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"I KNOW WHAT NOTHING MEANS": NOSTALGIA, HOPE, AND THE POSTMODERN SEARCH FOR THE SUBLIME

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POSTMODERN SEARCH FOR THE SUBLIME

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Abstract

Amid simultaneous crises of self, nation, digital citizenship, global health, climate change, and socio-political polarization, to name but a few of the catastrophes that seem to define life in the global West in the twenty-first century, where do we find hope? *Do* we find it at all? Is there any hope to be found? These are the questions that serve as the genesis for this undertaking in which I locate the origin of these crises far before the events of the 2016 and 2020 elections, far before even the panic of Y2K. I begin my examination of hope in contemporary American society in the literature of the 1970s and conclude with an examination of hyper-contemporary fiction, tracing essential threads of postmodernism, transhumanism and posthumanism, nostalgia and—via my coining of a new application of the term—*post*-nostalgia through the work of writers including Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, Jeanette Winterson, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jennifer Egan, and Don DeLillo. Postmodernism has long been accused of creating without feeling or emotion, an accusation that tends to stagnate within specifically aesthetic applications of the term. I, instead, ground my argument in material applications of postmodernism, primarily to resist the common "hierarchy of value," as Amy Hungerford terms it, created by the traditional valorization of primarily white, male thinkers that occurs in postmodern discourse. My investigation is divided into two parts that straddle the divide between nostalgia and post-nostalgia, which I argue are the two central forces that have impacted the experience of hope in Western society over the past fifty years, and I employ frameworks outlined by Sianne Ngai, Legacy Russell, Christina Sharpe, and O'neil Van Horn, among others, in determining how we *can* find hope as resistance and, ultimately, as surrender.

Introduction

> "What do you think about…the man at the trailer camp who told his wife he was going out
> for a walk in order to talk to God."
> "I wasn't listening, Maria. Just give me the punch line."
> "There isn't any punch line, the highway patrol just found him dead, bitten by a rattlesnake."
> "I'll say there isn't any punch line."
> "Do you think he talked to God?" Carter looked at her.
> "I mean do you think God answered? Or don't you?"[1]

The fundamental yearning of Maria Wyeth for any degree of certainty regarding the sublime has been ingrained within me since my first reading of Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970). Or perhaps it's not Maria's yearning as much as it is the ambiguity Didion leaves for her readers to sort out for themselves. *Was* it divine intervention that led the rattlesnake to the man? Was it the *lack* of divine intervention that caused his death? Does it matter?

As a child, my mother and I were regular church-goers. I can remember going to vacation bible school during school holidays and we had a well-worn book of grace that we read from before dinner. At one point, we used to walk about a mile to get to our church on Sundays, my mother making up for the length of the walk by coming up with silly games. I would have—and in fact did—identify myself as a religious person. At least until I was around age fifteen. At this point, my mother and I were living in one of the most devoutly Catholic countries in the world and we had stopped going to church.

The drop-off was gradual. For a few years, we kept telling each other that we were "church shopping" and just couldn't find the right one. By the time we arrived in the Philippines, we hadn't been regular attendees in years. I attended a private international school just outside Manila that was Episcopalian, which meant all students attended a weekly "chapel" service that took place in our auditorium and was more assembly than worship service, though our resident

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[1] Didion, 113

Father said prayers throughout. We held school-wide Eucharist services once a month in the gym

and I felt conflicted about lining up to receive communion. Some services I did, others I stayed

seated. The strangest part about our stark shift in religion, at least to me, was that my mother and

I never talked about it. Finally, as an undergraduate no longer living under the same roof, I

worked up the courage to ask her about it. My mother, a white liberal woman who cried upon

having the chance to vote for a woman for president during the 2016 election, and then cried

upon watching the live results confirm that the country had not, in fact, elected her, sighed when

I asked. "I just don't feel a lot of hope these days," she said. She was referencing a familiar

sentiment.

I was a college freshman in the fall of 2016. Several professors canceled class the day

following the election results, and I remember my best friend and I walking to buy ice cream

from the on-campus store and eating it in silence. A pervasive sense of *how did this happen?*

settled over everyone, and nobody really seemed to know what to do with that feeling.

Regardless of the political reality of the moment, though, my mother's answer was incomplete.

We had stopped going to church long before the events of 2016. Why was she identifying her

lack of hope with the contemporary political situation?

Calvin Warren, a scholar who writes often about hope and politics, conceives of hope as a

kind of

> "spiritual currency" that we are given as an inheritance to invest in various aspects of
> existence. The issue, however, is that there is often a *compulsory investment* of this
> spiritual substance in the Political. This is the forced destination of hope—it must end up
> in the Political and cannot exist outside of it…the politics of hope posits that one *must*
> have a politics to have hope; politics is the natural habitat of hope itself.[2]

My mother, though hardly the Black nihilist that Warren describes in his article, was certainly

suffering from this forced cohesion of hope to the political at a time where the political appeared

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[2] Warren, 219

particularly bleak. And though this feeling was not a new one, the 2016 presidential election served as the final crack in the dam.

These questions about hope—*who has it? Who doesn't? why?*—reemerged during my final undergraduate semester in the spring of 2020. The outbreak of Covid-19 that shuttered the world did not leave my little collegiate enclave undisturbed. We never returned to campus after our March break, and our well-earned commencement ceremony was postponed for years; I graduated in a rather unceremonious Zoom meeting sitting on my couch. And, of course, this was only the beginning of a multiple-year period characterized by words like *lockdown*, *quarantine*, *isolation*, and *death*. I don't reopen these relatively fresh wounds carelessly. I aim here to better understand the origin of my interest in the societal experience of hope and, through that experience, God. Especially when conducting an examination of this contemporary moment in Western society, it is simply impossible to thoroughly investigate the cultural *oeuvre* without examining hope.

The Method

The investigation I conduct here will be confined to the United States and, more broadly, the global concept of "the West." This is a result of my own scholarly familiarity and because of the overwhelming influence of Western culture on the international cyber landscape. This scope, therefore, places each text that I examine firmly within the entrenched Judeo-Christian and Abrahamic traditional religious context of the United States. As David Newheiser puts it in his *Hope in a Secular Age*:

> Medieval theologians identified hope as one of three virtues that are central to
> relationship with God. In cultures that are marked by a Judeo-Christian past, it is possible
> to detect echoes of this tradition when people talk about hope, even among those who no
> longer identify as religious. This makes hope an important site for reflection on the place

of religion in secular societies.[3]

Despite the rather popular belief, as echoed by scholars like Charles Taylor (2007) and Jordan

Carson (2020), that America—and broadly, the West—has become a profoundly secular society,

the "echoes of this [religious] tradition" reverberate throughout every aspect of our culture. So

though Maria's question of God's presence may not matter to the dead man any longer, her

question has proved itself to be a prescient inquiry, especially for those disciplines—theology,

sociology, philosophy, the arts—that conduct such existential examinations.

Perhaps the most impactful cultural development of the late twentieth and early

twenty-first centuries has been the ushering in of the Internet Age. Immediate gratification, the

illusion of global connection, and the increasing presence of transhuman technology at our

fingertips all have an outsized influence on our understanding of the societal moment. That

includes influencing how we locate, express, and lose hope. As such, my investigation will span

two distinct periods: pre- and post-Internet. I will begin my examination with the literature of the

1970s (Part I) and end with hyper contemporary fiction from the late 2010s and early 2020s (Part

II). There are particular reasons for my selection of these distinct time periods, which I explain in

turn at the beginning of each respective section.

Through my examination of hope as expressed through the language of the sublime, I aim

to make an argument applicable to both the scholarly realm and to the world outside the walls of

the academy. Theories of hope did not soothe me amidst the ravages of the pandemic; I did not

turn to scholarly journals and academics in my despair. I, like so many others, turned to art as my

balm.[4] In the service of this aim, I have tried to pay particular attention to the creation of equity

in my citational practice throughout my project as an active form of resistance against the

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[3] Newheiser, 3

[4] See: Filippo Ascolani et al., "Art Consumption and Well-Being During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Research Report," *Art & Wellbeing Project*, 2020.

systemic exclusion and devaluing of continually marginalized identities. I credit, and thank, Sara

Ahmed with my familiarity of the concept and employment of the language of citational practice.

Yuval Noah Harari remarks on the innately human quality of storytelling and myth

creation in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*:

> The truly unique feature of our language is not its ability to transmit information about men and lions. Rather, it's the ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all. As far as we know, only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled…The ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature of Sapiens language.[5]

What Harari calls "speak[ing] about fictions," I'd call a fundamental quality of belief. Humans

do not have to experience something for themselves before they share it with someone else. Our

language allows us to share and receive information on the basis of *belief*. This is why I join

Alexandra Glavanakova in echoing the point made by Peter Boxall (2015):

> The novel in the twenty-first century…"allows us to imagine and to make new worlds, to fashion new forms of accommodation between art and matter." The novel form seems to be best equipped to answer questions arising "under an emerging global regime that is almost unreadable to us."[6]

When conducting such an examination about hope, belief, God, and technology in our society,

the novel proves to be a particularly apt magnifying glass with which to focus my research.

I feel compelled to provide this justification of an examination of literature and art as the

basis for an analysis of cultural phenomena—hope, religion, existential crisis—because of the

particular moment in academia in which we find ourselves. Over the past few centuries, the

death of God, of Man, of the Subject, and of the Genre have all been declared at various points,

revived at others, and so on *ad nauseam*, and the humanities appears the latest institution on the

chopping block. Perhaps the loudest death rattle to echo across the internet was Nathan Heller's

2023 essay, "The End of the English Major." Heller's bleak statistics about the freefalling

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[5] Harari, 31
[6] Glavanakova, 93

enrollment numbers in humanities departments across the United States, and indeed the world, traveled at warp speed around the internet, traded by weary academics and their even wearier students, reflecting an increasingly uncomfortable reality for scholars and academics in the field.

Perhaps, then, my insistence on conducting an investigation with tangible implications is born out of more than my urge to discover answers that satisfy my own long-standing questions about hope in the contemporary age. Perhaps I am merely replicating the sublime-seeking, death-avoidant behaviors of my own test subjects by conducting my examination in the first place! Perhaps it is possible to do both at once. As Deborah Nelson writes, "in place of cleverness, the intellectual must risk perplexity and lack of mastery."[7] This investigation is my risk.

The Argument

My argument is divided into two parts that straddle the divide between nostalgia and post-nostalgia, which I argue are the two central forces that have impacted the experience of hope on a societal scale. I begin with my examination of postmodern literature from the 1970s in Part I, literature that is quintessentially *nostalgic*. The postmodernists of this time were confronting widespread social unrest born of the Vietnam War, the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, and the general decline of trust in foundational values like the government, democracy, and religion. Unable to find hope in their contemporary situation, nor in looking to a future they considered bleak at best, the postmodernists were suspended in this state of nostalgia for the hope once afforded to previous generations. With my transition into contemporary literature in Part II, we transition across the digital divide and land firmly in the realm of *post-nostalgia,* a term that signifies a wholesale severing of the past in favor of the pursuit of

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[7] Nelson, 95

unknowability as afforded through technology. Trans- and posthuman technologies like cryogenic suspension allow humans the opportunity—or, at least, the illusion of opportunity—to engineer the future and, ostensibly, escape death. I will define these terms much more concretely in turn.

Chapter One outlines my reasons for defining the pre-digital postmodern era as essentially nostalgic and exploring how that nostalgia manifests in the literature of the 1970s. I analyze Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* here because the novel was born specifically of the author's nostalgic impulse and centers itself around familiar themes of God, death, and hopelessness. In Chapter Two, I examine nostalgia as resistance, a particularly powerful phenomenon for Black American postmodernists of the 70s that has strong resonance in our current cultural moment. In this pursuit, I analyze Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and apply the critical framework of "ugly feelings" as laid out by Sianne Ngai (2005). I also introduce the concepts of *resistance as surrender* and *surrender as hope* in Chapter Two. These are two central pillars that create the contemporary ability to find hope, and as such will re-emerge in the discussion of the state of hope today that I conduct in my Afterword.

In Part II of my study, I move from the 1970s into our contemporary moment. Whether or not this continuation is or should be defined as postmodernism, post-postmodernism, or metamodernism is not of particular concern to me. Instead, I define our current contemporary moment as firmly post-nostalgic. I define my application of *post-nostalgia* in contrast to familiar usages pioneered by scholars like Marianne Hirsch in my opening of Chapter Three. Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019) and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) are two potent examples of trans- and posthuman literature that explore the fundamental tensions at play within

post-nostalgia. In Chapter Four, I boldly proclaim our society a dystopia through my examination

of Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021).

These two works of posthuman fiction are brilliant reflections of the dystopian metaverse that

has come to define our contemporary world.

     In my Afterword, I offer a brief summation of the journey from nostalgia to

post-nostalgia and more concretely define (and defend) my declaration of dystopia, building

upon the framework of "critical dystopia" pioneered by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan

(2000), stretching the term beyond the boundaries of literature into a material lens through which

we can interact with our world today. I also apply the concepts of "dark hope" as laid out by

O'neil Van Horn (2019) and "glitching" as outlined by Legacy Russell (2020) in my concluding

thoughts about hope..

Part I

Where We Were

"The animal lives unhistorically: for it is contained in the present, like a number without
any awkward fraction left over; it does not know how to dissimulate, it conceals nothing
and at every instant appears wholly as what it is; it can therefore never be anything but
honest. Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure
of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a
dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with
his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy."
– Friedrich Nietzsche[8]

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[8] Friedrich Nietzsche and Daniel Breazeale. *Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1997): 61.

Chapter One

"The Nameless Era": Defining Nostalgic Postmodernism

Shaping the postmodern

In many ways, attempting to define the parameters of "postmodernism" is an absurd undertaking. Postmodernism is a "nameless era," characterized by its formlessness, its unknowing.[9] In many ways, it rejects definition outright. Unlike previous movements defined by their central catalyst or eponymous philosophy—the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment—postmodernism can only be understood as a departure, a movement from the *known* into the *unknown* as marked by the ending of familiar social orders like "ideology, art, or social class" without immediate heirs for replacement.[10]

If you were to ask a dozen scholars to locate "postmodernism," you would receive at least two dozen responses. There are theorists, critics, and scholars—see Lyotard (1979) and Carroll (1987) —who locate the postmodern in the construction of quintessential postmodern aesthetics. There are also thinkers like Brian McHale (1992) who locate the postmodern in the absence of any tangible quality whatsoever:

> No doubt there "is" no such "thing" as postmodernism. Or at least there is no such thing
> if what one has in mind is some kind of identifiable object "out there" in the world,
> localizable, bounded by definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about
> which we can all agree.[11]

The lack of agreement among scholars seems to be the one unifying quality of postmodernism, if there even "is" such a "thing."

The vague aesthetic qualities of postmodernism are less vital to my definition of the term as I employ it. In the vein of producing substantive work that spans both the academy and the

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[9] Drucker, xv
[10] Jameson, 1
[11] McHale, 1

vast world of the non-academy, I am much more concerned with the nuances of the material

application of postmodernism. That is why I loosely ally myself with yet another camp of

postmodern scholars who define the movement temporally, as a discrete time period that can be

measured in years. Frederic Jameson, Mark C. Taylor, and Stuart Jeffries "locate[] the moment of

postmodernism not in the fall of the Berlin Wall," as Malcolm Bradbury[12] does, "or at the close

of the century, but on 16 August 1971, when global finance ceased to be tied to the gold

standard." I share in Amy Hungerford's opinion that "the condition of postmodernism cannot be

neatly linked to genuinely transformative moments in the market," though I also selected the

1970s as my period of analysis for nostalgic postmodernism, and consider the decade a solid

answer when asked to loosely define the beginning of the movement.[13]

I landed on a start date of 1970 for several reasons. In the spring of 1970, President

Nixon announced the combined invasion of Cambodia by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, an

escalation of an already unpopular war.[14] Three days after Nixon's speech, four students on the

campus of Kent State University protesting the war were shot and killed by members of the Ohio

National Guard. This was a "shocking and seminal event—American soldiers gunning down

white students was unthinkable until it happened."[15] Despite the beginning of the ramp-down of

American involvement in Vietnam, vast societal divides that already existed between

generations, socioeconomic classes, and ideological adherents only continued to grow.

Much in the same way as the origin of the movement, the end of postmodernism is

widely disputed. By the latter half of the 1980s, some scholars were already professing

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[12] See: Malcolm Bradbury, "What was Post-Modernism? The arts in and after the Cold War," *International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (1995): 763-774. DOI: 10.2307/2625097.
[13] Hungerford, 412
[14] Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," April 30, 1970, recorded broadcast, 22:12, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lEzgBOcGIPo&t=17s&ab_channel=RichardNixonFoundation.
[15] Chris McGreal, "How the Kent State massacre marked the start of America's polarization." *The Guardian*, 2020.

exhaustion with the movement. Richard Schusterman (1989) invokes this aesthetically-grounded sense of overwhelm:

> Tired of postmodernism? There seems to be little sign of relief from this complex and vexed phenomenon or from our current, at times almost obsessive, concern with it. Not only theorists and critics of the arts but mainstream philosophers are now deeply preoccupied with the modernist-postmodernist debate, much as thinkers a few centuries ago were engaged in the war of the ancients and the moderns.[16]

Exhaustion with a topic does not necessarily indicate its imminent departure, as Schusterman himself notes, though it can be a good indication of a topic's relevance. Even by the arrival of the final decade in the 20th century, postmodernism was a "complex" and exhausting movement that had moved from the aesthetic plane of the arts into "mainstream" philosophy. And Schusterman was far from the first thinker to express this exhausted quality in relation to postmodernism; John Barth's infamous 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion" comes to mind here, though Barth dedicated a great deal of space on his page blasting "women's literature" as "secular news reports" as an ironic, if unintentional, representation of his title.

Thinkers like Barth contribute to the tainted lineage of postmodernism. One of the central issues when studying the movement—and often, I suspect, a reason the term is a dirty word in certain circles of academia—is the suggested "hierarchy of value," to use Hungerford's term, created by the valorization of primarily white, male thinkers, such as Derrida and Lyotard, as hallmarks of postmodernism. This imbalance favors the writing of authors like DeLillo and Pynchon over that of Morrison and Didion for more or less obvious reasons, dismissing "the writing of women and people of color…as naively realist or concerned more with social issues than with the development of literary aesthetics."[17] Applying postmodernism temporally instead of aesthetically appears the simplest method of resistance to this devaluing.

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[16] Shusterman, 605
[17] Hungerford, 411

If we accept the fact that postmodernism, though exhausting, was still raging around 1990, we are bound to ask when, exactly, did postmodernism end? *Has* it ended? If it has, where are we now? Not long after Schusterman published his exhaustion, Tom Turner, an urban planner and landscape architect, called for "the gradual dawn of a post-Postmodernism that seeks to temper reason with faith."[18] This appears to be the first published mention of *post-postmodernism*. Turner was quickly followed by Epstein's *trans-postmodernism* (1999), Kirby's *pseudo-modernism* (2006), and Vermeulen and van den Akker's *metamodernism* (2010). As I mentioned in my Introduction, I am not particularly interested in parsing out which heir of postmodernism we may or may not be entering in the contemporary moment; indeed, my project affirms the continuation of postmodern trends, aesthetics, and affects into contemporary, twenty-first century culture. Instead, I am arguing for the recognition of a nostalgic–post-nostalgic divide.

Before diving further into nostalgia, a quick word about hope. The social divisions of the 1970s were paralleled in the new wave of formalized, and complex, solidarity between activist groups in the movement for civil rights. The summer of 1970 saw the inaugural celebration of Pride by the Gay Liberation Front on the anniversary of the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn,[19] and in September 1970, the inaugural, and only, Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC) was held. Hosted by the Black Panthers, also in attendance were participants in the Women's and Gay Liberation movements, the Chicano and Asian-American movements, and the American Indian movement. Delegates from each of these groups—attendance was estimated around 6,000 people[20]—came together to rewrite the United States Constitution, though the

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[18] Tom Turner, *City as Landscape: A Post Post-modern View of Design and Planning* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995): 9.

[19] Irene Lorenzo, "The Stonewall uprising; 50 years of LGBT history," *Stonewall,* June 28, 2019. stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/stonewall-uprising-50-years-lgbt-history.

[20] Paul Delaney, "Panthers to Reconvene in Capital to Ratify Their Constitution," *The New York Times* Sept. 8, 1970.

culminating document declared the proclamation of "an international bill of rights" that stretched beyond the physical borders of the United States. This was a radical call to arms on behalf of all movements involved; the first article "denounced [the] rights to nationhood" of the U.S., deeming it "an international federation of bandits."[21]

Radical thought and protests were nothing new by 1970. The cooperation of multiple groups across identity intersections, however, marked a broad shift in the solidarity of movements. Among these was second wave feminism. Though "viewed as less pressing than, for example, Black Power or efforts to end the war in Vietnam," second wave feminism, albeit "increasingly theoretical" in its applications, began to move away from the "middle class, Western, cisgender, white women" centering of the first wave.[22] These movements—anti-war, Black Power, women's rights, and gay liberation—can serve as a neat dividing line between modernism and postmodernism. This division is seen in the material differences between first- and second-wave feminists, for example, or in the ideology of members of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements—an example I will return to in Chapter Two. This generational cleaving serves as a potent division for the purposes of this argument, especially as it relates to what I conceive as the *quintessential postmodern affect*: nostalgia.

The social movements of the 1970s were fueled by a unique kind of hope. This was not hope "in the conventional sense[,] almost indistinguishable from optimism."[23] This was much more akin to the hope that theologian Janet Martin Soskice describes as "a state of readiness which is displayed in action."[24] The act of protesting imperialist violence, of hosting the RPCC,

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[21] "Workshop on Internationalism and Relations with Liberation Struggles Around the World." *Revolutionary Peoples' Constitutional Convention*. Philadelphia: 1970. aboutplacejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/RPCC-WORKSHOP-REPORTS1.pdf.

[22] Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism," *Pacific: The Magazine of Pacific University Oregon* 41, no. 2 (2008).

[23] Van Horn, 279

[24] Soskice, 76

of celebrating Pride, of denouncing the subjugation of women to the patriarchal gender binary are all radical, hopeful acts.

And yet, the literature of the decade rarely reflects the hopeful mood of these activists and radicals. Instead, the art of the 70s reflects the fundamental uncertainty of Americans that, as the Marxists argue, was rooted in the economic stumbling of the period and, as the deconstructionists argue, was rooted in the collapse of familiar social institutions and structure. These root causes are not mutually exclusive—both contribute to a decade defined by "golden age policies without golden age structures," culminating in the perceived "demise of American hegemony."[25] Indeed, the sociopolitical and economic upheaval makes the 1970s an apt parallel for the 2020s, where many of these same perceived stumbles of American global 'dominance,' not to mention widening polarization and inequality, are resurfacing. The reason for this stymied, seemingly incompatible experience of hope and widespread pessimism, is nostalgia.

Nostalgic postmodernism

Svetlana Boym conducted a brilliant study of nostalgia in her 2001 book, *The Future of Nostalgia.* In it, Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement."[26] The quality of yearning for a bygone place, indeed even a place that "has never existed," is a key component of the phenomenon of postmodern nostalgia.

The horrors of the Vietnam War, the ongoing fight for civil rights, and the remnants of pervasive paranoia that diffused through society in the 1950s skewered an entire generation's sense of reality. As Wendy Steiner phrased so well:

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[25] Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet Schor, *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Postwar Experience*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990: vi.
[26] Boym xiii

> When the objectivity of knowledge and the dependability of interpretation are in doubt, the past becomes utterly elusive, unknowable in its own terms and thus purely subject to the present.[27]

The postmodernists of the 1970s were incapable of returning to the institutions that provided previous generations with a foundational sense of hope and futurity. That included common bastions of faith like religion, politics and government, and the reliability of social structure as propped up on pillars of economy, democracy, and justice. Unable to "live in a present without a future beyond consumer capitalism," and incapable of returning to the pre-Vietnam fantasy Americana of previous generations—a "home" that is rooted in the past and thus remains fundamentally inaccessible—the postmodernists were, essentially, trapped in time.[28]

Though both affects are characterized by yearning, *hope* longs for "a time 'not-yet-realized,' a future tense," while *nostalgia* longs for a time-gone-by, producing a profound sense of "displacement and loss."[29] Not only does nostalgia "mourn distances and disjunctures between times and spaces, [while] never bridging them,"[30] the affect actively contributes to a widening "disjuncture[]" between space and time through its fundamentally disruptive nature.

Jameson critiques nostalgia as a colonialist pastiche—"a statue with blind eyeballs." He views the "blank parody" of postmodern nostalgia as a mandated return to the styles of the past due to the "collapse" of substance on a cultural level. This, of course, is born from Jameson's belief that 'postmodern culture' is a contradiction in terms. He dismisses postmodernism as superficial, a "neutral practice of [] mimicry,"[31] to such a degree that he expresses dissatisfaction with the word nostalgia itself:

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[27] Steiner, 324
[28] Graham, 209
[29] Warren, 222
[30] Boym, 346
[31] Jameson, 17

> Nostalgia does not strike one as an altogether satisfactory word for such fascination
> (particularly when one thinks of the pain of a properly modernist nostalgia with a past
> beyond all but aesthetic retrieval), yet it directs our attention to what is a culturally far
> more generalized manifestation of the process in commercial art and taste, namely the
> so-called nostalgia film (or what the French call *la mode rétro*). Nostalgia films
> restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level,
> where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the
> iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation.[32]

Jameson's dismissal of postmodern nostalgia as mere "fascination" with "aesthetic retrieval" is a reductive winnowing of the postmodern cultural moment that underemphasizes the cultural response to the affective flatness of time. Jameson himself concedes the existence of a "desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past," but this understanding never extends to his examination of postmodern artists and cultural producers. Instead, his critique is rooted in well-deserved attacks on late-stage capitalism that unfortunately also blisters the artists of the era, dismissing their art entirely. Far from existing as simple appropriation or superficial aesthetic pastiche, nostalgia is an alluring affect that tantalizingly dangles satisfaction and comfort just out of reach.

Jameson refers to nostalgia as "colonization of the present" because of this teasing and his flippant usage of the term "colonization" perpetuates an explicitly white standard of scholarship.[33] I join Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in critiquing the "invasion" of the term colonization—and decolonization, as Tuck and Yang specifically reference in their essay—by metaphor. Tuck and Yang write:

> When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it
> recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a
> settler future.[34]

Jameson's usage of the word "colonization" in his exploration of postmodern nostalgia without reckoning with the implicit violence contained within the term works to "recenter[] whiteness" within the conversation, contributing to an already-tainted lineage of postmodernism. It is both

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[32] Jameson, 19
[33] Jameson, 20
[34] Tuck and Yang, 3

more accurate and more responsible to describe nostalgia as "disrupt[ing] time" through the suspension of the nostalgic within a collapse of time and space.[35]

A heap of broken images

Joan Didion's impulse to begin writing her 1970 novel *Play It As It Lays* was "nostalgia, that yearning for a place."[36] This longing is shared between Didion and her heroine Maria, who returns often to Silver Wells, a town that is no longer. "There isn't any Silver Wells today," Maria says during a run-in with a former family friend. "It's in the middle of a missile range."[37] One could say that Maria's returns to Silver Wells are purely mental journeys, but it is not always Maria making the journey to the town. Occasionally, Silver Wells visits Maria: "Silver Wells was with her again."[38] The town becomes a spectre that follows Maria no matter the physical separation. It is through the omnipresence of Silver Wells that nostalgia carves a tangible, physical space for itself on the page; the past haunting the present.

Though readers are made quite aware of the non-existence of Silver Wells, and though none of the narrative exists at the same *time* as Silver Wells, the story unfurls itself around the tiny former town. This is how Didion successfully substitutes "categories of space" for "categories of time"[39] in *Play It*; a phenomenon Jameson termed "an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our living possibility to experience history in some active way."[40] For Maria, her alienation from her own past stymies her ability to develop any sense of futurity, which actively obstructs her ability to hope. Maria exists in a swirling eddy of places that drop

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[35] Graham, 208
[36] Kuehl, 151
[37] Didion, 6
[38] Didion, 86
[39] Ngai, 285
[40] Jameson, 21

onto the page with the consistency of a leaking faucet; not quite *Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time*, but rather *Maria Wyeth adrift in undefined, and unknowable, space.*

Space, both literal and metaphorical, is the key playing field of nostalgia. Much in the same way that anxiety, one of Sianne Ngai's ugly feelings exists in its own "special temporality," nostalgia exists in its own special spatiality.[41] Nostalgia is created by a place, but can only exist after that place is no longer. In this way, nostalgia is both place and non-place.

Nostalgia forces us to conceive of time as movements between spaces. Instead of before, now, and after, nostalgia refers only to history in the present by monopolizing the *now* with the *then* until the *now* ceases to exist entirely. This relates to the "loss of affect…that Jameson attributes [...] to 'the end of the bourgeois ego' signaled by postmodernism"—an "aesthetic situation engendered by a relentless spatialization that disables our capacity for temporal organization, and thus our relationship to 'real history.'"[42] Maria's inability to "organize [her] past and future into coherent experience" is the nexus of this nostalgic paradox of space and, arguably, the most defining characteristic of the heroine.[43] The trait manifests itself in her regular attempts to order her experiences—concerted efforts that go unrewarded:

> Since early morning she had been trying to remember something Les Goodwin had said to her, anything Les Goodwin had said to her. When she was not actually talking to him now she found it hard to keep him distinct from everyone else, everyone with whom she had ever slept or almost slept or refused to sleep or wanted to sleep. It had seemed this past month as if they were all one, that her life had been a single sexual encounter, one dreamed fuck, no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself...She could remember it all but none of it seemed to come to anything. She had a sense the dream had ended and she had slept on.[44]

Unable to locate herself in time, Maria also finds that she is unable to ground herself in space. She refers to "the dream" as the setting for these simultaneously real and unreal memories. She is

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[41] Ngai, 209
[42] Ngai, 285
[43] Jameson, 25
[44] Didion, 68-69

a sexualized commodity here, defined by the men who have either possessed her or coveted her possession. All of her experiences congeal together into this single one that offers "no point beyond itself." Her memories are at once collected—"they were all one"—and yet detached and fragmentary, with "no beginnings or endings." This is the work of nostalgia, this "sentimental longing for" and simultaneous "regretful memory of" a past event that completely unmoors Maria from firm conceptions of space and time. Maria tries desperately to remember "anything Les Goodwin had said to her," to conjure a tangible piece that she might finally be able to slot into its proper place; to collect the scattered fragments of herself.

When Maria proves incapable of ordering her own memories, she reaches out to others. After an unexpected run-in with Benny Austin, her godfather, at the Flamingo, Maria leaves him alone at the bar, later calling to feign illness as her excuse for avoiding him. They're almost off the phone when she asks:

> "Listen," she said suddenly. "You remember the last time you saw me? Remember? You and Mother and Daddy put me on the plane at McCarran? And before that we ate spare ribs at the house? Remember?"[45]

Benny does not remember. To Maria, this means that "the day they ate spare ribs and drove to McCarran had ceased to exist, had never happened at all" because "she was the only one left who remembered it."[46] Maria desperately needs someone else to remember, someone firmly part of the present and not just the past.

This is the fundamentally *ugly* part of nostalgia, to use Ngai's term for emotions and affects that are, among other things, "explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no…therapeutic or purifying release."[47] There is no satisfaction to be found through the experience of nostalgia, even though the affect manifests itself precisely *because* of the subject's

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[45] Didion, 151
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ngai, 6

deep yearning for such satisfaction. Ngai describes this kind of "noncathartic feeling" as what

"give[s] rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional

release…and does so as a kind of politics."[48] Nostalgia, like other ugly feelings, is "formed and

even 'shaped' by the means used to project, 'discharge,' or 'expel' them"—the more Maria tries

to absolve herself of her nostalgia, the worse the feeling becomes.[49] Maria's multiple returns to

Silver Wells are deeply unsatisfying because no matter how hard she tries, she can never quite

manage to make the past meet, or even matter in, the present. When Benny Austin doesn't share

Maria's memory, her entire being collapses into itself. Not only incapable of living in the present,

no one is able to affirm her past, leaving Maria adrift in a "'heap of broken images,' fragments

that do not cohere."[50]

God is dead

The postmodernists are stuck in a place that is also a non-place, where the hope once found by

the generations before them—hope in God, hope in government, hope for the future—is

fundamentally inaccessible. This widespread disillusionment certainly reaches far beyond the

walls of the church, but I share the opinion of theologians who characterize the loss of hope as a

direct descendent of the so-called death of God. Theologian Janet Martin Soskice writes about

hopelessness as a natural consequence of the longstanding rise of nihilism:

> From the religious point of view the period of European modernity has been one of
> sustained and continuing loss of beliefs; loss of belief in the authority of scripture,
> church, tradition, and even common sense. God, in dying—so the story goes—has
> dragged other cherished fancies to the grave…Most recently we have seen loss in belief
> in those "idols" which tried to take the place of the absent God—loss of belief in
> progress, in beauty, in Marxism, in the Enlightenment, in psycho-analysis; all the secular

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[48] Ngai, 9
[49] Ngai, 222
[50] Steiner, 327

narratives of salvation.[51]

If we've lost both the consecrated and "secular narratives of salvation," what is left? God's death has reached far beyond the walls of any church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, signifying "the death of any claim to absolute value, the death of any transcendental grounding of values, and the death of man as a privileged knower whose knowledge is underwritten by God."[52]

I do not join scholars proclaiming our entry into the postmodern age as the birth of a necessarily secular society. As I will explore even more in depth in Part II the death of God, the elevation of Man to take God's place, and the subsequent death of Man are cyclical phenomena that show up time and time again. I consider it a facet of our postmodern age following the same frenzied pattern of trend cycles that continue to recycle cultural materials at an ever-increasing pace, what music critic Simon Reynolds described as an "obsess[ion] with the cultural artefacts of [our] own immediate past."[53]

The death of man—or as Charlene Spretnak puts it, the "'fading' of man from the humanist role of glorious freewheeler at the center of everything"[54]—that occurs due to the death of God, and subsequent death to "any claim to absolute value," is the principal cause of the theorized "waning of affect" that occurs in nostalgic postmodernist art. Jameson figures that "since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling," there is a "liberation from anxiety" as well as from "every other kind of feeling."[55] Indeed, in *Play It As It Lays*, Maria never speaks of "feeling," except in the physical sense of "not feeling too well."[56] There is a gnawing lack of

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[51] Soskice, 69-70
[52] Soskice, 73
[53] See: Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
[54] Spretnak, 259
[55] Jameson, 15
[56] Didion, 91

"feeling" throughout the novel as a whole. Far from being a liberation, however, Maria suffers immensely at the hands of her nostalgia.

Because nostalgia exists as both space and non-space, effectively preventing the nostalgic from ever fully existing in one or the other, the more nostalgic Maria gets, the more unmoored she becomes. In effect, Maria's nostalgia ends up killing her. The process begins with her fundamental alienation from those around her. Carter tells her that she "[doesn't] understand anything"[57] and her agent, Freddy, admits that he "[doesn't] understand girls like you."[58] Even Maria herself doesn't seem to understand why she is "increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of [her] own current experience,"[59] to use another of Jameson's postmodern hallmarks.

Maria looks to her contemporaries for answers, having already lost her ability to look to God, Marxism, progress, or any of the other idols mentioned by Soskice. She studies "an old issue of Vogue" for hours, "her attention particularly fixed on the details of the life led…by the wife of an Italian industrialist." Maria scours this editorial feature "as if a key might be found" within it; she finds nothing.[60] All of her attempts to find this "key" or "understanding" end in a kind of nothingness until even the meaning of existence itself becomes nothing:

> The woman walked in small mincing steps and kept raising her hand to shield her eyes from the vacant sunlight. As if in a trance Maria watched the woman, for it seemed to her then that she was watching the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing.[61]

In a world defined by consumption and late-stage capitalism, where wealthy wives of industrialists with, apparently, no other attributes are featured in *Vogue,* where women are commodities to be traded among men and consumption has replaced representation, nothingness

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[57] Didion, 21
[58] Didion, 156
[59] Jameson, 21
[60] Didion, 75
[61] Didion, 67

comes to swallow the meaning of everything. The "center of the world" is quite literally "nothing."

Maria's endless searching, her desperation for the discovery of even a hint of the recognizable or familiar, is a representation of the larger search for meaning undertaken by the postmodernists on a grander cultural scale. Didion tells us this in *Play It* via a letter written to Maria from her father:

> "This is a bad hand but God if there is one, and Honey I sincerely believe there must be 'Something', never meant it to set you back in your Plans," is how it ends. "Don't let them bluff you back there because you're holding all the aces."[62]

Whether the violent end of Maria's mother was an act of God, a "bad hand," or an amalgamation of the two, her father assures her that God "never meant it to set you back in your Plans." This presents the existence of free will—Maria has her set of plans—and God's dominion as two separate but not mutually exclusive concepts. These contradictions highlight the fundamental issues postmodernists have with the sublime. The death of God, and the subsequent death of everything else, including Man, has removed the ability for certainty. *Was it the will of God? Was it the absence of God? Was God there, but ignoring us?* The postmodernists are a religiously insecure generation.

Man and God are dead, and with their death goes the body, "blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality." The disappearing of the body is a central part of the postmodern "critique of consumer culture," reflecting the larger societal trend of "disillusionment with an inability to escape" the capitalist nightmare that has swallowed every aspect of culture.[63] All that's left is the body, which, in the end, the great capitalist machine ends up taking, too.

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[62] Didion, 8
[63] Graham, 209

The limits of Maria's body begin to blur until she is "thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*."[64] Not only do Maria's memories blur into one "single…encounter,"[65] congealing into the spacelessness of nostalgia, her physical body also begins to dissolve at the edges. The weaponized machinery of neoliberalism—which moves beyond the capitalist "commodification of objects" into the commodification of "human subjects"—transforms Maria from human being into a sexualized object, "into [her] own image."[66]

Maria began her career as a model and actress in New York. In one of her two films, she plays a role only defined as "girl who was raped by the members of a motorcycle gang." Maria "like[s] watching" this movie because she enjoys the depiction of "the girl on the screen" who "seem[s] to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny."[67] Despite the fact that the girl is a victim of sexualized violence, there is something pleasing to Maria in the tidiness of the film. The girl has a destiny, a purpose for being, even if that purpose is defined entirely by men.

The other film "Maria [does] not like to look at." The picture is 74 minutes of raw footage that Carter shot

> simply follow[ing] Maria around New York…Maria doing a fashion sitting, Maria asleep on a couch at a party, Maria on the telephone arguing with the billing department at Bloomingdale's, Maria cleaning some marijuana with a kitchen strainer, Maria crying on the IRT. At the end she was thrown into negative and looked dead.[68]

The film is titled *Maria* and its eponymous star cannot bear to watch it. Maria spends the entire novel yearning to remember, for someone else to remember alongside her, and yet when she is confronted with the physical representation of her past, Maria has to "leave the house," opting instead to "sit outside on the beach smoking cigarettes and fight[] nausea for seventy-two of the

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[64] Didion, 170
[65] Didion, 68
[66] Jameson, 11
[67] Didion, 19
[68] Didion, 20

seventy-four minutes."[69] Even though this appears to be the opportunity Maria spends the entire

novel waiting for, when faced with the active disruption of the present by her past, Maria flees.

It is not that Maria dislikes watching herself on screens; she enjoys watching the

motorcycle movie because it distinctly features *not* her. There is no nostalgia to torment her

because she is looking at a past that is entirely artificial, something created instead of lived. With

Maria, Maria's discomfort comes from looking at something that actually existed, but no longer

does.

When Jameson refers to "nostalgia films," he draws specific attention to their ability to

"restructure the whole issue of pastiche."[70] In this film, a film that captures the essence of

Maria's nostalgia and so becomes a "nostalgia film," Maria's existence becomes a "pastiche" of

living; it is not actual life anymore, it is mere "parody" or "imitation" of existence.[71] Maria

spends the entire seventy-four minutes doing, essentially, nothing, until the very end when she is

"thrown into negative" and appears dead. This is not just the death of the subject on the

screen—it is the death of Maria herself. Maria does not recognize herself on the screen because

she no longer exists, neither in the present nor the past. This nostalgic collapse of time erodes

any existence of off-screen Maria, relegating her to the fragmented self that exists purely in the

past, and then kills off that two-dimensional version of her past self on screen.

Watching *Maria* is the closest that Maria comes to glimpsing what Jameson terms the

"hysterical sublime," a physical place wherein "the 'moment of truth' of postmodernism…has

moved the closest to the surface of consciousness as a coherent new type of space."[72] In *Maria,*

Maria's death after a meaningless, consumer-driven life, a life of arguments with sales

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[69] Didion, 21
[70] Jameson, 19
[71] Jameson, 17
[72] Jameson, 49

departments and crying on public transit, is a total collapse of space. This is the "moment of truth," the "quintessential intersection of nothing." For Maria, as for the postmodernists, the sublime is a non-space, a moving vacuum or black hole that absorbs everything in its path, a nothing.

Or is it?

Didion leaves us the smallest flicker of hope in Maria's open question to Carter, the very same question that prompted my queries in the first place:

> "What do you think about it," Maria asked Carter.
> "About what."
> "What I just told you. About the man at the trailer camp who told his wife he was going out
> for a walk in order to talk to God."
> "I wasn't listening, Maria. Just give me the punch line."
> "There isn't any punch line, the highway patrol just found him dead, bitten by a rattlesnake."
> "I'll say there isn't any punch line."
> "Do you think he talked to God?" Carter looked at her. "I mean do you think God answered?
> Or don't you?"[73]

This scene encapsulates the fundamental struggle postmodernists have with God and hope—the inability to ever be certain. Maria, who since reading the letter announcing her mother's untimely death has not mentioned God at all, wants to know if God is not just listening, but responding. Was the rattlesnake God's answer to the man? Or was it purely chance that the man encountered a deadly animal while asking for divine intervention? Did God direct Maria's mother to drive her car off a cliff, or was it happenstance?

Didion, as with other postmodernists, seems *mostly* assured of the lack of salvation that awaits them in a future marred by capitalism, imperialism, war, and systemic inequality. And yet, Maria still wonders if God answered. Though Didion can feel what Nietzche declared to be the death of God, and the subsequent death of various institutions propagated by faith, including eventually even the self, she is far from embracing the nihilism that critics like Jameson

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[73] Didion, 113

generalize over the entire postmodern movement. This is not mimicry, nor the absence of feeling. While certainly not an all-trusting blind faith, the ability to continue to ask the question, to wonder if God is dead or perhaps just on vacation, indicates a continued nurturing of even the smallest flicker of hope.

Chapter Two

Nostalgia as Resistance

The Sankofa Bird by Judy Bowman,
reproduced with permission from the artist

There is perhaps no image more befitting the phenomenon of nostalgia—and, particularly, the

phenomenon of *Black* nostalgia, a central pillar of both Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977)

and Ocavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979)—than the Sankofa bird. A familiar image to the Akan

people of West Africa, the Sankofa is depicted with "feet firmly rooted in the present, pointing

forward to the future, [and] its neck twisted backward, seeming to search for and retrieve

something left behind in time and space."[74] The Sankofa stands as an iconographic representation

of the Akan proverb "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind."[75] The curve of

the bird's neck as it reaches backwards and the egg, seen in some representations of the icon,

represent the cyclical nature of mankind's relationship to the past. Even our very origins,

symbolized by the egg, are "at risk of being left behind" in the name of moving forward. But, to

paraphrase that timeless query, *where would the chicken be without the egg?*

Forgetting the past is a luxury reserved for members of non-disenfranchised identities and

groups. While white postmodernists spent the 1970s confronting an unimaginable future in the

face of neoliberal capitalism, Black postmodernists confronted these same societal fissures as

well as several others that their white counterparts did *not* have to face, namely the Civil Rights

and Black Power movements. This is due to the collective past shared by Black Americans, a

past marred by violence. Christina Sharpe refers to this legacy as living "in the wake;" wake as

in a trail left behind by a ship, as in the vigil held at a deathbed:

> Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the
> present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and
> geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in,
> and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that
> terror are erased.[76]

This "terror [that] is visited on [Black] bodies" appears early in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. "I lost

an arm on my last trip home."[77] So begins Dana's recounting of the traumatic experience of

time-travel—the experience of her *nostalgia journeys*, as I term them— that is the central

occurrence of the novel. Dana's missing arm becomes the central reminder of her increasingly

violent encounters with nostalgia.

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[74] Traore, 123
[75] "The Power of Sankofa"
[76] Sharpe, 15
[77] Butler, 9

Dana is a Black woman, an author, living in California in the mid-1970s with her white

husband, Kevin. They are unpacking books for the library in their new house when Dana takes

her first trip through time, what I am terming her *nostalgia journey*:

> I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me…I
> heard [Kevin] move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before
> he would have touched me, he vanished. The house, the books, everything vanished.
> Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I
> was at the edge of a woods.[78]

Though she doesn't know it yet, Dana has traveled through both time and space, landing in

antebellum-era Maryland on the Weylin plantation. This trip through time functions as a physical

embodiment of Dana's nostalgia, representing both the legacy of slavery shared among

African-Americans in general, and a very personal legacy, too—Dana's recorded family lineage

begins on the Weylin plantation. Her great-great-grandmother Hagar, the first to start "keeping

family records," lists her parents as Rufus Weylin—son of plantation owner Tom Weylin—and

Alice Greenwood, a free girl that is sold into slavery on the Weylin plantation.[79] Dana deduces

that her trips to the past are "to insure my family's survival, my own birth," through her

protection of her (white) ancestor, Rufus.[80]

The expressly personal nature of Dana's experience of nostalgia is one born of her

existence as a Black woman in a world ordered by whiteness. There is an essential quality of

identity shared among historically marginalized people that necessarily links all present

understanding of the self to a collective past. James Baldwin described this quality in his 1965

essay "The White Man's Guilt":

> The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are
> unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we
> do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of

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[78] Butler, 13
[79] Butler, 28
[80] Butler, 29

> reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one
> begins to realize this.
> …
> On the other hand, people who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since
> they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable
> of seeing or changing themselves, or the world. This is the place in which it seems to me,
> most white Americans find themselves. Impaled.[81]

The "pain" and "terror" of history is all too present for Dana, whose continued visits to her

ancestral past begin littering her with scars, both physical and emotional. Baldwin's description

of white people's history as "impal[ing]" them, making them "incapable of seeing or changing

themselves, or the world" alludes to the central difference between the experience of Black and

white nostalgia.

Black nostalgia

While Svetlana Boym's definition of nostalgia as a "sentiment of loss and

displacement"[82] is, on the whole, accurate for the experience of nostalgia for Black and white

people, *Black nostalgia* is a necessarily much more nuanced phenomenon because of the potent

American legacy of enslavement, oppression, and violence. Christina Sharpe writes, "in the

wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."[83] This "rupture" of the

present by the presence of a "past that is not past" is the work of Black nostalgia.

During the years of the active trans-Atlantic slave trade, "sailors, soldiers, convicts,

slaves, and other groups whose labor forcibly separated them from home" were being *diagnosed*

with nostalgia, which had become a unique "pathology that related exclusively to forced

mobility."[84] Even though this diagnosis was used for both enslaved Africans as well as white

sailors, the experience of nostalgia was notably different for Black people and white people.

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[81] Baldwin, 723
[82] Boym, xiii
[83] Sharpe, 9
[84] Schroeder, 655

Where the "ethnic laborer dies from wanting to return home[], the black slave wants to die *to* return home."[85] White soldiers and sailors died because they lacked the agency to return to their homelands—nostalgia had fundamentally disrupted them. The nature of enslavement meant slaves were *already suffering* from obstructed agency. That's why the experience of nostalgia afforded enslaved Africans the opportunity to claim agency where white laborers could not; to the enslaved, death was freedom. Suicide represented a "form of self-destruction" that was "less a capitulation to slave power and more a 'revolutionary suicide, a hopeful, costly, imperfect escape into the night,'" as it was "a commonly held belief among enslaved men and women that upon death, the soul of the deceased returned to African natal lands."[86] Nostalgia is this force interrupting the brutal disruption-in-progress of enslavement.

Jonathan D. S. Schroeder first employed the term "[B]lack nostalgia" to represent this paradoxical experience of affording agency through oppression, using the term to "stand[] as a grim memorial to the combat that…African Americans have waged over the meaning and significance of suffering, death, and freedom."[87] The term "Black nostalgia" acknowledges the vast legacy of enslavement and resistance in the Black diaspora, which is why I am choosing to employ the term in my analysis.

The weaponization of nostalgia was, above all else, "a practical redescription of the disease that was directed toward arresting practices of resistance among the enslaved," practices that included "flying suicides, mass suicides, and hunger strikes."[88] And when enslaved people died from refusing to eat or by jumping overboard in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, these deaths were "recast as involuntary byproducts of insanity rather than political acts of

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[85] Schroeder, 656
[86] Young, 51
[87] Schroeder, 657
[88] Schroeder, 656-657

resistance."[89] The pathologization of resistance as illness relates to Sianne Ngai's exploration of

"animatedness" or "animation" as a particularly racialized affect that "remains central to the

production of the racially marked subject, *even* when his or her difference is signaled by the

pathos of emotional suppression rather than by emotional excess."[90] Even though enslaved

Africans were already stripped of their agency by their slavers—an act of "emotional

suppression"—their final acts of resistance, whether through flight or hunger, are transformed

into acts of "emotional excess," a transformation that served as the final stripping away of

reclaimed agency.

The application of "nostalgia" as an oppressive diagnosis fell out of popularity alongside

the fall of plantations, but the term remains another marked reminder of both the violent

disruption of enslavement and the long legacy of Black resistance, a legacy that still appears in

art today. In particular, the image of the flying African appears often in nostalgia narratives,

including as the central image of Toni Morrion's *Song of Solomon*.

The flying African

Song of Solomon is a book fueled by nostalgia. Morrison has written often about the

origins of her book within the death of her father:

> I can't tell you how I felt when my father died. But I was able to write *Song of Solomon*
> and imagine, not him, not his specific interior life, but the world that he inhabited and the
> private or interior life of the people in it.
> …
> Like Frederick Douglass talking about his grandmother, and James Baldwin talking about
> his father, and Simone de Beauvoir talking about her mother, these people are my access
> to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life.[91]

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[89] Schroeder, 662

[90] Ngai, 95

[91] Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard,* 230-231

The emphasis on personal understanding and narrative—as opposed to, say, 'historical fact'—is a key component of nostalgia/memory writing. As Gregory Hampton puts it: "Memory is a process of relocating bodies or consciousness in 'a past' or 'a time,' not 'The Past' or 'The Time.'"[92] Morrison roots her understanding of herself in her understanding of her family, a lesson it takes Milkman Dead an entire novel to learn.

Necessarily, Milkman's understanding of his family—and thus of himself—is linked to his understanding of flight. Flight is the first event of the novel—the "suicidal leap of the insurance agent" off the roof of Mercy Hospital—as well as the ending—Milkman's "confrontational soar into danger."[93] Every event and development between these two flights is thus connected like beads on a string. Even Milkman's birth is precipitated by flight. In particular, Robert Smith's leap:

> Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother.[94]

In this way, Milkman becomes the physical embodiment of Black nostalgia, a character "symbolically caught in the dynamic, complementary, and simultaneous tensions between movements back and forth into and out of the past and the future."[95]

We can understand Milkman's inability to fly as representative of the illegible nature of his family's collective past, especially when we read flight as a manifestation of the flying African mythos. Robert Smith's flight fails because "he lack[s] something which Milkman later acquires and which enables flight…Mr. Smith is too far removed from his heritage, [...] he has lost the secret—sign, word, timing—which would have allowed him to go home on his own

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[92] Hampton, 267
[93] Morrison, *Song of Solomon, xll*
[94] Morrison, 9
[95] Traore, 123

power."[96] Indeed, the Dead family has been severed from their family and collective histories, a fact symbolized through their name:

> Surely, [Macon] thought, he and his sister had some ancestor…who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less. Agreed to take and pass on to all their issue this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army.[97]

The Dead family has no trace of their family lineage beyond Milkman's grandfather, shot to death in front of his children when they were teenagers, and no ability to trace their lineage because of the "naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less."

The Dead family also stands apart from the rest of the Black community due to their privileged status. Ruth's father, Doctor Foster, was "the only colored doctor in the city" before his death, and his wealth and status passed along to Ruth and her children.[98] Macon is a self-made man, an exacting landlord, who greatly enjoys lording his privilege over the community, parading his family in their fancy Packard car through the streets every Sunday because "there were very few among them who lived as well as Macon Dead."[99]

This fundamental alienation from the world around him as well as from his own family is the defining characteristic of Milkman, a trait that makes Milkman fundamentally nostalgic. Unable to look forward, towards the future, because of his inability to connect with the community around him, and unable to glean any knowledge by looking towards an unknown past, Milkman suffers, stuck in the obstructed state of nostalgia.

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[96] Lee, 65
[97] Morrison, 17-18
[98] Morrison, 4
[99] Morrison, 32

Morrison illustrates Milkman's nostalgia during one of those fateful family drives. For

Milkman, the drives are "a burden":

> Pressed in the front seat between his parents, he could only see the winged woman
> careening off the nose of the car. … It was only by kneeling on the dove gray seat and
> looking out the back window that he could see anything other than the laps, feet, and
> hands of his parents, the dashboard, or the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the
> Packard. But riding backwards made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not
> knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him.[100]

He is "uneasy" facing backwards on the drives, a feeling "like flying blind." As a child, he can

barely see "the winged woman careening off the nose of the car," the hood ornament

representing Nike, the Grecian goddess of speed and victory. Despite her wings, and her ability

to fly, Nike here is firmly rooted to the car. She, too, cannot take flight, and Milkman does not

like to look at her. So he turns around, which "trouble[s] him." But this "concentration on things

behind him" slowly "be[came] a habit" for Milkman, "almost as though there were no future to

be had."[101]

Milkman's nostalgic state is disruptive for all of his adolescence and into his young

adulthood, preventing him from accessing solidarity with the rest of his community and even

further alienating his family:

> The street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming
> from. All walking hurriedly and bumping against him. After a while he realized that
> nobody was walking on the other side of the street. There were no cars and the street
> lights were on, now that darkness had come, but the sidewalk on the other side of the
> street was completely empty. He turned around to see where everybody was going, but
> there was nothing to see except their backs and hats pressing forward into the night. He
> looked again at the other side of Not Doctor Street. Not a soul.
> He touched the arm of a man in a cap who was trying to get past him. "Why is everybody
> on this side of the street?" he asked him.
> "Watch it, buddy," the man snapped, and moved on with the crowd.
> Milkman walked on, still headed towards Southside, never once wondering why he
> himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at
> all.[102]

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[100] Morrison, 32-33
[101] Morrison, 35
[102] Morrison, 78

Now twenty-two years old, Milkman still stands apart from his community. Even when he finds

that he is the sole person walking against the influx of people "all going in the direction he was

coming from," he "turned around to see where everybody was going, but there was nothing to

see." Guitar, Milkman's childhood friend, summarizes his alienation succinctly: "Looks like

everybody's going in the wrong direction but you, don't it?"[103]

As Milkman will discover later in life, the ability to fly is, in fact, part of his family

heritage. His ancestor, the titular Solomon, is even referred to as "a flying African" in local lore:

> "Why did you call Solomon a flying African?"
> "Oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they
> brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around
> here who did was this same Solomon."
> …
> "When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?"
> "No, I mean flew…You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some
> hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to
> wherever it was he came from."[104]

Though "for many, stories about flying Africans are best understood as coded messages

regarding more mundane occurrences: a slave suicide, a bondsman bent on escape,"[105] Susan

insists that Solomon flew "like a bird" and "went right on back to wherever it was he came

from." And indeed, while some enslaved people did commit suicide or otherwise stage a

successful escape, as some scholars interpret the flying African mythos as "a reflection of the

slave runaway par excellence,"[106] surviving accounts from formerly enslaved people and

members of Black communities attest to the truth of their accounts. As Jason Young describes:

"George Little, a root doctor from coastal Georgia, assured [...] interviewers of the veracity of

Africans in flight: 'Take the story of them people what fly back to Africa. That's all true. You

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[103] Morrison, 106
[104] Morrison, 322-323
[105] Young, 51
[106] Ibid.

just have to possess magic knowledge to be able to accomplish this.'"[107] The challenge these

accounts present to established Western (read: white) discourses and intellectual traditions have

often resulted in their discrediting from the narrative of "official" history. All of this to say,

Solomon's flight must be understood both literally and figuratively.

Milkman certainly understands Solomon's flight as a literal phenomenon, and this

knowledge changes everything for him. He feels an "incredible high"[108] upon hearing the news

and forces Sweet, a local Virginia woman, to take him swimming, where he:

> Began to whoop and dive and splash and turn. "He could fly! You hear me? My
> great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam!" He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped
> straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his
> mouth and eyes full of water. Up again. Still pounding, leaping, diving. "The son of a
> bitch could fly! You hear me, Sweet? That motherfucker could fly! Could fly! He didn't
> need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!"
> "Who you talkin 'bout?" Sweet was lying on her side, her cheek cupped in her hand.
> "Solomon, that's who."
> "Oh, him." She laughed. "You belong to that tribe [...]?" She thought he was drunk.
> "Yeah. That tribe. That flyin motherfuckin tribe. Oh, man! He didn't need no airplane. He
> just took off; got fed up. *All the way up!* No more cotton! No more bales! No more
> orders! No more shit! He flew, baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew
> on home. Can you dig it? Jesus God, that must have been something to see. And you
> know what else? He tried to take his baby boy with him. My grandfather. Wow! Wooee!
> Guitar! You hear that? Guitar, my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn
> town is named after him. Tell him, Sweet. Tell him my great-granddaddy could fly."[109]

Milkman baptizes himself anew with this knowledge. He comes alive here as nowhere else in the

novel, "whoop[ing] and div[ing] and splash[ing], … pounding, leaping, diving." Milkman brags

to Guitar that "the whole damn town is named after" Solomon, reveling in the permanent naming

of his "tribe." Finally, Milkman knows a name that is *real*. And this real name connects Milkman

to a legacy of freedom and resistance otherwise completely inaccessible to him.

Before, when lamenting to Guitar about how he "don't like my name," he describes the

ashamed naming process for him:

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[107] Young, 52
[108] Morrison, 326
[109] Morrison, 328

> "You know how my old man's daddy got his name?"
> "Uh uh. How?"
> "Cracker gave it to him."
> "Sho 'nough?"
> "Yep. And he took it. Like a fuckin sheep. Somebody should have shot him."
> "What for? He was already Dead."[110]

Milkman, having inherited Macon's shame, holds so much anger at his grandfather for taking the Dead name "like a fuckin sheep" that he says "somebody should have shot him." Milkman believes it would be better for his grandfather to have died in the name of resistance than to passively accept the Dead name, despite the fact that that very act of resistance may have interrupted the family lineage enough to end up preventing Milkman's birth at all.

But now, Milkman has a name. He has a whole host of names—Solomon, Ryna, Crowell, Sing, Jake—and they're all related to him. And what's more, Milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon, could *fly*. There was nothing passive about Solomon. As Milkman giddily describes: "He just took off; got fed up. All the way up! No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home." Once Milkman comes to know his family legacy, he can share in it. He, too, can join the legacy of resistance as surrender, which is the culmination of his journey and of the novel:

> "You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it? Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.[111]

Nostalgia as resistance

The dominant cultural *oeuvre* of the postmodernist 1970s was different for white and Black artists in the United States. Though postmodernists of all races addressed the widespread

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[110] Morrison, 89
[111] Morrison, 337

disillusionment and skepticism about the future of society through their work, the fundamental

difference in the experience of nostalgia for white and Black artists produced incredibly different

manifestations of hope.

White postmodernists in 1970s America found themselves confronting what they would

deem an unimaginable future ordered by the flattening, oppressive structure of capitalism and

neoliberalism. Unable to project themselves into this unknown future, and unwilling to return to

the normative structures of their past, these postmodernists found themselves suspended in an

obstructed state of nostalgia: longing to return to something at least vaguely recognizable,

longing to locate any sense of hope within themselves.

Black artists of the 1970s focused a great deal more of their attention on the fracturing

Black Power and Civil Rights movements attempting to recover from the high boil of the late

1960s than their white contemporaries. The aims of these movements, though often at odds with

each other in methodology, shared at least one common goal: the creation of a path forward into

a better future.

The Civil Rights and Black Power movements were powered by a kind of pervasive hope

that felt inaccessible to white postmodernists. This perseverance is a shared trait among

communities that have a collective history of facing brutality and violence at the hands of

colonizers, as among members of the African diaspora and global Native-Indigenous

populations. As Robyn Maynard phrases it:

> While the apocalypse is generally conceived as a dystopic possible futurity, the African
> diaspora has already undergone brutalities so vile and degrading, and so historically
> unprecedented in scope and scale, that only Armageddon can accurately describe the
> advent of modernity on our collective past, and only the postapocalypse can define our
> present.[112]

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[112] Maynard, 30-31

The shared legacy of enslavement does not have a counterpart in white American culture. As such, the kind of apocryphal reckoning that postmodernists considered themselves facing in the 1970s was an entirely foreign concept for white artists, where Black artists were not tasked with confronting anything so radically *new* in their examinations of society as much as confronting the latest iteration of the same inequality. As Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Or, to use the more familiar version of Karr's aphorism: *same shit, different day.*

Any equation of the atrocities of enslavement with the realities of living—freely and with substantial privilege, as white American artists did—in a society ordered by tenant of neocapital- and neoliberalism would be wholly reductionist, to say the least, though certainly none of these systems operate independently of each other. But the reality of living in the "postapocalypse" functions rather like the paradoxical nature of Black nostalgia; it affords a kind of agency to Black Americans where the same phenomenon actively obstructs people unfamiliar with the phenomenon and, thus, adrift in entirely unknown territory.

Octavia Butler identifies *Kindred* as her "attempt to resolve some of her own conflicted views on the politics of [this] period," what she calls her "1960s feelings."[113] While a student at Pasadena City College, Butler remembers

> the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents."[114]

This "young man" that Butler references is reminiscent of Milkman, angry enough to wish for violence at his grandfather's acceptance of the Dead name. Butler understands this sentiment

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[113] Behrent, 796
[114] Rowell and Butler, 51

well, remembering her own anger as a child "hear[ing] people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it."[115]

This generational divide fueled the division between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and these two central movements in the fight for liberation were seen by some to be "in binary opposition" to each other, with the new generation of "Black student radicals" fueling the Black Power movement to the chagrin of older generations "for whom such radicalism seemed impractical if not dangerous."[116] Butler tackles this divide in *Kindred* primarily through her construction of "a variation on the neo-slave narrative, or what she calls a 'grim fantasy' that hovers between past and present," the fertile ground of nostalgia.[117]

Dana's six trips from California in 1976 to Maryland in the early 1800s embody the paradoxical and confounding experience of nostalgia. Even in the very first line, though readers will not understand the significance until the end, we get a hint of this confusion; Dana says she lost her arm "on [her] last trip *home*."[118] Whether Dana is referring to the Weylin plantation or her California home as "home" is never made clear. A wandering, even misplaced, sense of home anchors Dana to the reality of her time travel. On one of her journeys to Maryland, Dana narrates her confusion:

> I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home.
> …
> I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time.[119]

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[115] Rowell and Butler, 51
[116] Behrent, 5
[117] Behrent, 801
[118] Butler, 9
[119] Butler, 190-191

Despite the violence and danger that surround Dana in Maryland, she cannot help but feel a sense of homecoming upon her return to the plantation, a sense she tries over and over again to deny.

The forced migration of enslavement meant the notion of "home" was complicated for the enslaved, and remains so for their descendants. In essays musing about the notion of home, Toni Morrison explores the "foreignness" that plagued her as a child. "How do we decide where we belong?" she asks. "What convinces us that we do?" She continues:

> African and African American writers are not alone in coming to terms with these problems, but they do have a long and singular history of confronting them. Of not being at home in one's homeland; of being exiled in the place one belongs.
> …
> Africa was both ours and theirs; intimately connected to us and profoundly foreign. A huge needy homeland to which we were said to belong but that none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive, traumatized otherness cultivated by textbooks, film, cartoons, and the hostile name-calling children learn to love.[120]

Morrison describes a feeling of rootlessness on two fronts. African Americans are "exiled" and fundamentally unable to "be[] at home in one's homeland" because of the ongoing marginalization at the hands of existing power regimes that has created a "traumatized otherness" that pervades every aspect of life and culture. Black Americans are also unable to feel at home in a "profoundly foreign" Africa. One of slavery's most lasting legacies is the divorce of culture that was forced onto enslaved Africans and has thus continued through their family lineages, producing generations of Americans whose family lines seem to begin like Dana's does: abruptly and on a slave plantation.

The quality of suspended temporality in Butler's writing itself adds to the complex web of nostalgia, memory, and reality that she explores. Instead of experiencing a direct recollection—'I recall'—or a present understanding—'I feel'—Dana notes that she "could recall

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[120] Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 8

being surprised" when she felt a sense of homecoming at the Weylins. This is a past observation

about an even further-past feeling. Butler alludes to this unique temporal quality in the writing by

dropping Easter eggs of meta-narrative throughout the text. During one of her returns to 1976,

Dana thinks, "someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write

about it."[121] This metatextual quality further embeds Butler's own experience into her fantastical

story.

The combination of the personal with the historical is very befitting a narrative that

explores the complicated systems of truth, memory, and fact. As Megan Behrent writes:

> Time travel provides a vehicle through which the narrator can physically "witness"
> slavery and thereby assert her narrative authority—nonetheless, truth continues to be
> problematized and contested as the history of slavery eludes documentation and historical
> representation.[122]

Not only is historical truth about slavery an incomplete narrative at best, Dana's very survival

and understanding upon her arrival in Maryland hinge upon the memories of her ancestors and

family story that she can recall. This highlights a point made by Gregory Hampton that "the loss

of memory can be detrimental - if not lethal - for marginalized bodies in hostile times and

space."[123] Without ready knowledge of her ancestral connection to Rufus and the Weylin

plantation, Dana's trips through time could be even *more* perilous. During her second trip, when

she first learns that she has indeed traveled across time and space to early 1800s Maryland, Dana

thinks to herself, "I had relatives in Maryland—people who would help me if I needed them, and

if I could reach them." Even in the face of her "new, slowly growing fear,"[124] Dana can situate

herself through the knowledge of her nearby family ties.

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[121] Butler, 116
[122] Behrent, 802
[123] Hampton, 273
[124] Butler, 27

As the novel progresses, Dana faces increasingly warped experiences of time. Her stays in the past keep getting longer while time in 1976 has progressed only a few days over the course of the entire novel. This represents the fundamental disruption of time that is a key characterization of postmodern nostalgia; Dana is increasingly unable to separate herself from the fact of her fluxations through time and space:

> I had begun to feel—feel, not think—that a great deal of time had passed for me too. It was a vague feeling, but it seemed right and comfortable. More comfortable than trying to keep in mind what was really happening. Some part of me had apparently given up on time-distorted reality and smoothed things out.[125]

Dana's reinforcement of *feeling* over *thinking* represents the deeply embodied nature of her "time-distorted" experience, of the amalgamation of reality and memory that plagues her. She distances herself from her body, only noting that "some part" of herself had "apparently given up," as if surprised, unaware of a process happening inside her. If we understand memory as something "necessary to give the body meaning and value in the present," it makes sense that Dana's forced confrontation of her ancestry—and thus her ancestral memories—would contort her bodily experience.[126] She has to reassess her understanding of reality constantly throughout the narrative, updating her understanding of her own body only after having the time to ground herself in whichever temporal reality is her current reality:

> Then I realized I wasn't really dizzy—only confused. My memory of a field hand being whipped suddenly seemed to have no place here with me at home. I came out of the bathroom and looked around. Home. Bed—without canopy—dresser, closet, electric light, television, radio, electric clock, books. Home. It didn't have anything to do with where I had been. It was real. It was where I belonged.
> …
> Today and yesterday didn't mesh. I felt almost as strange as I had after my first trip back to Rufus—caught between his home and mine.[127]

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[125] Butler, 127
[126] Hampton, 267
[127] Butler, 115

Dana severs any connection to her past, both immediate and ancestral, with her conception of "home." Her memory of witnessing a brutal whipping that happened—literally, if not temporally—just the day before "[has] no place here with [her] at home." She notes that her home "[doesn't] have anything to do with where [she] had been," a telling remark considering her very personal connection to the Weylin plantation and its people. She dismisses the past as not "real," despite the very real physical reminders she bears on her skin when she returns to her own time—the marks of Tom Weylin's whip across her back.

Dana's lack of connection to, or solidarity with, the people she encounters during her trips to Maryland is the central critique of Linh Hua's article about the relationship between time and history in *Kindred*. Hua argues that Dana fundamentally misunderstands her trips back to the plantation as a demand to maintain the historical status quo and protect Rufus, her white ancestor. Instead, Hua writes, "in turning to history to ground her disorientation, Dana obscures the import of her call-and-response opportunity. She misnames her caller "Rufus," rendering Alice's call unheard."[128] This is a particular function of Black nostalgia in postmodern literature. Because the telling and re-telling of history as a series of 'facts' that favors the narratives of the privileged reproduces the continued alienation of marginalized people at the hands of their oppressors, Dana understands her family legacy to be one that she feels the overwhelming desire to distance herself from and yet is unable to do so.

Where white postmodernists refused to look into the future and thus turned to look back at their past, Black postmodernists were desperate for the opportunity to look ahead. The fact of being yoked to the collective draconian history of being Black in the United States, however, forced them to continually confront that shared violence. In Dana's case, her "presum[ption]" of "a history already told" precludes any possibility that she might act in a way that could

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[128] Hua, 393

potentially alter the timeline of her ancestry, including acting to save Alice from Rufus's

cruelty.[129] One of Dana's trips happens upon the occasion of Alice's rape, when Rufus is beaten

nearly to death by Alice's husband, Isaac:

> It occurred to me that he might really be doing just that—killing the only person who
> might be able to help me find Kevin. Killing my ancestor. What had happened here
> seemed obvious. The girl, her torn dress. If everything was as it seemed, Rufus had
> earned his beating and more. Maybe he had grown up to be even worse than I had feared.
> But no matter what he was, I needed him alive—for Kevin's sake and for my own.[130]

The historical fact of Dana's ancestry prevents her from standing in solidarity with Isaac, Alice,

or any of the other enslaved people against Rufus. To protect her very existence, not to mention

to find Kevin—stuck in the past after accompanying Dana on her last trip—she must remain

complicit in Rufus's violence against Alice. Hua characterizes this as "Dana's most significant

act of family loyalty: her unwavering investment in white patriarchy as the bearer of history and

family."[131]

This is the obstruction of nostalgia at work. Dana is *obligated* to remain loyal to the story

of her ancestry even while confronting the atrocities committed against Alice, due to the fact of

her suspended agency while she's in Maryland. As Hua writes:

> Whereas time … varyingly shapes histories, "official history" ... is animated by a
> temporal logic that offers no alternative, even in a context where conceptually and
> mathematically, an alternative is viable.[132]

Dana is called to Maryland when Rufus's life is in danger and she feels obligated to save him,

obligated to the "official history" that at least seems to "offer[] no alternative." These trips are

fundamentally disruptive, and she is completely at the mercy of the nostalgia that powers them.

She has no agency or choice but to experience them, and, at first, at least, she cannot induce the

journeys to either begin or end, though that does not prevent her from trying:

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[129] Hua, 397
[130] Butler, 117
[131] Hua, 399
[132] Hua, 393

> I found myself swaying a little, swaying dizzily. I collapsed to my knees, desperately willing the dizziness to intensify, the transferal to come. … I had closed my eyes. When I opened them, the dirt path and the trees were still there.[133]

There is no standard amount of time between trips, and Dana has no way of knowing when she will be 'called' to Rufus, though she knows it is whenever he seems to be in life-threatening trouble. Dana's returns to her own time happen—much like what calls her to Rufus—when she is in life-threatening danger. This knowledge ends up affording her a sense of agency.

After selling an enslaved man named Sam away from his family for appearing to flirt with Dana, Rufus hits her for trying to intervene. Dana immediately goes into the house and slits her wrists in the bathtub, inducing her journey back to California. In order to trigger her return journey to California, Dana's life must be in real danger. This taints her agency with the violence of enslavement and stands as a manifestation of what Schroeder terms "the nostalgic death."[134] Though Butler does not use the term "flight" to describe Dana's trips back and forth between California and the Weylin plantation, her movement echoes the flying African myth, that Black nostalgic tradition of resistance.

Being forced to witness (and re-witness, *ad nauseam*) the brutal history of her ancestors' enslavement—not to mention the obstructed sense of agency that Dana experiences, a victim to the trips themselves and in her role as a bystander on Rufus's side of history—takes an enormous toll on Dana. The end of the novel returns readers to the very first line of the book, where "Dana's arm, symbolically heavy with alignments and dis/alignments with Rufus and Alice, is literally crushed by the pressures of history."[135]

Dana's last trip through time brings her as witness to Alice's suicide and Rufus's subsequent unraveling. Alice, having already birthed two children by Rufus—including Dana's

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[133] Butler, 34
[134] Schroeder, 657
[135] Hua, 401

great-great-grandmother, Hagar, hangs herself in the barn after witnessing the supposed sale of

her children by Rufus. Alice, having endured the brutality of enslavement, the torture and sale of

her husband, Isaac, and repeated assaults by Rufus, kills herself only after losing her children.

This severing of her family line is the final line in the sand and Alice commits a final "political

act[] of resistance" against Rufus's violence and oppression.[136] Alice's death is the final

reclamation of her agency; she chooses to die on her own terms, at her own hand, while inflicting

the maximum amount of pain on Rufus.

Unbeknownst to Alice, Rufus lied; he did not sell their children. Rufus sent Hagar and

Joe to Baltimore with his family "to punish [Alice], to scare her."[137] Her family legacy being thus

protected, Dana finally feels empowered to affect change in the narrative, to ignore historical

fact. She thinks, "I might be able to do some good for everyone, finally. At least, I felt secure

enough to try."[138] But Rufus presents an increasing threat to Dana. He begins to combine her with

her late ancestor in his mind, describing Alice and Dana as "one woman. Two halves of a

whole."[139] She kills Rufus as one desperate act of survival, managing to strike him down before

he can assault her the way he assaulted Alice.

Particularly "where the African-American subject is concerned," Ngai writes, "emotional

qualities seem especially prone to sliding into *corporeal* qualities…reinforcing the notion

of…truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body."[140] The

commodification of Blackness through the systemic apparatus of enslavement, and its

subsequent legacy, makes Black nostalgia a particularly *embodied* phenomenon. Dana not only

bears the mental and physical scars of whipping and abuse, her past ends up stealing part of her

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[136] Schroeder, 662
[137] Butler, 251
[138] Butler, 254
[139] Butler, 257
[140] Ngai, 95

body, reclaiming it as a kind of stark reminder. Rufus' hand, clasped around Dana's arm, remains

attached even after Dana stabs him. As Dana begins to pass back through to her own time, she

feels:

> Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing
> it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as
> though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and
> nonliving.
> …
> The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But
> I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of
> it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become
> a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it
> uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped.[141]

Dana's final act of resistance means she will forever be physically marred, forever split between

time and space, a part of her forever invisible to the people that do not share in her past.

This is the resolution Octavia Butler offers to her "1960s feelings," that central conflict

between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, which she located in an essential feeling

of shame. She describes the young man who blamed his parents "for their humility and their

acceptance" as "so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really

putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well."[142] Butler

forces Dana to surrender to this legacy by offering her protagonist an impossible choice: Dana

can surrender her arm as a reminder of the horrific knowledge she's gained about the past, or die

at Rufus's hand in the attic when attacks her. Dana makes her choice, and her missing arm will

remain an omnipotent reminder of "what the older generation had to do" in order to persevere, a

reminder of the legacy of resistance against indignity and violence shared among all Black

Americans, whether or not their descendents recognize it as such.

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[141] Butler, 261
[142] Rowell and Butler, 51

Resistance as surrender

Milkman discovers the power of surrender at the end of *Song of Solomon*, finally

realizing the "secret—sign, word, timing"[143] that Solomon seemed to have figured out before his

flight: "if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it."[144] Perhaps nobody embodies this concept

of surrender as resistance more so than Pilate Dead.

Unlike her brother and nephew, Pilate bears her name proudly. Pilate's name, too, is the

result of something "done to" her, her illiterate father having "chose[n] a group of letters that

seemed to him strong and handsome"[145] in the Bible, a name that turned out to be that of

"Christ-killing Pilate." And, at twelve years old, Pilate "folded [the page of the Bible bearing her

name] up into a tiny knot and put it in a little brass box, and strung the entire contraption through

her left earlobe," literally carrying her past with her everywhere.[146] Where Macon and Milkman

struggle immensely with their seeming lack of lineage, Pilate operates more like the Sankofa

bird—reaching back to carry the evidence of her origin with her. For Judy Bowman, the artist

behind *The Sankofa Bird* artwork that appears at the beginning of this chapter, the Sankofa

represents how to "take the *good things* from the past with you as you walk into the future." This

is a testimonial to the power of "preservation of those *good things*…from [one] generation to the

next," a power Pilate understands well.[147]

In addition to being a member of the Dead family, Pilate bears another incredibly unique

representation of her interrupted lineage—she has no belly button:

> After their mother died, she had come struggling out of the womb without help from
> throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result…her stomach was as
> smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a
> navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal

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[143] Lee, 65
[144] Morrison, 337
[145] Morrison, 18
[146] Morrison, 19
[147] Godman, "Looking back"

channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment.[148]

Pilate's missing naval marks her as something not-human, something more alien than even the rest of the Dead family, though her purported occupation as a bootlegger certainly helps to boost her popularity. This alienation never reaches Pilate, though; she retains her agency in a particularly Bartlebyian fashion—offering resistance to the would-be obstructing forces through her surrender to them.

Though she may bear no physical mark of her past, Pilate is well-versed in it. Her lack of a navel doesn't prevent her from linking her origin directly to her family, specifically to Macon. As she describes for Milkman, "hadn't been for your daddy, I wouldn't be here today. I would have died in the womb."[149] Even as Morrison's narrator describes Pilate's origin as a "struggl[e]" she undertook "without help," Pilate gives herself a very human origin through Macon. Later, when Hagar admits that "some of my days were hungry ones," Pilate understands almost immediately that her granddaughter isn't referring to food. Pilate leads Hagar and Reba into song:

> *O Sugarman don't leave me here*
> *Cotton balls to choke me*
> *O Sugarman don't leave me here*
> *Buckra's arms to yoke me…*
> *…*
> *Sugarman done fly away*
> *Sugarman done gone*
> *Sugarman cut across the sky*
> *Sugarman gone home.*[150]

This song will become extremely familiar to Milkman when he journeys south to discover his family's origins as *Sugarman* refers to *Solomon*, Milkman's great-grandfather. Pilate not only recalls the song from her childhood, she has taught it to Reba and Hagar in her own practice of

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[148] Morrison, 27-28
[149] Morrison, 40
[150] Morrison, 49

legacy curation. Pilate does not argue against the ostracization done to her; in fact, she barely

acknowledges it. Instead, Pilate roots herself in the firm, if slight, understanding of the family

legacy she *does* have. She prides herself on recalling details like the color of "my mama's

ribbons. I'd know her ribbon color anywhere, but I don't know her name. After she died, Papa

wouldn't let anybody say it."[151] Instead of letting this lack of knowledge prevent her from

remembering and therefore from progressing forward, as it does for the men of her family, Pilate

embraces the knowledge she *does* have and moves forward anyway.

Pilate's reclamation of agency is afforded through her experience of Black nostalgia. This

is a paradoxical affordance, given the fundamentally obstructing, or to use Sharpe's term

"ruptur[ing]," nature of nostalgia. Pilate achieves this by embodying what Sianne Ngai described

as "a practice of threatening one's own limits (or the roles in which one is captured and defined)

not by transcending these limits from above but by inventing new ways of inhabiting them."[152]

Pilate's agency *is* disrupted in the same way as Macon and Milkman by the inaccessible nature of

their past. She *is* cast as an outsider because of her lack of a navel—a symbolic representation of

her family's collective alienation. But Pilate finds "new ways" to "inhabit[]" the roles of sister,

aunt, mother, grandmother, and ancestor, a move that awards her a great deal of agency. It is in

this way that Pilate represents the fundamental belief that remains the heart of Black

nostalgia—a belief in homecoming, in freedom, and in return.

Ultimately, it is Pilate who guides Milkman to his flight, fulfilling her role as "the

mythical ancestral presence that connects past and future in an unbroken cyclical and circular

structure."[153] This is how Milkman discovers "why he loved [Pilate] so. Without ever leaving the

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[151] Morrison, 43
[152] Ngai, 124
[153] Traore, 125

ground, she could fly."[154]

Surrender as hope

As I've already begun examining, there are several ways scholars attempt to examine the phenomenon of flying Africans "within the margins of the white page of academic discourse," to borrow a phrase from Timothy Powell.[155] To refuse to explain away the phenomenon as merely metaphorical, though, is a refusal to maintain Western epistemology as the yardstick against which all knowledge is measured. This is the act of resistance as surrender.

When we—I employ "we" to implicate all scholars and participants in the scholarly tradition, as well as to openly acknowledge my place as fixed within the Western epistemological tradition—accept the evidence of people like George Root and Esteban Montejo, "a Cuban runaway slave, [who] asserted vehemently, 'There are some who say that the blacks threw themselves into the rivers, but that's a lie.' Rather, 'the blacks…went flying, flying in the sky, and headed off for their homeland. … I know that like the palm of my hand, and it's a fact,'" we surrender to the existence of knowledge that may remain, for any number of reasons, unknowable to us.[156] By doing this, we retread the familiar grounds of belief.

To practice resistance as surrender is to join the longstanding traditions of belief shared among communities for millennia. This includes communities where enslaved people looked

> to the realm of the spirit to express their discontent with the slave system's collusion with the newly dawning juridical and philosophical thinking that formalized and justified the exercise of violence. That spiritual realm also afforded to enslaved men and women new avenues of bodily movement—in spirit possession, transmigration, dance, and flight—that *rejected the idea of their bodies as merely an extension of the masters' will, as merely a discrete tool meant to produce and reproduce*.[157]

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[154] Morrison, 336
[155] Powell, 254
[156] Young, 57
[157] Young, 53, emphasis added

Like Pilate, the enslaved people who found "new avenues of bodily movement" transcended the limits placed on them by "inventing new ways of inhabiting them." The flying African is not a call to suicide, it is a call to transcend.

Notably, to join in the traditions of belief is *not* the same as categorizing the legacy of flying Africans *as* a "widespread belief."[158] To categorize the flying African as belief "grant[s] the supernatural a real place in somebody's belief system," refusing at the same time to "ascribe it any real agency in historical events," which further operates within the apparatus of Western academia.[159] By deeming the flying African "a belief," we lower the value of the arguments of the faithful who "maintain[...] the veracity of human flight" in the name of upholding a "dogged devotion to rationalism and empiricism."[160]

Instead, by surrendering our 'claim' to institutions like rationality, the immutable laws of physics, fact and truth, we open ourselves to conceiving of "a reality [or realities] based on very different assumptions about personhood, agency, life, death, and the nature of power."[161] This could be read as a call to posthumanism—a call that has only gotten louder in recent years. In fact, these new realities that restructure our very understanding of "personhood, agency, life, [and] death" are currently the closest they've ever come to tangible fruition through 21st-century technological developments, an examination I will continue in Part II. But in keeping with the context of the 1970s, we can better understand this call as a fundamentally postmodern one in which the Western conception of Man as "glorious freewheeler at the center of everything" is dead.[162]

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[158] Young, 53
[159] Chakrabarty, 104
[160] Young, 66
[161] Young, 55
[162] Spretnak, 259

Resurrected in Man's place, I argue, is God. The cycle between God, Man, and death I described in Chapter One continues. This is not an ecumenical argument; nor is it even a particularly theological one. Here, I'm applying God as an iconographic representation of the human ability to locate hope.

Where Maria in *Play It As It Lays* discovers "the quintessential intersection of nothing" when she goes looking, Pilate, Dana, and even Milkman locate something much more tangible.[163] These Black characters locate the opposite of nothing, in fact, discovering the prized possession of the Sankofa bird—they find the quintessential intersection of themselves, of the future, the past, and everything in between. This is how Pilate is both "the ancestor" as well as the "central bearer of the concept of Afrofuturism"[164] and why Dana can return to the former site of the Weylin plantation, now nothing more than a cornfield, still bearing "the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on my face."[165]

Hope is the legacy contained with Black nostalgia. Where nostalgia otherwise fundamentally suspends the ability for the nostalgic to experience hope, or any other forward-looking emotion, Black nostalgia is generated by, and fuels, hope. And this hope, though born of the particular experience of Blackness in America, is not inaccessible to those who do not share the legacy. As Young points out:

> flying Africans provided a direct and immediate avenue away from slavery's lash, *but not only for the slaves who flew away*. For the men, women, and children trudging through endless rows of cane and cotton, stories of flying Africans expanded…the "boundaries of their restrictive universe…upward until it became one with the world beyond."[166]

The hope generated by Black nostalgia, of which "stories of flying Africans" are but one part, has room for all of us. Not in the appropriation of living "in the wake" of Blackness, nor in a

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[163] Didion, 67
[164] Traore, 123
[165] Butler, 264
[166] Young, 58, emphasis added

competition about *who had it worse.* By practicing resistance as surrender to ways of

un-knowing and as surrender to new epistemologies of belief, we practice resistance to injustice,

oppression, and inequality. This is how hope—particularly the kind of "dark hope" described by

O'neil Van Horn that I explore more fully in my Afterword—grows, how hope is shared, how

hope lives.

Part II

Where We Are

"Perhaps he did not do at all what is related, but something altogether different, which is accounted for by the circumstances of his times—then let us forget him, for it is not worth while to remember that past which cannot become a present."
—Søren Kierkegaard[167]

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[167] Søren Kierkegaard [Johannes De Silentio, pseud.], *Fear and Trembling,* trans. Walter Lowrie, 1941: 12. Retrieved from: www.sorenkierkegaard.nl.

Chapter Three

Crossing the Digital Divide: Defining Post-Nostalgia

One of my earliest memories consists of textures and colors. It was my third or fourth birthday, and I was perched on one of a pair of wingback chairs upholstered with blue and gold quilted fabric that I can still feel ridging underneath my fingertips. One of those colorful cardboard pointed birthday hats was strapped around my chin and I was unwrapping brightly-wrapped gifts, including a box wrapped in bright yellow polka-dot paper. I do not remember what was in the box. At one point, I had a red plastic kazoo in my mouth that I greatly delighted in blowing. I'm not sure what time of day it was or exactly *where* I was, though I could venture a guess, but these various patterns are the first impressions I can recall.

Or are they? As with most late-90s children, my childhood was well photographed and the photos of this particular birthday party live on the first page in a well-visited family scrapbook. How do I know if these are *actually* my earliest memories or merely the earliest presentation of my life that I regularly encounter? Can I really feel the kazoo between my teeth, or did I see the photo of a grinning child with a kazoo and substitute the image for the sensation? I always feel a pervasive sense of joy when I think about this scene. Am I recalling my own feeling, or am I borrowing a sensation from others who were there and actually *do* recall?

In another moment of memory-versus-implant from my childhood, though I cannot remember the age at which my accident occurred, I swear I can remember the step-by-step manner in which it happened. I had crawled into my mother's bed to sleep one night. It was early morning and she was in her bathroom getting ready for work. I was still asleep in her bed, though somehow during the night I had wormed my way to the edge of the mattress. I was lying on my left side—the side I still sleep on—and, as if in slow motion, I rolled forward onto my stomach

only to learn my very first painful lesson about the principles of gravity. I managed to fall directly onto the corner of my mother's nightstand face-first. The rest of the morning is a blur—a bloody towel pressed against my face, an ER visit, a doctor complimenting my brave nature as she glued my head back together, the birth of a distinctly corner-shaped scar. I do not remember the details of the aftermath as well as I remember the fall itself.

Except that I don't. When I replay this moment in my head, I find myself standing at a vantage point outside of my own body. I do not see the nightstand coming ever closer to me as I fall. In my mind, I am standing in the hallway watching a little girl roll off the bed with a loud *thud*. This isn't even the vantage point of my mother, who was in the room; I'm not adopting borrowed memories as my own here. I'm time-traveling through my memory when I recall my accident, actively creating and re-watching a nostalgia film of this scene that I've substituted for actual memory.

These two *(non-? un-?)* memories of mine are examples of what Marianne Hirsch terms the "postmemory." Hirsch defines post(-)memory and post-nostalgia as generational phenomena:

> Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before –to events that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images and behaviors among which they grew up[]. But these events were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.[168]

Scholar Lucas F. W. Wilson's definition of post-nostalgia aligns with Hirsch's in his description of a sense of "adopted 'nostalgia'...for a place and a time that descendants have never lived but long for as if they have."[169] Both of these scholars define post-nostalgia and post-memory as a particular experience of identities earmarked by dislocation and diaspora. Hirsch and Wilson write extensively about descendents of Holocaust survivors, and Hirsch has expanded her

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[168] Hirsch, 172
[169] Wilson, 121

definition of post-memory in our contemporary, neoliberal age to reflect the "the legacies of nineteenth and twentieth century mass violence perpetrated on diverse populations" because, as she writes, "in the twenty-first century, neither the Holocaust nor any other collective catastrophe can serve as a conceptual limit case in the discussion of historical trauma, memory and forgetting."[170] While my two reconstructed early childhood memories are far from the collective trauma emphasized by Hirsch and Wilson, they adhere to what I would argue is the core premise of both scholars' ideas: the profound generational transmission of feeling that invades the memories of the younger generation and populates them with memories of the older. I cannot separate myself from these two embedded memories—they are a foundational part of me, even if they didn't begin that way.

However illuminating personally I might find this generational understanding of post-nostalgia, I am employing the term within the scope of this paper with a radically distinct definition. This is not to repudiate the applications of the term as pioneered by Hirsch and employed by Wilson—indeed, I find their work incredibly valuable and highly relevant. I aim here to demonstrate the division between pre- and post- Internet-age postmodernism as a divide that can be messily, incompletely, and yet *essentially* defined as the divide between nostalgia and post-nostalgia, and to explore what the discovery of hope in a post-nostalgic age could look like.

Defining post-nostalgia

My conception of post-nostalgia employs similar guiding principles as those that define the boundaries of posthumanism, a term I will more fully explore in the context of my work in the next section. I join scholars like Júlia Braga Neves (2020) in the conception of posthumanism as a projection into utter newness. A posthuman future is the "*futuro de outra espécie de corpo,*"

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[170] Hirsch, 174

the future as populated by another kind of body entirely. This body exists "*nas interfaces do humano e do maquínico*," within the interfaces between human and machine.[171] The posthuman goes beyond the transhuman properties of prosthetics, for example, to create an entirely new entity that is neither human nor machine but the cyborg amalgamation of them both. This is a post-nostalgic future.

Post-nostalgia signifies a *de facto* severing of the past. The rapid pace of technological development in our contemporary age has created a specter of futurity that looms over everything, a future that is both unimaginable and somehow so *present* that ardent techno-adopters long to skip directly past knowable human existence into something brand new. This is an utter rejection of longing for any part of the past, circumstance and belief. It is the original postmodern problem rearranged: we know where we have been *and* where we are, and we cannot wait to forget it all. Post-nostalgia is the central force that drives Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019) and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016).

Indeed, Victor Stein, the 21st century version of Mary Shelley's mad scientist that appears in *Frankissstein*, is the poster child for post-nostalgia. Victor longs to "upload myself, that is, upload my consciousness, to a substrate not made of meat" and escape the physical trappings of humanity for good.[172] Victor does not long for the abandonment of the body in favor of simple death or eternal life as promised by religious faith. Victor's urge to ditch the body is entirely in favor of throwing himself—or at least his consciousness—into a completely unknowable future.

Victor frames his goal of consciousness-uploading as "abolish[ing] death, at least for some people, by uploading our minds out of their biological beginnings." When the contemporary version of Mary Shelley that Winterson creates in the form of Ry, a trans- and

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[171] Braga Neves, 161
[172] Winterson, 110

non-binary journalist in love with Victor, interrupts him to point out how Victor's plans reduce

humans to "just a computer programme," Victor "frown[s]. Why do you say 'just'?"[173] To Victor,

there is nothing of value to be found in the preservation of biological humanity. Even the

physical brain can be left to decay, as long as the contents of the brain—Victor's

consciousness—have been uploaded to a virtual container where, in theory anyway, it can live

forever. This is a critical point of separation between our contemporary age and previous human

understanding. As Jordan Carson puts it:

> The notion of transcendence lost much of its meaning when the mind itself had to define
> what, by its own description, totally surpassed it. When meaning and value are
> understood to be located in the human mind, rather than encountered directly from nature
> or the divine, all extra-mental reality becomes objectified. When the mind becomes
> merely the source of objectivity, there is nothing left of substance; selfhood then lacks
> content and the capacity for inwardness.[174]

Victor looks towards a future where the "human" ceases to exist as we currently understand it

because his brain is not capable of imagining anything greater than itself. By merging

consciousness with the capabilities of AI—capabilities bestowed upon the machine by Man, lest

we forget the transcendent nature of technology is guaranteed only by the intellect of humans,

Victor aims to preserve "meaning" and "value" for eternity.

Victor is constantly denigrating the body, and more broadly the human, as a "collection of

limbs and organs" that has no intrinsic value outside of intelligence located exclusively within

the mind.[175] The quest to locate the seat of humanity—the soul, the intellect, the "'super-added'

force"—is hardly a new undertaking.[176] Winterson traces the lengthy lineage of this exploration

through flashbacks to 1816 when Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord

Byron, Claire Clairmont, and John William Polidori hosted a meeting of the minds in a drafty

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[173] Winterson, 114
[174] Carson, 16
[175] Winterson, 148
[176] Winterson, 56

house on Lake Geneva. In Winterson's fictional account of this real event, Mary Shelley argues

with Lord Byron about the meaning of life, aliveness, death, and the classic debate of

male-versus-female:

> Do you believe that if every person had enough money, enough work, enough leisure, enough learning, that if they were not oppressed by those above them, or fearful of those below them, humankind would be perfected? Byron asked this in his negative drawl, sure of the response, and so I set out to disaffect him.
> I do! I said.
> I do not! said Byron. The human race seeks its own death. We hasten towards what we fear most.
> I shook my head. I was on firm ground now in this ark of ours. I said, It is men who seek death. If a single one of you carried a life in his womb for nine months, only to see that child perish as a baby, or in infancy, or through want, disease, or thereafter, war, you would not seek death in the way that you do.
> *Yet death is heroic,* said Byron. *And life is not.*[177]

Byron locates humanity in a species-wide inclination towards death—"towards what we fear

most"—and calls the inevitable act "heroic," while dismissing everything that comes before it.

Byron's belief in the power of death, however, stems not from profound religious belief about

eternal (after)life or karmic soul recycling, but firmly within the very element he dismisses as

non-heroic: life. "To die well is to live well, said Byron. None finds satisfaction in death, replied

Polidori…What will you gain from it? Reputation, said Bryon."[178] Byron's longing for death is

really a longing for the eternal life of his reputation.

Byron's callous beliefs about death and the value he puts on an intangible entity like his

reputation are reminiscent of Victor's fascination with the notion of preserving consciousness

and escaping biology, his impatience with elements like the body, that mere "collection of limbs

and organs," that he dismisses as unimportant, with at least one critical difference. For Byron, his

reputation, the element of himself that will live on past death, is an entirely separate entity. He

classifies death as the ending of himself through the biological ending of his body. For Victor, in

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[177] Winterson, 10-11
[178] Winterson, 57

our contemporary, technology-forward age, death is not a foregone conclusion, and it's certainly

not—necessarily, anyway—an ending:

> Race, faith, gender, sexuality, those things make me impatient, said Victor. We need to
> move forward, and faster. I want an end to it all, don't you see?
> An end to the human, I said.
> An end to human stupidity, said Victor. Although, I do have a note from Jack, dated 1998,
> where he speculates that an ultraintelligent machine would lead to the extinction of Homo
> sapiens.
> Do you believe that will happen? I said.
> Victor shrugged. What do we mean by extinction? If we can upload some human minds
> to a non-physical platform, then what? Biological extinction, perhaps. I don't like the
> word 'extinction' – it is alarmist.
> That's because being wiped out is alarming, I said.
> Don't be so tabloid, said Victor. Think of it as accelerated evolution.[179]

Victor frames his call for a leap forward into a post-human existence as "accelerated evolution,"

equating human-driven technological advancements with the biological process of species

adaptation. In Victor's imagined future, survival depends on being among "some human minds"

that get uploaded to "a non-physical platform" as part of his effort to leave things like "race,

faith, gender, sexuality" behind.

The notion of "uploading consciousness" or otherwise merging reality with its virtual

counterpart is a common theme of contemporary AI/techno-fiction, perhaps due to the increasing

collapse of space between 'virtual' and 'physical' that has come to define our contemporary

hyperdigital era. Indeed, participation within cyberspace—what Getman et al. define as "a

special living environment in which all spheres of public life are connected"—has become a

prerequisite for participation in contemporary Western society as a whole.[180] Digital artist Lynn

Hershman Leeson would argue that cyberspace has reshaped much more than just public life.

Leeson's interactive art exhibit *Shadow Stalker* (2019) highlighted the disappearance of "the

boundary between the reality and virtuality of [] space" that occurs when people go online.[181] In

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[179] Winterson, 199-200
[180] Getman et al., 80
[181] Leeson, 97

the second part of the three-part installation, Leeson collected email addresses from visitors. A

replica of the Predpol predictive policing algorithm—an algorithm programmed to "predict[]

crime hotspots" for police departments[182]—scraped the web for personal data using the email

addresses. The collection of information gathered by the algorithm then appeared as a shadow

behind each participant, creating a physical representation of the virtual intrusion into their

online selves.

The lack of a boundary between 'online' and 'offline' that Leeson demonstrated in her

exhibit has tangible consequences for bodies. That is, anyone with a body who participates in

cyberspace is forced to *(willingly?)* participate in the process of reconfiguring their own

understanding of themselves; as Leeson notes, "a precondition for electronic access is being one

or even several other people."[183] Cyberspace demands the fusion of the self with technology

through the creation of an 'online' self that is distinct from the 'offline' self. This process could

be understood as a form of disembodiment or re-embodiment, though what is required of general

cyberspace users is different from the drastic abandoning of the physical body as championed by

Victor Stein.

The reality of this reconfiguring of the self was foreseen by Donna Haraway, who

employed the term 'cyborg' to describe the creature that results from such a process in her

landmark examination of the interactions between technology/culture and politics/power, *A

Cyborg Manifesto*. Haraway defines a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and

organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."[184] The cyborg can be seen

as an icon of transhumanism, the techno-social movement that aims to create a breed of

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[182] Litska Strikwerda, "Predictive policing: The risks associated with risk assessment." *Police Journal: Theory, Practice, and Principles* 94, no. 3 (2021): 425.
[183] Leeson, 85
[184] Haraway, 149

human-tech hybrids, with the "enhancement of human life [as] its fundamental goal,"[185] and also as one of posthumanism, a movement defined, at least materially, by "the joining of humans with intelligent machines" in the creation of something entirely new.[186] Contemporary examples of transhuman technologies abound—Apple Watches, Google Glasses, the Meta VR headset, really any wearable device that purports to offer some sort of longevity benefit, whether through claims of improved health by monitoring sleep quality, or by purporting to increase workplace efficiency.

The goal of transhumanism is, in a way, very similar to Byron's professed goal in *Frankissstein* (2019). Matteo Gilebbi defines the transhuman as "both a new-human and a super-human that can engineer its own evolution."[187] The urge to "engineer its own evolution" can be understood as an urge to prolong life by adopting technologies that, ideally, delay the inevitable: death. Lord Byron, too, wishes to delay the inevitable. The poet does not deceive himself, however; he knows he will die and he has no life-prolonging technologies at his disposal. His efforts, then, turn to the preservation of his legacy, his "wish to leave some mark behind[]."[188]

This is the central separation between Byron and Victor, between transhumanism and posthumanism, between nostalgia and post-nostalgia. Where transhumanism represents a desire to extend the human ability to exist in the world as we already know it, posthumanism is a radical departure from the known world. This is the work of post-nostalgia, as I employ the term—a desire, a *need*, to move beyond all previous human understanding, fueled by the rapid technological development of our contemporary age.

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[185] Gilebbi, 182
[186] Hayles, "Refiguring the Posthuman," 312
[187] Gilebbi, 182
[188] Winterson, 9

Introducing the (new) God

Don DeLillo examines the tension between nostalgia and post-nostalgia, transhumanism and posthumanism in *Zero K*. The amalgamation of religion and technology in the contemporary age is highlighted through DeLillo's creation of the, befittingly-titled, Convergence. The Convergence is a movement that is a radical departure into a vast, unknowable future ruled by science and technology, yet still rooted within human tradition. These two seemingly incompatible truths create the central tension of the novel.

Ross Lockheart, a Wall Street billionaire, is the main benefactor of the Convergence, which he describes to his son, Jeffrey, as "faith-based technology…Another god. Not so different, it turns out, from some of the earlier ones. Except that it's real, it's true, it delivers."[189] Everyone at the Convergence, as Jeffrey will find out, makes these weightless claims about the "real" and "true" power of their movement. The Stenmark twins—architects of the Convergence—echo Ross' statement, calling the Convergence "a promise more assured than the ineffable hereafters of the world's organized religions."[190] They never explain exactly *how* the promise of the Convergence is "more assured" than that of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish traditions; blind faith does not suffer the burden of explanation. Or maybe the truth is more akin to the old shoppers adage—if you have to inquire about the price, you cannot afford it.

The Convergence is a physical representation of the divide between nostalgia and post-nostalgia, which is incredibly appropriate for DeLillo, an author who has produced works straddling both nostalgic and post-nostalgic postmodern eras. Literally, the Convergence is a

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[189] DeLillo, 9
[190] DeLillo, 74

secretive, subterranean compound that takes Jeffrey five different private flights and a long drive

in a shrouded SUV to reach. Jeffrey asks Ross about the need for this isolation:

> "Why here?"
> "There are laboratories and tech centers in two other countries. This is the base, central command."
> "But why so isolated? Why not Switzerland? Why not a suburb of Houston?"
> "This is what we want, this separation. We have what is needed. Durable energy sources and strong mechanized systems. Blast walls and fortified floors. Structural redundancy. Fire safety. Security patrols, land and air. Elaborate cyber-defense. And so on."
> …
> "People in offices here. Hidden away. What are they doing?"
> "They're making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others."
> "And it has to be here."
> "This is land traveled by nomads for thousands of years. Sheepherders in open country. It's not battered and compacted by history. History is buried here."[191]

In effect, the Convergence is a new holy land under construction. The sacralization of this

"faith-based technology" has made it so the human engineers, scientists, and coders behind the

Convergence can sanctify their surroundings, no other God needed. When he describes the land,

Ross describes both a solid connection to human history—a land "traveled by nomads for

thousands of years"—and a vast severing, too, through the "separation" of the compound, the

absence of "batter[ing] and compact[ing]," a side effect of too much human influence.

Along the same lines of belief espoused by Victor Stein and Lord Byron, the followers of

the Convergence *(the converged?)* have faith in the promise of eternal life. Beyond just

cryogenic suspension of the dead for a future revival, the Convergence offers complete

renovation from the inside out, creating cyborgs out of humans through "devices [that] enter the

body dynamically and become the refurbished parts and pathways we need in order to live

again."[192] Artis, Ross' wife, is terminally ill and a patient at the Convergence. She describes the

process for Jeffrey:

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[191] DeLillo, 30
[192] DeLillo, 128

> I will become a clinical specimen. Advances will be made through the years. Parts of the body replaced or rebuilt. Note the documentary tone. I've talked to people here. A reassembling atom by atom. I have every belief that I will reawaken to a new perception of the world.
> …
> I will be reborn into a deeper and truer reality. Lines of brilliant light, every material thing in its fullness, a holy object.[193]

Not only does the Convergence offer followers the promise of eternal life—and it is a promise for which nobody besides Jeffrey seems to harbor doubt, it remakes humans into "holy object[s]," sanctifying them for a "deeper and truer" future. Artis expects to wake up completely renewed and *a*new, remade in the image of the Convergence.

Belief in the Convergence is intensely personal for Ross and Artis, as they "seek[] to conquer death, paradoxically, by submitting to it."[194] This is reminiscent of the concept of resistance-as-surrender that I analyzed in Chapter Two. Akin to the flying Africans who take flight as a method of returning to their ancestral homes in Africa, Artis and Ross are surrendering to death in their pursuit of an eternal return to life. Indeed, Artis tells Jeffrey she's "so eager, I can't tell you. To do this thing. Enter another dimension. And then return."[195] Their faith stems from the essential promise of *return*. It is a nostalgic impulse, a longing to return to the familiar after separation.

Their faith also, paradoxically, stems from a fundamental lack of hope. Laura Barrett identifies Artis as "the skeptic" whose "discontentment with the transience and imperfections of life compels her to seek transcendence, to [']withdraw her investment' in the world."[196] Artis and Ross critique Jeffrey for his cynicism and seeming inability to understand their belief in the 'promise' of the Convergence, yet they are willing to submit to premature death in order to

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[193] DeLillo, 47
[194] Glavanakova, 96
[195] DeLillo, 53
[196] Barrett, 113

escape the image of "a grim future, filled with suffering, war, terrorism, famine, drought."[197]

They do not have hope in a viable future outside of the subterranean world of the Convergence.

Artis and Ross contain echoes of the fundamental rootlessness exhibited by Maria Wyeth in *Play*

It As It Lays (1970) and other 1970s postmodernists with one fundamental difference.

Technology affords Ross and Artis the opportunity to forge their own future. Members of the

Convergence are not stuck in their discontent; their money and belief have purchased them a life

raft off the sinking ship that is our current reality.

While Ross and Artis are less concerned with the specifics of the future they shall return

to, more concerned as they are with the return itself, other believers, like the Stenmark twins,

source their faith entirely within the imagining of that absolutely unknowable future. The

Stenmarks do not think about *returning* as much as *enduring*. It is the same impulse that drives

Victor to upload his consciousness. He and the Stenmarks are "in a race against time," trying

desperately to "live long enough to reach the future," a future that is both post-death and

post-human.[198] The Stenmarks say as much in their presentation to stakeholders:

> "This is the first split second of the first cosmic year. We are becoming citizens of the universe."
> "There are questions of course."
> "Once we master life extension and approach the possibility of becoming ever renewable, what happens to our energies, our aspirations?"
> "The social institutions we've built."
> "Are we designing a future culture of lethargy and self-indulgence?"
> "Isn't death a blessing? Doesn't it define the value of our lives, minute to minute, year to year?"
> "Many other questions."
> "Isn't it sufficient to live a little longer through advanced technology? Do we need to go on and on and on?"
> …
> "What happens to history? What happens to money? What happens to God?"
> …
> "What about those who die? The others. There will always be others. Why should some keep living while others die?"

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[197] Barrett, 111
[198] Winterson, 162

> …
> "The defining element of life is that it ends."
> "Nature wants to kill us off in order to return to its untouched and uncorrupted form."
> "What good are we if we live forever?"
> "What ultimate truth will we confront?"
> "Isn't the sting of our eventual dying what makes us precious to the people in our lives?"
> …
> "What does it mean to die?"
> "Where are the dead?"
> "When do you stop being who you are?"
> …
> "Does technology have a death wish?"
> "Many other questions."
> "But we reject these questions. They miss the point of our endeavor. We want to stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human—stretch and then surpass. We want to do whatever we are capable of doing in order to alter human thought and bend the energies of civilization."[199]

By "reject[ing]" any and all questions that are born from the traditional human experience, the twins, and thus a major factor of the Convergence itself, aim to sever all ties with present and past, creating something entirely new. They dismiss questions of "ultimate truth" and fundamental "good," queries about God, and the existence of entire systems of belief because the Convergence is posited as the new God. Not just a new religion—a new God. They dismiss transhuman technology that prolongs life but cannot, alas, permanently guarantee it, as insufficient, incapable of making the promise of eternal life.

Jeffrey, an outsider, struggles immensely with the paradoxical concepts of the Convergence. He idles in his thoughts to such a degree that he begins to question himself:

> I didn't believe a word of it. It was a kind of wishful poetry. It didn't apply to real people, real fear. Or was I being small-minded, too limited in perspective?[200]

> Maybe I'm too limited in vision. Inadequate to the experience. All I seem to be doing is relating what I've seen and heard in these few days to what I already know.[201]

Taking the relational approach, as Jeffrey does, clearly does not fit the vision or mission of the Convergence. The Convergence is so *new*—as the Stenmarks put it, so concerned with

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[199] DeLillo, 69-71
[200] DeLillo, 66
[201] DeLillo, 99

"stretch[ing] the boundaries of what it means to be human"—that any attempt to define it through known quantities discounts the attempt at all; Jeffrey spends a great deal of the novel wandering seemingly identical hallways encountering nothing but locked doors, a fitting visual metaphor.

Even as the Stenmarks try their best to embrace post-nostalgia by representing the Convergence as the beginning of something entirely new—"a new metropolis, maybe an independent state, different from any we've known," the twins are relegated to using familiar language of belief and statehood to convey their mission. At least, for now they are forced to do so. Because the Convergence also employs

> philologists designing an advanced language unique to the Convergence. Word roots, inflections, even gestures. People will learn it and speak it. A language that will enable us to express things we can't express now, see things we can't see now, see ourselves and others in ways that unite us, broaden every possibility.[202]

Perhaps for non-believers like Jeffrey, the Convergence will always remain a phenomenon in conflict, a paradox of foreignness that can never be understood through the limited descriptions afforded by familiar language.

Some scholars will likely disagree with my categorization of the Stenmarks and Victor Stein as posthuman manifestations. I employ a material application of the term "posthuman." Therefore, the criteria I use to classify posthumanism is not grounded in theoretical definitions which, broadly speaking, include the "weakening [of] human exceptionalism, hierarchical views of existence, and anthropocentric normativity," of which I concur, the Stenmarks and Victor Stein are poor examples.[203] I do not fault the characters for this; human exceptionalism has served as an ersatz religion, especially in the West, for centuries, and the development of artificial intelligence has only inflated our collective egos even further. Characters like Ross,

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[202] DeLillo, 33
[203] Gilebbi, 181

Victor, and the Stenmark twins are easily understood as facsimiles of contemporary leaders in the tech industry. DeLillo, in particular, is an author that "quashes [any] notion that American exceptionalism has faded into the glowing cyber-matrix of a global age."[204] It is an entirely Man-centered undertaking, to sacralize AI and technology, as human-made phenomena, and work to subsume ourselves inside of that creation, shedding our humanness like a skin. This situates humans in the place of both God and Man, master of the technology and servant to it.

The materiality of posthumanism is evident in the new language created by and for the Convergence, to return to that passage as an example. Ross, through his faith in the Convergence, ardently believes in a future that he cannot possibly begin to describe for Jeffrey, because Ross can't even describe that future to himself. The Convergence creates holy cyborgs out of people—what Mark Poster termed "humachine[s]…an intimate mixing of human and machine that constitutes an interface outside the subject/object binary."[205] This is entirely new territory that falls far outside the realm of "human." This is the post-human.

In an essay about the phenomenon of postmemory, Marianne Hirsch writes:

> The "post" in "postmemory" is not a concession simply to linear temporality or sequential logic. It signals the complex relationship between proximity and distance, overlaid with the multiple effects characterizing mediated acts of transfer. Like other "posts" marking the end of the twentieth and the beginnings of the twenty-first centuries…postmemory reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture.[206]

This "complex relationship between proximity and distance" and "uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" readily applies to the material definition of "posthuman," which Hirsch mentions. This generous understanding allows for DeLillo's exploration of nostalgia and post-nostalgia, trans-human and post-human, without necessarily placing any movement in direct competition with any other.

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[204] Carson, 29
[205] Quoted in Hayles, "Refiguring the Posthuman," 312
[206] Hirsch, 173

Ultimately, I have adopted N. Katherine Hayles' definition of the posthuman. I share first in Hayles' understanding that posthumanism "signals [only] the end of a certain conception of the human," rather than an end to humanity as we know it.[207] Ross and Artis do not long to become machines as much as they are willing to become hybrid, humachines in order to secure that sacred *return*. Even Victor's longing to ditch the body for an uploaded consciousness does not indicate a desire to become altogether non-human. In fact, Victor's eagerness for eternal life—even if that life will be housed in a virtual container—can be read as decidedly pro-human. Hayles also writes that the posthuman "cannot and will not mean only one thing. Posthumans are likely to be as complex and diverse, as historically and culturally specific as humans have been."[208] Even if we don't yet have the language to describe the histories and cultures that will be created by the creation of humachines and cyborgs, we can begin to wrap our minds around the creation of *multiple* vast unknowns—replete with various elements of human, post-human, and anti-human sentiment—as we continue to investigate the forces behind our drive towards such an unknown future.

God is dead (again)

In a discussion with fellow author Mark O'Connell, Winterson categorizes this drive towards trans- and posthuman technologies, like cryogenics and consciousness uploading, as a fundamentally theological yearn: "I think the human dream…has always been in some form a dream of escape, or to put it in more philosophical-sounding terms, transcendence…Nothing is more human than the desire to transcend humanity.[209] While Winterson (correctly) locates the origin of this yearning within the vast annals of human history—and indeed, as at the

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[207] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman,* 286
[208] Hayles, "Refiguring the Posthuman," 316
[209] Winterson, 360-361

Convergence, even posthuman, post-nostalgia tech adopters use the familiar language of religion

and traditions of belief—Victor and the Stenmark twins would argue with her. Fundamentally,

they'd say, their various undertakings are much larger, and much different, than the transcendent

dreams of human ancestors. Analyzing the merits of this argument, particularly when it comes to

comparing strength of belief, is a task best left to the religious and philosophical scholars and

falls outside the scope of this paper. But understanding the fundamental point that these

characters, on behalf of the legions of Silicon Valley tech bros, early adopters, and other

enthusiasts of a tech-forward society, are making is *critical* when attempting to understand the

contemporary circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The irresolvable irony of the posthuman beliefs espoused by Victor and Ross are that they

are just that—beliefs. There is no evidence of the viability of consciousness uploading or

cryogenic suspension. Even as Victor longs to abandon the systems that have ordered humanity

for millennia, including faith and religion, he is a proselytizer:

> Victor Stein has a big following on Facebook and Twitter. His TED talk has netted six
> million views. He's on a mission, that's certain.
> Some people wonder: whose side are you on?
> He'd say there are no sides – that binaries belong to our carbon-based past. The future is
> not biology – it's AI.
> …
> Women adore him. Men admire him. He knows how to play a room. He'll walk away
> from the podium to make a point. He likes to crumple his notes and throw them to the
> floor.
> He's a Gospel Channel scientist. But who will be saved?[210]

Victor urges his audience to adopt his beliefs with the vigor of a preacher delivering a sermon.

Instead of God, he encourages the worship of AI. He answers questions from the audience with

careful ease, despite the lack of substance or evidence to support his points. Several women in

the audience press him, asking "will women be the first casualties of obsolescence in your brave

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[210] Winterson, 72-73

new world?"[211] and, more pointedly, "the race to create what you call true artificial intelligence is

a race run by autistic-spectrum white boys with poor emotional intelligence and frat-dorm social

skills. In what way will *their* brave new world be gender neutral – or anything neutral?"[212]

Victor's replies to the women are telling. He reaffirms the abandonment of biological

systems through technology, which he says will keep AI from "replicat[ing] outmoded gender

prejudices" because "there is no biological male or female."[213] He addresses the second query

about the "white boys with poor emotional intelligence" who are currently programming the AI

that powers this future with another faith-based argument:

> *Even if, even if* the first superintelligence is the worst possible iteration of what you might
> call the white male autistic default programme, the first upgrade by the intelligence itself
> will begin to correct such errors. And why? Because humans will only programme the
> future once. After that, the intelligence we create will manage itself.
> And us.
> *Thank you.*
> APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE[214]

Victor's arguments about the utopian future of AI and intelligence that can "manage itself" are

not yet supported by evidence; he is crafting utopia, a privilege afforded to him by the privileges

of his identity. Victor can dismiss the body, biology, the binary, and appease concerns about

parity across gender, ability, race, and faith because he's a cis-gendered white male with

tremendous power.

This is the greatest division between Victor and Ry. While Victor constantly dismisses the

body as an unimportant shell, Ry's identity is born, at least partially, from their existence in a

body that does not conform to the gender binary:

> I am a woman. And I am a man. That's how it is for me. I am in the body that I prefer.
> But the past, my past, isn't subject to surgery. I didn't do it to distance myself from
> myself. I did it to get nearer to myself.

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[211] Winterson, 74
[212] Winterson, 76
[213] Winterson, 74
[214] Winterson, 80

> …
> Why are you so easy in your body? [Victor] said.
> Because it really is my body. I had it made for me.[215]

Ry used a transhuman technology—the biological alteration of top surgery—to better embody

their identity. Victor's constant denigration of the body is alienating to Ry, just as Ry's

corporeality puzzles Victor, and threatens him. Victor, who so champions the need to move

beyond the traditional human ways of thinking, who longs to leave everything—society, biology,

economy—behind, struggles tremendously with the notion of sexuality as he and Ry fall in love:

> I am not gay, he said, any more than you are.
> I don't think of myself as part of the binary, I said.
> You're not. He shook his head.
> No, I'm not. But you are. Wings or no wings, angel or human, you don't want to be gay, do you, Victor?
> He goes to comb his hair in the mirror on the wall. He doesn't like this conversation. He says, It's not about what I want – like buying a new car. It's about who I am – identity.
> We make love, and you don't feel like a man to me when we make love.
> …
> When we are out together, like it or not, as far as the world is concerned, you are out with a man.
> You don't have a penis.
> You sound like Ron Lord!
> That reminds me – I need to call him. Listen, I have said this before but I will say it again – if you did have a penis, then what happened between us in the shower in Arizona…
> And after the shower when you fucked me…
> He puts a finger to my lips to shush me. Would never have happened. He walks to the coffee machine and starts fiddling with the water container.
> I said, If the body is provisional, interchangeable, even, why does it matter so much what I am?
> He didn't answer.[216]

Victor's notion of gender is relegated to the binary and to biology, refusing to acknowledge Ry's

'manness,' which Victor easily dismisses because they "don't have a penis." Victor's need to

believe in the promise of living as a computer program without the influence of existing systems

like gender appears more desperate in light of his seeming inability to accept being in love with

someone who could be a man.

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[215] Winterson, 122
[216] Winterson, 155-156

This is another fundamental hitch for both Victor and the Convergence—the salvation they guarantee is limited. Victor mentions uploading "*some* human minds to a non-physical platform," offering his version of eternal life as a consciousness in cyberspace only to the chosen few.[217] Victor's selection criteria is never made explicit, but even Ron Lord—a sexbot manufacturer—recognizes the necessary restriction on a tour of a cryogenic preservation facility:

> Ryan, you just said that 55 million people die every year?
> Yes…
> *We wouldn't want them all back though, would we?*
> …
> I mean, says Ron, where do you draw the line? Murdering bastards, child molesters, thugs, nutters, that bloke in Brazil – Bolsonaro. What if you had Hitler's head in a bag in there? Would you defrost it? And then there's really boring people…[218]

Whose consciousness qualifies for Victor's eternal life program? Who determines which life is worth preserving and which isn't?

Already the AI algorithms being developed today are replicating existing biases on an exponential scale because "technology never materialises as 'pure tech'; rather, it is embedded in concrete social and cultural norms…[and] is highly context- and application-bound."[219] Algorithms are applied in social contexts where lack of nuance presents an active threat to real people, as with the Predpol predictive policing algorithm. Human biases are absorbed into machines as learned behavior, producing biased outcomes.[220]

In *Frankissstein*, Ron Lord's sexbots are a physical manifestation of the kind of identity-based violence afforded by technology. Ron's "girls" come in various shapes with expressly 'female' anatomy, though the "70s feminist version" comes with "no bra, messy hair and a dildo for anal play. Yeah! Clever! She gets to fuck you!"[221] Ron's sexbots are high-tech

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[217] Winterson, 199
[218] Winterson, 226-227
[219] Klipphahn-Karge et. al, 6
[220] See: American Artist, *1956/2054, 2019.* vimeo.com/366338056.
[221] Winterson, 47

facsimiles of alive, human women, replete with "pneumatic" padding, "to give a softer feel,"

"top-grade silicon nipples," a "lovely ass with a bit of movement – soft silicon," and a "bigger

battery so we can warm up certain parts of her skin. My girls can seem lower-temperature than

born and bred girls."[222] Ron's "girls" are incredibly lifelike, and seem to be a popular outlet for

misogynistic rage:

> We ask for double deposit on this model because of the hair and you have to sign a
> waiver declaring that you won't spill booze or smear food, piss, shit or cum in her hair.
> Do they do that kind of thing? Sad but true. I wouldn't, but some do.[223]

> Why do I need extra heads? A lot of the XX-BOTs get their faces bashed in. Get thrown
> at the wall or something…Sex can get a bit rough, can't it? I don't judge.[224]

And though all of Ron's bots are Adult models, he notes that "there are some really small girls

on the market" that "look like children,"[225] because there's "no such thing as underage sex when

it's a bot."[226] Ron's no-judgment business model is, functionally, a high-tech prostitution service

that dishes up techno-replicas of women to clients who have the express intent of abusing them.

Just as algorithms learn based on patterns of behavior, what do we think the end result will be

when someone who loves "bash[ing] in" the face of their sexbot or "smear[ing] food, piss, shit,

or cum in her hair" encounters an alive woman they desire?

Even Victor's vision of a future that brings about "an end to human stupidity" replicates

existing systems of inequality: "Personally I would prefer to develop bots as a completely

separate life form that remains sub-part to implant-modified humans. Our helpers and care-takers

– not our equals."[227] Victor envisions a future in which he is God, able to designate which

consciousnesses can live forever as uploaded data—literally deciding who lives and who

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[222] Winterson, 42-43
[223] Winterson, 45
[224] Winterson, 51
[225] Winterson, 44
[226] Winterson, 47
[227] Winterson, 150

dies—and design a class system to rule over "parallel life forms" that exist to serve "modified humans."[228]

The Convergence is a similarly limited operation, both physically and economically. This technology is not designed for the masses. The Stenmarks make reference to this in their rambling speech of questions: "What about those who die? The others. There will always be others. Why should some keep living while others die?"[229] Most organized religions have always operated under a shrouded sense of restriction while openly professing attainable salvation for all. In this way, the Convergence is only making more explicit the lengthy human tradition of exclusion.

But even as the Stenmarks appropriate the language of belief, they reject the premise of religious organization: "Why not just die? Because we're human and we cling. In this case not to religious tradition but to the science of present and future."[230] The Stenmarks strictly categorize their undertaking as "science," or, more importantly perhaps, as "*not* [] religious." This contradictory logic makes sense in light of the widespread disillusionment and secularization that took place across American culture in the latter half of the twentieth century, a movement that "facilitated a new return to the theological[,] and a new emphasis upon reenchantment" that had to take place outside of religion.[231]

The refusal on the part of the Stenmarks to categorize the Convergence as a religion may also have something to do with the movement's foundation in capitalism. Besides just the fact that the Convergence is funded by billionaire "individuals, foundations, corporations, secret funding from various governments by way of their intelligence agencies," the only people who

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[228] Winterson, 150
[229] DeLillo, 70
[230] DeLillo, 74
[231] Ward, xv

can afford to take the "pilgrimage," as Jeffrey terms it, to the Convergence are those who can

afford the exorbitant costs.[232] For reference, The Alcor Life Extension Foundation, a cryogenic

preservation operation in Phoenix, Arizona, quotes "$200,000 for whole body cryopreservation

or $80,000 for neuro cryopreservation,"[233] and I'm assuming their services come without the

subterranean bunker, philologists on retainer, and the "coloniz[ation] of [] bodies with nanobots"

to repair the body from within.[234]

The Convergence is a neoliberal, pay-to-pray religion in which salvation is directly tied

to economy. The leap of faith required to become an adherent of the Convergence, or even to

participate in cryogenic suspension at Alcor, is directly related to affordability. This is an open

secret among the pro-cryogenic crowd; in his discussion with Jeanette Winterson, Mark

O'Connell recalls interviewing practicing trans- and posthumanists about cryogenic suspension:

> Most of them understood that cryonics was an extreme long shot. The science is pretty
> ropey, and even Max More, the CEO of Alcor…told me that he hoped never to have to
> freeze himself. It's Pascal's Wagner, basically. It might be a long shot, but it's better to
> believe against the odds and be saved than not believe and be damned either way. Again,
> we are back in the realm of theology, which we never really left in the first place.[235]

Like Lord Byron, the transhumanists are not deluding themselves. The majority of them seem to

understand that they will pay a substantial amount of money to preserve their body and still

never experience posthumous revival. But the slim chance that they could, one day, reawaken in

their bodies, in a world where death no longer looms as the final, inevitable truth is too tempting

to give up. O'Connell even uses some of the most familiar phrases in Western religion, framing

belief in successful cryogenic reanimation as "be[ing] saved" while doubters are "damned."

O'Connell and Winterson trace this existing human impulse—what the Stenmarks call the

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[232] DeLillo, 33-34
[233] "Membership," *Alcor*, accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.alcor.org/membership.
[234] DeLillo, 71
[235] Winterson, 363

quintessential human "cling"—understanding "this so-called future as part of the human dream once colonized by religion."[236]

Jeffrey summarizes the paradoxical nature of post-humanism best in one of his offhand comments:

> This place may not have been intended as the new Jerusalem, but people made long journeys to find a form of higher being here, or at least a scientific process that will keep their body tissue from decomposing.[237]

Jeffrey suggests a concrete, biological process—the prevention of "decomposing"—as a substitution for transcendence, what he terms the journey "to find a form of higher being." This is the post-nostalgic conundrum of the contemporary age. When people find themselves unable to access traditional systems of belief, they settle for the acceptance of an inevitably capital-driven solution.

The radical cryo-pod technology of the Convergence remains available only to elites. Jeffrey accurately observes that the solution, the salvation guaranteed by Ross and the Stenmarks, doesn't apply to "real people, real fear."[238] And as long as the Convergence remains a solution shrouded in an underground, armed complex, in the disparate hills of Uzbekistan, accessed only by a series of private plane charters, it doesn't have to.

When God can pick and choose who deserves salvation by the depth of their pockets, or the expanse of their 'intellect,' what is left for the rest of us? Where are we to source our hope for a future that remains not only unimaginable, but inaccessible? These are questions left unanswered by Victor and the Convergence.

At the end of *Frankissstein*, Victor, that "prophet of transhumanism[,] remains suspended between two dimensions. He disappears. His body is nowhere to be found. Perhaps he is dead or

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[236] Winterson, 359
[237] DeLillo, 43
[238] DeLillo, 66

his mind has truly entered the cybernetic eternity."[239] This echoes the open-ended question about

the man and the rattlesnake that Maria asks in *Play It As It Lays* (1970), only instead of

pondering the presence/absence of God, we are left in the wake of Victor, our latest "prophet"

who turns out to be as inaccessible, as fundamentally unknowable, as God.

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[239] Ciompi, 169

Chapter Four

Meaning-Making in the Metaverse

> Bix could feel the vibrations of an invisible web of connection forcing its way through the familiar world like cracks riddling a windshield. Life as they knew it would soon shatter and be swept away, at which point everyone would raise together into a new metaphysical sphere. Bix had imagined it like the Last Judgment paintings whose reproductions he used to collect, but without Hell.[240]

In 1516, Thomas More introduced *Utopia* to the world, thereby slinging an albatross around the neck of humanity for, potentially, the rest of time. The unattainable nature of More's mythical island has not prevented the term from creeping into contemporary vernacular as a kind of homing signal; utopia beckons, and tech developers are more than happy to heed its siren call, despite the very fact of its impossible nature. Or, perhaps, *because* of it.

Utopia is defined by Lyman Tower Sargent as, critically, "a non-existent society…that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived."[241] The fact of utopia's intangibility is critical for Sargent, as for many other scholars of utopia. Literally, utopia is a *not*-place. The nature of digitality has lent itself to the creation of countless virtually-inhabitable *not*-places within the online realm known as cyberspace. Cyberspace itself has been defined by scholars like Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2006) as "a virtual nonplace"[242] that, though its status as a nonplace makes it "fundamentally unmappable and unlocatable,"[243] has become a defined—and defin*able*—destination for users:

> a place in which things happened, in which users' actions separated from their bodies, and in which local standards became impossible to determine. It thus freed users from their bodies and their locations.[244]

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[240] Egan, 6
[241] Sargent, *Utopian Literature*
[242] Chun, 37
[243] Chun, 43
[244] Chun, 37-38

To participate in cyberspace has historically meant to participate in what William Gibson termed a "consensual hallucination."[245] The act of 'logging on' signified a separation between the 'real world' and the AFK world—to adopt Legacy Russell's digital shorthand, "away from the keyboard (or 'AFK')."[246] This is why cyberspace's status as a "nowhere-somewhere"[247] also necessitated the disembodiment of users, whose "actions [are] separated from their bodies."

At least, it used to. The separation between online and offline has deteriorated rapidly, especially since the early 2010s—if ever such a divide actually existed. Countless scholars including Legacy Russell (2020) and Iris Po Lee Yo (2021) have critically, and in my view successfully, challenged the idea that interactions in cyberspace are wholly divorced from the AFK world, especially for queer and disabled people who turn to the online world in search of genuine connection and expression of the "true self, open and ready to be read by those who spoke my language. Online, I sought to become a fugitive from the mainstream, unwilling to accept its limited definition of bodies like my own."[248] Communities forged in cyberspace "now play an indispensable role in the everyday lives" of people looking to "mitigate their experiences of [AFK] social exclusion," giving "rise to queer counterpublics."[249] Entire *worlds* exist online, especially for people excluded from mainstream experiences in the 'real' world.

The rise of ubiquitous technology like iPhones, smart watches, VR goggles, and GPS navigation is a further development that means most of us are always, at least partially, online. And people with marginalized identities are no longer the only people turning to the internet as the primary form of their connection, leisure, and identity-building, especially in our post-Covid landscape. In this way, we are living on the bridge between cyberspace and the metaverse, that

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[245] Quoted in Robins, 135
[246] Russell, 5
[247] Robins, 135
[248] Russell, 6
[249] Yo, 140

"junction or nexus of our physical and virtual worlds" as defined by "the convergence of 1) virtually enhanced physical reality and 2) physically persistent virtual space. It is a fusion of both, while allowing users to experience it as either."[250] Both of the novels I analyze in this chapter, Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), are firmly set within the budding metaverse, a resounding callback to the point made by Alexandra Glavanakova in my Introduction about the novel and speculative fiction, which "[has] proven to be of extraordinary relevance to the present moment and often reveal our current predicament more clearly than texts written in the realistic mode."[251]

Before diving into these texts, we'll briefly return to utopia. It is clear that the digital realm we occupy today is quite different from the utopic dreams of scholars in the early days of virtuality. Many of the earliest internet pioneers ascribed utopian qualities to the unbridled promise of cyberspace like the ones described by José Esteban Muñoz (2009), who conceives of utopia as a phenomenon that "offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*."[252] And indeed, cyberspace *was* described as "the technology of miracles and dreams…a nowhere-somewhere in which we shall be able to recover the meaning and the experience of community" as an answer to increasing societal isolation, polarization, and disillusionment.[253]

Of course, we know that the internet has not really lived up to this glorious potential. As Chris Dixon (2024) writes:

> Starting in the mid-2000s, a small group of big companies wrenched control away. Today the top 1 percent of social networks account for 95 percent of social web traffic and 86 percent of social mobile app use. The top 1 percent of search engines account for 97 percent of search traffic, and the top 1 percent of e-commerce sites account for 57 percent of e-commerce traffic.

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[250] Cheng-Han and Kiat-Boon, 315
[251] Glavanakova, 93
[252] Muñoz, 35
[253] Robins, 135-136

> …
> The internet got intermediated, in other words. The network went from permissionless to permissioned.[254]

The neoliberal restructuring of the internet "into an ever-expanding market of limitless access,"[255] in other words, quickly turned the not-space with utopic potential into a capital-driven "intermediated" and "permissioned" landscape. Even fictional characters today seem to have confronted this less-than-utopic reality; in Egan's *The Candy House*, Bix Bouton—origin of this chapter's epigraph—reflects on his earliest visions for an internet that fosters connection and is grateful that "he'd kept the utopian fantasy to himself" because "it looked comically naive from a 2010 perspective."[256]

We do not appear to have learned our lesson from this most recent occurrence of utopia once again slipping through our fingers. The lofty promises of Web 2.0 and early citizens of the cyber-universe have been killed, reconfigured, and reborn within the excitement for the *next* great wave of innovation—artificial intelligence, namely, though Web 3.0 and further developments in post-human technology are also prominent developments. And despite viral bytes like "welcome to hell, Elon"[257] and the prevalence of the phrase "hellscape" to describe the current digital landscape, Hell seems to be the one place missing in our collective projection of the future as ordered by this newest kind of technology, perhaps as just our latest attempt to escape death through technology.

Motherly devotion

Both Egan and Ishiguro employ motherhood within their novels in ways that highlight the uneven distribution of power and agency that already exists in society and is amplified by the

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[254] Dixon, xiv
[255] Bernard, 26
[256] Egan, 6
[257] Nilay Patel, "Welcome to hell, Elon," *The Verge*, October 28, 2022.

algorithms that structure the metaverse. In *Klara and the Sun*, our experience of "the Mother," as

Klara terms her, is necessarily filtered through Klara, our narrator, and, ultimately, it is the

Mother's yearning to escape death that is the primary, if hidden, motivation driving the entire

story, a story Ishiguro positions as "a cheerful, optimistic novel'"[258] despite its exploration of the

lives of Josie, a chronically ill child, and Klara, her Artificial Friend (AF)—an AI-powered robot

being groomed to replace, or "continue,"[259] Josie after her death.

     Klara is set in a nondescript American city at an unspecific, near-future time—the

obscurity of which can be read as a particular facet of Klara's unreliable narration, a continuous

reminder "that conventional markers of historical time register [...] less with an AF,"[260]which sets

Klara always apart in our minds. Despite her human-like qualities—indeed, Klara is deemed

acceptable by Chrissie, Josie's mom, *because* of her ability to accurately mimic Josie's stilted

walk—Ishiguro reminds readers at regular intervals that Klara is *not* human, a reminder that

occurs simultaneously within the narrative itself. At times, Klara's vision reverts to a pixelated

image consisting of "boxes" that divide her field of vision into a grid:

> I looked up past Rick's head and saw that the sky had become divided into segments of irregular shape. Some segments were glowing orange or pink, while others showed pieces of the night sky, sections of the moon visible at a corner or edge. As Rick moved forward, the segments kept overlapping and displacing one another, even as we passed through another picture frame gate. After that the grass, instead of being delicate and waving, came towards us as flat shapes, possibly made from heavy board such as the sort used for street advertising, and I feared they would cause Rick injury as he plunged into them. Then the sky and the field were no longer in segments, but one broad picture, and Mr McBain's barn was looming before us.[261]

Klara's experience of the world as "segments" that keep "overlapping and displacing one

another" interrupts Klara's existence, disrupting readers as well. In this way, we are positioned

outside the world of Josie and the Mother as much as Klara is. The pixelization of her

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[258] Allardice, "Kazuo Ishiguro"
[259] Ishiguro, 210
[260] Parkes, 17
[261] Ishiguro, 158

surroundings also serves to reinforce the fact that, whether or not he intended to, Ishiguro set his

novel in the metaverse, making Klara a particularly apt example of what it means to be a citizen

of a world defined both digitally—we see Klara's knowledge updating like software as she

encounters new phenomena—and physically.

Klara's unreliable narration gatekeeps the information we learn about Josie's illness, too.

During an "interaction meeting,"[262] the only form of socialization that privileged kids like Josie

receive, as they forgo school in favor of receiving virtual private tutoring at home, Klara learns

the origin of Josie's illness:

> 'Rick's a neighbor, yes,' the Mother said. 'He's been friends with Josie forever.'
> 'That's wonderful.'
> Then a large woman whose shape resembled the food blending machine said: 'Seems so bright too. Such a shame a boy like that should have missed out.'
> 'I wouldn't even have known,' another voice said. 'He presents himself so well. Is that a British accent he has?'
> 'What's important,' the food blending woman said, 'is that this next generation learn how to be comfortable with every sort of person. That's what Peter always says.' Then as other voices murmured in agreement, she asked the Mother: 'Did his folks just…decide not to go ahead? Lose their nerve?'
> The Mother's kind smile vanished and everyone who'd heard seemed to stop talking. The food blending woman herself froze in horror. Then she reached out a hand towards the Mother.
> 'Oh, Chrissie. What did I say? I didn't mean…'
> 'It's okay,' the Mother said. 'Please forget it.'
> 'Oh, Chrissie, I'm so sorry. I'm so stupid sometimes. I only meant…'
> 'It's our worst fear,' a firmer voice nearby said. 'Every one of us here.'
> 'It's okay,' the Mother said. 'Let's leave it.'
> 'Chrissie,' the food blending woman said, 'I only meant a nice boy like that…'
> 'Some of us were lucky, some of us weren't.' A black-skinned woman, saying this, stepped forward and touched the Mother's shoulder kindly.
> 'But Josie's fine now, isn't she?' another voice asked. 'She looks so much better.'
> 'She has good days and bad,' the Mother said.
> …
> The food blending woman said: 'She's going to be just fine, I know it. You were so courageous, after all you'd been through. Josie will be really grateful to you one day.'
> …
> The Mother, looking at the food blending woman, said quietly: 'Do you suppose Sal would want to thank me?'
> At this, the food blending woman burst into tears.[263]

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[262] Ishiguro, 66
[263] Egan, 69-70

Josie, along with the children of the "food blending woman" and every other parent at the party, but, critically, *unlike* Rick, has been "lifted."[264] Lifting, a kind of "genetic editing,"[265] is the newest marking of class status in society, a rapid development that occurred sometime in-between Chrissie's and Josie's generations and that serves as the clearest marker of God's absence in this human society. As Yuqing Sun puts it: "the twenty-first century heirs of [...] Enlightenment thinkers uphold the notion of a 'technocratic utopia' in which 'humans have beaten evolution'" through the development of trans-human technology, like "lifting," and through the creation of "robots who are capable of doing things humans cannot, and who make no mistakes," and yet still exists within the "fantasy of obedience" whereby these super-intelligent robots are designed with "flawless capacity…to obey their human masters."[266] Man, and man-created technology, has replaced God.

And yet, Man-as-God is seemingly unable to create something wholly *new*. Lifted children receive "screen tutor[ing]" and assured admission to "proper college[s]," while un-lifted children like Rick are ostracized from society, struggle to find tutors—an organization of tutors even "forbids its members to take unlifted students"—and only have "one decent option" for college.[267] In this way, lifting merely reifies a long-standing fascist belief that "it is possible to create not just 'improved' models of humans, but…a 'perfect' human society or 'master race,' as the Nazis claimed."[268]

Lifting is also a religion without the benefit of assurance. Where Ross so believed in the power of the Convergence as a tangible reality in *Zero K* (2016), as we saw in Chapter Three, lifting remains an incredibly risky proposition with a track record of proven failures. Parents who

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[264] Ishiguro, 82
[265] Ishiguro, 243
[266] Sun, 505
[267] Ishiguro, 146
[268] Sun, 504

choose to lift their children are deemed "courageous" for going ahead despite the risks. Rick,

giving voice to Josie's inner thoughts, describes the reality of this courage:

> I wish I could go outside and walk and run and skateboard and swim in lakes. But I can't
> because my mother has Courage. So instead I get to stay in bed and be sick. I'm glad
> about this. I really am.[269]

The piercing sarcasm of Rick's observation is the most honest take on lifting that we get through

Klara's narration. Despite the looming presence of the "worst fear" of parents who decide to lift

their children, they still try to assure Chrissie that "Josie will be really grateful" for having been

lifted. Lifting appears the only way to assure a good life for the next generation, something

Chrissie believes wholeheartedly:

> After Sal, [Paul] said we shouldn't risk it. So what if Josie doesn't get lifted? Plenty of
> kids aren't. But I could never have that for Josie. I wanted the best for her. I wanted her to
> have a good life…I called it, and now Josie's sick. Because of what I decided.[270]

In this society, chronic, debilitating illness as a result of being lifted is better than remaining

healthy, able, and un-lifted. Chrissie remains so assured of this fact that she makes the decision

to lift Josie even after Josie's older sister, Sal, dies as a result of her own lifting. This is the heart

of why Ishiguro characterizes his novel as, at least in part, "about maternal devotion."[271] Indeed,

the novel is dedicated to the memory of Ishiguro's late mother.

Chrissie's maternal devotion—or, rather, her devotion to being a mother—is the origin of

the desire to train Klara to "continue" Josie after her death. Chrissie tells Klara "if it happens, if

it comes again, there's going to be no other way for me to survive. I came through it with Sal, but

I can't do it again."[272] Chrissie's identity as a mother is crucial to her existence and refusing to

accept Josie's death is a way for Chrissie to refuse her own. But unlike the salvation of the

Convergence or Alcor's cryogenic reanimation in *Frankissstein* (2016), Chrissie's plans for

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[269] Ishiguro, 131
[270] Ishiguro, 210
[271] Allardice, "Kazuo Ishiguro"
[272] Ishiguro, 210

eternal renewal are indicative of a woman utterly *bereft* of hope. Not only is she facing the death

of her second child because of decisions she made, Chrissie has already tried—and failed—to

"continue" Sal after her death. Rick's mom, Helen, describes a scene for Klara:

> What I saw was Chrissie, Josie's mother, that is. I saw her come out of the grass, just over
> there, holding someone by the arm. I'm explaining myself rather poorly. What I mean is,
> it was as if this other person had been trying to run away, and Chrissie had been after her.
> …
> The other [person] looked like Sal…Josie's sister. That's why I called Rick. This being a
> good two years *after* Sal is supposed to have died.[273]

Whatever the situation that preceded the Sal AF "trying to run away" from her, Chrissie's

fundamental lack of belief also contributed to the failure of the replacement. When discussing

their previous attempt to continue Sal with Henry Capaldi, the scientist-cum-artist forging an AF

replica shell of Josie for Klara to inhabit, Chrissie's lack of faith is on full display:

> 'Maybe Paul's right. Maybe this whole thing's been a mistake.'
> 'Chrissie. You mustn't lose faith.'
> She brought her head back up and her eyes were now angry. 'It's not a matter of faith,
> Henry. Why are you so fucking sure I'll be able to accept that AF up there, however well
> you do her? It didn't work with Sal, why will it work with Josie?'
> 'What we did with Sal is no comparison. We've been through this, Chrissie. What we
> made with Sal was a doll. A bereavement doll, nothing more. We've come a long, long
> way since then. What you have to understand is this. The new Josie won't be an
> imitation. She *really will be Josie*. A *continuation* of Josie.'
> 'You want me to believe that? Do you believe that?'
> 'I do believe it. With everything I'm worth, I believe it. I'm glad Klara went in there and
> looked. We need her on board now, we've needed that for a long time. Because it's Klara
> who'll make the difference. Make it very, very different this time round. You have to keep
> faith, Chrissie. You can't weaken now.'
> 'But will I believe in it? When the day comes. Will I really?'[274]

If Capaldi's freelance business of crafting "bereavement doll[s]" and AF "continuation[s]" of the

recently-departed ever goes under, he could easily find a job at the Convergence. Instead of

nano-bots crawling through cryogenically-suspended veins to create reanimated cyborg versions

of deceased humans, Capaldi creates a physical shell of a human for an AI-powered android to

inhabit and instantly *become* them. This isn't post-death revival, it's staving-off death entirely.

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[273] Ishiguro, 147
[274] Ishiguro, 205

In this way, Ishiguro's posthuman solution contains echoes of Victor Stein's scheme to upload consciousness, only in reverse. Where Victor thought of the body as disposable, the body is the crux of Capaldi's eternal renewal. Capaldi denies the existence of anything "unique" and "unreachable inside each of us," trying his best to convince Chrissie that there is "nothing inside Josie that's beyond the Klaras of this world to continue." He dismisses the notion of the soul as a "sentimental" longing.[275] Chrissie isn't so readily convinced, but her lack of belief isn't going to stop her from going ahead with the scheme anyway.

This is the fundamentally post-nostalgic part of Chrissie. She is unable to face the possibility of Josie's death because she's unable to live with the physical manifestation of her supposed failure as a mother that would be Josie's absence. She can't face the past, and thus devises a desperate plot to escape the potential for endless grief entirely. If Klara can successfully continue Josie, Chrissie will essentially trap herself in the future—unable to reckon with the truth of the matter, the present, nor the pain of her past. By projecting a future where she does not have to feel any of the true, human pain that she is already all too familiar with, Chrissie is forging her own escape route out of the hell that is being a mother without children.

For Miranda Kline in Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022), motherly devotion ends up landing her directly in her own special kind of hell. An anthropologist by trade, Miranda develops "patterns of affinity," a "slender monograph containing algorithms that explained trust and influence among members of a Brazilian tribe."[276] The "genome of inclinations"[277] Miranda creates can be extrapolated to classify all humans in recognizable patterns, information that proves incredibly valuable to the social media and technology companies that have restructured society in their image. Most notably, the company Mandala, helmed by Bix Bouton, "a tech

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[275] Ishiguro, 207
[276] Egan, 9
[277] Ibid.

demigod on a first-name basis with the world," uses Miranda's algorithms, much to her horror.[278]

Miranda's algorithms are patented and sold to social media companies by her daughters, Melora

and Lana, acting to benefit their father, Miranda's ex-husband, Lou—a pioneer in the music

industry facing the collapse of his empire at the hands of pirating technology like Napster.

Melora, who has dedicated her life to "carry[ing] on our father's legacy" is notably unapologetic

when describing her treatment of Miranda:

> Let the record show that we did nothing without our mother's explicit permission.
> Whatever I've done belongs to you, she told us. Use it any way you like, and by all
> means, try to help your poor father.
> In fairness, she had no idea what we were asking.
> But she never retreated from that position—at least not to our faces—even after we'd
> patented her algorithms and sold them to the social media giants whose names we all
> know. Later, she spurned the credit that Bix Bouton and the others tried to give her, and
> she used her unwanted pop stardom to rail against the invasiveness of data gathering and
> manipulation, to insist on the deeply private nature of human experience, etc., etc. Still,
> she kept us out of it. She never once spoke our names in public or acknowledged, even to
> us, that we'd made a tragedy of her career by perverting her theory to bring about the end
> of private life.[279]

Miranda is never afforded any agency within the pages of Egan's story. Even though her career is

turned into a "tragedy" through the sale of her algorithms—a deed that ends up "bring[ing] about

the end of private life" in general—Miranda accepts her "unwanted pop stardom" in order to

protect Melora and Lana from the scrutiny she faces. Where Chrissie was willing to make

sacrifices of her daughters for their own good, Miranda sacrifices herself in pursuit of the same

goal.

Miranda uses the rest of her public life to critique tech moguls like Bix who use her

algorithms to invade the world. Indeed, her entire career becomes a public service campaign

against the social media companies. Still, critical responses from her peers in academia focus a

great deal more on her outward appearance than on her speech:

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[278] Egan, 60
[279] Egan, 126

"I thought she'd be dour, but she was almost playful."
"What makes her dour is people stealing her ideas," said Fern, dean of the women's studies department and rather dour herself, Bix thought.
"People have used her ideas in ways she didn't intend," Ted said. "But I don't think even Kline calls it theft."
"She calls it 'perversion,' doesn't she?" Rebecca asked tentatively.
"I was surprised by her beauty," said Tessa, a young professor of dance whose husband, Cyril (mathematics), was also in attendance. "Even at sixty."
…
"Is her appearance relevant?" Fern challenged Tessa.
Cyril, who took Tessa's part in everything, bristled. "Miranda Kline would say it was relevant," he said. "More than half the Affinity Traits in her book have to do with physical appearance."
…
"It's sad," Portia said. "Kline is better known for having had her work co-opted by social media companies than for the work itself."
"If it hadn't been co-opted, there wouldn't have been five hundred people in that auditorium."[280]

Even if the rapid rise of technology and the success of innovations like Mandala rest on the thinking and work of a woman, she is dismissed as petty, controlling, and bitter. Her revolutionary thoughts are considered worthless outside of their "co-opt[ion]" by Mandala, and the fact of Miranda "having had her work co-opted" becomes her central claim to fame rather than the ground-breaking "work itself." The fact of this kind of obstruction at the hands of tech development appears as a kind of open secret throughout the novel; at one point, Bix's "genius" is identified as "refining, compressing, and mass-producing, as a luscious, irresistible product, technology that already existed in crude form."[281]

The obstruction of Miranda's agency began far before her development of the affinity traits, though. Her world, at least partially, ends when she has children. This is a relatively common occurrence in the world of the *Candy House*; Bix mentions offhandedly in the first chapter that his wife "Lizzie now managed every facet of their domestic lives so that he could work and travel as he pleased."[282] Miles, a once-successful lawyer who becomes dependent on

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[280] Egan, 9-10
[281] Egan, 132
[282] Egan, 5

medication, mentions that his wife Trudy "had suspended her law career to enable our childbearing."[283] Trudy—referred to by her husband at one point as "poor Trudy"[284]—ends up filing for divorce after she discovers Miles' affair with a neighbor. Neither of these women appear much throughout the novel, except as background characters.

The same thing happens for Miranda, and Melora doesn't seem to bristle at the thought that she and her sisters were intrusions in their mother's life. She recounts the story as if it were a fairy tale:

> Long ago, she told us, when we were just a hope in her heart or not even that, because she never wanted children (or thought she didn't), a higher power touched our mother's head and said: *Stop what you're doing! Two little girls are waiting to be born and you need to have them right away because the world is desperate for their brightness.* So she stopped studying anthropology, which she really did love and maybe would study again someday, *when you're all grown up and don't need me anymore.*[285]

Are we meant to accept the literal interpretation of an unnamed "higher power" tapping Miranda on the forehead and telling her to give up her academic career to birth Melora and Lana? Is this merely a fable told to soothe angsty children wondering about their conception? Or one Miranda told herself to soothe a woman subjugated by her much older, powerful, male partner? Considering the development of surveillance machines like weevils that can burrow inside human brains to record, transmit, and, potentially, manipulate thoughts, are we not meant to question whether Miranda might have been hearing the voice of a manipulative device-controller instead of the word of God? Egan seems to squash this thought by dating installments of her story so as to suggest that weevils were not available in the pre-Mandala era when Miranda had her children. Still, the possibility pervades.

There is no resolution for Miranda, at least not within the pages of the book itself. On Bix's deathbed, the tech mogul is "gripped by an imperative to contact Miranda Kline," who

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[283] Egan, 51
[284] Egan, 54
[285] Egan, 101

"hadn't been heard from since eluding a decade before." Bix wishes to "repair and atone for[] a world he had inadvertently wrought" through his bastardization of Miranda's anthropological theories, but he is too late—Miranda "died the year before, in 2034, at age eighty-four."[286] Even in death, Miranda appears only as a blip in Bix's story.

Once Miranda eludes, she disappears entirely from a story that barely contained her in the first place. Eluding refers to the successful escape from techno-society into an offline existence. In the vast metaverse of *The Candy House*, entire networks appear to support the efforts of this "invisible army of data defiers.[287] This is why readers are never afforded a chapter in Miranda's point of view; we encounter her only through the narratives of Melora or in the background of other character's stories. Egan's omission of Miranda's perspective is a glowing representation of the fusion of story-and-tech that she achieves in *The Candy House*. Once people elude from society, they also drop from Egan's narrative. As readers, we are only afforded the knowledge that is available through the Own Your Unconscious cloud servers or through the select narratives of characters like Bix, who has not uploaded his consciousness but remains an active, non-eluded, member of society. By picking up Egan's novel, we are granted citizenship into this world; we become complicit. When we put the book down, we become eluders.

Eluders function as glitches in the technological fabric of Egan's society. Legacy Russell's theory of glitch feminism refers to

> glitch [as] an error, a mistake, a failure to function. Within technoculture, a glitch is part of machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong.
> …
> Glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance.
> …
> In glitch feminism, we look at the notion of glitch-as-error with its genesis in the realm of the machinic and the digital and consider how it can be reapplied to inform the way we

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[286] Egan, 320-321
[287] Egan, 127

see the AFK world.[288]

Miranda is a living glitch. She created the algorithms that fuel the world and then spends her entire life fighting against their use, before opting out completely, leaving a "vacant identity" in her wake. The job of proxy identities "isn't deception, as much as delay, like leaving a body-shaped pillow in bed before a prison break."[289] Miranda refuses to perform the role assigned to her and this "strategy of nonperformance" becomes the only way she can claw any sense of agency for herself. Alfred Hollander is another living glitch in Egan's world. He reacts "violently—'allergically' is the word he uses" to artifice and fakery, which he sees as abundant in the metaverse around him.[290] He begins to abruptly scream in public places in his attempt to locate "genuine human responses rather than the made-up crap we serve each other all day long," a disruptive refusal to accept the status quo.[291]

To accept the narrative of Miranda constructed by the characters whose uploaded consciousnesses she exists within—that is, to accept the Miranda presented by Melora, primarily—is to participate wholly within the technocratic society of Egan's creation. Miranda's thoughts and feelings about everything that happens to her are missing from the novel because they're also missing from the public record, the collective cloud. Miranda's fellow characters don't have access to her thoughts, why should we?

Readers *are* afforded a more privileged perspective in general than the audience of characters, though. This is the magic of a novel—it can present us with narratives that even the seemingly omniscient technology cannot. Our access to Bix's perspective and memories is one such privileged anomaly. Bix specifically refuses to share his memories with the world: "his

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[288] Russell, 7-8
[289] Egan, 110
[290] Egan, 25
[291] Egan, 33

Cube is programmed to delete if anyone tries to share it to the Collective Consciousness," an

irony that is not lost among his fellow characters:

> "But he invented it!"
> "Yeah, but only as an extension to solve specific problems. I don't think it ever occurred
> to him that people would choose to hand over their minds to the counters or stream their
> perceptions with weevils."[292]

The technology has surpassed the expectations of even its creator. Egan could not have known

quite how prescient this plot point would become by the time of *Candy House*'s publication.

A few months after the release of ChatGPT and other LLLMs in early 2023, Geoffrey

Hinton, the so-called "godfather of AI," started making the rounds to nearly any media outlet

that would talk to him. A contemporary Frankenstein with his digital monster, Hinton was trying

to warn humanity about the potential dangers of AI—the very technology he spent his entire

career trying to bring to life:

> "These things could get more intelligent than us and could decide to take over, and we
> need to worry now about how we prevent that happening." … This isn't just a science
> fiction problem," he says. "This is a serious problem that's probably going to arrive fairly
> soon."[293]

Bix's Own Your Unconscious is not exactly a sentient creature in the vein of Hinton's most

pressing concern about artificial intelligence, but Mandala's technology mirrors the infinite

catalog of user data that AI collects by trolling the internet. And once Mandala's users start

sharing their data, the enticement becomes "like gravity: almost no one can withstand it. In the

end, they give it everything. And then the collective is that much more omniscient."[294] It is this

very omniscience that "eluders want to escape so desperately," becoming so frantic in their need

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[292] Egan, 318

[293] Bobby Allyn, "'The godfather of AI' sounds alarm about potential dangers of AI," May 28, 2023, in *All Things Considered*, podcast, 3:28, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1178673070.

[294] Egan, 145

to evade the hellish techno-state they become like "trapped animals gnawing off their own legs

as the price of freedom." Only instead of their legs, they're "leav[ing] their identities behind."[295]

After Miranda eludes, Melora's sister, Lana, isn't far behind:

> Lana broke away in 2025, the year after our mother did. She, too, has joined the
> eluders…The two of them are likely together, much as it hurts me to think of this.
> Winning has its price, like everything else.
> I've wondered endlessly—obsessively—when and how Lana's perspective began to
> diverge from mine after so much shared history. If we'd uploaded our memories to the
> Collective Consciousness, I could pinpoint the moment exactly. But we both knew better
> than that.
> …
> I sometimes imagine eluding myself: selling off Melora Kline or consigning her to a
> proxy (now a booming and specialized business) and starting over as someone else. … I
> wend my way to a nondescript bench where two women are already seated, familiar
> strangers, and sit down beside them at last.
> Where have you been? I imagine myself asking as I fold them into my arms.
> Right here, they say. Waiting for you.[296]

This is a post-nostalgic yearning. Post-nostalgia is the longing to escape the knowable past into

something brand new, readily represented by posthuman urges to upload human consciousness or

otherwise live as a cyborg combination of human-and-machine. Melora longs to "return[] to

Venice Beach on a Sunday, something I haven't done in many years" to finally see Miranda and

Lana again, who have been "waiting for [her]" all these years. She may identify a familiar place

she would like to return to, a treasured memory from the past, but she would do so only *after*

shedding her identity—"selling off Melora Kline or consigning her to a proxy." In this way,

Melora would not be returning somewhere familiar at all. Both Venice Beach, undoubtedly

impacted by the widespread impact of technology, and Melora-who-is-not-Melora would be

brand new.

Though Melora doesn't know it, due to the nature of eluding that severs any connection

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[295] Egan, 110
[296] Egan, 127

between non-eluders and successful "data defiers," Miranda followed a similar not-return during

her own eluding, retracing her previous path to Brazil, where she had decades earlier developed

the affinity traits algorithms. Lana, too, did indeed "remain[] close to [her mother] until her

death."[297] The intimation that eluding means a return to a more peaceful, idyllic place solidifies

the hellish nature of the techno-society that surrounds non-eluders, as does the fact of the need

for a term like "eluder" to recognize people who wish to live outside the metaverse and are

willing to leave their entire identities behind in order to do so. And though "eluding and

proxying aren't [technically] illegal," people who help eluders often face social retribution and

tangible consequences.

Harvest is a company that employs "counter[s]—or, to put it professionally, [...]

empiricist[s] and metrics expert[s]"[298] to comb through and classify the ungodly amounts of data

generated by life in the metaverse, including "spotting proxies: vacant online identities

maintained by a third party in order to conceal the fact that their human occupants have

eluded."[299] At one point, Harvest discovers they have a double-agent in their midst, someone

> working to help the eluders baffle us, thereby tainting our data, with a statistically
> significant number of vacant identities and thus compromising the quality and accuracy
> of our work, [an act] that would fall under the rubric of industrial crime.[300]

The network of people who support eluders function as something of a contemporary

underground railroad or like the Leica freedom train—risking their own safety and well-being for

the benefit of people looking for something better. That something better, at least according to

the Harvest infiltrating "eluder-ally"[301] O'Brien, is belief:

> If you consider what I've gained by enabling so many proxies to function undetected, and
> thereby so many eluders to successfully elude—that is, nothing—versus what I've

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[297] Egan, 320
[298] Egan, 74-75
[299] Egan, 79
[300] Egan, 81-82
[301] Egan, 92

> lost—everything—you'll understand that only one thing could justify that appalling cost-benefit analysis. That thing is belief. I believe in what the eluders are doing. I believe in their right to do it, and the force of my belief more than compensates for the fact that acting on it will cost me everyone and everything I love. I have no regrets, even now.[302]

Eluders bear the same hallmarks as escapees of religious persecution, united as they are by a common belief in a reality that does not require the mass collection, consolidation, and commodification of people as data points. And though Hell is never explicitly mentioned by Ishiguro or Egan in reference to the metaverses they've created, each can be understood as just that.

Welcome to Hell

Indeed, a Hell-less imaginary is rapidly proving itself a hallmark of the contemporary genre of AI literature. Both Ishiguro and Egan are remarkably measured in their portrayal of society as ordered by technology, despite their exploration of existentialist themes like the end of death, the death of god, and trans- and posthumanism. These authors do not demonize the technology that fuels their narratives, though they don't exactly laud it, either.

In *The Candy House,* Egan explores the dynamics of a world where users upload their consciousnesses, not for the express purpose of pursuing eternal life but as the latest social media fad with a voyeuristic twist. Mandala—Egan's version of Meta, plainly—takes credit for various "miracles" besides inner-consciousness voyeurism, including solving "tens of thousands of crimes," "all but eradicat[ing]" child pornography, preserving nearly-forgotten languages, and causing "a global rise in empathy that accompanied a drastic decline in past orthodoxies."[303] In this way, Egan is careful to walk the line between technology-as-savior and technology-as-

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[302] Egan, 93
[303] Egan, 308-309

destruction, never definitively landing in either camp.

Overt dystopias with apocalyptic android-human war or mass extinction events these novels are not. The dystopias within *Candy House* and *Klara* are much more banal creations, populated by people experiencing afflictions like addiction, social stratification, gender inequality, espionage, burnout, and widespread institutional distrust. If these social ailments sound familiar, it's because they are.

Looking back, briefly, we find one of the most prominent dystopias of the latter half of the twentieth century: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood located an accurate pulse of oppression in her contemporary society and extrapolated the trend to a dystopian future. She foregrounds an extreme example as a cautionary commentary on the current, and though the wildly popular Hulu show of the same name reminds us all of her frightening prescience, Atwood was never forecasting immediate reality:

> The piece of speculative fiction that I have written is set in the future, and in the future the country has acted out in real life some of the things that are now just around as ideas in people's heads.[304]

Sexbots, cryogenic suspension, anthropological algorithms, social media, covert device implantation, algebraization of human behavior for translation into digital machinery—these are all current undertakings that exist in our real, AFK world, not just "in people's heads." They're also the key technologies at the heart of the four contemporary novels I've analyzed in Part II. As Chris Dixon writes: "If life imitates art, then art is now imitating life."[305]

When writing a novel about our current state—indeed, Egan's novel takes place over a wide range of years in the early 21st century—or by projecting a nearby future—recognizable to the audience through familiar social structure, language, and technology, like the world in *Klara*

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[304] Margaret Atwood, interview by Studs Terkel, March 13, 1986, https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/margaret-atwood-discussing-handmaids-tale.
[305] Dixon, 222

and the Sun—a large portion of the challenge on the part of the author is crafting reality that *feels*

real for the reader. In an interview, Jennifer Egan notes this as a driving force for *Candy House*:

> The technology in the novel is not dissimilar, on some level, to ChatGPT. People upload
> their memories both to collectivize and to gain access.
> When ChatGPT came along, I did feel a chill of recognition. But we're all responding to
> the same forces, whether we're fiction writers or inventors.[306]

By "responding to the same forces" as current trends and technology in the AFK world, Egan

specifically positions her story within it, at least in part. This is the central reason why there is no

need to forecast dystopia, no need to create and explore a new Hell. In many ways in our current

hyper-digital landscape, *we are already there*.

I acknowledge the dramatic nature of this claim. I also acknowledge the fact that many

users—a term I employ purposefully to delineate the all-encompassing nature of digitality that

has turned all of us from *people* into *users*—feel all-too-familiar with the catastrophic

possibilities of technology, possibilities like the familiarity with outrage, the fact of pervasive

surveillance, and the fundamental sense of distrust sowed by the most common applications of

the internet (read: social media).

These catastrophic possibilities occur both in cyberspace and in the AFK world. Online,

catastrophe is propagated daily by social media algorithms that rely on the perpetuation of

outrage to drive engagement and, thus, increase capital. The example of Daisey Beaton's 2022

Twitter escapade comes to mind as a particularly potent example:

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[306] Ulin, "A Conversation"

Daisey Beaton (@lilplantmami), X (formerly Twitter), October 21, 2022.

Daisey's seemingly-innocuous Tweet quickly became what journalist Rebecca Jennings calls

"rage-bait." Tens of thousands of people—as of March 2024, the post has received over 13,000

"quotes" and 315,000 "likes"—responded to Daisey's post accusing her of being privileged,

classist, and out-of-touch, among other "wilfully decontextualized moral judgments." This is

why Daisey's tweet is a now-classic example of the effects of being "chronically" or "terminally

online," when "too much exposure to too many people's weird ideas makes us all sort of lose our

minds and our sense of shared humanity." This is a particular facet of participation in

cyberspace, since the "discourse" happening not only doesn't "matter" in the real world, it also

doesn't *happen* in the real world. Only "on platforms where controversy and drama are

prioritized for driving engagement" are we "rewarded for despising each other."[307]

For other users, dystopia exists in the offline application of technology, specifically in the

omnipresence of algorithms, hardware, and software that surveilles, tracks, and profiles us.

Predictive policing software is a particularly handy example here. PredPol, a "location-based

algorithm[]" that "draw[s] on links between places, events, and historical crime rates to predict

where and when crimes are more likely to happen," is already in use in several U.S. cities.

Another tool called COMPAS

> draw[s] on data about people, such as their age, gender, marital status, history of
> substance abuse, and criminal record … to help make decisions about pretrial release and
> sentencing, issu[ing] a statistical score between 1 and 10 to quantity how likely a person

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[307] Jennings, "Chronically online"

is to be rearrested if released.[308]

Algorithms like PredPol and COMPAS function through the codification of existing biases in massive data sets. In the United States, Black people are "five times as likely to be stopped without just cause" and "more than twice as likely to be arrested" than white people. This data is fed to algorithms that, then, "disproportionately target all [...] Black people" based on these skewed statistics, a form of "tech-washing, where a veneer of objectivity covers mechanisms that perpetuate inequities."[309] Tech-washing and alike technologies that make technology fundamentally inescapable—helping to usher in the age of the cryptopticon[310]—are certainly more dystopian in tenor than the fact of being "terminally online," though both phenomena contribute to a swelling sense of techno-pessimism and dystopia.

I am hardly the first scholar to proclaim myself a citizen of dystopia. In 1972, Chad Walsh identified the slide from utopia to dystopia in his own contemporary surroundings:

> Utopian fiction has waned; dystopian fiction has waxed. I think the inverted utopias are the mirror of the nightmares that obsess not merely a few writers but millions of men and women who are too inarticulate to put their fears into words. It was not by caprice that W.H. Auden entitled one of his books *The Age of Anxiety*, and that others have spoken of the Age of Tranquillisers, and that the most popular brand of religion is the peace-of-mind cult. A vague but insistent anxiety lurks barely beneath the surface of our minds…There is the feeling that human destiny has slipped out of our hands. (Maybe it was never there in the first place, but once we thought it was.) Our very idealism and generous hopes and our careful planning may turn against us and make hell incarnate sooner than we think.[311]

The contemporary age has made us all far too familiar with a feeling of "vague but insistent anxiety" that "lurks barely beneath the surface of our minds," a phenomenon that cyberspace and the increasing merge of AFK and digitality only appears to be prolonging. Whether or not we actually *are* living in a dystopia, this perception is an important part of understanding

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[308] Heaven, "Predictive Policing"
[309] Ibid.
[310] See: Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (and Why We Should Worry)*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
[311] Walsh, 134

contemporary methods of hoping as well as provides essential context for understanding why contemporary literature strays away from the kind of draconian world creation seen in novels like *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Walsh's identification of "the most popular brand of religion [as] the peace-of-mind cult" speaks to another potent reason to conceive of the present as a dystopia: the death, and subsequent techno-replacement, of God.

God is (still) dead

Bix Bouton is the Christ-like figure—as much as a billionaire tech bro can be Christ-like—that helms *The Candy House*. Bix and his company Mandala have led the transformation of the world into a transhuman playground replete with technology like weevils—hardware surveillance devices that can burrow inside human brains to record, transmit, and, potentially, manipulate thoughts—and identity proxies, "hermit crab" software programs that "maintain the established patterns of an individual's online activity…as a way of hiding the reality that the original occupant of that identity has vacated it."[312]

Mandala's crowning contribution is Own Your Unconscious, a revolutionary program that allows users to upload their memories into an external storage device, the Consciousness Cube, either for their own enjoyment or to share with the world. It's Victor Stein's dream realized in neoliberal reality, where users think less about eternal life and more about "solv[ing] a mystery," creating a protective "hedge against dementia,"[313] and/or giving into a "crav[ing] [for] other points of view" through the ability "to search the anonymous memories of others."[314] And though Own Your Unconscious is not exactly the cyborgification Victor hoped to achieve by

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[312] Egan, 79
[313] Egan, 145
[314] Egan, 134

meshing human intellect with the lasting, non-biological power of a machine, the interior access

granted by the use of the Cube does contribute to a posthuman sense of disembodiment and

fragmentation. As Roxy Kline notes after completing her "externalization":

> The Cube is *her*, in a way. It contains the entire contents of her mind: all the things she
> can and can't remember, every thought and feeling she has had. At last, she is the owner
> of her unconscious. She knows where everything can be found.[315]

Like Victor in Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), Roxy locates the essential quality of herself in

the "contents of her mind," though she does expand beyond intellect to include "feeling."

Feeling, here, is vague; it could refer to the experience of emotions and/or to bodily sensations,

begging the question *if Roxy's Cube bears every physical sense she's ever experienced, is that the

same thing as having a body?* Perhaps this *is* Victor's dream come to life. Ishiguro takes up the

mantle of this question in *Klara and the Sun*, too, in his exploration of the location of essential

humanity, an exploration I will return to later in this chapter.

Another vital question has to do with Roxy's attribution of ownership. Only after merging

her consciousness with the Cube does Roxy feel that "she is the owner of her unconscious."

Ironically, Roxy feels more divorced from "the entire contents of her mind" when those contents

are located and accessible only to her. Only *after* externalizing herself from herself and

uploading these contents to the collective does she feel ownership, which she identifies as the

ability to "know[] where everything can be found."

The security of ownership that Roxy describes here harkens back to the yearning of

Maria Wyeth, heroine of Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970), that we encountered in Chapter

One. Maria, incapable of living in the present nor looking to the future, is desperate for someone

else to share her memories in order to offer any sense of firm grounding in the past. This is what

makes her quintessentially nostalgic. Even when she is afforded the opportunity to watch her

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[315] Egan, 157

memories on screen, via the pre-digital version of the Cube that is Carter's arthouse film *Maria*,

Maria flees, unable to stand the active interruption of her present by a "'heap of broken images,'

fragments that do not cohere" and, ultimately, add up to a meaningless past.[316]

Bix appears, at least on the surface, to have solved Maria's problem through Own Your

Unconscious. Despite the popular option of collective uploading, Own Your Unconscious is first

created as a private application; Mandala marketed the technology with ad slogans like "Recover

Your Memories" and "Know Your Knowledge."[317] Indeed, Roxy begins her externalization

believing herself "the exception" to the allure of the collective because "she has no interest in

other people's memories. She wants only to relive her best days."[318] But Roxy soon finds out

> why Chris Salazar opposes even the most private, limited use of Own Your Unconscious.
> The logic of this process pushes *out*. She feels it as a natural force, a current drawing her
> consciousness beyond the limits of her self into a wider sphere.[319]

This is the same urge Maria felt, a "natural force" towards connection, a "push[ing] *out* … into a

wider sphere." Unlike Maria, fundamentally obstructed by her nostalgia, Roxy can follow the

"current" and upload herself into the collective, which she believes will absolve the lack of

"therapeutic or purifying release" created by the experience of nostalgia.[320] Roxy understands

this as an act of permanency that she desperately craves:

> [to] converge, to be subsumed—how she longs for this! The prospect shimmers before
> her: fulfillment of everything she has wanted in her life. *Make my mark.*[321]

Much like the Convergence, Mandala is selling salvation. Somehow, a technology—a

product—that gives Roxy the ability to externalize her consciousness and upload it for perusal by

others offers her the "fulfillment of everything she has wanted in her life."

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[316] Steiner, 327
[317] Egan, 134
[318] Egan, 145
[319] Egan, 157
[320] Ngai, 6
[321] Egan, 158

It is a short-lived fulfillment; Roxy "die[s] of an overdose" a few months after

externalizing her consciousness to the Cube.[322] While her uploaded thoughts, memories, and

feelings may persist eternally in the collective, any part of her existence that occurs after her

upload—as part of the, as Roxy terms it, "diaphanous new present"—dies with her.[323] In this

way, the eternity guaranteed by the Cube is closer to Lord Byron's professed dream of an eternal

reputation. Own Your Unconscious preserves an everlasting "torrent of memories and moments"

that may "conjoin" with other uploaded memories like "two arms swinging on [a] long bright

night" but remain nonetheless static.[324] In the end, Roxy's life is not prolonged by Mandala's

Cube any more than Maria's life is through Carter's movie.

> Egan presciently skewers the ways in which
>
> consumerism in a neoliberal economy is manifestly religious in its "efforts to
> mass-produce relations of value." "Whatever else religion might be," [Kathryn] Lofton
> writes, "it is a way of describing structures by which we are bound or connected to one
> another."[325]

Mandala's Consciousness Cube, and its subsequent spin-off, the collective consciousness, is a

potent example of "consumerism constitut[ing] a spiritual discipline," through Mandala's false

promise of community.[326] There is only one moment in the entire novel in which the access

granted by Own Your Unconscious serves to actually bring living people together, and it is

related to Bix's reason for "try[ing] to mass-produce a memory externalization device" in the

first place.[327] In the early 90s, "after a night of partying," Bix and Lizzie's friends Drew and Rob

"went swimming in the East River, and [Rob] was carried away by a current and drowned."[328]

Bix had just left the two boys to go home when the accident occurred. Seventeen years later, in

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[322] Egan, 143
[323] Egan, 157
[324] Egan, 158
[325] Carson, 33
[326] Carson, 32
[327] Egan, 60
[328] Egan, 6

2016, Bix invites Drew to join him and Lizzie in rewatching Bix's externalized memory of that

night:

> The real torture was watching my nineteen-year-old self: cocky and full of hope, unaware
> that *within the hour*, I would begin the "after" portion of my life, in which I would try,
> endlessly and futilely, to atone. *Gentlemen, good morning*. We watched the memory again
> and again. … I had to keep watching. There was something I needed to pinpoint in the
> lull, that last pause before Rob and I waved goodbye and began walking south along the
> river in the blinding metallic early-morning sunlight. And then we were out of sight; Bix
> had turned and was walking toward the Sixth Street overpass, heading to his apartment on
> East Seventh Street.
> "Wait. Stop," I couldn't keep myself from exhorting him. "Turn around! Call us
> back—stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"
> I realized I was shouting only when Bix switched off my headset and lifted it gently
> away.[329]

Besides this sole shared experience of grief—for which the technology offers no resolution, Own

Your Unconscious is a singular space, where individual memories are stored and can be watched

by other users divorced from the original 'owner' of the thoughts and memories in the first place.

The true salvation of it all does not lie in the technology itself, but in its preservation and

presentation of shared history. That point gets lost by most Mandala users, who end up

sacralizing the technology and Bix. Indeed, even the academics of the novel equate God with

technology:

> "Are we *crossing a line* by breaching the mind of another sentient creature? Are we
> opening a Pandora's box?"
> "We're back to the problem of free will," Eamon said. "If God is omnipotent, does that
> make us puppets? And if we are puppets, are we better off knowing that or not?"
> "To hell with God," Fern said. "I'm worried about the Internet."
> "By which you mean an all-seeing, all-knowing entity that may be predicting and
> controlling your behavior, even when you think you're choosing for yourself?"[330]

This is the central point Egan makes with *The Candy House*—warning us all of the dangers of

blithely trusting ourselves, our data, our memories, and our future to a candy house.

In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro more directly skewers the technology itself in his

exploration of what it means to have faith and feel hopeful. Chrissie, fundamentally hopeless,

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[329] Egan, 60-61
[330] Egan, 16

stands in stark contrast to Klara, an infectiously hopeful entity who demonstrates unwavering

faith when it comes to Josie's recovery. Even when presented with Chrissie's dejection about the

prospect of Klara "continuing" Josie in Capaldi's workshop, Klara interrupts her:

> 'Excuse me,' I said. 'I'd like to say there's a chance you'll never need the new Josie. The present one may become healthy. I believe there's a good chance of this. I'll need, of course, the opportunity, the chance to make it so.'[331]

Because of her obstructed agency as a non-human AF, Klara is often dismissed by Chrissie and

Josie when she expresses a desire to take action. Klara does manage to talk Paul into helping her

plan to save Josie while they're still in the city, though. Klara has complete faith in her plan:

> 'You really believe this, don't you? That this will help Josie.'
> 'Yes. Yes, I do.'
> Something seemed to change within him
> …
> 'Hope,' he said. 'Damn thing never leaves you alone.' He shook his head almost resentfully, but there was now a new strength about him.[332]

Klara manages to convince Paul to help her commit an act of "criminal damage" in the name of

saving Josie's life.[333] But her hope never spreads to Chrissie, who sold her ability to have faith in

order to genetically modify her daughters, a decision driven by the maternal desire to set her

children up for success and ended up costing her her marriage and one of her daughter's lives.

Klara first gets a real inkling of Chrissie's plan to continue Josie when they visit a

waterfall, one of Josie's favorite spots. Josie, deemed too sick to make the trip by Chrissie, stays

behind, so it's just Klara and the Mother. Chrissie tells Klara "I want you to be Josie. Just for a

little while." Klara imbues her version of Josie with some of her signature hopefulness, which

breaks the delusion for Chrissie:

> 'I wish you were here. But you're not. I wish I could stop you getting sick.'
> 'Don't worry, Mom. I'm going to be fine.'

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[331] Egan, 16
[332] Ishiguro, 218-219
[333] Ishiguro, 221

'How can you say that? What do you know about it? You're just a kid. A kid who loves
life and believes everything can be fixed. What do you know about it?'
'It's okay, Mom, don't worry. I'll get well soon. I know how it'll happen too.'
'What? What are you saying? You think you know more than the doctors? More than I
do? Your sister made promises too. But she couldn't keep them. Don't you do the same.'
'But Mom. Sal was sick with something different. I'm going to get well.'
'Okay, Josie. So tell me how you'll get well.'
'There's special help coming. Something no one's thought of yet. Then I'll be well
again.'
'What is this? Who's this talking?'
…
'Really, Mom. I'm going to be fine.'
'That's enough. Enough!'[334]

Klara is unable to convince the Mother to have faith in Josie's recovery. The suggestion alone

sends Chrissie into a rage, and she seems offended by Klara-as-Josie's implication that someone

could know more about Josie's recovery than she does.

There's a constant tension between Klara as a sentient being and Klara as a robot

programmed by humans. When Chrissie asks "what is this? Who's this talking?" she could

equally be referring to Klara, mimicking Josie, or to whatever human entity created Klara and

imbued her with the ability to speak. On the drive back from the waterfall, Chrissie mentions

Klara's hopefulness:

'What you were saying earlier,' the Mother said. 'About her getting well. Some special
kind of help coming along. You were just talking, right?'
'You must excuse me. I know that you, the doctor and Melania Housekeeper have all
considered very carefully Josie's condition. It's very concerning. Even so, I'm hoping
soon she'll get better.'
…
'You're an intelligent AF. Maybe you can see things the rest of us can't. Maybe you're
right to be hopeful. Maybe you're right.'[335]

Klara's inner workings, the mechanisms and coding that fuels her, is never fully explained to

readers, whether because Klara herself isn't fully aware of the technology or because,

accompanying Klara down memory lane as we are throughout the novel, Klara doesn't feel the

need to explain herself. The technology isn't fully known to Chrissie and the family, either. This

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[334] Ishiguro, 104-105
[335] Ishiguro, 107-108

is why, despite her doubts and fundamental inability to actually feel hopeful about Josie's prognosis, Chrissie still recognizes that Klara might be able to "see things the rest of us can't."

As an AF, Klara was programmed by humans. Her Artificial Intelligence-informed algorithms mean she learns from pattern recognition and can update her knowledge in real time, but certain qualities of Klara had to be coded specifically by her human creators. This includes Klara's predisposition for faith, hope, and optimism. Unlike any other characters in Ishiguro's—or indeed even in Egan's—novel, Klara enjoys a kind of religious faith that is encoded within her. Instead of God, Klara's deity is the Sun.

Klara's relationship with the Sun employs all of the traditional language and actions of religious belief. Klara seeks out the Sun's "nourishment,"[336] prays to him at a make-shift altar, "speak[ing]" without "say[ing] the words out loud, for I knew the Sun had no need of words as such,"[337] and making offerings of herself to plead with him to save Josie.[338] Klara's Sun can create miracles and Klara clearly feels a sense of awe when thinking of it; she worries she has "angered" the Sun by asking it to cure Josie.[339] Klara's devotion to the Sun begins when she is in the store at the very beginning of the novel, and all the AFs try to earn a coveted spot in the front window where the Sun shines on them all day. Where AFs like Klara think of the Sun like a protective, nourishing God, there is an exceedingly practical reason for their devotion, too: AF batteries are solar-powered.

Ishiguro is specifically obscure when exploring this facet of Klara's personality. We don't know if Klara's religious devotion for the Sun is merely a byproduct of encoded self-preservation—similar to a robot vacuum cleaner that returns to its own charging station

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[336] Egan, 3
[337] Egan, 162
[338] Egan, 223
[339] Egan, 163

when its battery runs low—or if she was specifically imbued with religious fervor. I'm not convinced it matters whether Klara's faith was intentional or not on the part of her creators; I believe we have to understand her faith as a hard-wired part of her nature.

And in the end, Klara's piety seems to pay off. Despite the cries of "Damn Sun!" from Melania Housekeeper, Klara begins frantically opening the blinds to flood Josie's room with the blasting sunlight, finally breaking through a thick layer of gray clouds. Rick, "seemingly coming to some intuitive conclusion," helps Klara until the room is flooded with a "ferocious half-disc of orange."[340] Klara, Melania, and Rick then

> watched and waited, and even when at one point the orange half-disc looked as if it might catch alight, none of us did anything. Then Josie stirred, and with squinting eyes, held a hand up in the air.
> 'Hey. What's with this light anyway?' she said.
> The Sun continued relentlessly to shine on her, and she shifted till she was on her back, propped up by the pillowcases and headboard.
> …
> There was an obvious new strength to the way she'd maneuvered herself.[341]

Despite Ross' claim in *Zero K* that the Convergence is a new God that actually delivers on its promises, unlike previous gods, Klara's faith in the Sun pays off exactly as she hopes. And there is nothing particularly technological about this salvation, besides the fact that, apparently, the only person who could bring it forth is a robot.

In fact, technology seems to be an active hindrance to this kind of salvation. Josie and Chrissie represent the typical adoption of technology in their contemporary society. We see this through their adoption of Klara, and Chrissie's reliance on virtual tutors, doctors, and modern medicine to cure Josie's illness, though Josie's sickness can itself be understood as a direct consequence of modernity.

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[340] Egan, 279
[341] Egan, 280

Klara, though literally a 'living' piece of technology, fosters a hardwired belief in the Sun over everything else, a belief that is specific to her as an AF. None of the humans she interacts with recognize what she is doing or why. When Klara, recognizing the Sun's miracle in process, interrupts Chrissie and Rick to announce the news of the Sun's arrival, "the Mother glance[s] at the large windows, then back at [Klara]. 'Sure. So what? What's the matter with you, honey?'"[342] Rick and Paul are the only humans who aid Klara in her worship, Rick by carrying her to the barn-cum-altar for her prayers and Paul by helping her break the polluting Cootings Machine in the city. Other scholars have noted the connection between Rick and Klara, a connection born out of, as Yuqing Sun termed, an "ideological continuit[y] between the robotically programmed and the genetically inferior."[343] I would add Paul to this kind of class bonding as a member of a post-employed, fascist offshoot of society. These three un-lifted characters are the only ones who take any form of direct action to combat Josie's increasing illness, even if Paul and Rick don't really understand why they're doing what they're doing.

Klara narrates Josie's recovery for readers in a brief sentence—"the Sun's special nourishment proved as effective for Joise as it had for Beggar Man, and…she grew not only stronger, but from a child into an adult."[344] This period that Klara skips over is "the bulk of [Klara's] time as Josie's AF." We don't see the details of it, though, because

> the void created in the narrative represents the blankness of Klara's life in this period, as Josie starts interacting with her fellow "lifted" friends and her life "remained largely outside of my [Klara's] knowledge," Rick was "busy with his projects," and Josie's mother ended up "sometimes not looking my way even when she encountered me around the house" (289, 290, 295). The narrative concerning this period is unnecessary to the novel in the same way that Klara becomes unnecessary to the family.[345]

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[342] Egan, 278
[343] Sun, 505
[344] Egan, 285
[345] Xiao, 361

In this way, Klara has eluded from the narrative much in the way eluders escape Egan's narration in *The Candy House*. Klara's eventual "slow fade" into oblivion in a junkyard after Josie goes to college represents the post-nostalgia of contemporary technology that Ishiguro critiques in his novel.[346] The void created by God's death has been filled by technology that aims to move us beyond the recognizable into a future of endless possibility. In doing so, Ishiguro warns, we may very well be looking exactly past the thing we are so desperately seeking to find.

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[346] Ishiguro, 294

Afterword

Where We're Going

"The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think."
–Virginia Woolf[347]

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[347] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* January 18, 1915

So, in the wake of the body, of God, of all knowable society, in the face of phenomena like climate change, the simultaneous catastrophes of cyberspace, the ever-encroaching reality of the metaverse, where do we find hope?

Certainly, some of us continue to turn to institutions like religion and democracy as our eternal spring. But "this is [also] the first generation in living memory to have a global majority who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works," according to a 2020 study from the Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge.[348] And the "share of Americans who are nonreligious" is undergoing an "unbelievable rise"—about "four in 10 of those under 30" identify as nonreligious, "nearly as many as say they're Christians."[349] Though I may have couched my investigation here in the language of religious belief, I refuse to accept that such widespread institutional disillusionment means that a large majority of us are without hope.

As I put the finishing touches on my work, the 2024 *World Happiness Report* was published. Much is currently being made in the news and on social media of the fact that the United States ranks 23rd—the first time we have landed outside the top 20 happiest countries in the world in the report's history. The yawning happiness gap between the generations is of particular interest to me. If we look at the responses from those under 30, the United States' ranking falls to 62.[350] In a parallel situation of the generational divide that yawned in the 1970s, young people today seem to be suffering from a widespread lack of hope that is somehow distinct from the lack of hope felt by older generations.

This is where we see the most obvious representation of the cyclical nature of postmodernism. Each generation experiences its own version of the death of God, the subsequent elevation of Man, or Man-created proxies (read: technology), to take God's place, and the

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[348] Lewsey, "Faith in democracy"
[349] Smith, "America's nonreligious"
[350] Helliwell et al., 24

eventual death of Man. The cyclical nature of this phenomenon does not decrease the emotional impact on each generation as they experience it. In fact, the evergreen nature of this cycle means each generation inherits an even greater sense of pessimism from their parents, before their own experience of disillusionment begins. This contributes to a widespread cultural practice of "immersed resignation," as Tom Moylan phrases it.[351] This embedded apathy is dystopia at work.

Putting the hope in dyst(hope)ia

Though it may not appear as such, classifying our contemporary world as a dystopia, as I do in Chapter Four, is an inherently *hopeful* act on my part. It would be useful to clarify the definition of dystopia I employ here. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of dystopia reads: "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible; opposed to utopia."[352] This draconian sense of the word is not what I mean when I proclaim that we live in a dystopia; indeed, there are many true things about our society today that are most assuredly *not* "as bad as possible." The *OED* version of dystopia is the kind experienced by those who, though they continue to sit in positions of heavily-entrenched power, view the end of segregation and the development of policies like Title IX and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act as somehow stacking the deck against them. This delusion—what Wendy Brown would term the viewpoint of "an 'aggrieved' and 'wounded' … male subjectivity"[353]—stands far apart from my employment of the term, which turns instead towards the employment of "critical dystopia," as defined by scholars of utopia Raffaella Baccolini (2000) and Tom Moylan (2000).

Critical dystopias are defined as texts that "maintain a utopian core" amidst the narratives of peril and oppression, in distinct opposition to the more 'traditional' or uncritical dystopias that

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[351] Moylan, "The Necessity of Hope," 166
[352] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "dystopia (n.)," September 2023.
[353] Allen and Mendieta, 10

are mired in apathy.[354] Moylan and Baccolini's definition employs a specifically praxis-minded

framework in the conception of critical dystopias as ones that:

> reject the conservative dystopian tendency to settle for the anti-utopian closure invited by the historical situation…
> Critical dystopias give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects (and, I would add, to those diminished and deprived by the accompanying economic reconfigurations) they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move forward toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destructive logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few.[355]

Put simply, critical dystopias are projections of hope. Critical dystopias "critique the dystopian

implications of neoliberal capital[ism]...includ[ing] within their forms an injunction to imagine

the world otherwise," a material practice not unlike the call to action contained within the body

of my own work.[356]

There are several elements colluding to produce the conditions of dystopia within our

world today. Principally among these are "the worldwide incursion of neoliberal capitalism…the

overdetermined array of corporate power…a spreading wave of xenophobia…[and] the

downward spiral of climate catastrophe," to borrow but a few from Moylan's more exhaustive

list.[357] The ubiquity of these phenomena contributes to "the contemporary upsurge of 'dystopian'

expression," of which contemporary literature like *The Candy House* (2022) and *Klara and the

Sun* (2021) constitute a part.[358] These phenomena are felt across generations, cultures, races,

genders, abilities, and ideologies; experienced differently and with countless nuances

undoubtedly, but felt universally nonetheless.

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[354] Baccolini, 13
[355] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* 189
[356] Forter, 1562
[357] Moylan, "The Necessity of Hope," 165
[358] Moylan, "The Necessity of Hope," 166

One of the most universal arenas for the expression of these various dystopian phenomena is the original universal arena itself: the internet, and cyberspace more broadly. To brand our contemporary society dystopian is to recognize the depersonalized, fear-mongering nature that has come to define both the nature of existence on the internet as well as our contemporary neoliberal era generally. In a dystopia, "depersonalisation [] prevails…Men and women become numbers, interchangeable parts in the functioning of society."[359] This mechanized dehumanization is part and parcel of the machinations of neoliberalism wherein "all political issues are now subordinated to the self-interested and strategic pursuit of economic gain" and

> because neoliberalism singularizes the subject, detaching it from others, this subject can only experience social injury, derogation, and subordination, in terms of denied entitlements. The neoliberal subject, completely isolated, can only experience relationality in terms of aggrievement, resentment, comeuppance, and schadenfreude.[360]

This kind of "relationality" is the primary method for existence in our current cyber landscape, where algorithms feed on and amplify these feelings of "resentment" and "schadenfreude." And this virtual disenfranchisement carries over into the AFK world, producing a "popular structure of feeling…that opportunistically feeds back into the dark experience of our present and sustains a disarming anti-utopian pessimism."[361]

So how, exactly, is my declaration of our society suspended within a sense of "anti-utopian pessimism" *hopeful*? In a very practical sense, if we are already awash in dystopia, we have the benefit of a natural inclination towards utopia. We can appropriate Isaac Newton when we say *what goes down must, eventually, come up*. There is also the fact that, as Legacy Russell points out, "in a dystopic global landscape that makes space for none of us…the sheer

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[359] Walsh, 144
[360] Allen and Mendieta, 10
[361] Moylan, 166

act of living—surviving…becomes uniquely political."[362] But what is *political* is not necessarily

what is *hopeful*, as my mother and countless scholars like Calvin Warren have already

discovered. There must be something *more* than the idea that there's nowhere to go but up.

I believe the answer lies within the proclamation of dystopia—particularly critical

dystopia, which I move beyond the bounds of literature into a material, anthropological practice.

Dystopian literature has a long history of being the "fiction of resistance," as Jill Lepore terms it.

She writes:

> Autopia is a planned society; planned societies are often disastrous; that's why utopias
> contain their own dystopias. Most early-twentieth-century dystopian novels took the form
> of political parables, critiques of planned societies, from both the left and the right.[363]

Though she doesn't explicitly use the language of surrender and resistance, that's exactly what

Lepore is describing. Dystopia is "contain[ed]" within utopia itself, because utopias that

construct "planned societies" fail to surrender to anything outside of the realm of their immediate

control, thus creating the very terms of their own demise, the "disastrous" potential for dystopia.

Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) represents this kind of dystopia-within-utopia. Levin

constructs the 'perfect' Connecticut town where the women—all successful businesswomen,

scientists, and artists—are replaced by docile robots under the control of their husbands. The

dystopias created by posthuman technocrats, described by authors like Jeanette Winterson in

Frankissstein (2019) and Don DeLillo in *Zero K* (2016) and fueled in reality by corporations like

Alcor, are born of the same impulse towards control. It is only once we surrender to the

uncontrollable that we can find hope.

The concepts of *resistance as surrender* and *surrender as hope* are two central

phenomena within the experience of Black nostalgia, as we encountered in Chapter Two. Much

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[362] Russell, 55
[363] Lepore, "A Golden Age"

in the same way that she serves as the catalyst for Milkman's journey in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Pilate can serve as our example for the power of resistance through surrender. Pilate Dead, though ostracized from society and ancestry even to a greater degree than her male family members, is able to reclaim her agency—to break the curse of nostalgia, as it were—by offering resistance to the would-be obstructing forces through her surrender to them. Pilate does not argue when her neighbors and family members cast her as distinctly non-human because of her lack of a navel, for example—a fact that Pilate certainly has no control over. Pilate merely finds new ways to inhabit the role of human, affording her a sense of freedom and homecoming unshared by her kin, at least until Milkman takes his own flight.

In the same way that Lepore writes about "utopias contain[ing] their own dystopias," the reverse also holds true—dystopias contain their own utopias as well. This is what grants critical dystopian literature the potential to embody the moniker Lepore gives it: the "fiction of resistance."[364] This glimmer of utopia contained within dystopia is the heart of the legacy of Black nostalgia and the reality of living in the post-apocalypse as Indigenous scholars and activists around the world have described. This is the work of hope as actively surrendering to ways of *un*-knowing, as I wrote at the conclusion of Chapter Two. By surrendering our claim to control, we actively practice resistance to the oppression created by existing hegemonies of power and find, instead, a renewable source of hope.

Making this concept of hope as surrender more tangible involves the necessary restructuring of how we conceive of "hope" in the first place. Here, I echo O'neil Van Horn's call for the pursuit of "dark" hope:

> Hope must be undone as certainty, as clarity, as light, even as white. Dark hope lures toward the possible, toward imagining a world that 'could yet be' in the face of the possibility of 'no longer being'.

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[364] Lepore, "A Golden Age"

> …
> To un-know hope is to admit a dynamism to futurity, a queering of potentiality itself. Indeed, the darkening of hope seeks to disrupt assumed paradigms of futurity, at large.
> …
> To cling too tightly to a particular vision of the future is not hope, but a blind, or at least myopic, optimism. Instead, an opaque hope compels us to embody a vision of the future, always undetermined, always in process. This dark hope thus defers reassurance and certainty in favour of carving opportunities for negotiating, for living into, the vast uncertainties…[365]

When we surrender to "dynamism" and "disrupt[ion]" as opposed to the human predisposition to "cling," as the Stenmark twins put it in *Zero K*, we find that we can access an entirely fresh, renewable source of hope. Where the postmodernists in the 1970s faced an unimaginable future that seemed to rob them of any ability to find hope, we can face a similarly unknown future—ordered by neoliberalism and populated by AI and other technology that hasn't been invented yet—and still locate a sustainable source of hope by embracing this notion of surrender.

This is not to say that finding hope is an easy or simple undertaking. Indeed, the long tradition of Black nostalgia and resistance should stand in eternal reminder of how arduous the process of surrendering can be. The act of surrendering as I mean it is also *essentially antithetical* to the practice of abstaining. This is not a passive act that can be blithely undertaken; this is a call for a practice, a dedication to resistance as surrender. And how do we resist in the metaverse? We glitch.

To glitch, to hope

Legacy Russell describes glitching as "an activist prayer, a call to action, as we work toward fantastic failure."[366] Where Russell refers specifically to the gender binary, we can extrapolate their words to mean a call for working towards the "fantastic failure" of any system that obstructs our ability to find and practice hope. One such practice and system of belief that

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[365] Van Horn, 279
[366] Russell, 9

must be targeted is that of post-nostalgia. A tree remains planted for only as long as its roots

have space to grow. Following the siren calls of people like Victor (*Frankissstein*) and Ross

(*Zero K*) into a future that is utterly disconnected from our past is not only reckless, it has

damaging implications for humanity at large.

In this way, the first entity we must surrender to is our past. This is not a call for a *return*

to the past nor for a call for lauding it. We can surrender to the past and remain resistant to

right-wing populists who champion the practice of revisionist history. We do this by actively

using that collective history to build the foundations for a future that avoids replicating past

inequities. If the future we hope for is modeled on structures of exclusion, whereby only the

select will survive based on the color of their skin or the size of their bank accounts, we have

failed to surrender. This is not a new lesson; Chad Walsh uses the example of Orwell's infamous

dystopian novel as a potent example in his earlier text:

> The society of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not a nightmare because men eat too much or
> indulge in illicit sex, but because their minds and spirits have become corrupted until they
> call black white. In their collective solipsism they have tried to become as gods,
> controlling reality itself by an act of the will.[367]

Post-nostalgia is fundamentally about control. Men like Victor, the Stenmarks, Ross, and even

Bix each "tried to become as gods" in their attempts to "control[] reality itself." This was a way

for each of these new techno-Gods to escape, subvert, or otherwise persevere in the face of

obsolescence and death. At its core, post-nostalgia is about avoiding death.

In this way, we can understand fear as the second entity to which we must surrender. We

do this through our practice of hope that "defers reassurance and certainty" in favor of "carving

opportunities for negotiating, for living into, the vast uncertainties." The religious among us

understand this kind of surrender well, finding hope in the face of the unknowable abyss that is

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[367] Walsh, 141

death through their faith in eternal return and salvation. This was the hope the (white) postmodernists of the 1970s needed and could not access. We can.

Fear of death is one manifestation of a greater fear of the unknown. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate surrenders to this fear by "inventing new ways of inhabiting…the roles in which [she] is captured and defined."[368] She finds freedom in the exploration of "vast uncertainties" because she embraces uncertainty itself. Pilate's body bears physical markers of glitching, namely through her lack of a navel. This is glitch as "anti-body, resisting the body."[369] While we cannot easily change the physical demarcations of nostalgia upon our bodies—though med-tech developments in Botox and other aesthetic enhancements move ever-closer towards eternal banishment of wrinkles, freckles, moles, and birthmarks, I have yet to hear of someone managing to shed their navel—we *can* join Pilate in our surrender to the fear of the unknown by grounding ourselves in a new kind of "anti-body" resistance. As Legacy Russell points out: "legibility [becomes] a condition of manipulation" in neoliberal society.[370] We have already seen this through algorithms designed to typecast users in order to better capitalize on our interests.[371] If we define the future, and ourselves within that future, we open both avenues to manipulation by capital-driven interests. If instead we surrender any presumed claim to control and absolute knowledge, we practice resistance to manipulation.

Utility is one of the greatest axes of control seized by corporations and capitalist machinery, and glitching is a powerful method of reclaiming utility for ourselves, thereby restoring our identities as *individuals* instead of as *users*. American Artist creates artworks in response to AI, technology, and surveillance, and their name is a handy example of what it

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[368] Ngai, 124
[369] Russell, 91
[370] Quoted in Russell, 10
[371] See: Kant (2021)

means to glitch as resistance. Artist gave themselves their name, legally changing it

> as the basis of an ambivalent practice—one of declaration: by insisting on the visibility of blackness as descriptive of an american artist, and erasure: anonymity in virtual spaces where "American Artist" is an anonymous name, unable to be googled or validated by a computer as a person's name.[372]

By giving themselves a name that, when searched, "could yield their page or a Wikipedia list of American artists," Artist manages to "evade[] the low-grade surveillance technology of the search engine by using it against itself."[373] Artist is a living glitch who resists manipulation by existing biased algorithms through the surrendering of their name. Like Pilate, Artist has discovered new ways to embody their roles as an American, as an artist, and as an internet user. We all do not need to change our legal names in order to resist manipulation, and indeed the high-profile legibility of Artist makes their case a rather extreme one. We can use Artist as a potent reminder of the power we each have when entering every space, whether physical or digital. By choosing when and if to create legible identities for ourselves in each space we enter, and defining for ourselves what "legible" means, we are already practicing the glitch as resistance.

In my investigation of hope amidst the contemporary digital trend of post-nostalgia, I fear I have contributed to what Legacy Russell identifies as the

> fear-mongering equation *Internet = alienation* … a turn of phrase [] frequently weaponized to undermine the value of the digital and speaks recklessly through a white, straight, cisgender lens.[374]

While certainly not my intention, I do not doubt the ample potential for the grounding of various elements of my argument—especially within my examinations of cyberspace—to this "weaponized" framework. While I do not delude myself that simply stating my opposition to those connections here will prevent them from existing, I nonetheless wish to state it, for the

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[372] Quoted in Reid, "American Artist"
[373] Reid, "American Artist"
[374] Russell, 124

record, as it were.

The internet—cyberspace, more broadly and in keeping with the rest of my argument—is *not* a necessarily malignant entity. The paywalling, commodification, and intermediation of the digital landscape by corporations, however, marks a notable expansion of neoliberalism which has turned the vast potential of virtuality into moderated, alienat*ing* spaces that reproduce the constricted and constricting nature of Western AFK society. This is an example of what Moylan terms the "subsumption of utopian sensibility within the operating conditions of the present."[375] The utopian potential of cyberspace still exists, and indeed hope can—and *does*—pervade through online communities, particularly for "marginalized voices and bodies" that carve space for themselves and their communities in cyberworld because the AFK world is far less safe.[376] But the neoliberal severing of the internet from one vast universe into siloed hostile territories structured by corporate institutions that would rather dismantle communities than build them makes this potential far more difficult to uncover.

Still, moments of glitching are visible within our digital landscape. In 2021, a group of Reddit users managed to disrupt global stock trading and corporate hedge fund managers by coming together to drive a "meteoric rise" in GameStop stock, a feat journalist Emily Stewart called "a captivating David vs. Goliath story, where David — at least on some fronts — appears to be winning."[377] The development of guerrilla traders and so-called 'meme stocks' may appear trivial, but this is one high-visibility example of the kind of resistance that is possible when users come together and weaponize algorithms, data, and other tools of global capitalism against existing hegemonies of power.

The kind of hope that can be fueled by embracing the glitch is neither nostalgic nor

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[375] Moylan, "The Necessity of Hope," 166
[376] Russell, 124
[377] Stewart, "GameStop"

post-nostalgic, as I have defined them. Nostalgia is a fundamentally obstructing force that actively works against the radical call to action that is contained within the glitch. Glitching is fundamentally *embodied* and *actionable*. And while the post-nostalgic long for something new, they long to seize control of the future and build it exactly as they, individually, want to see it. Hope built on absolute control is already a false-bottomed one, and glitching is fundamentally about *escaping control*. It is only by resisting both the phenomena of nostalgia and post-nostalgia that we can glitch and only by surrendering to that which is unknown and uncontrollable that we can hope.

As scholars and readers, we glitch when we refuse to accept the story laid flat on the pages. In *The Candy House*, when we go looking for Miranda, we glitch. When we see and pursue the stories of the women, of the eluders, of Alfred and his absurdist quest for authenticity, we resist the boundaries enforced by Mandala. We can embody the sense of disruption, of being a living glitch, away from the novel *(AFN?)* in much the same way. As internet users, indeed as people—reclaiming the term here to indicate the fullness of our lives lived within the membrane of on- and offline and as practical resistance to the neoliberal commodification of the human experience—participating in a society increasingly ordered by technology, we glitch by paying careful, studied attention to the vacancies, the omissions, and the marginalizations created by that technology, and then screaming, organizing, fixing, or even eluding when we find them.

We participate in the action of hoping when we admit that we *don't* know what the future looks like and surrender our grip on the false-hope offered by the illusion of ultimate control. We also hope when we refuse to accept the future being built *for us,* too. We do not surrender to a future built by the Convergence and Mandala, or, in our *AFN* world, Alcor and Meta. We resist manipulation by finding new ways to deem ourselves illegible under the surveillance of facial

recognition technology and predictive policing software. We may not know what the future looks like, but we know what it will *not* look like, what we *refuse* to let it be. This is the practice of surrender and resistance. This is hope in the 21ˢᵗ century.

The rattlesnake problem

One final time, I shall return to the passage that started it all in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*:

> "What do you think about it," Maria asked Carter.
> "About what."
> "What I just told you. About the man at the trailer camp who told his wife he was going out
> for a walk in order to talk to God."
> "I wasn't listening, Maria. Just give me the punch line."
> "There isn't any punch line, the highway patrol just found him dead, bitten by a rattlesnake."
> "I'll say there isn't any punch line."
> "Do you think he talked to God?" Carter looked at her. "I mean do you think God answered?
> Or don't you?"[378]

At the beginning of this entire undertaking, I thought I would be able to find an answer to Maria's question. *Yes, God answered* or *No, God didn't, and I can tell you why.* Now I realize I will never have a singular answer for her. It is the task of hoping to surrender into that uncertainty, to accept the unknowability that Maria couldn't, or wouldn't. God might've answered, or might not have. Or perhaps God answered, but the snake got there first. Or maybe the snake *is* God. Or the man is God. Or none of it is God, or everything is God.

This is what I *can* offer to Maria, to my mother, to everyone who wonders how we're supposed to find hope today. We find it in resistance, in surrender, in the glitch. We practice hope, actively, because hope isn't a thing waiting to be found, it is created. I have no wish to claim to be the first person to employ hope as a verb; indeed I continue to find myself retreading the familiar grounds of belief. But a practice that felt inaccessible to me, and countless others, I

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[378] Didion, 113

know, now feels like a new tool in my hands. Even if we are rediscovering the same essential truth that the faithful have been lauding for millennia—not an argument I'm making, though certainly an intriguing theological query I'd consider worth pursuing—the ultimate goal of this work was to provide the foundations for a new path towards locating that eternal spring. And though the road is far from complete, and indeed I am surrendering to the unknowability of what will come next, I believe this work is a valuable first step.

At the end of it all, Maria decides to "keep on playing," even in the face of the "quintessential intersection of nothing," a choice that confounds her contemporaries.[379] Maria persists, she says, because she "know[s]" what nothing means.[380] Now, we do too.

It means surrender.

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[379] Didion, 67
[380] Didion, 214

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