hyperlink. The physical qualities of the print book also shape cultural understandings of what it means to be a reader. In my interviews with

[70] Gordon offers an elegant formulation of complex personhood that, among other things, "means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others…. that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward…. [and that at] the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (4-5).

Bookstagram users, many described reading and buying more physical books as a result of seeing the piles of books other users posted on social media. Like the bookshelves in OpenAI's old offices, print books can act as props for self-branding on social media. In addition to this more cynical observation, though, trends on social media have cultivated a particular interest in and knowledge of the material qualities of print books among users. Though I'm certainly familiar with them, I did not know the term for "deckled edges" until I came across it on social media. Viral videos on TikTok explaining the science of the particular smell of old books or showing processes like paper marbling or book binding encourage users to recognize the specificity of print books. In turn, the publishing industry seems to be taking notice of this interest in physical books. Walking into a bookstore in early 2025, I noticed a new trend that seems, to me, a clear response to this online interest in the book as an object. A surprising number of books had colorful edges, adorned with patterns and colors coordinated with their cover and/or dust jacket. One of the most intriguing conclusions I've made from this research is the degree to which digital media has sparked interest in the print book as an object, not just as a vehicle for information or narratives.

Gordon writes that the ghost "always registers" both the present "in which we are inextricably and historically entangled and the longing for the arrival of a future" that is "undiminished" (207-208). If the ghostly presence of the book demands a different future, what are the qualities of that future? What desires do our ongoing attachments to the physical book "register" (Gordon 207)?[71] What behaviors does it "incite" (207)? What are the affordances of reading a print book that set it apart other forms of media?

[71] Even when people find themselves reading less, after all, they often remain attached to the desire to read more.

I've argued in these pages that the material book is something people have used and continue to use to understand themselves, crafting our own life narratives out of the inner library of narrative media we've engaged with. In Chapter 1, I explored Bookstagram users whose attachments to the book and to reading led them to search for a community of fellow readers. For the readers whose stories I tell in this chapter, books are a tool for learning and for self-discovery, and reading is driven by curiosity and a desire for connection. The Bookstagram users I talked to saw writing and talking about their reading experiences as a way of opening up to the people around them. The way we interpret or respond to books, this chapter emphasized, is personal: writing about our own reading processes is a way of making ourselves visible, whether on a Bookstagram profile or in the pages of an academic monograph.

Chapter 3 emphasized the agency and creativity involved in the act of reading a book. The print book encourages a kind of open-mindedness and a recognition of the importance of different perspectives. Reading is contingent and multiple, full of possibility. At the same time, reading is also limited: there is no way to ever pin down or map out every way that someone might interpret a passage or an intertextual reference. Both Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 call for embracing uncertainty and narrow or localized meaning-making, probing the power of the book's epistemology of "not-knowing" as an antidote to the totalizing "strong" theories behind anxious doomscrolling as well as quantitative methods of big data (Sedgwick). Chapters 2 and 4 explore reading and writing as embodied practices, practices that are shaped by our interactions with media and technology, with one another, and with our sense of self. If the book is haunting the present, these chapters point to a desire to hold onto the *processes* of reading and writing, processes that are intimately connected to the specific affordances of the print book, as well as the ideas and ideals it has come to stand in for in contemporary American culture.

While writing this dissertation, I've thought a lot about the interrelated processes of reading and writing as forms of attention. As I describe in the introduction, as a child, I was a voracious reader. I loved books because they kept my mind busy, and I would churn through books faster than my parents thought possible. In retrospect, I've come to realize that I also loved books because losing myself in a book was a socially acceptable—even celebrated—way of letting my brain just *be*. I learned that I have ADHD during the pandemic, around a year after I started working on this dissertation, which has unfolded in parallel with a journey to make sense of my own, somewhat idiosyncratic, relationship to attention. Contrary to what the name implies, ADHD names an inability to regulate attention rather than a deficit of it. For me, ADHD has primarily shown up as an ability to focus—intensely—on things that catch my interest. When I was reading a book as a kid, almost nothing could pull me out of that imaginary world. In most other parts of my childhood, though, my ADHD was a liability. I struggled to finish assignments in school that seemed pointless or uninteresting. I had to work hard in conversations to stop myself from blurting out my thoughts in the middle of someone else's story. Books were a sanctuary from these pressures, and in their pages, I saw characters who, like me, were always distracted by a book.

As a result of my own complicated relationship to attention, I have mixed feelings about the notion that technology is destroying our attention. On the one hand, I do think that features like the infinite scroll of the newsfeed push us towards modes of attention that flit from one thing to the next, preventing us from sitting with an issue or an image or a text long enough to think critically about it. As I describe in the introduction, much of the fear surrounding the death of the book is reactionary, a response to feeling like social media platforms and internet culture are changing our brains—our attention spans, our emotional regulation, even our interests—in ways

we are powerless to change. It is increasingly impossible to imagine opting out of the internet, a shift that accelerated during the pandemic lockdowns. In this context, many people report struggling to find the mental capacity to engage in the kind of creative, immersive experience that reading can offer. As someone with ADHD, I am particularly susceptible to the addictive design of most social media platforms. But other factors, like overwhelm, anxiety, depression, and exhaustion, which are widespread in this period of growing precarity in the U.S., can also produce executive dysfunction. Both technological changes *and* social conditions make it harder to engage in the forms of creative and critical thought required by the present.

At the same time, in my own life, the mode of intense focus that shifts rapidly from one thing to the next is a source of joy and an expression of creativity and freedom. Focus is not always slow or deliberative—for me to stay focused and engaged, my mind and/or body need to be moving. As a kid, my reading looked like quiet, intense immersion to an outside observer. In practice, though, my reading was anything but: I skimmed through books at rapid speed, skipping around impulsively. While I certainly misinterpreted scenes and missed key details as a result, these methods of reading cultivated a strong capacity for creative, nonlinear, connective thinking. Often, conversations about books and attention seem to assume that reading requires deep, slow, careful focus. I include this autobiographical context in part to illustrate the other forms of attention that readers can bring to books, forms of attention that are no less critical or valuable.

I have gone back and forth about where or even if this autobiographical context fits in this project. Given my insistence on the individual quality of reading and writing, however, this dissertation felt incomplete without an acknowledgment of this parallel thought process that has shaped my perspective on reading, technology, and attention, even if it is not otherwise

addressed directly in these pages. Through this acknowledgment, I want to emphasize first the deeply personal and contingent nature of reading and the importance, as a scholar and a critic, of not assuming that one's own experience as a reader is generalizable. We all project ourselves onto the page in a way that, I believe, is important to acknowledge. Second, I hope this reflection can underline the complicated connections between technologies, modes of attention, and moral or critical potential, displacing the straightforward assumptions that structure public and academic discourse. Slow, quiet, contemplative modes of reading and thought are not necessarily the only route to critical analysis of the present, nor are they equally accessible to or productive for everyone. Lastly, the ability for kids to get so lost in a book that one is oblivious to the world is often venerated as a sign of precocious intelligence. For me, the obliviousness was a sign of ADHD—a sign no one knew to look out for given the dearth of scientific research on girls with ADHD at the time and rendered more invisible by the seemingly beneficial quality of the activity I was so absorbed in. My point here is not that the ability to lose oneself in a book is inherently symptomatic, but instead that attaching moral value to certain forms of media or modes of attention is fraught, oversimplifying something complex and highly personal, with real consequences, particularly for neurodivergent people.

Throughout this project, I've argued that books, like the ghosts that Gordon describes, ask us to engage in "a different way of seeing"—in my case, reading—"that is less mechanical, more willing to be surprised, to link imagination and critique" (Gordon 24). Reading has always had a networked, social nature. Books have long incorporated other mediums, from the earliest annotated manuscripts to the photographs included in some of the contemporary novels I read for this project. Today, as this project has shown, the book's immersion in a post-digital media environment has heightened some of these qualities, from the contingency and creativity of

networked reading to the desire for bookish community on social media. Books ask something of their readers. Unlike forms of visual media that dominate our digital lives today, books invite their readers to imagine scenes, characters, and settings, filling in the missing sensory details for themselves. As physical objects, books also hold onto the traces of their readers, from the smudged fingerprint to the dogeared corner or the annotation in the margins. Gordon argues that the ghost registers the limits of the present, representing a desire for a better, "undiminished," future (208). This dissertation is my attempt to identify what distinguishes the book in the digital age without resorting to nostalgia or simplistic binaries. I have argued that the book's imbrication in a broader media environment heightens the qualities of creativity, curiosity, contingency, and non-linear thought that constitute the reading process. This is not a nostalgic argument; neither I nor the readers and texts I have analyzed express a desire to return to an earlier understanding of the book or to life before the internet. Instead, it is a call to take seriously the new practices of reading, talking about, and connecting over books made possible by the post-digital media environment.

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