The Paradoxes of Intimacy in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy*, Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*, and Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*

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Introduction: Intimacy Between a Scientific Concern and a Literary Subject

> There are some people who would never have fallen in love if they had not heard there was such a thing.
> **La Rochefoucauld**[1]

> The world is full of new developments and love must also be something that innovates. Risk and adventure must be re-invented against safety and comfort.
> **Alain Badiou**[2]

The two epigraphs are taken from vastly different contexts and historical periods, yet read together, they construe the main issue that *Paradoxes of Intimacy* engages with: love is not a natural given but a narrative construction that must constantly be re-invented. In the seventeenth century, François de La Rochefoucauld suggested that our knowledge of love is not innate but primarily mediated through, and constructed by, the stories we tell and the forms through which we express affection and desire. Love, therefore, acquires its apparent givenness and universality not from its essence, but from its expression. Four centuries later, French Philosopher Alain Badiou calls for the reinvention of these forms. His implication is that the narratives and discourses governing our conceptions, representations, and understanding of love have grown inadequate for the rapidly transforming contemporary world. To unsettle the notion of love as a universal or natural state of being, one must venture beyond the "comfort and safety" of inherited narratives and confront the contradictions and paradoxes that underlie intimate experience. The two statements thus articulate complementary imperatives: La Rochefoucauld exposes love's dependency on form, while Badiou demands the renewal of those very forms in times of massive cultural and technological changes. Overburdened with the weight of universality and timelessness, love has become an uncontested ideal -an emotion laden with the promise of coherence and significance, and therefore rarely questioned**.** In fact, the givenness of love permeates our lives, and so does the givenness of its narrative.

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[1] The quote is taken from *Maximes et Réflexions Morales du Duc De La Rochefoucauld* (Maxim CXXXVI/136, 1829). The original quote reads as follows "Il y'a des gens qui n'auraient jamais été amoureux s'ils n'avaient jamais entendu parler de l'amour" (46). The English translation is taken from Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (1977, 191).

[2] In Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love* (11)

In recent decades, the social sciences[3] and philosophy[4] have voiced a shared concern with the changing nature of love and intimacy, ranging from the announcement that love has become "liquid" and frail (Zygmunt Baumann 2003), the "agony of the eros" (Byung Chul-Han 2017), to "the end of love" and coldness of intimacy (Eva Illouz 2007, 2019). Together, all these approaches announce a prevalent crisis in the conception and understanding of intimacy as a private experience that brings individuals closer together. They argue, instead, that intimacy is a social practice inextricable from the socio-political, economic, and cultural forces in which it unfolds. While the subject of love[5] has gained unprecedented interest in scientific disciplines and theoretical discourses since the second half of the twentieth century, it has never been absent from the literary arts. If anything, literature has remained love's most enduring laboratory. From fiction to poetry, theatre, and the visual arts[6], the aesthetic representations[7] of love have served both to define and to challenge social norms. The stories of Isolde and Tristan, Romeo and Juliet, and Layla and Majnun have long animated the social imaginary, becoming templates for how love is imagined, performed, and symbolized.

Conceptions and representations of intimacy, then, are to a large extent, shaped by the narratives of (romantic heterosexual) love. In fact, it is in the relation between the fictional

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[3] During the last few decades there has been an escalating interest in the research of emotions generally and intimacy and relationships, in particular, acknowledging the fundamental role these domains play in human experience. Starting from the eighties, an entire subfield in social sciences has emerged under the name of the sociology of emotions and includes works by Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983, 2007), Steven L. Gordon (1981), Niklas Luhmann (1982), Thomas J. Scheff (1983), Amitai Etzioni (1988), Anthony Giddens (1992), Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Lauren Berlant (2000, 2008, 2011), Zygmunt Baumann (2003, 2015), Eva Illouz (1997, 2003, 2007, 2018, 2019)

[4] See W. Newton Smith "A Conceptual Investigation of Love" (in Soble, 199), Allain Badiou (2009), Robert C. Solomon (1988, 2007), Peter Goldie (2000), Harry G. Frankfurt (2004)

[5] At this juncture, I acknowledge that 'love' and 'intimacy' are used interchangeably in the introduction. However, the nuanced relationship between these two concepts will be thoroughly clarified in the subsequent theoretical chapter.

[6] Visual arts include many art forms such as painting, photography, sculpture, video, filmmaking, and comics.

[7] There is a consensus among social scientists and cultural critics that literature -mainly poetry and theater in the 16th century and the novel since its beginning- has contributed immensely to the creation of "a semantics of love" and social imaginary about intimate relations that form the bases of our understanding of the subject until the present day (Luhmann 41-7). For more on the subject, see Niklas Luhmann's *Love as Passion* (58), Eva Illouz's *Consuming The Romantic Utopia* (154-9), and François Jullien's *Of Intimacy* (43), Lauren Berlant's *"Intimacy"* (285), Zygmunt Baumann's *Liquid Love* (123)

personae and the real person that love has gained its social significance[8], academic salience, and cultural mysticism. "Love stories," sociologist Eva Illouz observes, "have penetrated the fabric of our daily life so deeply that we suspect they have altered, and even transformed, our experience of love" (*Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 154). To claim that our experiences of love are, to a large degree, organized around narrative is to call for a deeper question: what is the relationship between fictional intimacies and real ones, and what are the implications of this interdependence for contemporary narratives of the self-in-relation? *The Paradoxes of Intimacy* takes that question as its point of departure. It proposes that the paradoxes of intimacy in contemporary culture arise from the entanglement between the fictional and the real, between the narrativization of love and its lived practice. In fact, the literary approach to the subject in the contemporary context[9] has equally witnessed numerous transformations, which remain hardly untouched by the processes of the scientification of the subject and modern cultural developments. The claim that love is an ineffable emotion that comes naturally as the truest and purest expression of human attachment is vigorously debated in the present argument, showing intimacy to be a paradoxical and contingent pre-emotion or social practice that dynamically crisscrosses between the individual and collective, public and private, personal and interpersonal spheres. The capacity of the fictional narrative to represent such subtle forms of intimate connections and ambivalences is what characterizes the broader themes of the *The Paradoxes of Intimacy*.

Today, in a cultural context marked by global media market expansion, the intensification of capitalist economies, and rapid technological advances, intimate relationships are -more than ever before- mutually shaped by the complex intersections of socio-political and cultural systems. Over the past three decades, the expansion of worldwide networked information and communications technologies[10] (Zuboff 2019); the waning faith in free-market and neo-liberalist

[8] As German sociologist Niklas Luhmann opines, love "is so well suited to narrative portrayal; for it is the subject *par excellence* of novels" (58). While Luhmann argues that love has not initially developed as a literary subject but as a philosophical one, his argument -which draws mostly on literary instances- sustains the substantiality of the discipline in the creation and development of the discourses and storylines of love in society, other cultural venues, and media afterward.

[9] By contemporary here, I refer to postmillennial literature, mainly fiction published after the year 2000.

[10] Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of of Surveillance Capitalism* (15–16)

capitalist economies[11] especially after the 2008 economic meltdown (Nealon 2012); the incorporation of social and individual experiences into the market through the fusion of consumption and mass media (Illouz 2007; 2012; 2021),[12] have together attended to the growing interplay between the macro-forces and processes (culture, history, economy, social processes, and organizations) and the most intimate micro-individual experiences. In that regard, "[i]deas about what is private and 'inner' versus what is public and 'outside' or 'other' appear to be changing" (Timmer 303). This shifting boundary between the private and the public has rendered intimacy not a refuge from modernity but one of its privileged sites of negotiation. Consequently, the constant need for the narrativization of intimate relationships to complex social and economic-political forms invites and necessitates the recognition of its underlying paradoxes.

The 2019 coronavirus pandemic brought this paradox into unprecedented visibility. Global lockdowns, digital mediation, and state-imposed restrictions blurred the distinctions between home and workplace, personal and public spheres. While most governments worldwide implemented similar tools -lockdown, social distancing, and hygiene rules- they diverged sharply in how they managed social anxieties, growing individuals' uncertainties, and the rhetoric of solidarity. *Home*, once imagined as a sanctuary of privacy, was transformed into a node of virtual productivity and surveillance. The domestic sphere became the primary stage where intimacy was performed, monitored, and mediated, exposing how thoroughly it depends on political and economic infrastructures. The pandemic thus materialized one of the dissertation's key claims: intimacy is a *liminal* experience, indiscernible from the adjacent socio-economic and political frameworks that shape it.

As a literary subject, however, love has traditionally been depicted as a private matter that finds its expression in confessional forms, letters, and lyrical poetry. Starting from the eighteenth century, romanticism defined the aesthetic and moral ideal of love, and romance fiction became the organizing grammar of intimacy. From that point, romantic love has been injected into the social imaginary, resulting in the construction of a "romance ideology" that views "sentiment or feeling as the essential and universal truth of persons. Feeling is what people have in common despite their apparent differences" (Berlant, *Desire/ Love* 110). Romance

[11] Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (25)

[12] Eva Illouz's *Consuming The Romantic Utopia* (1-3)

fiction[13] has become a vehicle for organizing intimate experiences around a typical love plot that principally reads as heterosexual, progressive, and personal. By the postwar period, love had descended from the literary canon to the mass-market shelves of popular romance and self-help manuals, its seriousness diluted but its cultural influence magnified.

The romantic view of love has contributed to thrusting it with fixed frames of expectations, predefined symbolic images and behaviors, and specific emotional rhetoric, contributing to its consideration as a longed-for or even idyllic emotion. Romance and the idealism of love have elevated the latter into a meaning-maker and a self-evident promising attribute that, once attained, happiness; fulfillment; depth; and value can be achieved. Love is, in that sense, understood "with a sort of mathematical shorthand: 1+1=1. By making two into one, such a formula attempts to reduce intractable multiplicity into a single, manageable whole" (Shelden 7). The formula presumes incompleteness: the individual becomes whole only upon merging with their "second half," "the one and only," ' the promised figure of unity and "happily ever after" ending (Shumway 17). However, love regularly fails to fulfill its promises and meet these assumptions and expectations. As literary scholar Jane Gallop asserts, "[t]he problem with the heterosexual couple is complementarity, the false ideal of 'making two perfectly equal one.' Here we have the danger of erasing the difference between two and one" (Gallop 79–80). One of the central premises of this study is to examine forms of intimacies that renounce this complementarity hypothesis. Instead of subscribing to the ideal of love as fusion, the narratives under study embrace the belief that difference -not imposed unity- is not contradictory to love. They conceive intimacy as a negotiation of boundaries, not their erasure; as a space where otherness is recognized, not assimilated.

The view of love as an uncontested ideal and as a practical experience has testified to the paradoxical nature of intimacy. As a matter of example, Emma Bovary -the eponymous heroine of Flaubert's nineteenth-century masterpiece novel- unpacks one of the enigmatic structures of

[13] Feminist literary critic Lynne Pearce asserts that the romance novel has been one of the most popular but least respected literary genres. Even though it has been dismissed by literary criticism, this genre remains continuously growing and in demand. The criticism stems from the view that romance novels produce repetitive stories of heroines confined to love and marriage, creating subservient readers -predominantly women. This claim has been critically debated in recent scholarly works such as Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan's *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (2009), *Lisa Fletcher's Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (2008), Lynne Pearce's *Romance Writing* (2007), Corinne Saunders' *Romance: From Classical to Contemporary (2007),* Imelda Whelehan's *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City (2005)*, Barbara Fuchs' *Romance (2004), and* Pamela Regis' *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003).

love and the conflictual relation between the fictional story of love and the real-life practice. Driven by the romantic ideals of love that she develops from her readings of canonical literary romances and turning into "the mistress of all the novels, the heroine of all the dramas, the vague 'she' of all the volumes of verse", Emma is disillusioned by the recognition that love -as she reads about it in the books- is different and clashes with the demands of domesticity and practicality of daily life (432). While love resolves itself unproblematically in fiction through its containment in narrative order and predictable plot machinations, its fictional representation interferes with its actual practice, widening the incongruities between love as an ideal and intimacy as a social practice. *Paradoxes of Intimacy* takes this tension as a central concern: the clash between the literary narratives and the practices of intimacy or between the problems of writing about and living intimacies. Not only does the ritualized romantic narrative of love structure the way we bond, choose our partners, and express our emotions, but it also burdens the intimacy with pre-made templates that constrain its imaginative possibilities. Contemporary women's fiction, by contrast, seeks to dismantle these templates and to reimagine intimacy as a dynamic, porous practice that exceeds the private sphere and reshapes our understanding of social, political, and cultural relations.

In addition, the fundamental role that love plays in human experience has led to an increasing tendency to rationalize it throughout the twentieth century. Disciplines such as psychology, psychoanalysis, biology, and neurosciences have mostly sought to explain love "subsuming [it] under some of their key scientific concepts, as 'the unconscious,' 'the sex drive,' 'hormones,' 'species survival,' or 'brain chemistry'" (Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* 163). By making the human subject an object of scientific inquiry, intimacy has procured a set of analytical tools and intellectual frameworks that helped the classification and labeling of emotions and the management of the self. The rise of the psychological discourse on intimacy reframed suffering as pathology and turned relationships into fields of emotional optimization. The centrality of mental health within these frameworks translates emotional pain into something to be treated, and attachment into a form of self-work. The self, as Illouz writes, "becomes the object of an ongoing process of self-understanding and careful self-monitoring of the psyche, which leads to an intellectualization in romantic relationships through the systematic labeling of emotions and through their monitoring by techniques of self-awareness and self-transformation" (*Why Love Hurts* 163). Love thus becomes both a scientific puzzle to be decoded and a therapeutic project

to be managed. The view of love as either a romantic ideal or a mere illusion has resulted in the development of two main discourses in its approach: the scientific and the literary one.

Caught between the two poles of romanticization and rationalization, love as a literary subject has lost some of its aura since the postwar period. This, however, does not imply that there are no literary writings about love developed since then; it is self-evident that the subject has never been absent from, nor foreign to, literature[14]. Rather, it signals a transformation in how writers approach it. The literary imagination has adapted to these changing epistemes, absorbing the languages of psychology, science, and therapy, while continuing to explore the contradictions that these discourses often conceal. In the postmillennial moment, the discussion of love -and particularly of intimacy -has acquired new urgency. Contemporary debates about emotional life, gendered labor, and the commodification of affect have renewed critical attention to intimacy's social function and aesthetic representation. While, as a concept, *intimacy* is the offspring of the scientific discourses on love and human close connections, it is mainly used interchangeably to love to denote the paradoxes and contradictions that permeate love relationships. The revival of interest in the discourses of intimacy in fictional narratives has made the subject back into a central issue worth re-exploration in contemporary literature.

In *Unmaking Love*, literary scholar Ashley Shelden asserts that "[w]hereas quite a bit has been written (albeit contradictorily) about the status of love in modernism, much less has been written about love in contemporary literature" (13). In that respect, this study aims to address this research gap, examining how contemporary women's fiction reclaims intimacy as both a literary theme and a narrative method. To this end, it studies intimacy in contemporary women's literary texts from a different perspective, going beyond its view as a solely private attribute or a rationalized scientific matter. While the argument is primarily interested in the literary conception of intimacy- more precisely the contemporary female conception and figuration- this

[14] Notable exceptions include Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*, Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In these works, love serves both as a structuring trope and as a political lens that reveals gender and racial inequities within the ostensibly private sphere. Far from idealized, intimacy is depicted as deficient, destructive, or self-limiting, echoing the second-wave feminist critique of romantic love as an instrument of subjugation. While these narratives expose the intersections of personal and collective histories of love, the contemporary women's fiction examined in this dissertation departs from this paradigm to explore the paradoxes and contingencies of relationality beyond the confines of gender politics. While feminist issues remain at stake in their exploration, the reframing of the subject goes beyond the view of love and intimacy as limiting experiences that reinforce gender inequality.

study will draw heavily on other sociological, historical, and philosophical interpretations to elucidate a view of intimacy as an ambivalent and socio-economically-charged practice. In the same way, the interdisciplinary approach to the subject stems from the conviction that the aesthetics of intimacy are indiscernible from, and contingent on, the social and cultural discourses that shape and circulate it.

Amid this growing disciplinary interest in love and intimacy, *The Paradoxes of Intimacy* engages with the question differently: it explores the transformations of the literary aesthetics of relationality along the lines of the emerging scholarly debate on post-postmodernism. With the emerging literary interrogations about new aesthetics of fiction writing that advocate sincerity and trust[15] over the postmodernist poetics of solipsism and skepticism of language, contemporary women's fiction experiments with different generic forms of writing about ways of *being-with* in the world. These texts are conscious of the limitations of language, yet they choose to work *through* those limitations rather than against them. They do not reject the poststructuralist insight that language is an open and unstable system of signification; rather, they transform that insight into an ethics of relation. In other words, these works are emerging from a literary constellation of contemporary writers who seek to overcome the postmodernist disillusionment with the ability of language to express anything beyond itself and to look at possibilities amid the limitations. They do not contradict the post-structuralist findings of language as an open system of signification but work within their assumptions to argue for a narrative that negotiates our terms of bonding in a world where alienation becomes the norm.

Drawing on theories from cultural studies and social sciences, *The Paradoxes of Intimacy* undertakes a cross-generic study of intimacy as both theme and form. It focuses on post-2010 literary texts written by women writers: Rachel Cusk's *The Outline Trilogy* by (2014, 2016, 2018), Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), and Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* (2014). These writers -extremely distinct in style and background- share a commitment to rethinking the conventions of relational writing. Each, in her own way, expresses dissatisfaction with the inherited scripts of love and seeks to experiment with and invent new modes of narrating the self-in-relation that resist viewing love as an ideal capable of structuring life and narrative. Their

[15] See Ihab Hassan's "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust" (2012), Adam Kelly's essay "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics" (2017), and Alison Gibbons', Robin van den Akker', Timotheus Vermeulen's compelling edited volume *Metamodernism Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017).

projects originate in a shared conviction that narrative itself is a relational practice -a vital form through which human beings revise, test, and re-direct their (in)capacities for connection. In this regard, the three writers present intimacy as a structure of paradoxes or ambivalent energy that best describes the narrative discontents and social disconnects, while arguing that the structures we perceive as unchangeable and universal are less fixed than we assume.

This study concentrates on these shared concerns, demonstrating how each text develops distinct narrative strategies that enshrine intimacy in the principles of difference, contingency, and paradox rather than sameness or resolution. By reading these authors together, the study shows how contemporary fiction reinvests in, even as it reinvents, the forms of intimacy that have always been so fundamental to women's lives and female subjectivities. Most importantly, fiction allows for a degree of non-rationalization since it narrates these paradoxes while questioning them as it proceeds. In doing so, they merge the social significance of the novel with a self-reflexive meditation on the limits of representation itself.

While the dissertation does not explicitly address race, ethnicity, or non-heteronormative sexualities, questions of gender and feminism remain integral to its argument. This is not merely because the primary texts are written by women, but because modern Western notions of intimacy have always been entangled with gendered hierarchies and the ideology of heteronormative marriage.

Despite the prominence of the three writers, the dissertation does not aim to treat their texts as normative, nor does it intend to help canonize them. Instead, it reads their works as cultural artefacts that are historically situated and formally experimental. Read together, these primary texts do not call for a consensual conception or narrative aesthetic of literary intimacy but are one way of engaging with, and thinking about, the ways we connect to the other in the world.

The Paradoxes of Intimacy is divided into four main chapters. The first part lays the historical, theoretical, and literary background for my present interventions along with the working definitions of the key concepts such as intimacy, affect, emotion, feeling, and narrative distance. It situates these concepts within the larger intellectual history that connects scientific discourses of emotion with the aesthetic and ethical concerns of modern literature. The subsequent three chapters present close readings of the primary texts, structured around what I call *aesthetic experiments with the paradoxes of intimacy*. In that sense, these chapters are not

about intimate relationships as such but about *how* intimacy is narratively constructed, mediated, and problematized in fiction.

Chapter 2 explores the relationship between love and narration through Rachel Cusk's *Outline* Trilogy. Reading the trilogy as a form of autofiction, the chapter interrogates the porous boundary between reality and fiction in the narration of the self and the other. It exposes one of the main paradoxical complexities of the intimate: Can narrative truly represent intimacy, reciprocity, and connection, or does it inevitably transform them into aesthetic distance? While intimacy traditionally implies self-disclosure and familiarity, Cusk reconfigures it as a story of the encounter with the stranger and unfamiliar other. Her narrator's withdrawal from self-expression into the act of listening produces what I call *an aesthetic of collaborative telling*- a narrative aesthetic grounded in attentiveness to others rather than in self-display. Through this narrative mode, intimacy emerges as *relational* and *situational* rather than private or confessional. In that respect, the stories that the trilogy narrates -despite their performativity and cruelty- do not ultimately create connection but reveal its impossibility. What emerges instead is a repetitive and recursive structure of storytelling in which intimacy is continually deferred and replaced by its narrative performance. The trilogy becomes a bubble of repetition, a space where the same stories are endlessly retold through the silent mediation of the narrator, who listens but never fully responds. Intimacy here dwells not in mutual recognition or the "space between" subjects, but in the collaborative act of narration itself -the ritual of telling and retelling that sustains the illusion of proximity. In *Outline*, the intimate is not what bridges distance but what exposes it as the condition of relationality.

Chapter 3 turns to Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*, examining the intersection of intimacy, power, and capitalism. It investigates the entanglement between the discourses of intimacy and the discourses of economy and politics, focusing on how late-capitalist ideologies infiltrate the affective sphere. Atwood's dystopian satire transforms the romantic narrative of love and betrayal into an allegory of emotional capitalism, exposing how intimacy becomes both a site and an instrument of control. By parodying the sentimental conventions of the romance plot -its adultery motif, moral closure, and promise of redemption- Atwood transforms love into a mechanism of emotional surveillance. The novel's oscillation between empathy and irony produces what Frederick Bogel terms a "poetics of disequilibrium" -a refusal of moral or affective stability. Rather than reaffirming intimacy as a redemptive human value, *The Heart*

Goes Last exposes it as a designed, marketable, and ultimately unstable construct. This chapter, therefore, reads Atwood's novel as a dual experiment: a dystopian allegory of emotional capitalism and a meta-narrative on the aesthetic management of feeling in an age dominated by surveillance and optimization.

Chapter 4 reads Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* as a conversion narrative that embeds the conversion from "asociality" to faith in the human other and the capacity of intimacy to create solidarities. Following Lila's journey from the wilderness to civilization and her marriage to Reverend Ames, the narrative displays the potential of intimacy to surpass the social, linguistic, and cultural differences between the characters and to build a creative space of encounter beyond silence, absence, and death. In Robinson's anachronistic narrative, intimacy does not dissolve difference but shelters it: the self persists alongside the other in the empathetic and hospitable acts of welcoming their otherness rather than merging them into sameness. By resisting the tyrannizing attempts to rationalize love, *Lila* locates intimacy in the irrational silences and gaps that structure the narrative. Robinson's use of literary form and devices -such as fragmentation, paratactic style, and optative mode- produces affect, which circulates not only within the text, but beyond it, creating intimacies between characters -both living and dead- narrator and narratee, and text and reader.

Across these readings, the three texts converge in their rejection of an individualistic and self-centered narrative of love, yet they diverge radically in their aesthetic representations of the intimate. This divergence feeds into the dissertation's central argument: that there can be no single, normative paradigm or genre for narrating intimacy. The plurality of forms and voices in contemporary women's fiction makes any universal or uncontested definition of love impossible. Intimacy, as this study argues, is not a pre-given emotion or a stable state but a dynamic threshold -an in-between space that resists closure and completion. By taking love from the gaze of universality, these texts resist the seduction and comfort of the definition of the former as meaning-maker and ultimate happiness-inducer. Amid the paradoxes, they choose to dwell.

Read together, these works do not lament the decline of intimacy in a postmillennial context; rather, they reimagine its direction. They turn away from the ideal of romantic unity and toward an understanding of intimacy as a site of difference, risk, and ethical engagement. Returning to Alain Badiou's epigraph that opened this introduction, we might say that love and

intimacy, in these texts, are “re-invented” against the comforts of sameness and normativity - embracing instead the creative risks of living, and narrating, in relation.

1 . The Discourses of Intimacy in Contemporary Women's Narratives

The introduction addressed the problematics of the representation of love within fictional texts and the urgency of a literary study of intimacy amid the growing global cultural and sociopolitical changes. This chapter provides working definitions of the key concepts and a theoretical and historical account of the discourses of intimacy, focusing particularly on how these discourses are put to work in the analyses. While acknowledging the variety of significant contributions across other fields of inquiry that explore the notions of intimacy and human relationality, this chapter elaborates upon the specific development of the concept in fictional narratives, namely in a postmillennial literary context. While arguing that the study of intimacy in recent fiction finds its expression in the mutating character of the concept and in the discourses that shape its emergence, it nonetheless draws on -and contributes- to the aesthetic approach of the subject. Reading along the lines of this mutation, the representation of intimacy in literature is best understood in its social context amid the frontiers between the private and public, the individual and collective, and the real and the imagined. The first part of the chapter investigates the historical and etymological transformations of the discourses of intimacy and shows its impact on the forms of writing about relationships in the contemporary context. In doing so, it draws mainly on theories of the sociology of emotion to argue that the rhetoric of distance used in most narratives in the depiction of intimate relationships is primarily activated by the perplexity of real-life forms of bonding. Not only do these narratives revise the concept of the intimate by questioning its former representations but they also expand on these complications to produce narratives that welcome the other while constantly reminding them of the limits of this welcoming. This will be the main interest of the second part of the analysis.

1.1 The Dynamics of Intimacy: the (Hi-)story of the Concept

1.1.1 An Etymological Metamorphosis

Before discussing the ways and forms according to which the discourses of intimacy take shape in sociological and literary scholarship, a preliminary terminological delineation is in order here. An ill-defined concept, intimacy is usually understood as a synonym or euphemism for sexuality and erotic relationships. While sexuality can be one of the routes for understanding the working and transformations of intimacy, it is far from being its unique defining criterion. As it will be unpacked further along this chapter, intimacy is the space of encounter between the self

and the other -be it emotional, spiritual, physical, or textual[16]. In that sense, it is not an emotion itself nor the outcome of the encounter but is, here, to be understood as a pre-emotional and dynamic site of encounter that establishes ways of bonding with the other and of being related *to* and *in* the world. While the spatial metaphor implies the salience of distance and proximity to intimacy, it refutes any claim to fixity and stillness because every encounter presupposes the presence of a self and an external other and the dynamic overlapping with other external social and cultural forces. Intimacy is, in short, a threshold space that permits the collision and interplay between the paradoxical poles of the self and the other, the inside and the outside, and the private and the public. While Intimacy is usually aligned with the domains of the private and the personal or internal[17], its definition as a space of encounter suggests the preliminary presence of an external site to this interiority[18]. In what ways is the meeting between exteriority and interiority established in aesthetic forms is one of the questions furthered by the etymological analysis of the term.

The classification of intimacy as a personal and internal emotion finds its explanation in a long literary and typological history of the concept's construction. Etymologically, intimacy is

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[16] By textual encounter, I refer to the affective space between the reader and the work of fiction. As Jennifer Cooke explains in the introduction to the edited collection *Scenes of Intimacy,* literary texts are bodies that affect and are affected by their readers, creating textual intimacies or what she refers to as "scenes" of intimacy. This reading encounter "is an event with a diverse potential for dramatic effects upon a reader who is embodied rather than just a structural receptor: a text can shame us, disgust us, shock us or move us and such reactions are not merely abstract. We may blush, cry, grimace or smile in reaction to what we read, as the body becomes the stage upon which our emotional responses play themselves out" (*Scenes of Intimacy* 7).

[17] In dictionary definitions in more than four languages, intimacy is always connected to privacy and interiority. In *Larousse*, it is defined as "Qui est au plus profond de quelqu'un, de quelque chose, qui constitue l'essence de quelque chose et reste généralement caché, secret" ("Something that is in the deepest inside of someone, which constitutes the essence of something and generally remains hidden, secret" ("Intime" translation mine). In *Merriam Webster,* it is defined as "something of a personal or private nature" ("Intimacy"). In the *online Diccionario de la lengua española* "íntimo" means "Lo más interior o interno", which translates to innermost, closely interior ("Íntimo, Ma" translation mine) whereas Italian "intima" signifies "Interiorità, sfera spirituale: *nell'i. della coscienza*" that is interiority, spiritual sphere, consciousness ("Intimità" translation mine). In German "*innig"* means "tief empfunden, mit tiefem Gefühl", "'herzlich, tief empfunden, eng verbunden", meaning deeply felt, heartfelt, devotional, fervent and closely related ("Innig" translation mine).

[18] To resolve this problem, Lacan suggests the term "extimacy" ("exitimité") -as a more inclusive concept than intimacy- which joins the interior with the exterior (98). He coined the term combining *ex*-teriority with *in*-timacy to highlight the interpenetration of both public and private spheres. "Extimacy", in that sense, aims at retaining the interconnections of the outside and the inside, the exterior and the interior of the psyche, the outer world and the inner world of the subject, the cultural and the personal, the social and the mental, surface and depth. Whereas Lacan's coinage of the term is intended to resolve the paradoxical and dual understanding of intimacy as something interior, it has further solidified the connection between intimacy and interiority. The term has had a low impact on psychology and critical studies afterward.

derived from Latin *"intimus"* which means "furthest from the outside, most remote, inmost, the inmost part of" and "*intimē*" which is explained as familiar and "most intimate, closest" ("Intime" 952). Two main features of the intimate are depicted here: first privacy and inwardness and second familiarity and closeness. The use of the superlative form of the word "inmost" explains the dominant understanding of intimacy since the first cultural and literary usages of the term- as highly personal, inner-directed, and even secret and as opposed to public and exterior. The intimate domain is, in that sense, inaccessible to the public. Another characteristic is depth or profound feelings which are opposed to superficial and frivolous relationships and suggest a process of inward direction into the recesses of the self to actualize the close bond. In the 19th century, intimacy took another turn and started to be used as a synonym and/or a euphemism for sexuality[19] and physical relationships. It has become, thereafter, tightly related and sometimes even used interchangeably to denote sexual intercourse.

The second meaning of familiarity and closeness poses on its side another level of complication because it presupposes the presence of prior shared knowledge between the intimate self and the other. This suggests that intimacy cannot occur between strangers or between subjects who do not possess prior knowledge of each other. The sharing of personal information or self-disclosure introduces the conditions of reciprocity, trust, and sharing to the intimate relationship. Trust becomes fundamental because disclosing intimate details requires faith that the other will refrain from using this private knowledge for other purposes. This meaning of intimacy is extremely connected to men's comradeship that characterized male bonding in the public sphere in times of wars and explorations. This form of close friendship or brotherly love -referred to as *philia* in Greek mythologies- brought together the notions of loyalty, friendship, profoundness, warmth, and mutuality to intimacy (in Soble 165).

What emerges from this primary investigation of the historical development of the term and its uses is one of its many paradoxes: its classification as private and interior while at the same time being relational and outward-oriented. It provides a view of intimacy as the nexus of individual and communal, interior and exterior, and private and public. To say that intimacy

[19] Since 1904, the word had an additional meaning and started to be used euphemistically in reference to women's lingerie. This meaning surfaced first in Perceval Gibbon's *Souls in Bondage* where he describes "[c]lothes hung on lines in all directions, intimate linen flapped in the wind, and day and night resounded with outcries and laughter and blows" (5).

exceeds the private sphere prompts a delineation of the intersecting conceptual and theoretical paradigms that explain this paradoxical nature, namely affect, emotion and feelings. As the reference to these concepts is inevitable in a study of human intimate connections, the distinction is needed as early in the analysis. In the remainder of this chapter, I also attempt to unpack this definition further and distinguish intimacy as a concept from the discourses that mediate it.

Affect, Feeling, Emotion

The differentiation between "affect", "feeling", and "emotion" has primarily originated in psychoanalysis (Ngai 25). It has been inaugurated thereafter to humanities by Adam Frank and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick through their influential re-readings of Silvan Tomkins theory of affect. The growing body of research on "affect" across a range of disciplines since the 1990s[20] has testified to the slippery nature of the concept. In the notes to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, Masumi defines affect as

> an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. L'affection (Spinoza's *affectio*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies) ("Translator's Foreword" xvii)

Describing affect as a force or an "intensity", Masumi differentiates the former from personal feeling and from intersubjective emotion. While affect is to be understood as a pre-linguistic as well as a pre-cognitive state of being, emotion is "a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (Masumi, "The Autonomy of Affect" 88). To put it simply, we experience affect and are affected by other "bodies", then we interpret this experience and label it, turning it into an emotion. Emotions become the shared linguistic signs which embody the experience of the unpredictable and unruly affective encounter, and as a result acquire a social and cognitive dimension to them.

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[20] A growing interest in the study of affect and emotion has developed since the 1990s and includes -to name but a few-: Robert Solomon's *In Defense of Sentimentality* (2004) and *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (1993), Derek Matravers's *Art and Emotion* (1998), Nancy Chodorow's *The Power of Feelings* (1999), Jack Katz's *How Emotions Work* (1999), Peter Goldie's *The Emotions* (2000), Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), Rei Terada's *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'* (2001), Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Dylan Evans and Pierre Cruse's *Emotion, Evolution and Rationality* (2004), Alan Peterson's *Engendering Emotions* (2004), Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert's *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (2006).

Feelings, on the other hand, are individual experiences that describe personal sensations. They retain the tension between the unstructured affective experience and the social and cognitive emotion. Cultural studies scholar Eric Shouse describes feelings as being personal and biographical, emotions as social, and affect as pre-personal (Shouse). However, since feelings denote a sensation that has been identified and labeled against other different experiences, they are "fundamentally 'social'" (Ngai 25). Earlier, Raymond Williams coins the notion of "structures of feeling" to argue for the fundamentally social nature of the subjective experience of feelings (128). He refutes the distinction between feeling and thought and concludes that the former are social hypothetical forms that can be classified and fixed in structures according to their emergence. He accordingly delineates the connections, tensions, and complexities emerging from the understanding of "thought as felt and feeling as thought", prompting the view of feelings as historical and social phenomena that inevitably connect emotionality to rationality[21](132).

In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg explain that "[a]ffect arises in the midst of inbetween-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon […] That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise) […] Affect […] is the name we give to those forces, […] forces insisting beyond emotion" (Seigworth and Gregg 1). The reference to the body as human or non-human allows for the view of narrative as a body, which affects and is affected by other bodies (readers). According to this definition, it could be understood that the in-betweenness from which affect arises is the space between bodies and is defined by its unpredictability and resistance to any closed and pre-defined structure. Affects "are positioned in the pre-linguistic space between a stimulus and reaction, and between reaction and consciousness. The turn to affect is thereby a turn to that 'non-reflective' bodily space before thought, cognition and representation -a space of visceral processing" (Papoulias and Callard 34). Because it emerges from the in-between-ness, affect resists framing and labeling. Whereas feelings and emotions are experienced by the subject and are not necessarily shared with another subject, affect allows for a

[21] This interpretation will be examined in greater detail in the fourth analysis chapter. Emotions constitute a social matrix of interaction, accessible only to individuals who are both emotionally attuned and literate in the language of feelings. Lila, the eponymous protagonist who lacks the vocabulary to name emotions and cannot engage with this shared linguistic and social repertoire, is positioned as an outsider -both to the other characters in the novel and to her readers.

space of reciprocity between the affected and affective bodies. To feel pain or happiness in the presence of the other does not imply that the other share or are expected to reciprocate similar feelings. The sharing is, however, salient to the experience of intimacy and does not presuppose the merging of the one into the other or their eventual fusion. On the other hand, it implies the crossing of the spaces that separate the self from the other and the welcoming of otherness in its difference. Once this encounter is linguistically labeled or organized along a specific structure, it seizes from being spontaneous, unruly, and singular. To feel close to the other, to enter and share an in-between intimate space sustains a belief in the uniqueness of each encounter and each body. It is an experience resistant to repetition and framing, or an event -in Alain Badiou's sense of the word- that is, an ontological state of being[22] which interrupts and creates possibilities.

While this chapter promises no singular theory or approach to affect, it tries to make a case for the salience of the latter in thinking about how intimacy is mediated, experienced, and energized in contemporary women's fiction. Concluding that affect is precognitive and "is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*", that feelings are inextricable from thoughts, and that emotions are inherently social categories, I refrain from using these terms in the analysis interchangeably (Seigworth and Gregg 2). Instead, I use *feelings* and *emotions* in the course of this study to denote the pre-established discourses of intimacy and *affect* to refer to the emerging literary models of intimate encounters in their uniqueness, unruliness, potential for reciprocity, and resistance to translatability.

1.1.2 Intimacy as Discourse: *Dominant, Residual, Emergent* Forms of Relationality

While the definition of intimacy suggests its unruly, inherently paradoxical, and dynamic nature, its discourses unravel that it is highly structured and discursive. In this context, discourse does not refer to the set of ideas and ideologies that develop the concept of the intimate as a doctrinal belief or a totality that lends itself unproblematically to being aesthetically mirrored. Instead, it refers to the diversity of contradictory and competing usages of the concept that circulate and guide actions and emotions in specific situations. These discourses are constantly alternating due to adjacent social and historical changes, resulting in paradigm shifts in the

[22] In Badiou's thought, an ontology does not represent the nature of being as such but instead unfolds being as it inscribes it. That makes ontology not a singular state of being but "multiple" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 25). Badiou asserts that this conception of ontology frees philosophy from any foundational ambition and enables the relational thinking of multiple processual states of being (4).

understanding of and assumptions about intimacy. A discourse implies dynamism, contingency, social energy, interconnectedness, and interaction, which are all pertinent to the present approach to intimacy. In his theory of love as a symbolic media of communication, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann refutes the view of love as an emotion and argues instead that it is a set of codes that encourages the communication of a certain set of feelings (9). Drawing on literary works in his analysis, Luhmann argues that characters in the novels are "code-oriented", implying that these characters are written according to a particular set of pre-existing cultural symbols. In this way, their relationality in the fictional world tends "to animate the code rather than expand upon it" (11). Slightly similar to what Luhmann calls "codes" to denote the ensemble of symbols related to and expressive of love in a particular period, I use *discourse* to denote the way the structures of feelings and experiences circulate and shape the conception of love aesthetically. However, I argue that these discourses are not "animated" by -but circulate *affectively*- between characters, narrators, and readers.

Residual, Dominant, and Emergent Discourses of Intimacy

The discourses of intimacy represent the intersection of material, sociopolitical and affective structures that carry meanings and organize the self and its intimate relations in the social world. These discourses are variable, contingent upon the historical and cultural context in which they emerge. As a result, to think of love and intimacy as discourses implies that they are prone to change, fade, intertwine, compete with other discourses, and be re-invented. This view enables intimacy to be seen as a framed discourse that interferes closely with other cultural discourses and changes correspondingly. The contemporary women's narratives examined here investigate these frames of knowledge and clusters of discourses, revealing how they shape conceptions of intimacy while simultaneously signaling a paradigm shift in the contemporary discourses of relationships. Raymond Williams's conceptual cluster of the "residual, dominant, and emergent" helps account for the changes of discourses beyond falling in the reductive poles of the old and new. This cluster provides a pertinent angle of thinking about the dynamic, interactive, and contingent relations between the older, ongoing, and emerging discourses of intimacy. As a social practice, the discourse of intimacy unveils the changeable character of relationality, its resistance to fixedness, and its temporal interconnectedness. It should be noted that the distinction is only theoretically possible and helps identify the nature of cultural

processes in their dynamism, interrelatedness, and resistance to a single totalizing dominant perspective.

Williams defines the "dominant" as the shaping force of any cultural process and as inclusive of "emergent' and "residual" alternatives. The residual in culture, on the other side,

> has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values that cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue -cultural as well as social- of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (Raymond Williams 122).

To trace residual practices and values, and to examine their entanglement with dominant ones, underscores the enduring salience of the past in shaping and understanding intimate social relationships in this study. To take Marilynne Robinson's use of the Puritan narrative of conversion and the Christian *agape*ic form of love in *Lila* in the third analysis chapter as an example, the emergent discourse of intimacy draws heavily on this residual religious formation, showing the salience of the concepts of hospitality and selfless love in the construction of alternative forms of "imagined love". In this sense, the residual is also necessarily emergent because it participates in creating different possibilities in relation to the temporal fusion of old and new. As a matter of fact, some of the literary texts suggested here for analysis or as examples do not work to unsettle the residual discourses altogether but seek to find alternatives in older aesthetic and cultural forms. On the other hand, the emergent refers to how "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created" (123). In sum, to define an emergent discourse or cultural practice against a dominant one does not imply the dismantling of the dominant practices but the creation of a new constellation out of the ongoing one.

What should be retained from the use of the cluster of dominant, residual, and emergent in this study, is that all three inextricably work together to shape the textual signification of intimacy in the studied literary texts. Even though the present study is not historical per se, it sustains the belief that the writing about intimacy is haunted by temporalities, that is by past forms of relationality and emergent alternatives. It argues that the dominant discourse of romantic love monopolizes the contemporary conception of intimacy and that the residual forms of *eros* and *agape* and the emergent ones of (non-) solidarity and reciprocity (or lack of it) form

the anti-dominant alternatives. However, it looks simultaneously at the spatial dimensions of these discourses, that is the relations to other adjacent and competing discourses, namely male and female discourses of relationality. By so doing, it merges temporal categories with spatial ones, probing into the relations of power and control between genders, arguing that women and men experience and write about intimacy differently.

This claim transforms the view of intimacy as an ontological state of being into an epistemological knowledge and power system that is regulated by the processes of meaning-making and social enactment. Looking into these heteronormative tensions does not intend to exclude or mute other spatial categories like minority groups, nor to sidestep other gender identities like lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, homosexuals, or intersexual partners (LGBQI+). In fact, the argument refrains from viewing heterosexual forms of love as the default prototype of intimacy and argues instead that temporal categories of discourse have helped produce narratives of gender exceptionalism. In that regard, it forcefully resists any totalizing and exclusionary tendency to ignore the various perspectives and contributions to the emergent understanding of intimacy. There is, in fact, amounting interest in literary studies and fiction writing in marginalized and non-normative groups' forms of relationality. Works like Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Adult Onset*, Jules Ohman's *Body Grammar* have explored subversive and transformative forms of intimacy between lesbian and gay couples beyond the symbolic existing order and helped uncover new forms and semantics for intimate relationality. However, that is a different argument from the one that I aspire to make in the space of this dissertation. Second, the choice of mainstream cultural perspective instead of ethnic minorities does not, in any way, attempt to disavow the historical importance and contribution of the narrative of intimacy in cultural politics. Even though the romantic conception of love in Western societies has been historically and culturally implicated in mainstream literature and in the economic context, it has nonetheless had a similar impact on ethnic minorities. However, the historical contexts play substantial roles in the aesthetic conception of intimacy among these groups, turning into a totally different project with different aspirations than the present one.

Examining the competing and emerging discourses of intimacy among heterosexual couples reveals a tension between lived intimacies and written ones. While intimacy is defined as unruly and unstructured energy or encounter, its discourses show that it is socially and

aesthetically framed, operating according to predefined frames of reference that impose repetition and closure. This tension between the chaotic reality of intimate relations and their narrativized, constrained forms will be analyzed in depth in the second chapter through a close reading of Cusk's *Outline Trilogy*. To further account for this point, the subsequent part will provide a historical overview of the transformations and constant negotiations between the emergent and residual discourses of love. This contextualization helps us understand the prominence of the subject in the literary field and the actual understanding of intimacy and love as interchangeable. It also outlines the paradoxes that emerge with respect to the subject of intimacy from pre-modern, to modern, then to postmodern times. For this, I draw non-exclusively on two influential sociological texts: Niklas Luhmann's *Love as Passion* and Anthony Giddens' *The Transformations of Intimacy,* which offer illuminating approaches to the historical mutation of the concept.

In *Love as Passion,* Luhmann explains the sociological importance of the study of love in relation to the transformation that the "semantics of love" have witnessed in the transition from traditional "stratified" to modern "functional" societies (5). In traditional societies, the main hierarchies of family, religion, and morals prompted a stratified form of the social system. Modern societies, on the other hand, promote an autonomous model of functional systems according to which politics, economy, and family are all seen as autonomous, interdependent systems. "The semantics of love", detected primarily from the literature of the time, has been constantly changing in accordance with these transformations showing that individuals love and suffer mostly according to cultural imperatives. By probing into how and why the appearance and disappearance of certain discourses affect the social character of societies at a given time, Luhmann ties the intimate and its transformation to the adjacent functional systems that imbue the phenomena with a social rather than individual character.

Equally so, Giddens locates the change of the discourses of intimacy in the transformation of society from pre-modernity to modernity in Western societies. Giddens' account covers a larger time span to include and reflect on the liberal movements of the sixties and eighties -especially the feminist one. The historical probe shows that the definition of intimacy emerges from and interpenetrates with the definition of love. While the difference between both concepts is notoriously hard to pin down, a distinction should be made -for the sake of the present analysis- between love as an (elusive) emotion or an ideal and intimacy as a

social practice or a pre-emotional in-between space of encounter. It is worth noting that as a concept, intimacy has gained currency in late modernity through the psychological approaches to the subject[23]. Its psychiatric significance and definition as a key component in individuals' life and well-being have turned it into a subject of scholarly and scientific research. Love, on the other hand, has been made into an uncontested subject, an emotion to be unquestionably chased, or a longed-for ineffable pursuit and experience. The semantic ambiguity of love which sometimes "refers to powerful sexual desire, sometimes to religious or cosmic exhilaration, sometimes to faithful oneness with human relations" turns the latter not only into an elusive quest but also into an evasive concept (Singer, *Meaning in Life: The Pursuit of Love* 1). In this study, love -namely in its romantic form- is perceived as the dominant discourse that structures lives and permeates narratives and multiple artful and cultural sites while intimacy is the emergent one. For these purposes and as the subsequent section intends to argue for, the conceptualization of intimacy is inextricable from the discourses of love.

1.1.3 A Socio-Historical Overview of the Discourses of *Love* and *Intimacy*: From Metaphysical Times to Late Modernity

Conceived primarily as a predicate to love, intimacy has been mostly used interchangeably with romantic love in modern times[24]. Full of promises of granting happiness, endowing life with meaning and value, and finding the "one and only", the modern understanding of love has brought intimacy into line with these promises and permeated their naturalization (Solomon 24). It has, in fact, turned romantic love into "the chief example in our culture of what is natural, uncontested, obvious" (Shumway 2). This modern understanding of intimacy is further shaped and reinforced by historical social and economic transformations.. In *Of Intimacy* and in his argument for a distinction of the concept of intimacy from that of "noisy" love ("Loin de Bruyant de l'amour"), French philosopher François Jullien argues that the modern

[23] Psychological studies on the subject flourished in the 1990s and include -to name just a few: Gilligan, 1980, 1982; Haber, Leach, Schudy, and Sideleau, 1982; Erikson, 1982; Miller and Lefcourt, 1982; Chelune, Vosk, Waring, and Sultan, 1984; Waring, Patton, Neron, and Linker, 1986; Waring, 1985; Ingram, 1986; Buhrmester and Furman, 1987; Markus and Wurf, 1987.

[24] For more on the subject see Irving Singer's *The Nature of Love* Trilogy, Niklas Luhmann's *Love as Passion*, Robert C. Solomon's *About Love*, François Jullien's *Of Intimacy*, Eva Illouz's *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*

understanding of intimacy is anchored in the representation of love and its transformations since antiquity (*De L'intime,* 53).

1.1.3.1 From Greek Mythology to Modernity

Mythologizing Love: Eros and Agape

The Western conception of love is based on two main forms of love[25]: *eros* and *agape*[26]. The platonic concept of *eros* and the biblical doctrine of *agape* have joined together to form the fundamental resources from which the Western world have drawn their definitions of love[27]. *Agape*, for instance, translated into love the meanings of excess, selflessness, irrationality and eros legitimized the pursuit of pleasure, the myth of unity and becoming a whole with the beloved. In the *Symposium*[28]*,* Plato explains eros as the desire for completeness or wholeness "the desire of the whole"[29] while Socrates associates it with the desire for beauty. In both

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[25] While *eros* and *agape* are the two main forms that informed the understanding of love for centuries afterwards, it should be noted that there are other Greek forms of love that remained less influential but were nonetheless reflective of the prominence of the subject. To cite some examples: *Philia* (denotes roughly friendship), *Storge* (kinship), *Mania* (love as obsession), *Ludus* (playful love), *Nomos* (submission to God's will). See Singer's *The Nature of Love* and Alan Solbe's *Eros, Agape and Philia: Reading in the Philosophy of Love.*

[26] See Alan Soble "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Love" in *Eros, Agape,and Philia* (1989) and Anders Nygren's essay "Agape and Eros" (85-94), John A. Brentlinger's "The Nature of Love", and L.A Kosman's "Platonic Love" from the same volume. Also, John Wilson's "Love the Child of Want" in *Love Between Equals* (1995).

[27] For more about this hypothesis refer to Irving Singer's exhaustive three-volume study *The Nature of Love* (Volume 1 *Plato to Luther* (1966), Volume 2: *Courtly and Romantic* (1984), Volume 3: *The Modern World* (1984)). In this lengthy and thorough trilogy, Singer's concludes that "the philosophy of love stems from two principal sources: on the one hand Plato, his followers, and his critics; on the other hand Christianity arising out of Judaism and merging with Greek philosophy begun by Plato. Beneath these two foundations, however, there existed an undeveloped mass of native ideas about both the attitude and the ideal of love. Greek and Christian thinking changed the character of these ideas immensely. What in primitive religions had served to idealize the natural functions of man now became a means of transcending nature. Love turned into a supernatural device, and in Christianity it became the very essence of God. In the ancient and the medieval world philosophical idealizations were primarily transcendental" (*The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther, 42*). He also concludes, in the same volume, that "[w]ithout the notion of *agape*, Western thinking about love would not have advanced beyond Aristotle's modifications of Plato" (270).

[28] Love constitutes the subject of many other Ancient Greek texts such as Plato's dialogue *Lysis*, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where they extensively discuss the nature of love (and friendship, as far as Plato is concerned). In ancient Roman literature, Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote an essay *On Friendship* (*De Amicitia*) where he accounts for the warmth of intimate feelings and the loyalty that friends share. For more on the subject, see François Jullien's *Of Intimacy.*

[29] One of the many metaphors used in the *Symposium* to refer to the ideal of "oneness" in love is that proposed by Aristophanes, who claims that humans are originally eight-limbed beings split into four pairs by Zeus as a punishment, eternally doomed to seeking their other half or soulmate (189c-193e).

instances, eros is associated with the idea of lack and need or is "'the child of want'", as described by one of the characters of the *Symposium*. The experience of love is, here, tied to the individualistic pursuit of desire to surmount a state of need or lack and is mainly governed by the logic of means and ends (in Wilson 12). "Platonic eros", as John A. Brentlinger opines, "is the concept of love as motivated by the belief that the object of love is good or beautiful or valuable in some other way" (in Soble 139). The valorization of eros is not made in accordance with the beloved subject but instead with their association with the objects of beauty and goodness. In this sense, eros is fundamentally a form of "acquisitive love", a love triggered by a consciousness of a present lack and by its pursuit to make up for the imperfection (in Soble 89). This metaphysical view of love as the complementary union of two subjects "has permeated much of Christian and romantic philosophy" later on (Solomon 24).

Even though *agape* is predominantly seen as a strict antonym to eros, it should be noted that the distinction is not a simple one and that both notions interpenetrate in many ways. Yet, basic differentiations are made according to the nature of both forms of love. *Agape* has become a characteristic feature of Christian fellowship with God and consists of the latter's fatherly and supreme love to humans. This act of unbounded love which is initiated by Godly will is reciprocated by human beings, establishing a supernatural bond between divine and human. As Singer opines "[t]he concept of *agape* idealizes bestowal, and in Christianity it divinizes love" (*The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* 270). It could be said accordingly that eros functions according to a need for something or a want whereas *agape* occurs unconditionally and is "unmotivated" (in Soble 85). In other words, while eros is mainly associated with *lack*, *agape* is triggered by *gift* and is accordingly a form of selfless love. Further appropriated by Christian theology, the notion of *agape* was conflated with that of *eros* and dualism has been constructed in the understanding of both associating eros with the earthly, desirable, physical, and profane, and elevated *agape* to the spiritual, sacred and divine.

The concept of divine spiritual love is best expressed in St Augustine's Confessions where he equates *agape* to intimacy and explains the latter as "*higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self*" /"tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo" (Book III 110). In his philosophic-theological exploration of the self and its components, Augustine differentiates exteriority from interiority and relates the intimate to the interior and to faith in God, furthering an understanding of intimacy as interior, self-revelatory, and

imperceptible on the outside. By getting in touch with the "most interior" part of the self, which is God or the eternal and absolute Other, the self can penetrate the core of one's conscience. The breakthrough in Augustine's reflections is the thought of the subject not as *a being* but namely as a *being-in-relationship*. This relational nature of existence is primarily activated by an inward turn through which one discovers the nature and meaning of being human, while in the company of an eternal other -that is God. Here, the understanding of *agape* as selfless love has a religious connotation and is also directed towards an end which is the knowledge of the interiority of the self. François Jullien notes that the shift from God to the human as the other in the intimate relationship was introduced later, thanks to literary narratives, in the person of Madame de Warens in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) and in Madame de Chastellier in Stendhal's *Lucien Leuwen* (1973) (*De L'intime /Of Intimacy* 81, 85). What remains on guard in this shift is the act of opening "unto" the other as the innermost part which became an integral feature of the intimate and made the *Confessions* into a turning point.

Idealization of love

In medieval times, another conception of love as "amour Courtois" or "courtly love" developed from the convergence of elements of eros and *agape* and found its shape in classical Arabic love poetry, Minnesang, and love literature of the Italian Renaissance (Luhmann 48). Singer concurs that courtly love is, in fact, the humanization of Platonic and Christian love in the sense that it centers the object of love in the human nature

> Not God or the Good but other men and women became the object of devotion […] As with courtly love, the new idealizations were quite remote from primitive ideas about natural functions; they clearly showed the influence of Greek and Christian thinking; and yet they also continued the search for a human love -a love between human beings based upon the facts of human nature (*The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* 43).

The main "code" of the period is the idealization of the object of love. In the "perfection of the object of love", love was considered to inspire virtue and to alter the lover into a noble person, introducing the redemptive potential of love (Luhmann 48). The latter idealizes human desire as well as the objects capable of satisfying that desire, introducing the ideal of "great love" for the one and only beloved (44). This form of love has two major implications: the first is the view of sexual love as the material realization of the spiritual one. "Sexual love is thus performed through spiritual love", turning sexuality into a complementary action to attain the totality of love (49). Second, the idealization of love helped introduce suffering as an integral characteristic

of its experience, as love turns into a site of struggle between earthly excessive desires and rational behavior. The discourses of idealization of love legitimized the presence of desire between lovers and associated material or physical love with the spiritual ideal one.

From Idealization to mystification

In the seventeenth century, the notion of "*amour passion*" or "passionate love" took shape initially in France with the writings of Jean Racine, Molière, and De La Rochefoucauld (Luhmann 45; Giddens; Jullien; Singer). *Amour passion* is distinguished by its irrationality, by the weakness of reason in the face of love, and by the torrentiality of unreasonable emotions of the lovers. It "initiated the incorporation of sexuality into the code as an essential component of love" (Luhmann 45). Therefore, the main semantics and the utmost goal of love was "sexual enjoyment" or "sexual pleasure" (Luhmann 45, Giddens 39). In a highly structured society, this form of love was only possible among aristocratic groups and was mainly a bourgeois attribute acquired through gallantry and wealth because "[g]alant behaviour provides adaptive links both to intimacy as well as to sociability and can bridge differences in rank" (Luhmann 76). The major implication of *amour passion* is that it coded passion in passivity with "'passion' originally signifying a mental state in which one suffered passively instead of actively doing something" (Luhmann 60). The passivity of passion justified the actions made in its name and opened to the freedom of action in intimate relations. "Passion" therefore "became freedom of action and neither it nor its consequences needed to be justified; activity became disguised as passivity, freedom as compulsion" (60). This conception of *amour passion* has given rise to the ever-growing discourse of freedom of choice of partner and to the rhetoric of seduction in the late 17th century. Love has equally translated into a "communicative medium" between the lover and the beloved and its communication code has derived from the use of the "art of seduction and verbal forms of gallantry" (71).

The semantics of love associated with *amour passion* urged the submission of the beloved (namely female object) to the lover's needs (male subject), constituting love as a manly conquest of the female object of desire. Passion became caught between the two paradoxical poles of activity and passivity, suffering and pleasure, submission and control. It was, therefore, with its introduction that love has been, for the first time, introduced as a site of paradoxes, transforming accordingly the semantics of love from idealization to "paradoxical behavioral expectations" (61). The introduction of paradox to love in the seventeenth century originated

primarily from the intertwining of love and excess and from the belief that passion should remain unregulated by law or by society -not even by the social institution of marriage. Passion is thought of as uncontrollable and excessive, and the virtues of love were transferred into the beloved as the object of love who "in the lover's opinion [...] only has positive qualities" (64). Still, love and marriage were not associated together at the time as the code of "*amour passion*" remained "a socially fixed form" that seeks to "avoid marriage". Although passionate love detached the notion of love from the regulated marital relationship and associated it primarily with eroticism and seduction, it helped introduce these mystifying prequisites into the marital relationship later on (77).

Passionate love has also rendered the intimate experience temporal, bounded by a beginning and an end, thereby introducing the narrative malleability of the subject. Due to the impossibility of its permanence or durability, love is made into a theme to be treated in narrative and in the love story that is usually deemed to end at a given moment (76). The temporality hypothesis turns love into a self-referential process that embeds the presence and animation of a particular "code" at its beginning and end. "By laying claim to time," Luhmann comments, "love destroys itself. It dissolves the characteristics which had lent wings to the imagination and replaces it with familiarity" (73). This suggests that once love has turned into the subject of a narrative that is bound to temporal rules of beginning and end, it has become iteratively expressive of given underlying -social, personal, imaginary, and symbolic- codes.

Modernity and the Romanticization of Love

The industrial revolution in the eighteenth century and its massive social impact marked the transformation from feudalism to modernity. It furthered the separation between the workplace and home and the two-sex model division of work which was further consolidated during the nineteenth century. Feudal societies were mainly united by a common sense of relative stability where human lives were anchored around highly predictable intimate and social practices. The modern bourgeois subject lacks, on the contrary, this sense of stability and certainty and is instead fragmented into a variety of social roles. Consequently, the subject is no longer considered as a whole but mostly as incoherent. It could be said that this historical conception of selfhood has its own impact on the definition of the intimate bonds. The naturalization of the sexual division of labor with women doing domestic work while men monopolizing the workplace resulted in the invention of new domains of intimacy for each sex

such as motherhood or maternity for women (Giddens 52-4, Luhmann 160). This transformation had a major influence on the emergence of the form of "romantic love" and on the rise of an emotional moral order.

The eighteenth century furthered the romanticization of the subject and developed a dichotomy between the idyllic versus rational types of love. To account for such a claim, Anthony Giddens states that

> Romantic love which began to make its presence felt from the late eighteenth century onwards, drew upon such ideals and incorporated elements of *amour passion*, while nevertheless becoming distinct from both. Romantic love introduced the idea of *narrative* into an individual's life- a formula which radically extended the reflexivity of sublime love. The telling of a story is one of the meanings of 'romance', but the story now became individualised, inserting self and other into a personal narrative which had no particular reference to wider social processes. The rise of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel: the connection was one of newly discovered narrative form (Giddens 39–40).

The individualized narrative of romantic relationships encouraged the view of love in the light of a subjective conception of the world. The story of love should, in a way, enhance the personal experience of the world and the other and transcend the immediacy of the momentary through moral sentimentalism.

Likewise, the idea of romantic love furthered the belief in the individual and their own personalized story, as detached from all social processes as well as it justified for the self the pursuit of validation through the other (Giddens 50, 56, 58). This change has entrapped love in a self-referential frame, according to which it started to be considered as a virtue or an elevated moral order. The emphasis on feelings and their enjoyability made love a universal and uncontestable quest and justified the meanings of suffering and pain due to the unfulfillment of such quests. It is mainly at this time that marriage and love were associated for the first time and that the former has become "the task of repeatedly earning love", turning the marital relationship into an emotional project (Luhmann 14; 79-80; 117). Even though romantic love developed in modernity as an attempt to overcome the contradictions and paradoxes that pertain to individuality and intimacy, it has introduced further complications to the nature of intimate relationships, especially with the personalized narratives it helped establish.

The romanticization of love introduced another paradox to the concept by classifying love as irrational, sentimental, and individual and as opposed to the rationalizing powers of

society. In fact, the nineteenth century encouraged particular forms of love, constructing the latter as a collective utopia of self-fulfillment and individualism (Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 42–48). The triumph of romance as the dominant narrative of love is tightly related to the emergence of individualizing tendencies. In fact, "[r]omantic love accompanied the dawning of individualization among the bourgeoisie, and it became a dominant discourse only when individualization was widespread" (Shumway 19). The literary model of romantic love found its expression in fiction such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Henry James' The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), in which the use of confessional styles, highly emotional language, and intensely psychologized narration characterizes their representations of love. As projected in these texts, romantic love arrives with promises of authenticity, happiness, and as an escape from social responsibility and public pressure. Loaded with meanings of self-fulfillment and hope, love turned into a coveted personal pursuit that is constantly challenged by the social structures in which it develops. In fact, as sociologist Eva Illouz argues, romantic love transformed into "a cultural practice" in which "culture operates as a frame" (*Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 3). The functional transformation of society and the modernization processes have overburdened the romantic discourse as well as the romantic subjects by introducing new pursuits to them, that remain mostly unfulfilled. Incapable of realizing its promises in the daily life of individuals, love has become tightly associated with failure and impossibility which paved the way for the introduction of the compensatory and therapeutic forms into the narratives of love.

Late Modernity

In the postwar period and with the formation of the welfare state and the escalation of industrial and capitalist societies in the United States and Europe, the structure of the family has changed and with it the forms of expression as well as the codes of intimate bonding and writing. Marriage became the ultimate model for love and brought incredible shifts in the discourses of intimacy under capitalism (Singer, 1994; Illouz, 2007; Beck, 1990). The rise of leisure culture, the commercialization of entertainment, and the clamor for gender equality together prompted a rethinking of the domains of intimacy and marriage. The leisure industry, for instance, has associated romantic love with a range of symbolic practices and commodities from orchestrated romantic encounters to the mass consumption of romanticized objects and media iconography, including scented candles, heart-shaped gifts and red-tinted paraphernalia.

These marketable instruments of seduction are created differently for each gender polarizing the sexual asymmetries further and dividing the spheres of love (Illouz, *Consuming The Romantic Utopia* 25-6; 52-3; 74-5). To a significant degree, the love relationship draws its perceived value from the possession and display of such symbolic markers. At this historical moment, romantic love became intricately bound to the institution of marriage, which came to signify the culmination or triumph of love itself. The cultural symbols and representations circulating within this emergent discourse served to legitimize and perpetuate its idealized form. Drawing love as a promising individual pursuit for meaning and value, the capitalist economy has built into the concept meanings of realization and marketability. American philosopher Irving Singer explains this view in more details:

> Most of the twentieth century has been an awakening from idealistic attitudes induced by nineteenth-century romanticism and predicated upon the belief that human beings can find infinite sexual harmony through romantic love alone. That idea incorporates much that preceded it in the philosophy of love. Like religious dogma in the West, it treats love as an expression of divinity that appears in ordinary existence when life is fully realized and most consummatory. Like courtly love in the Middle Ages, it locates this all-resolving affect in the passionate oneness that a man and a women can achieve through intimacy with one another. In the modern world, romantic love was often thought to be the basis of married love as well as the love for whatever children issued forth […] Throughout its permutations, romanticism treated love between the sexes as a primary source of value and meaning (*Meaning in Life* 14).

The romanticization of love accounts for the burdening of the latter with notions of meaning-making and self-fulfillment. Besides, the entry of women into the labor market and their financial autonomy has altered their expectations from relationships. The marital bond has also become burdened with emotional mandates because "[b]ecoming less dependent financially, women were expecting emotional fulfillment from marriage rather than economic security" (Illouz, *Consuming The Romantic Utopia* 49). In addition, the advent of contraceptive methods in post-WWI has helped free sexuality from reproduction and introduced sexual pleasure as an enjoyable emotional experience (27-8). Together, they altered the view of the institution of marriage from a predominantly economic to an emotional one.

The growing feminist radical criticism of romantic love and the latter's power dynamics in the 1970s onwards were also regarded as threats to the institution of marriage and the prime reason for the increase of the divorce rate in the United States of America during the last few decades (Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 49). American writer and feminist activist Ti-

Grace Atkinson argues, for instance, that love is primarily "a special psycho-pathological state of fantasy" that creates "false consciousness" and delusional action (43). In *Sexual Politics,* Kate Millet writes that love is one of the "techniques of control" and that sexual relations are "charged microcosms" for the production of binary politics and social power (31). Moreover, Shulamith Firestone outlines the corruptive character and destructive potential of love when growing out of an *"unequal balance of power"* (130). She concludes that love -which is "essentially a much simpler phenomenon"- is obstructed and complicated by the sexual polarity that saturates it. To the question: "Do we want to get rid of love?" she explains that the fear that is implied in posing such a question emanates from the political significance of the subject of love. She further outlines that

> [t]he panic felt at any threat to love is a good clue to its political significance. Another sign that love is central to any analysis of women or sex psychology is its omission from culture itself, its relegation to "personal life." (And whoever heard of logic in the bedroom?) Yes, it is portrayed in novels, even metaphysics, but in them it is described, or better, recreated, not analyzed. Love has never been *understood*, though it may have been fully *experienced*, and that experience communicated. There is reason for this absence of analysis: *Women and Love are underpinnings. Examine them and you threaten the very structure of culture* (126 emphasis in original).

By implicating love in the personalized narrative of the self and by considering it the expression of individual subjectivity in fiction, the social and political significance of such an experience is undermined. This results in an "imitative narrative", as stated by Shulamith, which recreates a reiterative and ritualized story of love as progressive towards happiness and coherence and subsides its analytical and political potential. As a result, love as an ideal and its narratives are never questioned or doubted but mostly taken for granted. The feminist radicalism that describes this period has altered the conception of love as a personal emotion and has unveiled its political significance. The failure of the grand narratives of modernism and liberalism to address women's private concerns urged the second-wave feminists to tie their domestic oppression to the political and economic subjugation and to unveil the politicized nature of intimate practices.

While Giddens and Luhmann's arguments conclude at some point with the discourses of intimacy in the eighties, the present argument tries to further investigate how these historical framings work formally within postmillennial women's fictional narratives. In this brief historical charting of the "semantics" and etymological transformations of the meanings and usages of intimacy for over four centuries (from metaphysical time to modernity), the discourse

of intimacy proves to be tightly related to and to a large degree unthinkable without those of love and gender politics. In fact, each discourse emerges as dependent on older forms of intimate relationality, either building on -or rejecting them. While emphasizing continuously the interiority and privacy of these domains, their shifting conceptualization shows that they function primarily amid paradoxes and develop according to given social and economic contexts. From being a relation to God to becoming a relation to a human other, a sign of lack or a selfless gift, the reason for excessive behavior or erotic activity, an ideal end or a painful experience, intimacy has always occupied a threshold position playing between opposites.

1.1.3.2 Postmillennial Discourses of Intimacy

In more recent contemporary theories of the sociology of culture and cultural studies, works by sociologists Zygmunt Baumann, Anthony Giddens, Richard Sennett, Jeffery Weeks, Ulrich Beck, Eva Illouz, Lauren Berlant, and philosophers Allain Badiou, François Jullien and Byung-Chul Han have re-ignited a scholarly and critical interest in intimacy within the humanities and social sciences. Their works have meticulously probed into Western societies from the perspective of individuals' relationality and intersubjective identity, namely by approaching love and intimate relations. However, the question of the relation of love and intimacy to capitalism is not new to sociology. It has been approached from the sociological perspective -although not centrally- since the beginning of the discipline with classical sociologists like Durkheim, Max Weber, Marx and Engels[30]. In their accounts love is mainly seen as an individualizing experience that plays a role in the *moral* individuation of the person and has itself been mutually impacted by the advent of modernity. The recent scholarly investigations of the topic have all approached the question of love more directly and looked into the inscription of the economic and political in the intimate, explaining that in such a relation, intimacy is the site of numerous modern social concerns like patriarchal domination, gender inequality, narcissistic behavior, and individualizing tendencies. As a result, a wide range of new conceptual and theoretical frameworks that describe forms of intimacy have emerged out of their scholarships.

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[30] Marx and Engles explore the relation between marriage, love and interest (Engels in *The Origin of the Family*, 1884, with Karl Marx in *The Holy Family* 1845). Likewise, Durkheim studies singlehood in relation to suicide (*Suicide: A Study in Sociology* 1897) and Weber talks about the erotic sphere ("Intermediate Reflection"/"Zwischenbetrachtung" 1915).

Berlant's concept of "intimate public spheres", for instance, captures the social dimension of private intimacies and introduces the latter as the nexus of the private and political. She explains that intimate publics are "constituted by strangers who consume common texts and things", and that they are nested in and mass-mediated by cultural artefacts (Berlant, *The Female Complaint* viii). The ensemble of cultural texts produced for, and coded to, women have helped develop an elaborate imaginary of intimacy that ties women to a shared narrative of communal quest. This cultural repertoire which fuses ideology with everyday most intimate practices is what Berlant loosely refers to as "women's culture" (10). The latter stems primarily from a "sense of lateral identification" which "sees collective sociality routed in revelations of what is personal, regardless of how what is personal has itself been threaded through mediating institutions and social hierarchy" (10). The domains of intimacy are, accordingly, inextricable from the domains of politics and are the locus of women's sexual identity struggles.

In the United States, this "women's culture" is primarily recognizable through "the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot" (7). The centrality of emplotment to intimacy unveils the salience of shared intimate knowledge and experience among social groups. The sense of belonging develops from the identification with, or detachment from, these intimate publics. Berlant concisely identifies intimacy as follows

> To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, as about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. People consent to trust their desire for "a life" to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed with those frames will turn out beautifully, lasting over the long duration, perhaps across generations ("Intimacy" 281).

However, these individual aspirations are often met with disillusionment because they underrate the importance of the collective repertoire from which they pertain. In a way, practices of love construct and are constructed by "the intimate public sphere". In the same vein, Illouz coins the term "emotional capitalism" to refer to "a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (*Cold Intimacies* 5). While Berlant focuses on the workings of intimacy and its prime impact on gender politics and in the development of a

women's "ordinary feminine consciousness", Illouz's argument elaborates this view further to investigate the impact of economic models and technological advances on the domains of the intimate (Berlant, *The Female Complaint* 18).

A renowned sociologist of culture interested in the change of the practices and ideas of love and emotions, Eva Illouz argues in over twenty years of research that love and intimacy are social energies contingent on economic and technological imperatives. She contends that numerous cultural and political reasons heap into forbidding this widely-perceived-as-emotion from being individual and private. In *Cold Intimacies*, she argues that the meaning of intimacy has been radically transformed by three main factors: the rise of "*Homo Sentimentalis*" -that is the overburdening of all life domains with the language of psychoanalysis and over-sentimentalization; the feminist and sexual liberation movements together with liberal countercultural politics; and finally, the emergence of technologies of choice -most notably the internet. She further explains that

> emotional uncertainty in the realm of love, romance, and sex is the direct sociological effect of the ways in which the consumer market, therapeutic industry, and the technology of the internet have been assembled and embedded by the ideology of individual choice that has become the main cultural frame organizing personal freedom (Illouz, *The End of Love* 5)

It is part of the current argument that these three domains have unintendedly had a crucial impact not only on the daily practices and experiences of bonding but also on transforming the literary discourses of intimacy in postmillennial women's narratives. For this matter, the following section will elaborate further on these prominent factors.

Psychotherapeutic Discourses of Intimacy:

The therapeutic discourse sprung out of the development of psychology in the nineteenth century and has impacted the understanding and workings of intimate life tremendously. Therapeutic psychology summarized in pop psychology and self-help cultural practices (books, workshops, how-to manuals) has validated the idea that love and its failures must be explained by the psychic history of the individual, and that they are consequently within the purview of the person's control

> Although the original Freudian notion of the unconscious aimed at dissolving traditional authorial notions of responsibility, in practice, psychology played a crucial role in relegating the realm of the romantic and the erotic to the individual's private responsibility. Whether psychoanalysis and psychotherapy intended to or not, they have

> provided a formidable arsenal of techniques to make us the verbose but inescapable bearers of responsibility for our romantic miseries (Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* 4).

Illouz highlights the individualistic approach of psychology that implies the justification of all issues following the internal mental state of a particular individual (such as traumatic experiences, dreams, and childhood memories). The inward movement to the abyss of the self to disclose and solve all the problems of the subject undermines the social and cultural factors and limits everything to the individual, burdening them with the imperatives of self-responsibility and self-infliction. This implies that individuals are left on their own to face their destinies and that they are fully responsible for their own happiness or lack of it. The hyper-responsibilization of the individual in neoliberal culture burdens the latter by holding them accountable for any economic loss, personal non-fulfillment, or unsuccessful and easily breakable relationships. Following this logic, the individual becomes an economic machine enclosed in their quests to create successful versions of their ego and in ongoing trials for optimizing and maximizing themselves and their worth. This individualizing tendency results in the creation of loose forms of neoliberal solidarities, which remain ephemeral and chosen, mainly in the service of the self and not of the other. This individualist tenor and capitalist economic mandates of competitiveness and self-management have collaborated in creating individualizing drives toward personal autonomy, happiness, and progress.

The neoliberal values are mainly attainable by the process of self-examination, which presupposes the monitoring and control of one's emotions or what Illouz calls the "rationalization" and "intellectualization of intimate bonds" (*Cold Intimacies* 34). This process refers to the ability of the individual to describe their experiences and emotions in neutral scientific terms. In fact, the (psychological and neurological) scientific knowledge has developed "cognitive scripts" of emotionality and definite channels for their enactment, resulting in the construction of a form of reflexive emotion that Illouz calls "anticipatory emotions" or "emotions about emotions" (*Why Love Hurts* 206). These pre-mediated anticipatory emotions are key attributes in creating a desired personality and improving communicative skills. They become the substantial structural elements of any self-help manual or course, as well as the tools of self-management. According to Illouz, rationalized self-examination leads to the disintegration of intimate bonds and distance between individuals because

> remoteness derives from the fact that people share a standardized language, an abstract way of capturing and making sense of relationship. In other words, the fact that we increasingly have cultural techniques to standardize intimate relationships, to talk about them and manage them in a generalized way, weakens the capacity for closeness, the congruence between subjects and object, the possibility of fusion. When the relationship becomes increasingly generalized and intellectualized, love loses its unmediated character, and both the emotion and the object of love come to be interpreted in terms that are alien to the inner experience of the self (*Cold Intimacies* 149).

The growing discrepancy between what one really experiences and feels and the standardized tools at their disposal to express this experience has unintentionally helped enhance the distance and alienation between subjects. The emergence of a shared cultural repertoire and ritualized symbolism to refer to intimate bonds and intersubjectivities disregards the singularity of each intimate bond and encourages the categorization of emotions according to predefined structures of meaning. In this sense, the therapeutic discourse, which oversaturates the domain of intimacy, has become an invasive power that rationalizes and consequently individualizes intimate life.

Similarly, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim in *The Normal Chaos of Love* argue that an ever-growing quest for intimacy is furthered by the welfare state and the industrial capitalist market mandates yet at the same time and due to the same forces, this quest is ultimately undermined. The tension, here, evolves basically from the market and the state's "engineering" of the self into being independent, competitive, and protective of its own interest (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 36). Therefore, the individual is torn between an increasing need for "true" emotions and the constant accompanying self-managing dictates of being independent -a dilemma that the Becks refer to as the "normal chaos of love" (3). They further argue that intimate relationships are organized according to "choice biography" which enables the self to choose their own roles in life in relation to the needs and pre-given choices of the market (5). As a result of the market's incessant need for mobility, the growth of "inner homelessness" in modernity, and the erosion of traditional communities, they claim that intimacy is the only attribute that can free the self from the unending demands of the market and state and substitute the fading of tradition (6, 49, 46). Yet the Becks argue that intimacy -for the same reasons stated above- is unable to hold that promise and becomes more than ever an elusive exhausting quest.

In addition, they view that the normalcy of the chaos is mainly due to the entry of women into the labor force in industrial capitalism and their struggle for equality. Because of the pressure on gender equality, the private and daily domestic chores have become a site of

continuous self-measurability and competition for justice. Earlier in *Risk Societ*y, Ulrich Beck outlines this tension, arguing that "individualization, which separates the conditions of men and women, conversely also pushes them back to bonding. *As the traditions become progressively diluted,* the promises of relationships grow. Everything that has been lost is suddenly being sought in the other" (Beck 113, emphasis in original). This creates the illusion for the individual that the private intimate life is the only sphere that can be put under control in a highly uncontrollable social sphere. The main reason for this is that the individual is designed by the welfare state and the corporate market into planning their own lives while positioning themselves as the center of that plan, or what the Becks describe as the skill to reflexively stage and manage their biographies (40). This reflexive management of biographies creates tensions in the individual who becomes caught between the perpetual quest of seeking intimacy and bonding and the individualizing drive of managing the self. The background vocation that moves Beck's argument is that the warmth of intimacy is a value that gives the individual's existence a purpose and that, in this sense, love is a "new religion" or a new foundation of human existence. However, his view of intimacy's elusiveness in relation to market dynamics and the mandates of the welfare state is decidedly pessimistic, as he maintains that the "chaos of love" remains largely irresolvable.

Anthony Giddens shares this same belief in the value of intimacy, yet his approach to the subject in *The Transformation of Intimacy* is rather a positivist one, as he believes in the democratizing potential of intimacy.

Giddens aligns with the view that intimacy has a radicalizing social potential. Yet, he diverges from Beck in his view that the democratizing value of intimacy is attainable through what he terms the "pure relationship," which he explains as a relation of emotional and sexual equality (58). Contrary to "plastic sexuality," that is sexuality as untied and unburdened by the need for reproduction, which occurred due to the growth of contraception methods during the eighteenth century, pure relationship "is part of a generic restructuring of intimacy" (58). "The more sexuality became detached from reproduction and integrated within an emerging reflexive project of the self," Giddens opines, "the more this institutional system of repression came under tension" (178). Accordingly, sexual emancipation and the enlarged scope of choices have

transformed intimacy into a democratizing attribute.[31] However, this democratizing hypothesis is criticized by other scholars such as Laurent Berlant, Laura Kipnis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michel Warner, who all argue that everyday practices and intimate publics drain women further in forms of gender inequalities by examining the estrangement, betrayal, pressure, and even violence inflicted on them in intimate heterosexual relationships.

Within a heterosexual economy, the heteronormative forms of femininity saturate the practices and expectations of social relations and generate predefined plots and narratives of intimacy, resulting in the ostracization of alternative forms of relatedness. In fact, "desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them" (Berlant, "Intimacy" 285). The exclusionary view of intimacy and the absence of juridical and social institutions which sustain and regulate the alternative forms of intimate relationships reduce the domains of love to a shared collective heteronormative narrative and view non-normative forms of intimacy as a threat.

The threat of social and political destabilizations by intimate domestic practices unveils contemporary love relationships to be a contested site of fear and desire. Contemporary intimacies, in that sense, threaten the same structures and institutions that construct and regulate them (such as marriage, monogamy, and heterosexuality). The positivity usually accorded to love as a meaning-making and self-fulfilling experience is questioned and confronted with the negativity inherent in this practice. As far as women are concerned, for example, intimacy has constrained the experience of love to pre-established frames which work to subjugate them further. "The modern love plot," Berlant argues, "requires that, if you are a woman, you must at least entertain believing in love's capacity both to rescue you from your life and to give you a new one, a fantasy that romantic love's narratives constantly invest with beauty and Utopian power" (Berlant, *The Female Complaint* 171). This normative plot is consolidated by the discourses and theories of feminism, which initially aim at destabilizing it.

Feminism and the Individualization of Intimacy

[31] Giddens' view is shared by Jeffrey Weeks who in *The World we Have Won* (2007) tracks the transformation of intimate and erotic life since 1945 and argues that feminism, same sex marriages, the sexual revolution and the countercultural movements have led to a more democratized and egalitarian form of intimacy and that the internet has enmeshed "a new form of intimacy where anything seems possible, with fewer of the risks than traditional forms of contact" (Weeks 159). While I consider Weeks's argument outdated, I refer to it in this context to show the vehement sociological interest during the postwar period in intimate relationships.

Feminism, particularly the early work of French theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous, initially drew on psychoanalysis and the study of sexuality as "the battleground for the politics of emancipation" (*Cold intimacies* 14). Contemporary feminists such as Judith Butler, however, have since become increasingly critical of Freudian psychoanalytic theory for its essentialization of femininity and its tendency to isolate the individual's psychic life from broader cultural and social structures. Feminist critique has, in this sense, consistently negotiated the boundaries between the personal and the political, challenging the division that traditionally separated inner experience from collective conditions. Yet, paradoxically, feminist discourses -like psychotherapeutic ones- have contributed to the rationalization of intimacy by deploying similar tools of self-analysis, self-scrutiny, and emotional management. As Illouz notes that

> [w]omen have been enjoined both by feminism and by therapy to clarify their values and preferences and to build relationships that conform to and suit those values, all with the goal of asserting an autonomous and self-reliant self. This process can take place only when women carefully take themselves as objects of scrutiny, control their emotions, assess choices, and choose their preferred course of action (*Saving the Modern Soul* 137–38).

In their pursuit of liberation, women often find themselves under the constant pressure of self-management. This pressure emerges from the ideal of equality itself -the demand to democratize domestic life, redistribute chores, and measure fairness through comparison. Such practices, while emancipatory in intention, promote a new regime of emotional control and self-monitoring.

To gain autonomy, women are encouraged to rationalize and discipline their emotions, a process that ultimately threatens the spontaneity and warmth of intimacy. As a result,

> [t]he feminist and therapeutic persuasions produced new emotional practices, entailing new ways of attending to emotions and new ways of using cultural categories and discourses to classify emotions, label them, explain them, and transform them. To put this differently: feminism and therapy conjoined have been part and parcel of a vast process of disciplining the emotions inside the private sphere (Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul* 102–03).

In their aim for egalitarian social relations, feminist theories have thus -often unintentionally- encouraged the rationalization of affect and the spread of economic logics of measurability and optimization into the private sphere. The result is the emergence of a self torn between the desire

for connection and the fear of dependence: an individual whose pursuit of freedom paradoxically undermines the conditions of intimacy. In attempting to liberate love and domestic life from the constraints of patriarchal marriage, feminism inadvertently reproduces the same managerial rationality it sought to resist -transforming intimacy into a site of perpetual self-examination, emotional quantification, and calculated negotiation.

Technologies of Choice and Social Alienation: The Other-Directedness of Contemporary Society

To answer the question of why intimacy is short-lived and relations are doomed to end in disarray, Illouz argues that the economics of emotions, which reveal the implication of the economic models in the creation of new forms of emotional and intimate self-organization and representations, are one of the main reasons. The transformation in intimacy in modern times is highly intertwined with the capitalist economic structures and markets which inform our notions of freedom; choice; and love, making emotions into individualized; economized; and institutionalized attributes. These economies are shaped by the growing conceptual ideals of free will and choice. In *Why Love Hurts*, Illouz contends that

> psychology, Internet technology, and the logic of capitalist market applied to mate selection have contributed to create a cultural personality which has considerably refined and multiplied its tastes and capacity for discernment and choice […] A hypercognized, rational method of selecting a mate goes hand in hand with the cultural expectation that love provides authentic, unmediated emotional and sexual experiences (180).

In this respect, the choice of the loving subject seems to be mostly guided by the mechanism or grammar of freedom of choice. To choose to begin or even end a relationship is a decision emanating from one's own will and aiming at liberating the self from the pressures and uneasiness of the institutionalized relationship. The presence of choice -or better say its overabundance in contemporary society- transforms the idea of commitment and long-lasting bonds into a volatile one, partially explaining the fleeting nature of intimacy and the breakable nature of marriages.

Illouz further elucidates that the centrality of choice in the economization of intimacy and social structures is the outcome of the "technologies of choice", "the architecture of choice", and "the negative choice" (22, 19). It is self-evident to start with the definition of choice here to understand the changing rationale of intimacy and relationships in contemporary western societies. While choice is unavoidably accompanied by risk and

uncertainty, it has inevitably become the integral expression of freedom and free will in neoliberal societies. To choose is to execute a form of one's free will and to express one's desires and preferences, while knowing that the decision brings with itself potential risks and uncertainties. Likewise, choice is one of the routes to understanding how the market economy informs the emotional and cognitive processes that are at work while performing a personal decision. As Illouz asserts, "[c]hoice is the defining cultural hallmark of modernity because […] it embodies the exercise not only of freedom but also of two faculties that justify the exercise of freedom, namely rationality and autonomy" (*Why Love Hurts* 19). The subjective experience of choice -whether it is a choice of a consumer object, partner, or relationship- becomes accordingly the organizing principle of the self and their will. Freedom transforms into a measuring entity according to which the ability of choosing widens in accordance with the increasing circle of choices. Being the prime advocates of the freedom of choice[32], liberal societies are accordingly structured as sites of possibilities from which the individual is permitted to choose, at their own risks.

The marketed ideal of choice along with the overabundance of the technologies of choice has become the "[in-]visible shapers" of intimacy and social bonds and has contributed to making "the freedom of choice" an economic marketable concept that cultivates on the capitalist economies as well as liberal political policies (14). This form of freedom is what philosopher Günther Anders in his "The Pathology of Freedom" refers two as a contingent and paradoxical form of freedom that fuses feelings of freedom with acts of non-freedom and what Illouz defines as negative freedom, that is "a freedom in which the self affirms itself by negating or ignoring others" *The End of Love* 20). This self-affirmation through the negation

[32] However, this choice -whether it is emotional, sexual, or economic- is "the chief trope under which the self and the will in the liberal polities are organized [...] Choice is the trope of selfhood linking freedom to the economic and emotional realms; it is the main modality of subjectivity in the consumer and sexual realms" (16). The "architecture of choice"[32] refers to the mechanisms that are internal to the subject in the process of choosing yet at the same time shaped by culture in the process of deciding. In other words, when it comes to making decisions, the individual has recourse to historically and culturally variable emotional as well as cognitive processes which help them compare, self-consult, and settle (20). The introspection of the grammar of choice remains, therefore, a historical variable subject to the context of the individual and not an attribute of their inner being. In the same volume, Illouz differentiates between the "architecture of choice" and "technologies of choice", defining the latter as the overabundance of possibilities permitted by technology and the use of the internet like online dating, Tinder meetings, internet sites and the ability to choose filters and assessment tools to find a potential (sexual or/ and romantic) partners (17). These technologies construct choice as a matter of algorithmic calculation and not as the expression of free will.

of the other results in the creation of loosely-related communities and in the prevalence of states of loneliness and social alienations. Due to the self-centeredness of the desire for intimacy, the latter becomes an individualizing rather than a uniting quest, creating what German sociologist David Riesman calls "lonely crowds"- that is individuals sharing the same normative narrative of relationality, yet each absorbed by their own realization of its plot. The result is the emergence of a multitude of volatile intimate relationships that alienate subjects instead of bringing them together.

In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman examines the new American middle-class in the 1950s and develops a theory of social character. Interestingly, he concludes that the identity and behavior of the individual are, in general, shaped by their intimate relationships. With the advance of capitalism, American social character's socializing roles transformed from inner-directedness to other-directedness marking a shift from industrialism and production to the market and mass society consumerism. Drawing the lines of convergence between the social and the personal, he concludes that the social traits of a given society are marked by the character of its subjects. Social character refers to the sets of experiences shared among a given social group and defined as "the more or less permanent socially and historically conditioned organization of an individual's drives and satisfactions -the kind of 'set' with which he [the subject] approaches the world and people" (Riesman 4). As a consequence, the individual's intimate bonds are not arbitrarily nor autonomously constructed but rather inevitably bound to social and cultural mandates showing that "the satisfaction of the largest 'needs' of society is prepared, in some half-mysterious way, by its most intimate practices" (5). Riesman refers to the social character of modern American society as the "other-directed" ideal type[33] which "develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the

[33] In his analysis, Riesman tracks the demographic shifts that took place in Western societies since the Middle Ages. He remarks that each demographic phase "appears to be occupied by a society that enforces conformity and molds social character in a definably different way" (8). Following this line of thought, he discerns three "ideal types" of character and society: first, the "tradition-directed" society which is characterized by a high growth potential and "develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to follow tradition" (8). This type of society is dependent on pre-established customs and traditions and driven by "shame" as its primary disciplining emotion and is, in that sense, threatened by ostracism and exile that enforce traditional action. The second character is the "inner-directed society's which is a "society of transitional population growth develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to acquire early in life an internalized set of goals" (8). Guilt, or the fear that one's behavior is not commensurate with the 'imago' within is the prime feeling that results from the unconformity of the inner-directed personality. It is self-evident that these are only ideal types mainly related to middle-class American society and do not aim at making an over-generalized claim about society as "no nation is one of a piece" (9).

expectations and preferences of others" (8). "Contagious, highly diffuse" anxiety becomes the defining character of contemporary society and results in the ascending sense of insecurity and the disintegration of social institutions and bodies. Riesman accords this third social trait to contemporary American society, which is fraught with anxieties, uncertaintie,s and fears from all kinds of threats- be they political, ecological, personal, interpersonal, or economic.

One of the major findings of Riesman's study is that the social characterological traits are revelatory of the historical and social organization of individual personal character. By concluding that contemporary society is chiefly "other-directed", he sustains the view that individual's identities emerge from the social structures which they seem to refute or try to surpass. The other-directed person is oriented by "radar" in contrast to the inner-directed person who is mainly oriented by an internal "gyroscope", implying that the inner-directed person consults the internalized voices of a mostly dead lineage, while their other-directed counterpart heeds the external voices of their living contemporaries. The latter, accordingly, searches for acceptance and approval in others, unlike the inner-directed person who is "somewhat less concerned [...] with continuously obtaining from contemporaries (or their stand-ins: the mass media) a flow of guidance, expectation, and approbation" (9). In that respect, the other-directed person is soaked in and shaped by the cultural discourses and common narratives that regulate their relations in society. The constant pursuit of approval and recognition has brought intimate relations to vogue and centralized the pursuit of intimacy in modern other-directed societies.

Making intimacy into a constant quest for approval does not deny the existence of this form of relationality nor suggest the end of social attachments but rather suggests the overburdening of the individual and contemporary discourses with new forms of intimacy. As Riesman concludes, consumer technology does not necessarily alienate or separate people from one another. Even though the forms of sociability are different and mostly superficial, they still exist in abundance. In fact, other-directed people are "at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with and response to everyone"; they establish bonds quickly or "liquidly" -to use Zygmunt Baumann's terminology-, but not deeply, ordaining the "crowd" to be, and to remain, "lonely" (25). By delineating these varieties of social characters, what remains of importance to the present study and to the analysis of intimacy in a contemporary social context is that the transformation of personal traits is reflective of changes in the "technologies of choices" and the conceptualization of freedom. The shifts in the social

forms of relationality emerge from the changes in the development of identities and in the view of the other as a threat or a need to one's state of being. While Riesman's hypothetical categories do not attain the category of scientific empirical and analytical evidence, they serve in literary studies in showing the impact of social character on various forms of intimate relationality.

To summarize, it may be said that psychology, feminism, and the overabundant technologies of choice have altogether played a prominent role in transforming contemporary experiences of intimacy. They help infiltrate individualizing actors and postulate personal autonomy and personal needs over self-sacrifice by rationalizing intimate relationships, and -as a result of individualizing and rationalizing- eroding the other and amplifying the distance that separates individuals from each other. Therefore, intimacy becomes a "cold" in-between space, where individuals form bonds only to serve their personal endeavors and protect their autonomy and independence. They analyze and measure their relationships with others and, as a result, live in remote togetherness with rationalized over-abundant affective language to structure feelings and bonds. This claim characterizes intimacy as one of the main reasons "why love hurts" and becomes eventually the source of anxiety and uncertainty. While Illouz's argument about intimacy crosses in many ways with Riesman and Luhmann's arguments, it further grounds it in the rapidly-changing cultural context of the digital age and technological breakthroughs. To conclude, here, the diverse theoretical examinations of the social and political functions and transformations of intimacy form the basis for the analysis set forth in this dissertation. Whereas these scholarly accounts provide a lens into the nature of love and intimacy in late capitalist and neoliberal American society, the major focus of the present argument is to show how these interrogations work formally within literary texts.

1.2 Narratives of *Being-With*: Towards a Concept of Literary Intimacy

The ascending interest in intimate matters in recent fiction finds its expression in a re-gained faith in fiction's ability to connect and explore forms of *being-with* in the world. Critical literary investigations such as Nicoline Timmer's *Do You Feel it Too?* (2010), Mary Holland's *Succeeding Postmodernism* (2013) and *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* (2020), and Bieber Lake's *Prophets of the Posthuman* (2013) made it clear that the postmodern conceptions of selfhood have entangled the representation of subjectivities in problems of signification and in linguistic self-referentiality. In a way, it resulted in a representation of the self as alienated and incapable of going beyond language's incapacitating potential to communicate meanings or to

communicate and connect at all. The growing solipsism around language as a medium of representation and connection between human beings has resulted in a growing skepticism of the subject's abilities to represent their own subjectivities and feelings. Looking into what she calls the "post-postmodern syndrome" in postmillennial fiction, Nicoline Timmer investigates the paradoxical essence of the contemporary aesthetics of expressing feelings using inexpressive interpretive tools

> The problem of 'it hurts, I can't feel anything' has to do with the fact that the selves in these novels find it difficult to appropriate feelings, while feeling them nevertheless. This confusion about where to situate feelings points [...] to insecurities about what exactly are the limits of the self, or to the question of how to delimit the self. Ideas about what is private and 'inner' versus what is public and 'outside' or 'other' appear to be changing (303).

A new sense of the self becomes accordingly manifest in postmillennial novels, which seeks to go beyond the postmodernist cul-de-sac in the representation of subjectivities and to embrace the discursivity and intersection of interiorities and publicness. Probing into new forms of intimate relations that are congruous with the formal and linguistic limitations, these aesthetic projects take the subject from its familiar bounds of the private, unspoken, and confessional to widen the scope of its understanding as a site of paradoxes. In so doing, they try to reframe the normative approaches to the subject of love and intimacy, not to say eradicate them altogether. While Niklas Luhmann, towards the end of his study, concludes dubiously that "one even has to wonder whether and how the topic can be treated in literature", the dissertation argues that literature can contribute to, as it enhances, the understanding of human relationships in contemporary protean societies (159). Additionally, even though he views that "the differences between the sexes- which were emphasized in all love codes in the past, and around which asymmetries were constructed and enhanced- are toned down", the subsequent analysis of women narratives aims to show that the gender polarities are still lively in play (160).

Numerous post-2000 fictional narratives written by writers who identify themselves as women have shown the capacity of fiction in reflecting upon the above-described paradoxes. Narratives such as Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), Zadie Smith's *Swing Times* (2016), Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013), Sheila Heti's *How Should A Person Be?* (2012), Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Adult Onset* (2014), Lauren Groff's *Fate and Furies* (2015), and Vendela Vida's *The Diver's Clothes Lie Empty* (2015) to cite just a few, gesture towards -albeit differently- the socially institutionalized and culturally framed forms of intimate relationships.

Highlighting the blurry line between feminist politics and women's literature, these texts foreground conceptions of intimacy that mirror and prefigure social practices and sexual politics, showing that literary intimacy is at the heart of the political and public debate.

While *Adult Onset* focuses on another alternative female experience of lesbianism, it focalizes -similarly to the other narratives- the transformative and transgressive capacity of literary intimacies in illuminating the real struggles of relationality in contemporary contexts. Telling the story and the struggle of Mary Rose MacKinnon, who "approached heterosexuality rather like math: she worked at it until she achieved a C, then felt justified in dropping it", the narrative delves into the consciousness and traumatic experience of a lesbian wife. Resisting the comfort and comprehensibility of a progressive narrative, the thir-person narration complicates the protagonist's childhood memories and coming-out story by juxtaposing her own voice with her mother's. Under the surface of her ideal life as a successful writer with two toddlers and a stable same-sex marriage, Mary Rose struggles with the apparently neurological problems of amnesia. Her memories of the past are revealed through an agitated and fragmentary consciousness which echoes the fragmentary structure of the narrative, generating disorientation in the readers. The narrative tells the story of one week in the life of Mary Rose, following her while running her daily errands and caring for her toddlers. Throughout this week, unfinished domestic chores fuse with unfinished sentences resonating with the disruptive tendencies of everyday life, which take the form of interjections such as "the cursor blinks", "[t]he phone rings. A long distance ring", "Ring-ring!" (MacDonald 13, 16). These intrusive daily interferences interrupt not only the protagonist but the reader as well, who is held at a distance by the narratorial mediation of an unsettled and fragmentary free indirect narration.

In fact, Ann-Marie MacDonald tells the story of an unlikely likable character and makes the relatability with her a struggling task. Capturing the rage and agitation of the protagonist who "[i]f she met herself now, she would not want to be her friend", MacDonald questions the potential of self-disclosure to establish close bonds and to redeem fragmented selves as well as incoherent sexual and individual identities. Her conclusion is that acts of remembering and telling are not redemptive but are the nexus of the conflictual questioning of the reliability of memories and narratives. In that respect, the narrative does not aim at distancing nor at approximating the reader but emerges from a belief in the normality of conflictual sexual and

political identities and from the paradoxical nature of human intimacy. The paradoxes become the narrative's own aesthetic so there are no attempts at resolving them.

Similar to Mac Donald's narrative, the works of fiction stated above converge in their use of narratorial distance through their choice of interruptive first-person narrative, third person narration, and free indirect styles. In fact, they position relationality amid the ambivalence between closeness and distance and refute the idea that intimacy is only generated by the rhetoric of proximity and identification. Different from the postmodernist deployment of distance through the techniques of irony and parody, these texts deploy distance to uncover the contradictions of contemporary hyperconnectivity and mass-mediated forms of bonding, according to which there is an abundance of relationships but no "real" intimacy. These texts maintain the belief that the view of intimacy as an ideal to be harbored by the individual in order to establish meaning in their lives burdens intimacy with unfulfilled and impermeant expectations and promises. In their use of distance, these narratives attempt to "un-make" the burden that constructs intimacy as a meaning-maker, a risk-free space of encounter, a valuable experience, and a life-determining force that grants the complementarity of the individual. If anything, they converge in revealing that intimacy is, similarly to its narrative, haunted by insecurities, impermanence, paradoxes, and instability. Unpacking these paradoxes, these texts do not stop at the question of the forms and ways of *being-with* in the world, but they go further to assert that the understanding of the nature of relationality is tightly related to the long-ignored question of the responsibility towards the other that is characteristic of any act of bonding.

1.2.1 The Aesthetics and Ethics of Contemporary Literary Intimacy

In Katie Kitamura's *A Separation* (2017), the narrator- a first-person translator in her mid-thirties- goes on a trip to Greece to look for Christopher, her missing husband. As a matter of fact, the couple was separated for almost six months because of the husband's numerous infidelities, yet they kept their story of separation secret, adhering to the latter's request. Worried about the absence of her son and ignorant of their separation, Christopher's mother buys his wife a flight ticket from London to Greece to catch her son on his trip and to assuage her fears about his disappearance. Trying to keep the secret of separation, the narrator decides to go on the trip and seize the opportunity to confront her husband and ask for the legal termination of the marriage. Arriving at a village in the deep south of Greece, she learns about her husband's suspicious death and the investigation conducted into that matter. Far from being a detective

crime fiction and emptied from the elements of suspense; eventfulness; or twists of the detective plot, *A Separation* transforms into an extended meditation by the anonymous narrator on the nature of marriage and intimacy, realizing that "there were forms of intimacy that looked nothing like the name -but it was nonetheless a marriage" (Kitamura 214). Bewildered by how little she has known her husband during their eight years of marriage, the narrator finds in the latter's absence a way to reflect on their intimate relationship and marital bonds in general.

Following the protagonist's long interior monologue, several speculations and revelations take place. In a passage where she contemplates a newly-wed couple celebrating their honeymoon in the hotel, numerous questions arise and complicate the familiarity of the conventional romantic story for her as well as for her readers

> almost everything around was dark, while up above the embracing couple was brilliantly illuminated, as if they *were standing on a stage*. There was nothing elegant or even erotic in the sight of them, their passion was *grotesque*. They continued grinding up against each other *with animal passion*, it was clear that however much of *a performance they made of their desire for each other*, *it was nonetheless the real thing*. It was the real thing and yet I was certain they were aware of how *dramatically* the light fell on them, how the balcony was *framed* against the night. Having paid a premium for the suite, for this hotel, so evidently *designed for romance*, they would have been aware of its *theatrical possibilities*. *Every romance requires a backdrop and an audience*, even- or perhaps especially- the genuine ones, romance is not something that a couple can be expected to conjure by themselves, you and another, the two of you together, not just once but again and again, *love, in general, is fortified by its context*, nourished by *the gaze* of others (34-5 emphasis added).

Performance stands out in the passage as the main marker of the intimate relationship between the couple. The newlywed become actors in this scene and their expression of love turns into a dramatic act enhanced by lightning, props, and the presence of an audience. The intimate relation is, therefore, not located in the space between the self and the other but is an act energized and enhanced by the presence of an audience and by the existence of discourses and social practices that regulate and predefine this experience. In another sense, what the couple refers to as real is performed and mediated by the discourses and social practices that are associated with intimacy and romance. In fact, the aporetic constellation of intimacy as an unmediated expression of individuals' feelings emerges from the conventionalized representation of love as an unequivocal emotion. The conflict between reality and artistic performance or between "real" feelings and their aesthetic representation is highlighted in this passage, showing that intimacy is performed and not "authentically" experienced. As Illouz contends, "never has the private self been so

publicly performed and harnessed to the discourses and values of the economic and political spheres" (*Cold Intimacies* 4). The cited example could also be read as a meta-poetical statement for the writing of intimacy in contemporary realist fiction, self-consciously questioning how the artistic depiction of such a conflictual and mediated social practice can reveal the real practices and forms of intimate bonds.

Kitamura's short passage summons some of the questions that the current study engages with. It hints at a new direction in the fictional discourses of intimacy whereby the use of interior monologue does not reveal the emotions and inner thoughts of the narrator or the characters as much as it denotes levels of complexities in the depiction of spheres and acts of intimacy. Three main points are made about the aesthetic representation of intimacy in this concern: **1)** the use of a rhetoric of distance and the absence of sentimental language in the expression of emotions in the interior monologue, **2)** the centering of the story of heterosexual marriage amid the problematic thresholds of reality and pretense, and **3)** along the lines of the private and public.

1.2.1.1 The Rhetoric of Distance

The literary primary texts of this study share their use of free indirect style and interior monologue techniques as narrative strategies that allow the examination of the discursive workings of *being-with*. The employment of such narrative devices does not permit the reader to venture into the depth of the characters' consciousness, yet it criticizes the taken-for-grantedness of feelings and the conflictual and even chaotic nature of *being with-ness*. In *A Separation*, the character's struggles, which unveil through the interior monologues, emanate from the inherently contradictory nature of intimacy -as a practice and as an ideal- and from the former's relational identity and not from her own growth within the narrative. This paradox is the outcome of the intersections of other forms in the organization and the structuring of intimate experiences.

The camouflaging of this contingency in literature and the treatment of intimacy as a personal matter of the heart is full of risks and conducive to disintegration. Therefore, contemporary women writers agree on the premise that the discourses of literary intimacy should be reconsidered, re-written-, and re-explored from other vantage points (instead of the lens of an all-knowing over-empowered narrator who inhabits the mind of their characters and encourages identification and sympathy). Instead, distance permits the understanding of how structured and unnatural our love relations are. In the prose of Kitamura, for instance, the absence of sentimental language, the distance and passivity of the first-person narrator, and the plotlessness

of the narrative all normally enhance the detachment on the part of the reader. Yet, it is actually due to the same factors that the narrative calls for a different type of attachment that resists sympathy and identification and emerges instead from the exploratory attempt of the narrator to re-think intimacy as a way of world-making beyond the prescribed fantasies and idealism. Because intimacies are everywhere, to be related to others through the channels of illusions and performances could only be a cause of alarm.

Accordingly, these texts use complex rhetoric of distance based on empathy as a paradoxical rhetorical strategy and combines affective and cognitive dimensions. It allows the co-creative imaginative processes of the exploration and knowledge of the consciousness and thoughts of the other as it intersects with outside forces without implicating the self in the narrative. Amy Coplan defines empathy as "a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (40). While the complexity stems from the fusion of affective and cognitive processes in empathy, the simulation necessitates that the reader imagines the other's (namely the characters) experiences and consciousness without reverting to their own experiences. This other-oriented perspective encourages the reader to go beyond the constraints of self-centered experiences, resist the projection of one's own affective experiences on the text, and focus on the other as such and their own imaginary experiences. The highlighting of the distance between the (real) self and the (imaginary) other, in that sense, does not entail the absence of an affective response but establishes a new form of connection between both poles that attends to the understanding of the difference between the self and the other and between the impossibility of a merger. In that respect, empathy needs to be differentiated from sympathy.

While numerous approaches tend to conflate both concepts (Eisenberg[34] 1991, Hein and Singer[35] 2008), the various emotional implications of both acts call for them to be theorized distinctly. While empathy tends to cause similar feelings to the self as experienced by the other, sympathy entails a different emotion, such as concern for the other, pity, or shock. The difference becomes, accordingly, one of *feeling with* the other and *feeling for* them[36]. The

[34] Eisenberg defines sympathy as "a vicarious emotional reaction based on the apprehension of another's emotional state or situation, which involves feelings of sorrow or concern for the other" (Eisenberg et al. 65).

[35] Hein and Singer distinguish empathy respectively and sympathy as "feeling as and feeling for the other" (157).

[36] This point will be further explained in the fourth chapter of the dissertation.

analysis chapters argue that the narrative empathy used in the texts simulates the conflictual feelings of disorientation and uncertainty about intimate relationships and the accompanying need for the other. This approach does not suggest distance from the other as much as it gestures towards a different form of connection that embraces paradoxicality and differences -rather than similarities- between the self and the other as its main aesthetics.

The narrative techniques and strategies used to induce an empathetic understandable response in readers include the

> manipulations of narrative situation to channel perspective or person of the narration and representation of fictional characters' consciousness (Schneider 2001), point of view (Andringa et al. 2001), and paratexts of fictionality (Keen 2007: 88–89). Other elements thought to be involved in readers' empathy include vivid use of settings and traversing of boundaries (Friedman 1998), metalepsis, serial repetition of narratives set in a stable storyworld (Warhol 2003), lengthiness (Nussbaum 1990), encouraging immersion or transportation of readers (Nell 1988), generic conventions (Jameson 1981), metanarrative interjections (Fludernik 2003; Nünning 2001, 2004), and devices such as foregrounding (Miall 1989), disorder, or defamiliarization that slow reading pace (Zillman 1991).(Keen 524)

The presence, however, of such narrative strategies does not necessarily simulate empathic experiences. For instance, the "manipulations of narrative situation to channel perspective or person of the narration and representation of fictional characters' consciousness" can entail a contradictory effect and encourage critical detachment. While the use of the stream of consciousness techniques in modernist literature calls for the identification with the protagonist by the centralization of an individual fictional character who is recognizable to the reader, this act is overtly denounced in the texts under study. An act of imagination activation, identification presupposes that the reader acquires feelings of sympathy because they can relate to the context of the character. This relatability feeds mainly from repetition, closeness to reality, and recognizability of the experience or struggles of the character, presupposing a sense of familiarity with the context of the narrative and/or the emotions triggered by the narration.

However, in the example stated above and in the works selected for thorough analysis afterward, the identification process is self-consciously suspended for the sake of a new form of responsiveness based on non-familiarity. This difference stems from the re-exploration of intimacy not as an emotion or as a sharing of feelings but as the in-between space of encounter that defies familiarity, repetition, and preset codes of expression and expectations. Being with someone does not uniquely mean *feeling with* someone that is sharing affect and emotional

closeness; *being-with* implies going beyond the space of the self and the "I" to inhabit the in-between space of meeting with the other. Forging intimacies, in that sense, does not entail being oriented in the same direction as the other nor sharing their emotions and feelings. It rather finds its expression in the process of going beyond the self and opening *unto* the different other- to use François Jullien's terminology- that is accepting the other in their otherness, difference, and singularity ("François Jullien: Interview").

Despite being bound to failure and suffering in fictional and media representation, the prevalence of romantic narratives of love in cultural and literary contexts has contributed to making love a coveted experience, continuously longed for and inexplicably pursued by individuals. Love in fictional narratives works according to a logic of repetition that creates symbols, genres, and forms, transforming intimacy into a complex repository of (personal and collective) expectations, affect promises, and behaviors. Postmillennial literary intimacies, however, resist being constrained to a set of familiar symbolic codes because their logic defies repetition and closedness. These works try to go beyond these symbolic codes, surpass them by exposing their contradictions and strive for aesthetically re-engaging with questions of intimate relationality amid the intersecting discourses of feminism and post-postmodernism. Advocating a belief in the singularity and uniqueness of each intimate encounter, they argue that *to be intimate* is to be capable of going beyond the self and being *with* the other regardless of their strangeness, non-recognizability, and non-sameness, resulting in the creation of new forms and possibilities of relationality.

Going beyond centuries of romanticized narratives of intimacy and love in heterosexual marriages, these texts ask what it means to be intimate with someone in a growingly insecure world and experiment with various forms of relationality and writing about them. This distance has many implications on the readerly aesthetic response as it self-consciously violates the mandate of sympathy and identification. The play on the reader's expectations challenges their imaginative processes of relating to the text as a fictional world and a physical body and blocking the identification process. The challenge becomes to empathize with the other who is different and unfamiliar and unrecognizable as well as to affect and be affected by this challenge, as Jennifer Cooke states, "the more imaginative challenge is cultivating empathy for the other who is different" ("The Violations of Empathy" 156).

The socially institutionalized forms of intimacy that unfold in the trope of heterosexual marriage in these case studies are therefore portrayed as limiting and contradictory to the possibilities of co-creative forms of relationality because they are inscribed in a set of social and cultural mandates that imbue them with a limiting iterative character. To go back to the example of *A Separation*, the narrator is hit by the revelation that while Christopher's absence along the narrative and in her life resulted in a life empty of any sign of intimacy- a life of perpetual sexual meaningless affairs and infidelities- intimacy could be a possibility at the moment of his death offered by the complete stranger who bestows him the gift of death,

> but we do know, if we dare to imagine that those final moments will have been intimate, even if the precise nature of that intimacy diverges from what we think of when we hear and use the word- the arm thrown around the neck, the hand resting on the shoulder, the lips against the ear and the whispered words. This will have been no tender embrace between loved ones but it will have been *intimate* nonetheless, the contact between the two men being of the most definite and significant kind, against which all erotic touch fades, including my own, including that of all others (Kitamura 224–25 emphasis added)

The divergent form of intimacy that Kitamura draws is asexual, violent, nonfamiliar, and even shocking. It paints death as a gift -not only to her husband who spends most of his marriage years absorbed by his own erotic adventures- but also to the protagonist who is a prisoner to heteronormative forms of intimacy. This death launches her in a long investigation of the meanings of marriage and love and brings her to the conclusion that her understanding of intimacy is culturally and socially predefined.

While shocking at first, the narrator's attempt at redefining intimacy and emptying it from the conventional romanticized symbolic images is interestingly revelatory. Intimacy, in this instance, becomes the gift of death handed in by the complete stranger. The narrator implies that all of Christopher's past intimate encounters are either erotic ("sexual adventures") or institutionally pre-defined (their marriage), enhancing his sense of the self and eliminating the other. In another sense, the relationships with others emanate primarily from a narcissistic drive towards fulfilling sexual and personal desires, agonizing the other in the process and making their presence peripheral. In the act of death, the murderer is not portrayed as depriving Christopher of his own life but as resurging the presence of the other as the gift for the self. In another sense, it is the only time that Christopher might have looked besides his own needs and identified the presence of the other within. In this Derridean image, the narrator views death as

an invitation to go outside the bounds of self and to experience the transcendence of otherness through a renewed sense of responsibility. Because the other is viewed as absolute and singular, the relation with them finds its shape in a form of ethical responsibility. As Jacques Derrida opines

> I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility [...] cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other, the other others. Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre], everyone else is completely or wholly other (*The Gift of Death* 68).

Because death is outside knowledge and pre-defined norms, it is inarticulate and outside language. Even though death is undecided by the subject, it is the unique experience that expresses the irreducible singularity and the irreplaceability of each dying subject. The intimacy with the murderer becomes, in a way, the experience of the irreplaceability of the subject and the responsibility towards their otherness. As a matter of fact, the responsible action that Derrida explains in his assertion that every other is a wholly other, is necessarily an act of faith in this otherness. While by far this is one of the most unusual forms of intimacy[37] explored in contemporary women's fiction, it is one of many other narrative models that finds fault with the traditional representation of intimacy in literary fiction and its association with the pre-defined rhetoric of romanticization and sentimentalism.

Amid the burning fires surrounding her hotel in her investigatory stay in Greece, the anonymous narrator's reduced prose, affectless language and constant passivity and distance conjoin into making her a bystander to the dissolution of her own marriage. She wonders

> Why else would a woman follow her estranged husband to another country, other than to bring an end to their separation? It was an extravagant gesture, and extravagant gestures between a man and a woman are generally understood to be romantic, even in the context of a failed marriage. I would appear before him and he would -would he be filled with apprehension, would his heart sink, would he wonder what it was that I wanted? (10)

[37] The narrator describes the relation to the murderer whom she assumes is a man as "The man -in some ways, although none of us will say it, the most important man in Christopher's life, the man who brought him death just as Isabella gave him life- is a blank" (Kitamura 53).

Repulsed by the romanticization drives and by the feelings of sorrow and regret, her coldness becomes a rhetorical choice that seeks meaning in absence and distance. She concludes, accordingly that "perhaps *wife* and *husband* and *marriage* itself are only words that conceal much more unstable realities, more turbulent than can be contained in a handful of syllables, or any amount of writing" (228, emphasis in original). Because these forms cannot be contained by any narrative attempt, we can only hope to approach, circulate, disrupt, make and re-make them.

Contemporary women's fiction testifies to a genuine pursuit of human connectedness by their emphasis on the uncertain forms of relationality and recognition of the self's dependency upon others. This emergent literary form goes essentially beyond the self, the narrator, and the characters towards another form of aesthetic responsiveness that is sensitive to differences rather than to the similarities of readers. The process of sympathy is self-consciously violated in favor of another degree of empathic responsiveness. Whereas identification centers around an individual fictional character, this fiction decentralizes its characters and narrators and emphasizes either a slow-paced plotless narration (*Lila*, *The Outline Trilogy*) or an exaggeratedly accelerated and eventful one (*The Heart Goes Last*), questioning the premises and claims of the narrative of the self. Intimacy is therefore not created by proximity to a quasi-identical character or a character with similar concerns, who is emotionally implicated in the story but is rather the result of rhetoric of distance that is based on difference and empathy. Redrawing the reader's expectations, each intimate experience is different in the same way that every act of reading is. The exploration of the rhetoric of encounter takes the aesthetic response from the realm of positive or negative identification to that of exploration and negotiation of the encounter within the text which -as a physical presence- forms itself a body or another of some sort.

1.2.1.2 Literary Intimacies and "Real" Intimacies

Burdened by the degree of romanticization and emotionalized language that accompanied it for centuries, the literary discourse of heterosexual love has become mostly understood in the light of the presence of a highly sentimental style and of a repetitive love plot. Advanced contemporary capitalism, [38] which has emerged from shifts in global economy and has been

[38] Jeffrey T. Nealon refers to this economic and cultural phase as post-postmodernism, arguing that it operates according to the cultural logic of "just-in-time" capitalism. What defines this period, he explains, is an "intensification" of postmodern capitalism and the deep infiltration of the economic sphere into every segment of everyday cultural life. Economic and cultural production, consequently, no longer function as distinct domains but intersect and interact to the point of being inextricably intertwined. In response to this intensification, Nealon

based on informational technology and services' design, has invited various emotional behaviors, experiences, and spaces. Marking the shift from industrial economy (based on the manufacturing of industrial goods) to the production of services and informational goods through analysis and design of social and individual experiences, it has impacted our forms of bonding (Giddens, 1991; Reich, 1991; Freeman and Louca, 2002; Baumann, 2003, 2007; Zuboff, 2018). This shift has resulted in the development of more explicit market-driven forms of intimacy that encourage a degree of performativity to the intimate experience and in the blurring of the line between how much is 'true' and how much is performed or socially pre-scripted in social relationships.

As Zygmunt Baumann expresses it "'individualization' consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance [...] As this happens, human beings are no more 'born into' their identities" (*Liquid Modernity* 31–32). Usually defined by the individual's subjective and affective orientation, intimacy is made discernible through behavioral and marketable indicators such as the ones suggested in the first quoted passage from Kitamura's *A Separation*: holding hands, kissing, staging happiness, purchasable commodities (a designed-for-romance hotel), and even spatial and temporal intensifying effect (the night as a more romantic time, a hotel premium suite as more expressive emotional settings than a room). Aware of how "much of *a performance they made of their desire for each other*", the performance becomes "*nonetheless the real thing*". Not only is the performance of emotion an integral part of the experience of intimacy, but so does the awareness of the theatrical potential of such an experience.

This cultural symbolism has found its shape in a long tradition of fictional grounding of the concepts of love and intimacy in romanticism and their unproblematic perpetuation into other cultural mediatized forms (such as movies, songs, and media technologies) which have shaped the most intimate real-life practices and understanding of relationships. The translation of

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proposes a shift from the postmodern "hermeneutics of suspicion" to a "hermeneutics of situation," one that acknowledges the saturation of economic logic in cultural practices and moves beyond purely textual or linguistic critique (88). The deconstructive focus on language, signification, and the decentering of grand narratives must, he argues, give way to a new cognitive mapping of post-postmodernist agency -one attuned to the operations of neoliberal capitalism and biopolitical control. Thus, the central question of contemporary cultural analysis becomes not one of signification and deconstruction, but of how intensified economic and affective forms structure power, control, and subjectivity in advanced capitalist societies.

fictional symbolism of love into real-life experiences has resulted in constructing a template of expectations and symbolic behavior. This claim teases the question of the frontier between the fictional and the real in the construction of the relational self and of the intimate relationship -a question that structures part of the thesis. Yet instead of asking to what extent are our intimate relationships shaped by the fiction we read, the question will instead take the other turn inquiring about how the literary approach to the subject from the perspective of contemporary women's writers intersects with and diverges from the sociological and cultural approaches.

In literary depictions of intimacy, the deliberate blurring of real experience and performed or narrated ones serves as an aesthetic strategy, revealing how characters negotiate desire, vulnerability, and social expectation within intimate relationships. The abundance of the theatrical lexicon in *A Separation*'s short speculation resonates throughout the narrative, where the narrator continuously questions the claim of the naturalness of the "emotion" of love and its potential performativity. Alluding to her own story, she interrogates how much of what we tell about our love and marriage stories is true and how much we should believe in and transmute into our real-life intimate relations.

1.2.2 Public Intimacies, Intimate Politics

Aesthetically, intimacy has mainly found its expression in the language of affect and emotions and in confessional genres. To intimate and to affect are hardly apprehended in disassociation. "What both intimacy and affect share", in their structural and conceptual understanding, "is the work of renegotiating the boundaries of what we have come to distinguish as 'the public' and 'the private'" (Lenon, Luhmann et al. 4). Similar to the language of other contemporary female fictional intimacies, *A Separation* does not look into "entering" nor "translating" the emotion, but instead bluntly exposes these emotions, questioning and redefining them. What these works look at is a reframing of intimate relationships by exposing the degree of performativity and unnaturalness in a usually seen as the most natural and unquestionable of emotions. The interpenetration of the political and domestic is given expression in the narrative by representing intimacy as social energy informed by social semantics and behavioral codes of expression. Accordingly, while "intimacy" evokes images of love, romantic relationships, and emotional grounding, it is not itself the emotion. Rather, intimacy is the in-between space that bonds the self to the other, resulting in the expression and experience of a particular emotion(s).

This in-between space is not static, inward-looking, or emerging solely or partially from the "innermost" expressions of individuality but is instead highly dynamic, outward-oriented, and energized by social, economic, and political structures. The workplace, economy, cultural artifacts, and social institutions all collide in shaping and defining this in-between distance, forcing it to be public and political and not only personal and individual. To deny the intersection of such forms is to deny love or intimacy its primary characteristic: its being the nexus of private and public. "Persons," according to Berlant, "were to be prepared for their critical social function in what Habermas calls the intimate spheres of domesticity, where they would learn (say, from novels and newspapers) to experience their internal lives theatrically, as though oriented toward an audience. This is to say that liberal society was founded on the migration of intimacy expectations between the public and the domestic" ("Intimacy" 284). While this claim problematizes the view of the literary characters as "human figures," the argument subsumes that in their distance, the characters of these narratives are not impenetrable. Still, they provide new pathways of entering- albeit without fully surrendering- to their "as-if" world. The characters can be accessed in their social significance and contextual closeness to the reader, yet not in their similarities and likeability.

The closing lines of Alain De Botton's *The Course of Love* capture what I mean by saying that these writers do not aim at resolving the paradoxes but accepting them and living within them instead. After cycles of challenges and difficulties in their love marriage, Rabih and Kirsten conclude that love can never be perfect or ineffable. To maintain the intimate bond that they share, they need to accept the imperfection, insecurity, and instability that come with this love. While fiction and movies tend to end either by finding love and living happily ever after or by the pain of separation, Rabih khan makes this end his own beginning and investigates what happens after this love mediating

> Very little can be made perfect, he knows that now. He has a sense of bravery it takes to live even an utterly mediocre life like his own. To keep all of this going, to ensure his continuing status as an almost sane person, his capacity to provide for his family financially, the survival of his marriage and the flourishing of his children- these projects offer no fewer opportunities for heroism than an epic tale. He is unlikely ever to be called upon to serve his nation or to fight an enemy, but courage is required nevertheless within his circumscribed domains. The courage not to be vanquished by anxiety, not to hurt others out of frustration, not to grow too furious with the world for the perceived injuries it heedlessly inflicts, not to go crazy and somehow to manage to preserve in a more or less adequate way through the difficulties of married life- this is true courage, this is a

> heroism in a class all its own. And for a brief moment on the slopes of a Scottish mountain in the late afternoon summer sun- and every now and then thereafter- Rabih Khan feels that he might, with Kirsten by his side, be strong enough for whatever life demands of him (de Botton 221–22).

The bravery that Khan expresses in this passage is related to an understanding of intimacy as the nexus of private and public, self and other, comfort and insecurity, silence and speech. These negotiations bring together the contrasting aesthetic and social forms of intimacy, making a case that contemporary literature is incapable of surmounting these paradoxes and so its narratives can only endure in the same way as our modern intimacies endure.

By charting the etymological and the socio-historical understandings of love and intimacy, this chapter argued for a definition of postmillennial literary intimacy as a non-static in-between space of encounter that embraces the paradoxes instead of masking them. In that regard, this conception draws on the dominant discourse of romanticism in the depiction of heterosexual intimate relationships while negotiating its constant intersections with the residual discourses of Greek eros and Christian *agape* as well as with the emergent discourses of solidarity and ethical responsibility. As the following analysis chapters seek to argue, the female experience of intimacy emerges from a similar theoretical understanding of the latter as a site of paradoxes, encouraging, therefore, the traversing and negotiation of these paradoxes instead of dissolving them. Walking through and within such roads does not promise access to a more successful love story or a better understanding of how we bond but calls for changing the interpretive and analytical tools of writing and reading about the topic.

2. Cruel Intimacies: The Aesthetics of Collaborative Telling in Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy: Outline*, *Transit*, and *Kudos*

> Because most 'serious' fiction, still, involves the fullest possible expression of a single person's subjectivity, it's considered crass and amateurish not to "fictionalize" the supporting cast of characters [...] The 'serious' contemporary hetero-male novel is a thinly veiled Story of Me, as voraciously consumptive as all of patriarchy. While the hero/anti-hero explicitly is the author, everybody else is reduced to 'characters' […] When women try to pierce this false conceit by naming names because our 'I's' are changing as we meet other 'I's', we're called bitches, libelers, pornographers and amateurs. 'Why are you so angry?' he said to me (Kraus 55).

The narrator's frustration in Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* stems from her recognition of the asymmetry between how male and female writers navigate fiction. She implies that the postmodernist tools of writing subjectivities and the post-postmodernist *aesthetics of sincerity* are unsuited to women writers who remain reduced to "characters" designed by male-dominated narratives and theories. While male writers are afforded both self-assertion and literary playfulness in writing about intimacy, most women writers are confined to spaces of domestic fiction, where their works are often categorized as "women's literature," a term loaded with condescension[39]. The literary masculine "I" emerges confident, dismissive, and self-assertive, setting narrative rules and limiting narrative spaces for the (female) other to occupy. In contrast, the space traditionally delegated to women's literature is often associated with women readers and female domestic issues and is far from the space that Kraus -or numerous other women writers[40]- want to inhabit. Viewing female subjectivities as relational and situational and as

[39] In "The Second Shelf", fiction writer Meg Wolitzer argues that "women's fiction", which emphasizes relationships and the private matters of women, is often relegated to the lower shelves. They are frequently categorized as "Women's literature" or domestic fiction and addressed primarily to female readers. However, when their male counterparts write about the same topics, they are often praised for their approach to unprecedented territories. Among others, she gives the example of Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, David Foster Wallace, Cormac McCarthy, Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes. "The truth is," Wolitzer contends, 9"women who write literary fiction frequently find themselves in an unjust world […] As VIDA, a women's literary organization, showed in February in its second annual statistical roundup, women get shockingly short shrift as reviewers and reviewees in most prestigious publications. Of all the authors reviewed in the publications it tracked, nearly three-fourths were men. No wonder that when we talk about today's leading novelists -the ones who generate heat and conversation and are read by both men and women -we are talking mostly about men" (Wolitzer).

[40] Other women writers who articulate comparable forms of experimental discontent and self-reflexive inquiry include, alongside Cusk, Kraus, and Ferrante, Sheila Heti (*How Should a Person Be?*, 2010), Virginie Despentes (*King Kong Theory*, 2006; *Vernon Subutex* trilogy), Kate Zambreno (*Heroines*, 2014), and Maggie Nelson (*The Argonauts*, 2015).

unable to be contained in contemporary male-dominated narratives of subjectivities, writers like Chris Kraus, Sheila Heti, Kate Zambreno, Elena Ferrante, and Rachel Cusk tend to experiment with new narrative forms that aim at dissolving the distinction between the aestheticism of the literary medium and the politicization of the social world. Their works challenge the conventions of fiction by presenting subjectivities that are relational and situational, constructed through interactions with others rather than through an insular self-exploration.

Cusk's *Outline* Trilogy exemplifies this discontent and experimentation with form. Its narrator, Faye, withdraws from the traditional role of an inward-looking protagonist and character-driven storyteller, instead constructing her identity through the stories of others. Unlike traditional novels that center on a protagonist's internal transformation, Cusk's trilogy replaces character development with what I call here "an aesthetic of collaborative telling", where the self is constructed through interactions rather than introspection. Testing fiction's ability to connect, the literary narrative becomes a relational act rather than a mimetic one. In this sense, Cusk's approach stands as a form of resistance to what she perceives as the limitations of traditional storytelling. By crafting a narrative that is both detached and deeply engaged, the trilogy offers a meditation on the role of storytelling itself- what it means to listen and to speak, and how intimacy is generated through the act of narration rather than internal revelation.

This chapter looks primarily into the use of *form* as a trope and a structural technique that dissolves the boundary between aestheticism and the socio-political frames. It considers the act of storytelling and narrative reiteration as some of the routes into understanding the intimate and narrating the self. Intimacy is best understood, here, in the liminal position between life and narrative, fact and fiction, self and other. Using Caroline Levine's suggestive conceptualization of forms, this chapter investigates the narrator's experimentation with new ways of intimate self-writing, which emerge from the liminal position between aestheticism and sociality and between interiority and exteriority, where presence and absence; narrative and story; and fiction and reality incessantly overlap. This chapter concludes that the trilogy excels in examining the conditions, limitations, and possibilities of a narrative of intimacy- one that does not function as an isolated confession but instead as a web of interconnected voices.

2.1 The Liminal Narrative of Intimacy: Intimate Explorations; *It is All Form!*

Cusk's *Outline* Trilogy engages tightly with the question of presence and absence in the narrative. The novels follow Faye, a writer, who listens to the stories of others while revealing

little about herself. Her passive role challenges conventional first-person narration, raising fundamental questions about subjectivity, storytelling, and the limits of fiction. As Faye becomes a conduit for other people's narratives, her presence oscillates between invisibility and authority, crafting a text where the act of listening becomes a form of narrative control.

By employing a structure composed of fragmented monologues and disconnected personal narratives, Cusk reconfigures the novel as a collection of intersecting voices rather than a linear development of a protagonist's subjectivity. In *Kudos*, the novel opens with an epigraph from Stevie Smith's poem "She got up and went away," setting the tone for a narrative concerned with the act of withdrawal. Similarly, Elena Ferrante's third book of the Neapolitan Novels -*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2013)- explores a parallel tension between presence and absence, particularly in the way the narrator constructs her identity through relationships rather than self-contained subjectivity. Chronicling the longtime friendship of two women, Raffaella or Lila and Elena, from early childhood to adulthood, Ferrante's quartet navigates the poignant questions of intimacy and social relationships and their interference with the blurring lines of fictionality and factuality. To investigate these issues, the narrator who -similar to Faye- is a fiction writer herself,\ oscillates between diegetic and narratorial presence and between the incentive to "[l]eave, instead. Get away for good" (Ferrante 28). She decides ultimately on the middle position of "hiding" where she can observe without being observed because "shrewdness means hiding and hiding from oneself the true state of things". Resisting full disclosure, these narrators allow the novel to unfold as a mosaic of external voices rather than a singular one.

This recurrent question hints partly at the growing limited position of women writers, especially with the amounting dismissal of female authorship[41], yet it focuses primarily on the state of the author in the writing of interiorities and on how much their "real" person should be shared with their readers. While "real" and "fictional" are mostly seen as antonyms, in the autofictional form -in which Cusk and Ferrante write- these polarized domains problematically overlap. While in the case of Ferrante -who uses a pseudonym and has a limited appearance in

[41] see Rachel Cusk's "Shakespeare's Sisters" in her collection of essays- *Coventry* (2019), Kelly Jenson's "Male Leads In Fiction Sell 10 Million More Books On Average Than Female Leads" (2020), and Meg Wolitzer's "The Second Shelf" (2012).

public- the detection of the real from the fictional is quite problematic[42], the presence of the memoirs and the numerous interviews with Rachel Cusk helps draw a loose narrative of the persona of the writer that allows her comparison with the narrator of the trilogy and the tracing of the liminal lines of fact and fiction.

A Canadian-born British novelist, Cusk has written fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, book reviews, and numerous essays. Her first novels received several awards and literary acclaim, yet it was mostly through her memoirs -*A Life's Work* (2001) and *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012)- which tackle the subjects of motherhood and divorce from a controversial poignant perspective- that she gained unprecedented notorious critical attention which amounted on many occasions into aggressive attacks. The motherhood and divorce memoirs have unleashed the outrage of numerous critics, mostly women as Cusk surprisingly affirms, who were almost unanimous in their disparagement of these works. They criticize the writer's portrayal of parenthood -namely motherhood-, divorce, and marriage and even condemn her for being a callous mother who mistreats her children, a "narcissist", a "self-obsessed bore: the embodiment of the Me! Me! Me! attitude which you so resent in small children" (in Cusk, "I Was Only Being Honest"). While Cusk's own experience of motherhood and parenting is behind her generic shift from fiction to memoir at first, the visceral critical and even personal attacks of the latter's works have made the writer aware of the limitations of the autobiographical genre. They have also impacted her narrative choices afterward, resulting in another remarkable detour in her writing career which is characterized by an exploration of a liminal narrative space along the affordances of autobiography and fiction.

In fact, it took Cusk two years of writing malaise or what she names a "creative death" before she regained her voice in the form of experimental fiction, with the *Outline* Trilogy in 2014. Unlike the hostile reception[43] of her memoirs, the trilogy -which includes *Outline* (2014),

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[42] For more on the topic, refer to Alison Gibbons' essay: "The 'dissolving margins' of Elena Ferrante and the Neapolitan Novels" (2019), in which she argues for the salience of a cognitive approach in understanding reader's responses to so-called autofictional genres and authorial intentions.

[43] Cusk's memoirs *A Life's Work* (2001) and *Aftermath: On marriage and* Separation (2012) were described by one critic as "pure misery to read" (Cusk, "I Was Only Being Honest"). Quoted by Cusk in *The Guardian*, another reviewer went on to warn against the publication of the books claiming that "if everyone were to read this book, the propagation of the human race would virtually cease" (2008). In Camilla Long's assaulting review of *Aftermath* in *The Sunday Times* -which won the Hatchet Job in 2014- Cusk is described as "a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish" (2013). The writer was even sued for libel by

Transit (2016), and *Kudos* (2018)- has been met with acclaim in the UK, US, and Europe[44]. In her interview with Kate Kellaway in *The Observer* in 2014, she states that "it was creative death after *Aftermath*. That was the end. I was heading into total silence -an interesting place to find yourself when you are quite developed as an artist" (in Kellaway). In most of her interviews, Cusk has frequently confirmed the presence of a link between her choice of a passively effaced narrator in a depersonalized narrative and the vitriolic criticism that she received for the memoirs. With this choice and in her attempt to overcome the writing impasse, she courageously crosses numerous conventional boundaries of first-person fiction writing while launching the novel form in an experimental quest. This narrative experiment has gained her accordingly much recognition and critical consideration and her name has often been cited "[a]mong the different writers grouped under autofiction's umbrella" such as Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti, Elena Ferrante, and Karl Ove Knausgaard (Cummins). Bearing traits of autofiction, this chapter argues that the most salient feature of the trilogy and what sets it apart is its probing into the most intimate matters while bringing together the two inconsistent poles of the referential and the fictional.

Rarely does an interview with Rachel Cusk take place without the interviewer highlighting the peculiar nature of the *Outline* Trilogy's generic form. In response, Cusk adamantly dissociates herself from the common classification of her works as autofiction, arguing instead that the conventional laws of fiction writing are incapable of accommodating her work and themes. As a result, she sees herself as "inventing" and experimenting with a new form of writing, in which personal experience serves as both the primary catalyst and substance in the creation of a fictional world.

Her main arguments are, first, that her writing emerges from a deep dissatisfaction with the constraints of fiction writing, and second, that -unlike Karl Ove Knausgård and Sheila Heti, with whom her name and works are often associated- her trilogy is outward-looking rather than self-revelatory. By that, she means that her work reveals little about her as a person and her subjective individual life experience. While this stance is theoretically non-suggestive, it serves

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someone who recognized himself while anonymously mentioned in her memoir *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009). The suing was based on the account that the person can be easily identified through the lines of the book and not because of inaccurate or falsified portrayal. The memoir was revised, and the passage was removed from all publications.

[44] The trilogy has been published internationally and translated into several other languages, including French (Cyrielle Ayakatsikas, 2018), German (Eva Bonne, 2018), and Spanish (Marta Alcaraz, 2016).

the analysis by revealing the writer's narrative discontent and her attempt at dissolving margins. Echoing similar discontent, Faye opines that "what other people thought was no longer of any help to [her]. Those thoughts only existed within certain structures, and [she] had definitively left those structures" (*Outline* 70). Cusk, and Faye by extension, work to go beyond the narrative structures of fiction writing as well as the social structures of marriage. Whether it bears the traits of autofiction or not, the trilogy brings to the fore the interrelated questions of fictionality, truthfulness, and authorial intention, resulting in the development of a more distinct and highly personal style of writing. So instead of addressing the question of whether the trilogy is generically misclassified as autofiction, the following part dwells on how the writer's distinctive use of form traces new lines of understanding of fiction and society through the bifurcated presence of its narrator as an active tale-teller and a passive listener.

Outline is the first installment of the trilogy and is about the first-person narrator Faye's week-long trip to Greece to teach a summer creative writing workshop. The novel unfolds through a series of nine conversations, beginning with an extended exchange with Faye's seatmate on the plane. This pattern continues throughout, as Faye listens to and records the experiences of strangers- editors, poets, writers, and students- allowing their voices to shape the novel's narrative fabric.

Transit shifts focus to Faye's life post-divorce, chronicling her transition into single parenthood as she attempts to renovate her dilapidated London apartment. The novel revolves around her encounters with neighbors, contractors, and old acquaintances, mapping the disorientation of rebuilding both a home and a self-contained sense of self. Yet, much like her renovation project, Faye's individual transformation remains unresolved, reinforcing the trilogy's themes of impermanence and transition.

Kudos returns to the motif of air travel, opening with Faye en route to an unnamed European literary festival where she is set to discuss her latest novel. Once again, the narrative unfolds through a series of monologues delivered by fellow travelers, writers, publishers, and journalists. Small, indirect glimpses into Faye's own life emerge through these exchanges, such as a journalist's offhand remark about her rumored remarriage: "I read you married again [...] I admit that you surprised me. But don't worry I won't be focusing on the personal elements" (Kudos 84).

The brief synopses show that the trilogy is not plot-driven, nor inward-looking into Faye's inner thoughts and life. It eschews plot in favor of loosely connected conversations, projecting thematically cohesive, yet narratively disjoint, stories of unconnected characters -namely their marital bonds, divorces, post-separation traumas, relationships with their ex-spouses and children, and viewpoints about the contemporary literary enterprise. Uneventful, the narratives take accordingly the structure of loosely tied monologues by unrelated characters whom Faye meets during her temporary transit between transient spaces and during her unfinished project of settlement.

Structurally speaking, the trilogy does not follow any biographical thread. Faye's personal life is rarely referred to in her random conversations with others. The overabundance of the stories told by others sidesteps the personal story of the narrator and places it in a peripheral position. Plotless in its essence, the trilogy does not revolve around the temporal sequentiality of events, nor does it follow any narrative arc. Rather, it builds on a succession of confessional stories mostly emanating from the intimate and domestic family life and evolving into philosophical and ontological musings. For that reason, the three installments share mainly similar structural and formal narrative techniques of plotless narration, silent narrator, and flat characterization as well as the same thematic concern of exploring the possibilities and limitations of narrating and writing the intimate. It is accordingly a loose trilogy[45] bound by dint of stylistic and structural fictional techniques and not by the succession of events nor the development of its characters. Indeed, all the characters- apart from Ryan and Faye's son- are mentioned only once throughout the trilogy and are emptied of any form of agency to move the narrative forward. In a sense, they do not develop, grow, or move along the space of the narratives, yet remain mostly static, immemorable, and to some extent transient and disposable.

Explaining her novelistic choice of characterization, Cusk announces, "I'm not interested in character because I don't think character exists anymore" (in Schwartz). As provocative as it sounds, Cusk's assertion does not register as the annihilation of one of the pillars of literary fiction but as discontent with the use and writing of characters, especially in contemporary fictional narratives. To centralize human experience on the imaginary subjectivity of a fictional character and disregard the relational and contextual nodes and intersections that collide in the

[45] While Mireille Juchau calls it the "post-divorce saga", Sabine Peters maintains that "[o]ne does not have to know the previous novels -*Outline* and *Transit*- to find their way around the new book" (Translation mine).

making of the aesthetic experience is the major issue that she tries to surmount. She explains further in the same interview

> It's not a sort of doomsday view. It's one of the things that I realized had changed since the old templates, the Victorian template of novel writing, where character is a big thing. How much does character actually operate in a person's life? I think it probably operates to create what we might fairly see as a dysfunction -not sticking to what you're meant to be doing. So I think character is sort of a little low, and there's a homogeneity afoot that I think everyone would accept in terms of our environment and how we live and how we communicate, and those things seem to be eroding the old idea of character (in Schwartz).

Accordingly, Cusk claims that the narrative tools, such as character development and plot construction, which are normally serviceable and indispensable to the writer of fiction are at the same time limiting. She contends that the assumption that the reader can have access to the character's interiority clashes with the affordances of the form itself. The novelistic representation of interiority becomes a troubling endeavor that resists its fulfillment through the limitations of the medium itself, emptying the writer of the traditional God-like power of mastering subjectivities and representing depths. To better understand the role entertained by the narrator of the trilogy, it is worth exploring the narrated stories all along.

The characters that Faye meets not only tell their own stories, but they also retell stories they overheard from acquaintances. Turning into hearers and storytellers at the same time, they always attempt to find connections between these told stories and their echoes in their own experiences. In the same way, their tales are either narrated directly by them or reported by the first-person narrator. For instance, reporting the story of the millionaire whom she meets in Greece, Faye narrates

> It was nearly thirty years since his first marriage ended, and the further he got from that life, the more real it became to him. Or not real exactly, he said -what had happened since had been real enough. The word he was looking for was *authentic*: his first marriage had been authentic in a way that nothing ever had again. The older he got, the more it represented to him a kind of home, a place to which he yearned to return […] All the same, it seemed to him now that life had been lived almost unconsciously, that he had been lost in it, absorbed in it, as you can be absorbed in a book, believing in its events and living entirely through and with its characters. Never again since had he been able to absorb himself; never again had he been able to believe in that way. Perhaps it was that -the loss of belief- that constituted his yearning for the old life (Cusk, *Outline* 15).

The seatmate describes his younger self as having been "lost" and "absorbed" in life, in much the same way a reader is absorbed in a novel. He interrogates the ways in which past experiences

gain significance over time, often feeling more "authentic" than present realities. His yearning for the past, then, is not merely nostalgia but a longing for a time when he could be fully absorbed by his experiences. He suggests that life, like narrative here, when experienced fully, is mostly immersive and unquestioned. However, as one loses this state of immersion, they gain distance, allowing their lives, and/or narratives to be retold, revised, and interpreted rather than simply lived. By taking distance, the interpretive and analytical tools of the experiences of reading and loving unfold better for him. The flow of the recounted story shows, in the same way, that the narrator herself attempts to keep her distance and not to get absorbed in the story told. This echoes the narrator's exploration of relationships in the trilogy- how intimacy is often realized only in retrospect and how true connection may be more of an illusion than a sustained reality.

Faye's recounting of the story of the millionaire suggests that she deliberately refrains from interfering with its content -though not with its telling. She only reports what the latter says, without altering how he says it. This approach creates the impression that she is merely relaying his speech as it was delivered, without commentary. The narration seems to flow seamlessly from the hearing to telling, while the absence of explicit narratorial intrusion encourages the reader to engage in the interpretive process alongside the narrator. Rather than guiding the reader through conventional techniques like omniscient narration or direct analysis, Faye's role is limited to recounting, observing, and listening, ultimately relinquishing traditional authorial control. This role shifting emerges from a belief that such prerogatives, to take the example of free indirect style as the mind-reading of the character's thoughts and consciousness, distance the narrative further from the realities of the social context and constrain it in the form in which it is implicated. The dynamics of intimacy in the trilogy emerge, not from the characters' interiors and their growth, but the collision and intersection of socio-political and contextual forms, storytelling techniques, and aesthetic forms. The narrator trades off the power of mind-reading, omniscience, and omission with the everyday skills of listening and conversing with random strangers, or to put it differently, with minds she assumes that she is unable to inhabit. In that respect, she maintains the belief that the narrator is incapable of representing interiorities but can, instead, trace relational and situational selves and identities through listening to and observing the complex intersections of the social and aesthetic forms.

Cusk's method of dissolving the traditional constraints of fiction reveals an aesthetic experiment in storytelling. This can be understood through the lens of narrative ethics, which examines the moral implications of storytelling, particularly the ethical responsibility of the narrator towards the stories being told. By rendering the protagonist a silent observer, Cusk challenges the power dynamics of narration, distributing authority among multiple voices rather than a singular authorial consciousness.

2.1.1 The Bifurcated Narrator

Throughout the trilogy, Faye embodies a paradoxical role: she is both an observer and an orchestrator of narrative. As a first-person narrator, she is constantly torn between a pronounced desire for passivity and a narrative impossibility of granting such neutrality. In *Outline*, Faye asserts "I had come to believe more and more on the virtues of passivity, and of living a life as unmarked by self-will as possible" (170). The overt choice of passivity finds its expression in the narrative through what Emily Donaldson describes as a "placid, spongelike" presence of the narrator who absorbs and echoes the stories of others with minor hints into her own life (2018). While the stories of her acquaintances are unpacked in detail throughout the conversations, the narrator's own life remains backgrounded and only accessed through inference. It is gathered from the trilogy that the narrator, whose name Faye is revealed constantly only once towards the end of each book, is a middle-aged woman writer, a mother of two teenage boys, a divorcée from the father of her children, and married a second time as fleetingly revealed in *Kudos*. An observer-narrator, Faye rarely uncovers details about herself yet reports with precision the conversations she shares with the characters she meets randomly, using direct and indirect narration. In both forms, she is constantly positioned outside of the stories, which seem to pass by, yet through her. The conversations are hardly participatory on the part of the narrator; they are not discussions nor conversations as much as they are long monologues, even soliloquies in some cases, facilitated by Faye's passive presence. Commenting on this position, she reveals

> It was as if I had lost some special capacity to filter my own perceptions, one that I had only become aware of once it was no longer there, like a missing pane of glass in a window that allows the wind and rain to come rushing through unchecked. In the same way I felt exposed to what I saw, discomfited by it […]. I was beginning to see my own fears and desires manifested outside myself, was beginning to see in other people's lives a commentary on my own (*Outline* 74-75).

The narrator's personage takes shape unconventionally through the stories of others and by the constraining choice of granting the reader access to other characters' intimate personal details but not to her own. She is simultaneously detached and implicated in the stories she hears. Her revelation is, however, that the stories of other people's lives turn into "commentary on [her] own".

Rather than asserting a strong, central perspective, Faye absorbs and reflects the narratives around her, allowing them to shape her subjectivity. This decentered yet deeply filtered mode of narration blurs the boundaries between subject and object, reinforcing the narrator's role as both an absent conduit for others' stories and an intimately present figure whose own identity is defined through them. This passage also highlights Cusk's innovative approach to narrative authority. By dissolving the traditional first-person narrator's dominance, Faye becomes a fragmented consciousness- both self-effacing and deeply embedded in the text. In this way, she exemplifies a paradoxical form of intimacy: simultaneously exposed and distant, visible and obscured, allowing the reader to experience the act of perception as a fluid and relational process.

This form of writing which "defies ordinary categorization"-as Kellaway puts it- "is about authorial invisibility, it involves writing without showing your face" or what Ferrante's Elena refers to as "hiding" in *The Neapolitan Novels* (Kellaway 2014). It highlights the deliberate narrative choice of observation and listening over the narratorial authority of first-person omniscience and ubiquitous omnipresence. This choice of an effaced first-person narrator with minimum self-referentiality poses numerous ambivalent questions and complicates the genre and readings of the trilogy. Is the narrator being opaque or transparent? Is the trilogy a "degree zero narrative" -to use Barthesian terminology- that follows objectively on the "neutral" mode in its report of other's tales? Does the trilogy "literally wr[i]te itself"? (*Kudos* 157)

The unsolicited interventions end up mostly into confessions inclusive of lengthy ruminations on intimate relationships and the state of fiction writing and publication and never amount to become well-rounded stories. Yet the narrator purports not to stimulate any of the stories nor to make any palpable demand for them to carry on. The informality of the encounter, combined with the unfamiliarity of the characters involved- who share neither a significant past nor a foreseeable future- creates the illusion of a risk-free space for emotional disclosure. The transient nature of both the conversations and the settings in which these intimate stories are

shared contributes to a sense of narrative fluidity, where stories appear to circulate freely, unanchored by conventional constraints. Even the narrator's occasional and minimal comments on some of the stories go primarily unnoticed and uncommented by the speakers, who remain self-absorbed in their own tales. In *Kudos*, for instance, Faye's publisher -a man in his mid-thirties- meets her for the first time in the hotel and then starts immediately talking about his prominent achievements as a sales manager in the publication house after its bankruptcy. In a lengthy conversation that merges the publisher's success with his evaluative authority over the literary valence of classical contemporary works, the narrator remains primarily silent and invisible. When she, towards the end, comments on his opinion on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and on the concept of justice in online literary criticism, she observes that "[w]hile I was speaking my publisher had been stealthily removing his eyes from my face in order to look at something over my shoulder" (42). Disregarding her comments, the publisher makes eventually no effort to engage with her, act as though she were inaudible. This inaudibility recurs throughout the narratives: interviewers approach her with pre-scripted accounts, including her supposed answers to questions, they never actually ask. Her presence seems to be overwritten in advance. This deliberate passivity is signaled early in the trilogy when she admits, "I did no longer, want to persuade anyone of anything", not even of her presence (*Outline* 19). Faye seems to deliberately embrace her own erasure, taking a certain satisfaction in remaining hidden and making no attempt to assert herself into the foreground.

The instances of invisibility and withdrawal are numerous and continuously work to conceal the narrator and reveal the speaker's stories (11, 21, 47, 95, 110, 119, *Outline;* 8, 19, 50, 114, 168, 178, 210, 243, 245 *Transit;* 11, 12, 19, 71, 73, 79, 89, 118, 135, 183 *Kudos*). The interviewer, ostensibly assigned to write an article about Faye's latest publication, instead delivers an extended monologue detailing her sister's divorce, her envy of her sister's second marriage, her own childhood, her husband's chronic illness and its strain on their already deteriorating marriage, and her children's academic successes. Personal anecdotes are interwoven with sporadic social and cultural commentary, while Faye remains largely silent. At the conclusion of this lengthy soliloquy, the interviewer declares, "'I think I have everything I need [...] In fact, I looked up all the details before I came'" (*Kudos* 84). This recurring pattern of characters who speak at length but fail to engage in genuine dialogue suggests Faye's interest in reimagining subjectivity not through self-assertion, but through the act of listening. Toward the

end of *Transit*, Faye tells a woman that she "[has] found out more […] by listening than [she] had ever thought possible" (243). By abstaining from reciprocal self-disclosure, Faye appears to offer others greater freedom: less interruption, more narrative space, and the possibility of articulating their inner lives on their own terms. She becomes a sheer outline through which other voices find shape and overlap. However, her attempt clashes with her pronounced desire for such a withdrawal, showcasing the impossibility of narrative neutrality.

Roland Barthes defines the neutral as "that which outplays {déjoue} the paradigm, or rather […] everything that baffles the paradigm" (7). The neutral emerges, in this sense, as a form of escaping the paradigm and exempting meanings by avoiding conflicts. The conflicts are mainly structural and come in the form of narrative choices

> the paradigm is the wellspring of meaning; where there is meaning, there is paradigm, and where there is paradigm (opposition), there is meaning; elliptically put: meaning rests on conflict (the choice of one term against another), and all conflict is generative of meaning: to choose one and refuse the other is always a sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed (*The Neutral* 7).

Because a paradigm is inherently generative of meaning, the decision to write within, or to depart from, it signals an active engagement with meaning making. Despite the narrator's apparent withdrawal, her deliberate selection and sequencing of others' stories, along with her shifting between direct and indirect modes of narration, reveal that narrative neutrality is ultimately impossible. In choosing not to reproduce the dominant paradigm, she nonetheless asserts meaning -through omission, ellipsis, and the structuring of silence. Therefore, her passivity emerges not as a sign of withdrawal, but as a deliberate and prominent narrative choice -one that reveals presence through restraint. In this light, the use of Zadie Smith's poem *"She got up and went away"* as an epigraph can be read as a conscious gesture toward abandoning traditional, self-contained forms of representing intimacy that depend on self-revelation. Instead, the text embraces alternative forms that are more relational, dialogic, and collaborative in nature.

The impossibility of neutrality in the narrative is accounted for by the presence of an ordering consciousness that -despite its claim of passivity- is responsible for the narrative choices made in the texts. During the boat trip, which she was invited to by the millionaire she randomly sat next to on her flight to Greece, he recounts the story of his two marriages and divorces. The narration switches continuously between direct and indirect forms, as shown in these two quotes:

> I said to you, when we first met, that I regard love -the love between man and woman- as the great regenerator of happiness, but it is also the regenerator of interest. It is what you perhaps would call the storyline (*Outline* 166).

> His first marriage, he said, had really come to an end on a day when they had had a large family party, a lunch to which all the relatives on both sides had been invited and which they held in their home in the suburbs of Athens […] 'I believe,' he resumed presently, 'that what my wife did then was premeditated, that she saw me lying there and intended to force a confession from me by surprise. She came to the sofa and shook me by the shoulder […] she asked me whether I was having an affair (172- 173).

Faye's recounting of the story using, at times, direct style and inverted commas and, at others, indirect speech testifies to her presence within the narrative -despite not in the story itself- but through the choices she makes to show that story. Her silence does not imply absence and neutrality but is a liminal form of presence. In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", Hayden White poses the question, "[c]ould we ever narrativize without moralizing?" (27). He argues that moralization is unavoidable as far as a narrator in the text chooses the order in which the events will take place. Even though the trilogy lacks eventfulness, the ordering of the conversations and the binding together of -otherwise chaotic and unrelated stories- in a given narrative show that there is a human consciousness behind this order. In fact, "the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine" (18). By ordering and selecting the stories told along the trilogy, the narrator resists any claim or attempt to neutrality since narration becomes a choice of giving meaning to an -otherwise meaningless- set of events or conversations. However, the narrator comes to terms with this failure of neutrality and strives to find connections despite the loosening bonds.

Faye uses the direct and indirect styles of narration interchangeably in a manner of paraphrastic retelling, relaying the characters' stories directly using quotation marks or paraphrasing them indirectly. As a matter of example, expressions like "[a]n astrologer emailed me to say […]", "'[…]' he said", "'[…]'she said" (*Transit* 1, 127, 163). The time of the story usually precedes the time of narration and results mainly in a retrospective narration, in which characters reminiscence about their divorces and reflect on their most intimate relations. The temporal gap and the style of reflection on private matters endow the characters' speech with a confessional tone. The multiple confessions gradually turn out to be repetitive, bleed into each other, and form one shared story turning into a single confession of how forms- be them narrative, social, or literary- collide, intersect, and compete. The second temporal gap concerns

the time of speech and the time of narration. Introduced mainly using the simple past, the conversations occur in the recent past and are not synchronous to the time of narration. As a matter of fact, the language of the conversations is highly stylized and elaborate and obstructs the spontaneous flow of conversational speech, implying the presence of a writing consciousness that filters, orders the character's interventions, and vocalizes the story told over the characters themselves. These stories follow a logical pattern of argumentation and use academic jargon in a pseudo-oral discourse or random everyday conversation. For instance, in a story-within-story, Faye's seatmate on the plane relates a story of his friend who

> felt something akin to love […] for the female voice that guided him while he was driving his car more devotedly than his wife ever had. There had been a great harvest […] of language and information about life, and it may have become the case that faux-human was growing more substantial and more relational than the original, that there was a tenderness to be had from a machine than from one's fellow man. After all, the mechanized interface was the distillation not of one human but of many (*Transit* 3).

The conversations do not aspire to develop or reveal a well-rounded speaking persona as much as they direct the attention to the spoken subject itself. In this instance, the subject of disconnection and the evolving nature of human intimacy in a technologically mediated world. The man's attachment to the mechanized female voice -one that is more attentive and devoted than his wife- suggests a reconfiguration of emotional fulfillment, where artificial intelligence provides a more reliable form of companionship than human relationships.

The phrase "faux-human was growing more substantial and more relational than the original" underscores the unsettling notion that technology may offer a more consistent, predictable form of emotional engagement than the complexities of real human connection. This echoes broader anxieties in contemporary society, where mechanized interactions can sometimes feel more affirming and risk-free in comparison to interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, the passage plays with the idea of collective versus individual identity. The "mechanized interface" is described as a "distillation not of one human but of many," implying that technology synthesizes a collective knowledge and experience that transcends any single human perspective. This notion resonates with the trilogy broader preoccupation with presence and absence and narrative authority- suggesting that individual subjectivity is increasingly fragmented, shaped not only by direct experiences but also by external, interrelated factors. The prime concern in this passage is that technology is a repository of collective human experience,

one that paradoxically feels more intimate than individual human relationships. The same concern with mechanized intimacy taking over human relations is reiterated in numerous other stories throughout the trilogy.

In *Outline* and during the writing workshop Faye leads in Athens, her students recount stories that seem to follow formulaic, almost algorithmic patterns. From the formulaic story of a woman who enters marriage with someone she does not love, to the student who is more concerned with the dramatic arc than creativity, to the story lacking resolution yet oddly familiar, these stories are bound to prestructured techniques and predictable patterns that all felt familiar and repetitive to Faye. To her, "everything was highly orderly. There was no confusion or secrecy: things were in their correct places and complete" (*Outline* 57). Their retelling of personal stories can be structured according to a predefined model mirroring how technology processes human emotions- by distilling them into recognizable, replicable patterns. In the same way, Faye's interactions with others follow somehow a mechanical structure according to which she acts as a "listening machine" absorbing, processing, and relaying these human experiences without emotionally engaging with their tellers. The repetitive storytelling mimics the way technology processes human emotion, reducing them to recognizable patterns and algorithms. It reflects a broader anxiety in the trilogy: that intimacy itself can be mechanized, reduced to a series of predictable narratives that lack genuine unpredictability. Accordingly, intimacy feels mechanical and predictable, and its narratives are scripted and predefined rather than organic and genuine.

By the end, all stories unite thematically as well as stylistically around the same writerly style and mellifluous prose. This style, along with the succession of seemingly unrelated short stories, creates a circular instead of a progressive narrative pattern, repeatedly echoing the same themes and concerns. Over time, it becomes clear that these stories are not just repetitions but gradually reveal themselves as the narrator's desired story. Consequently, the narrator still wields power by arranging and rearranging the stories and conversations of her characters, working out the puzzle of storytelling. Like a Scheherazade, she spins her tales not to amuse the Sultan but to sustain the reader's interest in several themes while trying to self-consciously efface herself from her own narrative. Yet, unlike Scheherazade, whose stories are meant to regale the Sultan and the reader, Faye's storytelling is far from being for muse as they imply a moral act within. The characters become a study and their tales turn into testimonies that the story of intimacy is not

individual but mainly social and relational, disavowing the transcendence of a narrator and a central filtering consciousness.

Even though all the characters share an ending or a failing intimate relationship, the pathos is suspended in favor of analysis. Their valence reveals towards the end when the narrator's voice unveils itself as a self-analyst examining intersubjectivities and mapping multiple identities. This mapping does not lead to a better knowledge of the self as much as it uncovers the underlying contradictions of that knowledge. In a way, the narrator does not seek to entertain a reader and to urge them through the suspense of plot to turn the pages but gestures towards bringing the reader to question and to negotiate the boundaries between the outside and the inside and between the narrated intimacies and the real ones. The invitation of the reader to the text takes a different form in the narrative which withholds identification and sympathy. The narrator shows that the mapping is never complete without the presence of the reader in the text and without their own response and decision on how to read this narrative. Similarly to the author, Faye endeavors to write narratives that "irritate and antagonise rather than please" because -as she paraphrases and endorses Virginia Woolf's statement- believes that "the woman writer might have to break everything -the sentence, the sequence, the novel form itself- to create her own literature" (Cusk, *Coventry* 176, 173). In her attempt to create "her own literature", she follows two spectrums: one of contemplation or of "objective" observation in which she becomes a sociologist who investigates the formation of social practices and habits. The second is that of literary narration where she is the fictional narrator, who in their utmost silence and withdrawal, is incapable of being completely erased, making her realize that "it almost seemed to [her] that even by clothing [her]self [she] was inventing the mystery to take root there under [her] clothes, and to weave the web of subjection in which later [she] might become trapped" (*Kudos* 195). Faye becomes mainly a sociologist who tries to understand the collective in the intimate by contemplating with distance. However, as a narrator-writer and by dint of the form she uses, her experiment is primarily aesthetic and not scientific.

In her description of the countess and the owner of a writing retreat in Italy, Linda -a writer and one of the attendees of the literary festival- interestingly depicts the countess as follows

> She would watch the people around the table with a rapt, glittering, hawk-eyed expression, *prowling the conversation* like a predator monitoring their hunting ground. Because they were *conscious of her*, everyone made an effort to say witty and interesting

> things. Yet because she *didn't conceal herself* the conversation was *never real*: it was the conversation of people *imitating* writers having a conversation, and the morsels she fed on were *lifeless* and *artificial*, as well as being laid directly at her feet (Cusk, *Kudos* 50, emphasis added).

The countess who opens her castles to writers to come and enjoy the luxury and the natural sites to write their books is continuously looking for the pleasure of intellectual conversations in return. In her ubiquitous presence and reluctance to be seen, the speakers' honesty is hindered, and their conversations turn into performances that aim at pleasing and emphatically engaging the listener in their well-made stories. Both listener and speaker, consequently, share their knowledge of the presence of pretense amid their acts of storytelling, a knowledge that hardly troubles their enjoyment of the performativity of these narrative acts. Conversely, Faye is bewildered by the amount of pretense that generates from the act of storytelling. She refrains from sharing interactive conversations with the characters and from making her presence flagrant. In one of her rare revelations while swimming in the Greek sea, she contemplates the impulse of storytelling and compares it to the experience of swimming in an unknown shore:

> I felt that I could swim for miles, out into the ocean: a desire for freedom, an impulse to move, tugged at me as though it were a thread fastened to my chest. It was an impulse I knew well, and I had learned that it was not the summons from a larger world I used to believe it to be. It was simply a desire to escape from what I had. The thread led nowhere, except into ever expanding wastes of anonymity. I could swim out into the sea as far as I liked, if what I wanted was to drown. Yet this impulse, this desire to be free, was still compelling to me: I still, somehow, believed in it, despite having proved that everything about it was illusory (*Outline* 73–74).

The knowledge of the enchantments of storytelling and the performativity that entraps the narrative does not call for avoiding this form. On the contrary, the narrator expresses the impasse in which such a claim is entangled: the vital need for narrative despite the knowledge of its performativity and illusory assertions. Narrative, in a sense, becomes a mode of existence - uncertain yet unavoidable. Her recognition of the necessity of stories in life shapes her into a bifurcated narrator -both opaque and transparent- employing the very narrative tools and medium she seeks to reject.

By absorbing the character's stories, Faye turns into -what Cusk calls in her introduction to Natalie Ginzburg's *Little Virtues* as an "observational core" or in *The Guardian* interview as "an annihilated perspective" (in Kellaway). By this, she explains that the narrator chooses to background her own life story and foreground others' stories to expose another social layer of

relational subjectivity that is not self-centered but outward-looking. That her story emerges from the connections and intersections with the stories of others is the locus of this outward-looking "observational" approach. Towards the end of *Transit*, Faye concludes that "what mattered far more was to learn how to read that fate, to see the forms and patterns in the things that happened, to study their truth. It was hard to do that […] just as it was hard to listen while you were talking. I had found out more, I said, by listening than I had ever thought possible" (243). Holding onto the belief that fictional narrative has limited capacity to represent interiorities and capture subjectivities, she instead turns to her narrative of self; marriage; and divorce as a form that intersects -amid the character's stories- with other socio-political and aesthetic forms and brings *order* instead of *meaning* to the narrative. Stylistically, the result is a discourse of intimacy that initiates primarily from the stories of others and reduces the narrator's voice in favor of the characters. However, the characters' stories are not meant to make the reader know them better or empathize with them. In contrast, these stories reveal the nature of the narrator, who -in her quest for self-knowledge- decides to listen and becomes consequently aware of the indispensability of others in this exercise. What Cusk calls the "observational core" and -through the words of the narrator Faye- is described as "the virtues of passivity," I term here as the aesthetic of collaborative telling.

2.1.2 An Aesthetic of Collaborative Telling: Unbound, We Can Connect!

The stories that the trilogy tells do not constitute floating forms or unrelated shapes but are related together by acts of listening, hearing, and ordering. In fact, the narrator's story is an outline "to be pieced together from other people's accounts" (*Kudos* 58). Like Faye, the reader listens to these stories, searches for echoes, and is inspired to forge connections- not only between the different stories but also within their own world. To further explain the description of the narrator as a sheer connecting form and the narrative as a collaborative form of telling, this part draws on Caroline Levine's conceptualization of *forms* in literature. Levine defines form generally as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3). These patterns organize aesthetic experiences as much as they contain political and social ones. Instead of viewing aesthetic forms as independent forms or as the outcome of socio-political and cultural contexts, Levine argues for the view of such forms in their interplay and collisions without prioritizing one over the other. Interestingly, she uses the term "affordances" to denote each form's own possible hidden and potential usages and argues that

the novel is the space where numerous distinct forms overlap and compete, resulting in unexpected consequences of their affordances. Since each form lays claim to affordances, the latter becomes portable (across different contexts) and distinct (from other forms' affordances). In this respect, form "emerges from this perspective as transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political, on the other "(11). In this way, the aesthetic form overlaps and conflicts with the social one, pressing up against the limits and constraints of their affordances. However, Levine is not interested in the view of the literary form "as an ideological artifice, a neat structuring of representation that soothes us into a false sense of order, preventing us from coming to terms with a reality that always exceeds form" (14). She, instead, calls for a view of the literary form as a site of clashes of distinct forms and of the potential possibilities and intersections of their affordance. Being all and mostly form, *The Outline Trilogy* explores the clashes and collisions between the forms of marriage, intimacy, the novel, and storytelling. It shows that intimacy endures in the same way that the literary narrative does.

The claim that traditional fiction conventions fail to capture social tensions or represent inner lives positions the theme of intimacy in Cusk's texts within a liminal space where different forms overlap. The aesthetic form cannot mimic social realities and complex relational issues, nor can it be the effect of such complexities. Furthermore, it neither attempts to oppose a specific form nor seeks to resolve these tensions by dint of imagination. Instead, it chooses to work from within the forms (marriage, divorce, literary criticism, women's literature, capitalism) and explore their limitations, intersection, and potential affordances. The unloading of intimate life details becomes a way of approaching the spaces that bind and distance the self from the other without imposing any mind-reading or interiority construction on the characters. In that respect, the first-person narrator's function is not one of reading minds or weaving subjectivities but is primarily one of ordering and listening. It is what Cusk refers to as a "moral location" in one of her interviews about the trilogy where she explains

> I wanted to achieve something more oceanic in terms of how we're so much the product of our moment in history, the place where we live, it is like you're drinking the water in a place and it's part of you but you are also you and I think that's is so true in these themes of family life. We can seem so alien to one another but I tried to find a line- which is talking- where everyone brings themselves to a *moral location* (*Rachel Cusk on Kudos* 34:34).

Although the quotation is transcribed from an oral interview and retains a spoken tone, it is worth citing because it clearly shows that far from being a neutral observation, the seeming numbness and muteness of the narrator towards the stories of others are deliberate narrative choices for social critique. This critique originates primarily from listening to the other and exposing the dynamics of relationality and intimacy in families and among spouses and couples.

It should be noted, though, that by referring to the space of the narrative as a moral location, the argument is not about valorizing a specific moral norm over another or making any ethical assertions, nor does it presuppose a literary valence to the text. Instead, the text explores the realm of ethics alongside the relational positioning of the characters towards their family and their intimate other and through its positioning amid a given social context. With ethics referring primarily to the mutual responsibility that structures the relation of the self to the other, *The Outline Trilogy* re-investigates this responsibility and questions the social categorization of "wrong and right." In *Kudos*, in a conversation with Sophia -a writer and translator of Faye's works- the former mediates on socially moral claims concerning her son

> [I]t was only a matter of time, she realised, before her son's question about *right and wrong* found their answer in the low-level bigotry with which he was surrounded and to which everything was encouraging him to submit. Nevertheless, whenever he complained that his father had said one thing and she another, she refused to offer an opinion in which one of them was right, as he was imploring her to. *Make up your mind*, she would say; *use your brain*. He would often become upset by her response, and this was the proof that her ex-husband was giving him the most partisan accounts of their situation, because the child simply couldn't cope when there was no side for him to be on; in other words, when *there was no point of view*. Yet the effort of using his brain was far less appealing than the *easy prospect of believing* his father's stories (135, emphasis added).

The omnipresence of a point of view in the narrative of the self is always associated with the risk of interfering with the reader's moral judgment. It structures their way of thinking and subordinates their decision-making mechanisms by imposing a pre-given cognitive direction on their thoughts and actions. Sophia, here, encourages her son to understand what is "right and wrong" by observing his parents' relationship instead of absorbing the biases of their conflicting parental narratives. The quoted passage suggests that, for many, passive belief is easier than critical thinking, particularly in emotionally charged situations like intimate relationships. This hints at the choice of the narrator to withhold her point of view in the narrative, allowing the reader the autonomy to interpret these fabricated stories.

The readers gain more space and freedom, especially since they are not trapped in the complexities of plotting or stumbling over the sophistication of language. Instead, they are made to listen to the stories as such and to understand them as they come seemingly uncamouflaged, challenging their conventional receptive channels. Like Sophie's son who "[i]ncapacitated as he was, and removed from the field of action, the facts of his life became much clearer to him", the narrator comes to a deeper understanding her own life better through observing others (135-6). The stepping away from action results in inaction, statism, and slow-paced narration, where narrative arcs, characterization, and focalization are all dismantled in favor of a stylistic order of *active listening*. How does the narrative gain an active dynamic of its own without being subscribed to action, narrative arcs, character nor narrator's *Bildung* is what this following part tries to answer.

In fact, the trilogy gains its dynamic from the negotiations it sets between the self-concealed narrator on the textual level and the actual reader and author on the extra-textual one. Drawing on Caroline Levine's conceptualization of forms as "patterns of repetition and difference" that structure both aesthetic and social experiences, trilogy becomes a site of tension between personal narrative and collective storytelling, where intimacy is located in the intersection of multiple voices rather than in psychological depth. Through this interplay, Cusk's work dismantles the idea of an authoritative, omniscient narrator and instead positions narrative as a collaborative and relational act. The narrator, who refrains from the acts of subjectivity construction and mind-reading, hints at a new kind of authority that summons the reader to take part in the narrative universe. The narrative, here, is not a self-representational riddle that has to be navigated by a sympathetic reader but a way of coping with what Cusk calls "the pain of being the self in the world", by traversing the frames and forms that contain these social relations (in Julavits). This pain emerges from the recognition of the complexity of representing the self and its intimate matters when disregarding the contradictory nature of the prerequisite of this representation in life.

In her resistance to omnipresence and its claims of a full presence uncontaminated by absence, Faye does not allow herself to be passively narrativized by others. In fact, all the stories bleed into her own, showing that her displayed asceticism is, in reality, a subversive act of, what I term *collaborative narration*. "Collaboration," is here to be understood as "a meeting of minds that don't match", emphasizing the interplay of disparate perspectives in shaping the narrative

(Berlant and Stewart 5). While it seems that the story is writing itself without any personal interference; it ultimately writes itself into a larger diagnosis of and commentary on contemporary society. This commentary emerges from shattered intersubjectivities and the shared, yet fractured, nature of intimate human experiences Commenting on the collection of recordings of classical music by the tenant of her apartment in Athens, Faye compares the collection to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* pondering that "in Clelia's mind they perhaps represented the same thing, a sort of objectivity that arose when the focus became the sum of human parts and the individual was blotted out. It was, perhaps, a form of discipline, almost of asceticism, a temporary banishing of the self and its utterances" (*Outline* 54). The voluntary banishing of the *self* arises from a view that the individual imaginary subjectivity can withhold the complexity, paradoxes, and even cruelties of relationships and social life by imposing meaning on a meaning-resistant medium.

Acknowledging the inaccessibility of the quest through the conventional tools of omniscient first-person narrative, the trilogy draws forms of intimacies as they emerge from the practice of, or the will for, a narratorial asceticism. This collaborative telling is the strategic use of distance that never becomes detachment because, in her distance, the narrator creates new channels of collaboration with others -through telling, listening, and retelling- and new sites of connection. She does not accordingly detach herself from the stories as she creates a space of sharing between strangers that go beyond familiarity. While her reticence from self-exposure and from inhabiting characters' minds draw her as distant, her quest for finding connection and ordering intimate social experiences brings her to the core of attachment. Along the lines of this endeavor of sharing with others, she negotiates for another literary conception of intimacy that overlaps with referential lived experiences. Like intimacies, stories are only "real" because they are lived by an individual and recognized by them as so. Thus, the narrative is neither self-revelatory nor self-amplifying; instead, it reverberates a quest for moral selflessness and self-denial through which the narrator chooses to conceal herself and let others speak their "truths" for themselves, concluding the inaccessibility of the self. Because of this inaccessibility, she refrains from using the narrative techniques of mind-reading and mastering interiorities and uses instead the life skills of listening, telling, and retelling.

2.1.2.1 The Art of Listening

Throughout the trilogy, Faye frequently questions the reliability and constructed nature of narrated stories. In *Outline,* for example, one of the speakers remarks that "[w]ithout structure, events are unreal" (24). This observation underscores the idea that reality and truth in storytelling are inextricably tied to the narrative forms that shape and contain them. The belief that stories derive meaning from their framing structures helps illuminate the significance of the book's title, *Outline*, as well as its persistent focus on the narrative frames through which stories find life. Although the author and narrator are not identical, they remain closely intertwined, prompting questions about the boundary between reality and fiction. The trilogy's frequent autobiographical references repeatedly disrupt the fictional world, blurring the line between lived experience and narrative construction. While Cusk largely distances the trilogy from the label of *autofiction*, the narrative inevitably invites readers to interpret Faye as a textual counterpart to Rachel Cusk herself. This reading is reinforced by both extra-textual materials such as Cusk's memoirs, *Coventry* essays, and interviews as well as intra-textual elements, particularly the trilogy's self-reflexive, metafictional commentary on writing, storytelling, and the construction of the self. A journalist interviewing Faye remarks that "if [she] had an imagination [she] had the sense to keep it well concealed. 'And there is no better hiding place [...] than somewhere as close as possible to the truth" (*Kudos* 186). Similarly, in an interview with Alexandra Schwartz, Cusk observes, "I think anyone trying to create something, in the spirit that I'm trying to create something, wants it to not pass for life exactly but be as close as possible to what might be felt as true to anybody." As previously noted, Cusk has spoken about how the trilogy emerged from a deep dissatisfaction with the conventions of confessional writing- particularly those that govern the female self- and from a sense of malaise at the harsh social structures that shape gender roles and influence how intimacy is both expressed and expected. While this affinity suggests that the books Faye writes resemble the ones Cusk herself produces, it ultimately generates a liminal space between the referential and the fictional, where the boundaries between author and narrator, life and art, remain intentionally unsettled.

In the trilogy, form is more than just a narrative choice, it reflects how lives; identities; and stories are constructed and perceived. The narrative processes of revealing and withholding, of creating sheer outlines instead of self-contained narratives, mirror the way intimacy, self-narration, and meaning unfold in everyday life. Rather than depicting intimacy as traditional

emotional closeness, Cusk presents it as something mediated through language, narrative structure, repetition, and constant interruptions. In this way, intimacy does not emerge from direct emotional connection but rather from the act of sharing stories while remaining emotionally distant from them. This is not to deny the universality and indispensability of the form of narrative and storytelling but to further amplify its importance and intersection with other socio-political forms.

In *Kudos*, Faye meets on her plane to Europe a retired businessman traveling to a European country to attend a musical festival where his daughter plays. Eager for conversation, the man initiates a long discussion under the pretext that "[i]f [he] do[es]n't talk,' [...]'[he]'ll just go to sleep again'" (6). When asked about herself, Faye introduces herself briefly to him: "I said I was a writer and was on my way to speak at a literary festival" (Cusk, *Kudos* 5). Showing a fleeting interest in her own writing career, he wonders "'What kind of thing do you write?' he said, after a while. I said it was hard to explain and he nodded his head" (6). In a lengthy conversation spanning nearly twenty-seven pages, these two pieces of information and a brief uncommented mention of her son are the only personal disclosures the narrator reciprocates.

In contrast, the seatmate shares the most intimate details of his life. He talks about his daughter- her ultimate sensitivity to lying and her anti-social behavior- his strained communication with his wife, his early retirement from his self- and time-consuming job, the recent loss of dog to cancer and his burial of the pet all alone the night of that flight. Observing his way of telling the story, the narrator comments

> He had grown more animated while he spoke, and his desperate, wild-eyed demeanour had softened into *the genial mask of the raconteur*. I had the impression that these were *stories he had told before and liked to tell*, as though he had discovered the power and pleasure of reliving events *with their sting removed*. The skill, I saw, lay in striking close enough to what *appeared to be the truth* without allowing what you actually felt about it to regain its power over you (Cusk, *Kudos* 10, emphasis added).

This quote highlights the transformative nature of storytelling as a means of emotional management and self-presentation. The man's shift from desperation to animation suggests that recounting his experiences is not merely an act of sharing but a way of distancing himself from their emotional weight. His stories, familiar and well-rehearsed, allow him to shape his own narrative in a way that dulls its original pain. The phrase "striking close enough to what appeared to be the truth" underscores the tension between authenticity and self-protection -his storytelling

is not necessarily deceitful, but it is carefully curated to prevent raw emotions from resurfacing. The narrator thus suggests that storytelling can function as both a performance and a coping mechanism, where the act of narration grants a sense of control over past suffering. Looking into *how* the story is told, the narrator emphasizes the act of storytelling, the subjectivity of the "raconteur," the illusion of truth that accompanies the act of storytelling, and the power of taking control over the story told. By delineating these main points, which characterize most first-person narratives, the narrator alludes to the artifice of fiction and warns the reader about the narrator's conscious power of controlling and directing their narratives. She refers to it as the "tyranny in the matter of storytelling" where the tale-teller takes complete control over the story and writes themselves into it, making their presence largely opaque and their point of view pervasive (*Kudos* 23). Even though Faye attempts rigorously to evade the God-like position of the first-person omniscient narrator, the evasion remains unattainable as she oscillates between the lines of opacity and transparency.

The narrator, in this sense, is not put under erasure in a constant state of passivity and withdrawal, nor is she uniquely the vessel of multiple other reiterative stories-within-stories. These stories not only reverberate the narrator's own story but also resonate with a more significant societal commentary that takes into consideration the usually perceived-as-private matters and reads them along a matrix of political and economic intermingling context. In the narrative of the self, the self-effacement of the narrator becomes a vivid pursuit that problematizes the degree of the presence of subjectivity in self-writing and the impossibility of detachability from one's own story. To explain further, the use of a first-person narrator has two implications for the narrative: it first signals a communicative approach to the story by implying the presence of "you" -that is the *Other*, in reference to the characters-speakers and to the reader as well. It simultaneously problematizes the communicative approach by refusing a solicited sympathetic response and locating the me-story in the words of others. It is "her own capacity of storytelling […] that made her see her own hand in what happened around her" (*Kudos* 71). The narrator invites readers to rethink conventional ideas of intimacy and connection, encouraging them to question how storytelling itself shapes the ways we relate to one another.

Choosing distance, Faye decides to occupy a liminal position that allows her to continuously crisscross between her role as a fictional narrator guiding the story and her person and life as the subject of the narrative. If anything, this choice shows the narrator's awareness of

the medial qualities and cultural constructedness of the form she writes and her choice to act from within the same aesthetic forms of action and expression that she thwarts instead of dispensing with them. In the process, she uses the stylistic and narratorial tools that she criticizes and points out their problematic use. When Felicia, the translator of her books, surprisingly asks her towards the end of the trilogy: "What I don't understand [...] is why you married again, when you know what you know. You have put it in writing […] and that brings with it all the laws'", she replies "I hoped to get the better of those laws [...] by living within them" (*Kudos* 225). Deciding to "liv[e] within" the laws of marriage, writing, and society and not outside them, she does not thwart the possibility of a literary or real intimacy but looks into their intersecting formations by experimenting with new forms of expression of subjectivity (225).

This new form of subjectivity obscures the frontier between the fictional and factual, real and imagined, persona and person. While Faye as the narrator of the story and a writer herself struggles with the problems of authority and the conventional confines of fictional narrative, her two-fold position unpacks another degree of complexity that pertains to the narratorial authority of the tales she tells and to the limits of that authority. By observing the others telling their own stories, the life of the narrator unfolds as the product of a constant struggle between who she is and how the story of who she is- is told. As a consequence, "the burden of perception [...] was inseparable from the burden of living and of telling the story" (*Kudos* 164). The assumption that the problems of living and telling collide haunts the trilogy and is constantly referred to in interviews about the books (*Outline* 7;16, *Transit* 23; 88, *Kudos* 137; 174). "Essentially," Cusk asserts, "I think all the problems of writing are problems of living. And all the problems of creativity are problems of living" (in Schwartz). This suggests that writing and creativity are not separate from life but deeply embedded within it. In this sense, Cusk argues that the challenges a writer faces -such as how to tell a story, how to construct a narrative voice, how to express emotion or experience -are not merely technical or artistic concerns. Instead, they stem from the broader, existential struggles of being human. In this view, writing becomes a symmetry of life with its conflicts, limitations, and complexities that shape our relationships, identities, and moral choices. According to Cusk, creative expression is not a retreat from life but an extension of it. The act of writing becomes a way to engage with, work through, or even make sense of the problems of existence.

2.1.2.2 Autofictional Generic Explorations

Coined by Serge Doubrovsky in *Fils* (1977), autofiction designates a form of fictional writing that blends autobiographical elements with the fictive narrative. The underlying contradiction of this form of writing does not only translate into the textual and extra-textual levels where the writing of the self is complicated by the experience of the self but also to the act of reception where the reader oscillates between belief and suspension of belief in the story of the autodiegetic narrator. Philip Lejeune distinguishes the fictional narrative from the autobiographical by the reading act, according to which autobiographies set an "autobiographical pact" between the reader and the writer as to how to read it referentially (Lejeune 13). Reading a fictional narrative necessitates, on the other hand, a "fictional pact" that triggers its reading from an imaginative framework (14). In the case of autofiction, this reader-writer pact is problematized because the bifurcation of the narration and its encompassing of referential and fictional elements impose an oscillation between the novelistic and autobiographical pact. While autofictions call for their reading as fictions primarily, the presence of real-world referential elements in the textual world opens readerly forays into the mapping of the narrative of the self from the reader-narrator and reader-author viewpoints.

Reading a fictional narrative typically relies on a "fictional pact" that frames the reading experience within an imaginative mode (14). Autofiction, however, complicates this pact by blending referential and fictional elements, creating an oscillation between novelistic and autobiographical reading modes. While autofictions are primarily framed as fictional works, their incorporation of real-world references invites readers to navigate the narrative of the self through both narrator-reader and author-reader perspectives. Traditionally, the literary representation of the self-in-relation has been expressed through confessional or biographical forms, where sincerity and authenticity are central to conveying personal experience. In contrast, autofictional narratives triangulate between the real, the imaginary, and the fictive- just as they do between narrator, reader, and author. This structure does not merely encourage readers to conflate narrator and author; rather, it interrogates the interdependence between the extra-textual world and the world of the text in constructing the narrative self. This claim to authenticity and to the possibility of accessing the self through narrative is highly questioned because selfhood and intimacy are constructed mainly in the narratives or stories that we tell ourselves.

In *The Outline Trilogy*, this narrative quest is addressed by reshaping the conventions of first-person confessional storytelling -particularly as Cusk notes that she "was eager to find a new form that was less confrontational" (Dockterman). Through this deliberately ambiguous and genre-blurring approach, the trilogy gestures toward an experimental form of writing in which, as one character remarks, "truth threatens to become apparent" (*Kudos* 68). The narrator's unobtrusive style invites the consideration of the stories of others as guiding threads throughout the trilogy. Yet it is only toward the end of the trilogy that the seemingly effaced narrator becomes fully perceptible, along with her subtle moral shaping of the narrative. In the closing moments of *Kudos*, the narrator's "I" emerges, hovering above the intimate forms with which she has been entangled all along: "Amid the shadows I saw human figures, crouching or standing or sitting. They were arranged mostly in pairs, and they were either still or moved around intimately and absorbedly as if bent on some primitive task [...] I began to walk amid the figures up the beach. They were men" (230–31). Here, the narrator's vision of shadowy human figures arranged in pairs conveys both estrangement and recognition. The figures appear as archetypes, absorbed in "primitive tasks," suggesting their stripping of individuality. They are reduced to shadowy forms enacting the same cyclical patterns of intimacy. Their repetitive patterns suggest that intimacy, at its most elemental, unfolds in recurring structures that transcend the particularities of individual stories. The narrator's movement "amid the figures up the beach" marks her passage from an observer to a participant, from a detached consciousness to one implicated in the same structures of intimacy and desire that she has been cataloguing throughout the text. The belated emergence of the "I" therefore unsettles the illusion of her effacement: it reveals the narrator as always present, quietly shaping the narrative's moral and interpretive frame. Positioned between Faye's apparent passivity and Cusk's authorial guidance, the scene crystallizes the novel's concern with how narrative authority oscillates between concealment and revelation, silence and judgment.

This raises the question of whether the trilogy is a subjective account or an intersubjective approach to selfhood. Alexandra Schwartz, for instance, views the book as "a barrage of subjectivity", while Josie Mitchell wonders if "[t]here is a fertile ambiguity to the mask. It is often unclear to [her] how to interpret Faye's silence: is it judicious or judgmental?" These readings highlight the complexity of Faye's narrative position -one that oscillates between

presence and withdrawal, empathy and critique. In response to such interpretations, Cusk addresses the intention behind her narrative choices as follows:

> It's not a bad thing to try. It's a false suspension of personal identity, and a protecting of personal identity that is false. And if you remove that, if the self is less, other things change their proportions and relationships to each other and to you. I've never thought of myself as a terribly subjective writer. I've always stayed very close to the line of my own life and I've never sort of made things up or been particularly interested in narrative arcs or fantasy of any kind. This was much more a problem of living, of thinking, Why do these things inevitably happen? You enter these structures, you exist in these structures, they collapse or you leave them. Why? So that was how I really broke my own style (in Schwartz).

Cusk frames her narrative experiment not as a retreat into subjectivity, but as a dismantling of it - an attempt to reduce the presence of the self in order to reveal new relational structures and meanings. Reflecting on her own writing process, she admits that tracing clear-cut lines between fact and fiction is limiting, if not impossible. The claims to a fixed personal identity that could be represented in narrative and the tendency to shield the self in order to preserve its own essence is a "false suspension". According to her, the boundary between self and fiction is porous which makes the writer's identity constantly shifting. In this light, the narrator's constant mediation - both drawing attention to the intimate lives of others and casting doubt on the veracity or stability of their accounts- foregrounds the constructedness of the text. As one character notes, "it becomes harder and harder to tell what is fake and what is real" (*Kudos* 211). Each story, then, carries with it an unspoken multiplicity, suggesting that behind every articulation lies a variation left unsaid. By embracing this narrative fluidity, the text resists any attempt to stabilize meaning into an idealized singular truth or a neatly packaged self-identity. What emerges instead is a representation of the self as a fluid subject, whose connections to the world are likewise shifting and provisional. In this sense, the crisscrossing of fiction, reality, and the narrative forms that sustain them underscores how both selfhood and relationality remain perpetually in flux.

On the other hand, the overabundant and redundant use of speech tags echoes the backgrounded presence of the narrator who indirectly guides the reader's attention not only to the subjectivity of the story but also to their artifice. Speech or dialogue tags are stylistic signposts that primarily function as guiding markers that introduce the interlocutors into the narrative. In addition to their attributive function, they serve as guiding signs in a conversation that attribute speech to the interlocutor and prevent confusion, especially in long multiple

conversations. It also helps to include comments on the speaker's action or state to sustain the narrative's progress. In the trilogy, the use of speech tags is not restricted, or better say, not directed to attain the functions mentioned above. In fact, it becomes a marker of confusion, especially due to its overabundant use. For instance, in a conversation that brings together the narrator; the departing Gerta; and Ryan, and in the limited space of two pages, the narrator uses the dialogue tags thirteen times; "Gerta said/ Ryan said/ he added/ he said to me/ he said/ he said/ he said/ he said/ he said/ he said now/ he added/ he said/ he went on" (*Kudos* 113-4). Even though Ryan remains the only speaker after Gerta leaves and his conversation remains uninterrupted by the narrator's speech, it is constantly reattributed to him and marked by a redundant use of dialogue tags. While the tags remain brief and non-adverbial at the most, they tend to recur, repetitively and constantly interrupting the flow of speech. This redundancy becomes a constant reminder of the fictionality of the story and a marker of the narrator's presence despite her alleged silence, preventing the reader from identifying with the characters and having an empathetic response to their stories or getting absorbed by them. In fact, identification is seen as a form of injustice to the other -be it here the reader- as it implies a privileging of the self and a reduction of the other. The enunciating self is, instead, effaced and put under erasure to take shape in the in-between space of relationality with the other. In this respect, the reader becomes a substantial presence in the act of writing itself -and not only in the act of reading- where the writer leaves gaps to be filled with this prospective presence. Therefore, the visibility of the signposts tends to distract and detract the reader from the story while highlighting their presence and, by inference, the presence of the narrative consciousness which reports these stories.

This choice of reader-narrator dyadic relationship sidesteps the "new sincerity" aesthetic relation that implies the empathetic relation with the reader and the rhetoric of trust (Kelly). While David Foster Wallace's "new sincere" aesthetics valorizes the singularity of the self and veers towards an individualizing machinery, Cusk's fictive world overtly refuses the identification process and attempts at thwarting it, denying therefore the privileging of the individual over the relational. Even though the narrator deliberately colludes to silence in order to question and nullify the self-centeredness of the narrative subjectivity, the text is not authorless, nor is this choice a Barthesian "death of the author" literary instance. The play with the authorial intention and reader expectations solidifies, in contrast, the presence of the

personage of the author behind the text. The weaving of stories, their ordering, their tying around the subject of the intimate, and the choice of who speaks and what to say signal the presence of the ordering consciousness behind the text. Additionally, the meticulous descriptive passages reflect the observational role of the narrator.

2.1.2.3 The "Observational Core"

Conversations in the trilogy are frequently preceded by elaborate descriptive passages, which focus either on the space where the characters meet or on the physical, sartorial, and gestural traits of the speakers themselves. These passages are primordial in that they mark the transient presence of the narrator. In her portrayal of her publisher, for instance, Faye describes him as follows

> He was a delicate-young man, dapperly dressed in a blazer and striped shirt, with neatly slicked-back flaxen hair and angular silver-framed glasses and a smell of ironing and cologne. His slightness made him even younger than he was. He was very fair-skinned the flesh at the cuffs and collar of his shirt was so white and unmarked it almost looked like plastic- and his pale-pink mouth was as small and soft as a child's mouth (*Kudos* 35).

By relying on perceptible objects, the narrator provides a detailed physical account of the publisher, emphasizing the materiality of the scene. The description hints at the *realistic* approach of the narrator in the depiction of the characters and her tendency to portray the scenic, material, temporal and experiential dimensions of the encounters. She, in fact, refrains from imaginative idealizations in favor of a more unembellished depiction of outward appearances. This quasi-realist depiction does not aim, however, at developing fully-rounded characters and grounded interiorities but surfaces iteratively and interruptedly along the trilogy, leaving more gaps between conversations and allowing for the speculative forging of dispersed connections. The intersection of these short realist instances with the affective free indirect style complicates the view of social reality as a totality capable of being represented or mimicked and veers toward mapping the relations between different forms and narrative styles in the writing of multiple subjectivities.

The publisher who meets Faye for the first time informs her that having her books published depends heavily on his presence at the top of the publication house and on the success he made during his management of the house. His interest in Faye as a writer is, in fact, triggered by her photo on the cover of her book, yet he expresses his doubts that the content is in any sense

appealing to readers. Being one of the "unprofitable literary novels", Faye's book is a risky investment compared to the "Sudoku", "popular thrillers", "self-help books" that "were chiefly responsible for the upswing in the company's fortunes (37, 38, 37). Even though there is no direct reference to the subject of Faye's novels, it is constantly depicted by the publisher, some of the interviewers, and critics as being centered around intimate social relationships and as being an unappealing or discomforting literary one. The publisher mirrors, therefore, the market of literary publication and its dependence on profitability and the "economics" of "the big names" in its determination of "the literary scene" (121). The aesthetic experience overlaps accordingly with the economic structure and the literary market[46], showing the competitive forms of patriarchism, literary production, and consumability at play.

The literary market of fiction production is also strongly nested in the dynamic of gender polarities. As referred to in the introduction of this chapter, the classification of "women's literature" hooks -not only most female writers-, but also anyone engaged in the industry and machinations of literary production, such as critics, translators, and journalists, in a system of unequal opportunities. This gender polarization becomes mostly pronounced towards the end of the trilogy where Faye's depiction of her characters transforms into being less impartial and more ironic and critical. Accounting for the entry of Ryan -the arrogant best-selling fiction writer- Faye fuses the bodily, gestural, and sartorial description together to overdramatize his entrance

> His skin hung so loosely on his face that it formed clown-like folds that accentuated his changes of expression, and the room's harsh light gave it a ghastly, almost ghoulish cast. He was wearing a pale linen suit that similarly hung on him in loose folds, and the electric light dramatised the folds so that he almost looked as if he were wrapped in bandages. He had the appearance of someone who had been hit by extremity, even by some retributive force that had harried him and then left him, chastened and depleted, to limp on, an impression to which his walking stick contributed the final touch (*Kudos* 111).

[46] For more on the relation between the literary market and literary aesthetics, see Paul Crosthwaite's *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction,* where he considers that "Literature, and especially prose fiction, have long been shaped by their relations to the capitalist marketplace. But fiction published in Britain and the United States over recent decades has increasingly internalized the structures, dynamics, and demands of market systems. More specifically, contemporary authors are inclined to conceive of the literary marketplace in which they operate, and to which they are obliged to be acutely sensitive, as inextricable from the financial markets that exert ever-greater dominance over the global publishing industry and book retail business and the global economy at large" (2).

The bodily description is heavily tied with the stories and point of view of the character. Ryan's dramatic impartial depiction hints at the anger that the narrator internalizes towards this male author profile.

While the male characters, in particular, are mostly described as domineering of the story and the scene and "exud[ing] an air of anonymous and slightly provisional manliness, like a soldier in uniform", the female counterparts are rather depicted as unassertive and more yielding (3). Most descriptions of women in the trilogy are revelatory of the centralization of body image, lying between extreme interest or complete disinterest in physical appearance. In addition, the female characters' presence tends to be rather peripheral, secondary, and even inaudible at times. These meticulous descriptions counteract the characters' continuous claims to "honesty" and "truthfulness" and strip them from "the reality effect" they pertain to in their direct speeches (72,65). Besides, the direct questions of being "honest" or "lying", of "reality being revealed" or "concealed" through their stories, the narrator's transient presence through the descriptive passages constantly reiterates the problem, leaving the questions of -whether these characters really exist or not, and whether their stories are "recognizable" and "believe[able]" or "fabricated"- to the reader to decide (127, 99, 98). The oscillation between realist and ironized accounts of the characters entangles the reader in the initial question of "Would you believe it" (122)? This circularity is compounded by the spatial design of the narrative, where descriptive passages, interruptions, and repeated motifs reinforce the instability of perception and the iterative construction of social reality. Building on this discussion of narrative perspective and corporeal description, the following section focuses on the spatial, or what I here term the architectural iterative design of intimacy.

2.1.3 The Architectural Iterative Design of Intimacy

Apart from *Transit* which is set in a familiar London neighborhood and in the narrator's new apartment, the trilogy predominantly takes place in transient spaces that evoke circularity, endlessness, and inability to lead into a final destination. The circular and unfinished flow of stories about marriage, divorce, and romance is mirrored in the tangled spaces that contain them. Arriving late at the literary festival hotel, the interviewer observes that "in this city to go anywhere by car was effectively a diversion from one's aim […] The giant freeways circled the city without penetrating it, […] to get anywhere, you had to go everywhere; the roads were permanently jammed while lacking the logic of a common destination" (*Kudos* 61). The

circularity, intricacy, and lack of direction of the road system hints at the narrative structure of the text that sends the reader "everywhere", yet without any potential comfort of a final destination or clear-cut conclusion, urging them instead to look at the forms of the narrative that they traverse.

The metaphor of navigating spaces saturates the trilogy, creating a continuum between the narrative concerns and the spaces inhabited and visited by the characters. Three central spatial metaphors recur: the ability to traverse unknown spaces without a fixed destination, the transience of those spaces, and the cyclic, repetitive nature of their traversal. The motif of journeying, a traditionally male literary trope, is emptied of its symbolic implication of reaching a final destination or achieving physical or metaphorical self-realization. The journey remains ongoing, denying the solace of arrival. Analogously, the act of reading the trilogy mirrors this unfinished traversal: the reader is enclosed within repetitive patterns of story and form, unable to attain narrative closure. Most encounters occur in ephemeral spaces such as planes, hotels, restaurants, and oceans that are impermissible for long-term inhabitation and host individuals from varied backgrounds. Unlike the culturally and emotionally weighted notion of home, these spaces allow temporary stepping outside the bounds of conventional life. They facilitate resilience and confessional intimacy by "erasing the boundary between in and out" (Kudos 118).

Such spaces carry dual potential: they grant temporary freedom while obstructing the permanence and reality of settled space. For instance, the hotel where Faye meets Paola is described as "plush as the one from which I'd come had been bleak. The walls of the vast lobby were paneled with dark wood and leather, and an air of mystery had been created by the use of columns and dim lighting and lowered section of ceiling, so although the people inside remained visible, it encouraged them to feel concealed" (Kudos 174). Emptied of personal history, these transient spaces provide opportunities for characters to leverage impermanence, allowing intimate stories to emerge while simultaneously situating them within repetitive patterns. In this way, narratives of marriage and divorce become themselves transient spaces, entered and exited repeatedly, appearing distinct but remaining fundamentally indistinguishable. Through this spatial and narrative design, the trilogy constructs a continuum in which characters operate as ciphers of shared, intimate stories.

In *Transit*, Faye's efforts to renovate her apartment and settle with her children remain unfinished, reflecting the broader impossibility of closure in her life. The narrator observes:

> I said that my current feelings of powerlessness had changed the way I looked at what happens and why, to the extent that I was beginning to see what other people called fate in the unfolding of events, as though living were merely an act of reading to find out what happens next. That idea [...] was strangely seductive, until you realised that it reduced other people to the moral status of characters and camouflaged their capacity to destroy (*Transit* 197-8).

The interplay between living and narrating highlights the constraints of agency: attempts to impose order on experience are repeatedly interrupted, revealing both the seductive and destructive potential of narrative control. In *Transit,* Faye's active engagement with her environment -renovating her apartment, attempting post-divorce intimacy- confronts these limits, mirroring the structural constraints of the trilogy's narratives. She reflects:

> For a long time, I said, I believed that it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there. But my decision to create a disturbance by renovating my house had awoken a different reality [...] I had started to desire power, because what I now realised was that other people had had it all along, that what I called fate was merely the reverberation of their will (198).

As the trilogy's central installment, *Transit* emphasizes the unfinished home and the unwritten self, echoing the impossibility of closure in narrative and intimate experience. At the conclusion, Faye relinquishes her endeavor: "[I] let myself silently out of the house" (260).

Throughout the trilogy, spaces resist forward movement and closure, critiquing progressive narratives of romantic love. Their circularity reinforces the repetition of entwined stories from beginning to end. Observing the uniformity of a hotel corridor, the narrator remarks:

> The hotel had a long central corridor on each floor with a row of rooms to either side [...] the doors continuously opening and closing in the reception lobby [...] Yet [...] when a guest was to be seen letting themselves into their room [...] something in their demeanor suggested they unconsciously believed their own room to be recognisable and distinct (*Kudos* 127).

Like the space of the book itself, which is a transient and temporary world traversed by the reader, these spaces do not lead to the comfort of a final destination. Still, they rotate around unending roads perpetuating "the additional danger of forgetting where [one] was supposed to be going" (95). Despite the *recognizability* of the characters' stories of marriage and divorce, their approach as the nexus of the intersection of other forms, such as economy, narration, and gender binarism, makes these stories indistinguishable. In their repetitiveness and circularity, these spatial metaphors overlap with social forms, uncovering the architectural design of intimacy in

the trilogy. The labyrinthine and enclosed nature of this spatial design and its crisscrossing with the iterative stories of intimacy is portrayed principally through the ordinary experiences of the subjects

2.1.4 The Language of the Ordinary

The narrative charts the intimate in the personal histories and the minutiae of the everyday and not in overlooking the ubiquity of the ordinary[47]. While such an approach threatens to be undervalued or dismissed as women's literature or a merely domestic concern, the narrator underscores its critical significance as a way of understanding how subjectivities and intersubjectivities work without risking the exclusion of the other from the story. She even introduces a male writer who entertains a similar literary interest. In her description of the latter's fiction, Sophia –a literary critic- ponders that what distinguishes this writer from his male peers is precisely his focus on subjects "our other male writers would not deign to touch" (*Kudos* 138). This assertion pertains to a classification of the domain of the domestic as an underrated and namely "female" subject of inquiry, which remains peripheral to serious literary themes. Sophia elaborates

> Domesticity […] and the ordinary life of the suburbs, the ordinary men and women and children who live there. These were things [...] that most writers would consider to be beneath them, pursuing instead the fantastical or the noteworthy, gathering around themes of public importance in the hope […] of increasing their own importance by doing so. Yet Luis had trounced them all with his simplicity, his honesty, his reverence for reality (*Kudos* 138).

Luis's style resonates with that of the narrator, whose reliance on simple sentence structures, uncluttered language, and familiar diction results in a prose that "encompasse[s] all the mundanities of domestic routine" (209). Yet the seemingly trivial monologues that arise from the randomness of everyday occurrences often ascend into philosophical and sociological reflections, demonstrating that "it's the random thing that is so often the tool to lever yourself out of your rut" (115).

The paradox of intimacy without self-disclosure that defines the narrator's voice extends to Cusk's broader literary practice. In crafting a new template for the female narrative voice,

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[47] *The Outline Trilogy* approaches the distress of entering and exiting relationships mainly through mundane particulars, that is, the minor components of domestic life such as a family dinner, the illness of a family pet, the presents exchanged between partners, and children's daily issues at school. Starting from the tangible world, it captures the sociality and universality of the ordinary and familiar and the opacity of the human experience.

Cusk resists abstraction. Her work, much like Natalia Ginzburg's, "is not abstract or overtly philosophical: it is deeply practical and personal. You come away from it feeling that you know the author profoundly, without having very much idea of who she is" (Cusk, "Violent Vocation"). This assertion applies to the narrator of the trilogy and her use of the most intimate tangible and experiential life details to attain to larger societal matters and to touch on questions of identity, gender issues, and social relationality. Drawing on the mundanity of daily experiences with precision and agility, *The Outline Trilogy* provides a detailed look into the world, a way of getting inside life -and not about life. The attentiveness to the details of family life and female experience while keeping a narrative distance endows the immediacy and familiarity of the subject with ethical complexity. This suggests that the framework of the mundane and oral storytelling is one of the routes to understanding the paradoxes of literary intimacies.

The first part of this chapter investigated how the text interrogates the storytelling practices by anchoring them in the narrative of the self and its intimate matters, destabilizing generic demarcations and readerly expectations. The second part explores how the collision of these aesthetic choices and social forms results in the creation of acts of moral transgression which articulate the cruelty of bonding.

2.2 Cruel Intimacies: The Wound and the Necessity

The more one reads in the trilogy, the more one realizes that the unsolicited confessions do not belong to their tellers nor to the listener. Because everything about the speakers is pretense, they remain vehicles for circulating disruptive episodes of literary intimacy, without granting access to the depth of their carriers. Using the aesthetic tools of exaggeration and dramatization, the narrator pushes the depiction of intimacy to the shore of cruelty and brutality - a space somehow unusual for the intimate to occupy. In doing so, she reveals a paradox at the heart of human bonds: that intimacy can wound as much as it connects. This tension surfaces early in the first installment, when Faye attempts to explain to her seatmate why her own marriage ended:

> It had been, in other words, our family home, and I had stayed to watch it become the grave of something I could no longer definitively call either a reality or an illusion […] It was impossible, I said in response to his question, to give the reasons why the marriage had ended: among other things a marriage is a system of belief, a story, and though it manifests itself in things that are real enough, the impulse that drives it is ultimately mysterious (*Outline* 10-11).

Her assertion that marriage is a "system of belief, a story" -driven by a mysterious impulse across illusion and reality, art and life, fact and fiction- diverts her interest from identifying the reasons for the end of marriage to understanding the working of its story. Focusing on *how* the stories of entering and exiting marriages are told and retold, patterns and connections are drawn. In her exploration of intimacy, the narrator repeatedly returns to the institution of heterosexual marriage, distilling its contradictions while foregrounding its continued salience as a conventional social structure in writing. As one character observes, "[m]arriage is still the best model for living […] or at least no one's been able to come up with a better one, so why shouldn't it work for writing?" (*Kudos* 120) Yet the cruelty that pervades the many stories of marital dissolution suggests that marriage is, in fact, an old story -one that demands to be re-told differently. The brutality of intimacy is staged most forcefully through two recurring motifs: the symbolic treatment of family pets, and the post-divorce polarization of power between male and female characters.

2.2.1 Visible Animals, Invisible Humans

Recurrent references to domestic pets in the trilogy are not merely incidental; they function as deliberate narrative instruments through which the cruelty of intimate relationships is exposed. As emblems of loyalty, dependency, and domestication, pets become symbolic extensions of the family unit, their fates exposing the fractures of intimate bonds. In fact, they are made hyper-visible in moments of conflict or rupture, while the human figures around them often recede into silence or invisibility. In these moments, animals become proxies for ethical tension: they reveal the imbalance, dependency, and emotional violence in domestic life, even as the humans around them often remain opaque or morally inscrutable.

In the opening conversation with her seatmate on the plane in *Kudos*, the latter relates the story of how he deliberately chooses to end his dog's life because of cancer. After their marriage, the speaker and his wife decide to get a dog for their suburban house, symbolically marking the entry into the new married life and the new responsibilities that align with it. The dog becomes tightly close to all the members of the family, particularly attending to the children; so "when their son was seriously ill with pneumonia last year, Pilot [the dog] had sat outside his room day and night and automatically came to get them if the child called for anything. He was attenuated to and even mirrored their daughter's periodic episodes of depression" (13). Interestingly, the dog is not only depicted as a social and emotional actor in the family but as the central emotional

pivot, assuming a role traditionally associated with the father. He is described as “a guard dog of the utmost vigilance and ruthlessness. People who didn’t know him were terrified of him, and rightly, because he would have killed them without hesitation if they had presented any threat to the members of the household” (14). He even compensates for the frequent absences of the father, ensuring that the family remains secure “knowing that the family would be safe in his absences” (14). Ironically, Pilot becomes the emotional surrogate substituting the real father and is considered by the wife and children not only a member but “the most important member of their family” (11). The dog, as his name suggests, becomes a *pilot* of the dispersed emotional nodes between the family members. Rarely speaking to each other and “constantly getting into arguments”, the speaker concludes that after his early retirement “[his] family complain that now [he’s] at home all the time, [he’s] trying to control them” and that the dog is the only point of agreement in the household to which everyone turns for emotional support and recognition (9).

The father’s relationship with Pilot is fraught with ambivalence. Because of the dog’s deep attachment to the children and wife, he chooses to withhold the truth about Pilot’s cancer, admitting that he fears “telling the others, because to be honest I’m not sure they wouldn’t rather had Pilot than me” (25). A devastatingly shocking declaration, the father implicitly expresses his jealousy of the dog because he substitutes him emotionally and functionally. He believes that while the others “loved Pilot”, it was him “who trained him and disciplined him and made him what he was. In a sense [he] created him […] to stand in for [him] when [he] wasn’t there” (26). However, he realizes that the alternative that he created to substitute his absence has made him disposable to his family. The story of Pilot illustrates how animals in the trilogy function as both mirrors and mediators of human emotion, exposing fractures in domestic life that remain largely invisible among the human characters themselves. By foregrounding the dog’s centrality and agency, the narrator dramatizes a reversal in perceptual and emotional hierarchy: the nonhuman becomes hyper-visible, while the humans -the very agents who create, care for, and rely on it- fade into relative obscurity. This dynamic underscores the paradoxical cruelty embedded in intimate bonds, where care and attachment coexist with jealousy, invisibility, and moral transgression. It is this oscillation between visibility and erasure, human and nonhuman, bonding and wounding.

Since everyone ignores that Pilot has cancer, when the pet starts gradually showing signs of death, the father decides to “put the animal out of [his] misery” (27). He believes that taking

the dog out of their lives can help him regain his position as a father and a husband and that "[they] were going to have to admit what [they] truly felt" (30). This decision highlights the rage of the speaker and his impatience to reach an end in this relationship that reduces his role as a father and a husband. Describing the dying process, which approximates an act of revenge, the speaker says,

> I didn't really know anything about the dying process […] and I realised I was beginning to feel impatient. It wasn't even that I wanted him to get it over with for his own sake. I just wanted something to happen [...] I wondered whether what I ought to be doing was knocking him out or putting a pillow over his face and whether I was just too weak or scared. And it felt weirdly like Pilot would have known the answer to that question (27-8).

The lack of empathy with the dying companion dog and the overabundance of the use of the first-person singular pronoun in the depiction of the scene of the death of the animal show the centeredness of the action around the speaker who eventually realizes that he is not really putting the animal "out of [his] misery", but instead putting an end to his own.

When digging the grave in the house yard, the depiction of the horrific scene is continuously revelatory of the amount of rage and brutality in what the speaker assumes to be acts of affection; "all the time as I was digging I couldn't tell whether what I was doing was manly and honourable or just fake as well, because at the same time as I was digging I was imagining telling people about it. I was imagining them talking about my physical strength and my decisiveness" (29). At the end of his long speech, he notes "[t]he only thing I couldn't get out was the mud under my fingernails" (31). This final reference signals a chilling normalization: the speaker claims to have moved past the emotional gravity of the act, with only the residue of mud remaining as a trace of the violence enacted. The interplay between the physical residue and the seatmate's storytelling skills problematizes the ontological status of the narrative. It raises the question of whether the story emanates from the character himself or is a product of Faye's narration. Yet whether the episode is "true" or invented is secondary to its ethical and affective force: the abrupt ending, with its focus on mud, forces the cruelty of the dog's death to linger in the reader's mind, reverberating across the trilogy. Such instances of shared, brutal intimacy are designed to resonate beyond their immediate context, circulating between unrelated characters and unknown readers, and thereby enacting the paradoxical violence at the heart of human bonds.

Unlike the dog who symbolizes guidance, protection, loyalty, alertness, and unconditional love, Linda's story about the hamster in the cage sustains that the latter is unfit to offer such an affection in return. However, its presence, contrary to the speaker's expectations, "solidified their bond [her husband's and daughter's] so that Linda felt left out" (*Kudos* 55). According to her, the hamster's presence does not provide "satisfactory companionship" as felt by her husband and daughter but instead a feeling of "the leverage this rodent gave her in describing the human triangle at home" (54-5). The presence of the pet helps accordingly materialize the idea of love for her and provide comparative tools for understanding how intimacy works. As a writer, she

> tried to write about the family dynamic before but somehow, no matter how cold it had come out of the freezer of her heart, it always ended up turning to mush in her hands. The problem, she now saw, was that she had been trying to describe her husband and daughter using materials -her feeling- that no one else could see. The solid fact of the hamster made all the difference (55).

She implies that writing about such intimate matters requires her stepping outside of the circle of relationality to privilege from the distance and to understand the cruelty lying within. It is rage that helps her realize the contradictory nature of love: its ability to bring kindness in tandem with cruelty. The physical presence of the hamster translated the workings of intimacy in the household to Linda who, seeing the development of the human-pet relation wonders "[w]hat kind of love was this, that needed the love *object domesticated* and *locked up*? And if there was love being handed out, why wasn't she getting any?" (55) She, in fact, sees in the imprisonment of the hamster and the pleasure of her husband and daughter with this form of companionship a mere pretense of love which gets its meaning from the confinement of the loved subject and from the self-absorption of the lover. Observing these dynamics, she "feels sorry for the hamster as the unwitting victim of the mutual narcissism of human relationships" (56). Because this relationship emerges as exclusionary of the other and resistant to sharing, it remains impenetrable.

While the presence of the hamster, in this instance, lends itself to be read as a metaphor for intimate human relationships in general, it highlights the cruel part of this relationality which requires the confinement of the other to the narcissism of the self. This resonates with the narrator's experience of writing relationships, according to which she pushes intimate relations to their darkest sides, revealing their ever-amounting degree of cruelty. The result is a depiction of intimacy not only as "cold" -in Eva Illouz's sense of the world- but mostly as cruel and

devastating. In the continuous readerly negotiations between the real and the fictive in the narrative, the narration of cruelty turns out to be an act of moral transgression that calls for questioning the ways we bond in contemporary society. The dominant story of marriage finds its shape in the narrative of progress, according to which the latter is understood in terms of accumulation of physical acquisition such as houses, children, cars, furniture, savings. Enclosing marriage within the mandates of such narrative results in the limitation of human imagination to given ways of bonding and forms of writing about these bonds. In this sense, acts of literary cruelty expose the ethical and imaginative constraints of conventional narratives of love, marriage, and domestic life.

The invisibility of the human other in the intimate relationship, the failure of long-lasting love unions, and the absence or difficulty of communication reiterate throughout the trilogy (*Outline* 32-3, 84,152; *Transit* 22-4, 246-8; *Kudos* 25-31, 54-5). These stories resonate across the texts, sharing numerous structural and thematic commonalities despite the unrelatedness of the speakers. Their repetition produces a circular, echoing, and resistant narrative, one that forecloses conventional notions of progress or closure. There are no exits or resolutions -only the unprecedented sharing of experiences and their often-shocking consequences. Irresolvable, cruel, and redundant, these episodes linger with the reader long after the books are closed. A further layer of cruelty emerges at the intersection of intimacy with gender power relations, revealing how relational and social structures interfere with narrative forms.

2.2.2 Painful Bonds: Marriage, Divorce, and the Limits of Love

The narrator explores another dimension of cruelty, one informed by the dialectic of gender inequality between male and female discourses of intimacy. Most characters as members of or affiliated with the literary circle in which the narrator operates, enact this polarization in both their personal relationships and their engagement in literature. This unequal positioning of the female and male voices unveils through the experiences of marriage and divorce as well as through the literary criticism of the valence of female and male fictional works -where the subject is mainly avoided because of its classification as a “less serious” feminine one.

2.2.2.1 Painful Exists:

The narrative of intimacy in the trilogy is closely intertwined with conventional narratives of love, marriage, and divorce or separation. Cinematic portrayals of intimacy and modern conceptions of selfhood have often promoted the view that relationships are confining,

while separation offers liberation. This section of the dissertation examines a paradox of literary intimacy: its simultaneous depiction as both constraining and liberating. In *The Outline Trilogy*, the decision to exit the marital institution is frequently aligned with an act of liberation, signaling release from the social and emotional confines of such social engagements. Similar to entering marriage -which consists of forming a pact based on free will and deliberate choice of the partner- divorce becomes the intentional act of untying the knot to regain or pursue an ideal of freedom. To take the example of *Kudos*, when talking about her husband and his changing behavior, the interviewer confides to the narrator that "[w]hat he had to tell me was not that our life together was over and that *I was free*, but that he was ill" (*Kudos* 79). The illness, in fact, impedes her attainability of freedom because it positions her in an awkward moral situation in which she is unable to exit the relationship. She thinks "[t]he one thing that was forbidden to me was to desert him in his time of need, despite the fact that I no longer loved him, and that equally he might not have ever loved me either" (80). They eventually continued living together "like sheep, grazing side by side, huddled next to one another in sleep, habituated and unthinking"(77). Even though she chooses to stay in the marriage, she continues fantasizing about the freedom that lies beyond its bounds and about "other men" in her "dreams." These fantasies result in feelings of "exquisite happiness that grew cold [...] and became disappointment." The disappointment is indissociable from the transient moments of happiness that she attains by relinquishing to her acts of illusory unfaithfulness. In fact, "the defining motivation of the modern era", as one of the characters claims, "is the pursuit of freedom from strictures or hardships of any kind" (*Kudos* 39). The pursuit of freedom is an end in itself yet is arguably unattainable as well as highly institutionalized and individualized. It is in the pursuit itself that the complexity emerges because, in their disengagement from their marriages; patriarchal systems; and obligations, the characters realize that the act of liberation is not eventually fulfilled as it remains a fantasy in itself. These forms prove to be inextricably related to each other to the point that the act of departure from one defies any possible fulfillment.

Fantasizing about the freedom(s) lying outside the constraint of the matrimonial institution, the narrator's interviewer Linda avows that "the truth was that I had long wondered *what might lie outside the circumscribed world of my marriage*, and what freedoms and pleasures might be waiting for me there" (*Kudos* 76-7, emphasis added). Yet even in her imagination, she remarks that she has "met people who have freed themselves from their family

relationships. Yet there often seems to be a kind of emptiness in that freedom, as though in order to dispense with their relatives they have had to dispense with a part of themselves" (81-2). Felecia, the translator of her books similarly affirms the counterintuitive impact that divorce has on her; "I had not, moreover, found freedom by leaving him: in fact, what I had done was forfeit all my rights, which he had only extended to me in the first place, and made myself into his slave" (223-4). The self-centeredness of the pursuit of freedom results in creating a common narrative that defines marriage and intimate heterosexual relations as confining experiences and divorce or separation as freeing ones. The heterosexual union becomes a "[u]nity in an ear of self-interest" where "[t]he one thing you can say about people for sure [...] is that they'll only free themselves if freedom is in their own interest" (*Kudos* 112). Yet such promises of freedom are ultimately illusory, clashing with the relational nature of the self. The loneliness and individualism associated with this desired freedom are themselves embedded in narrative structures: unlike relational narratives, stories of the isolated self lack dramatic material. As one character observes,

> What she did learn from all the books was something else, something she hadn't really been expecting, which was that the story of loneliness is much longer than the story of life. In the sense of what most people mean by living, she said. Without children or partner, without meaningful family or a home, a day can last an eternity: a life without those things is a life without a story, a life in which there is nothing -no narrative dramas- to alleviate the cruelly meticulous passing of time (*Transit* 141).

While narrative and marriage are two distinct forms, each trying to impose its own order against the other, they intersect; collide; and clash, creating new narratives and formal possibilities. None of the forms dominates the other, but they emerge continuously in competition. The narrator, crucially, resists granting marriage -whether as social institution or as a narrative trope- the conventional centrality it assumes in romantic narratives. The trilogy offers no progression toward a happy ending or definitive exit. Once this pact is entered, one remains entangled in its structures even after leaving them. In this paradox, both marriage and divorce appear as traps: the former confines intimacy within social and narrative structures, while the latter promises liberation only to reveal its own emptiness. As Faye concludes, freedom "is a home you leave once and can never go back to" (*Transit* 210).

Moreover, to further account for the mystical and unattainable nature of freedom and its conceptualization, Eduardo -one of the characters she encounters- describes a car trip he

had with his friends from Holland to a farmhouse in south Italy following a satnav. In the time they spent in the farmhouse, they were "marvelling at their own freedom and autonomy and the ease with which they had made this transition" (*Kudos* 168). Yet on their way home, the satnav stopped working and they realized that "[a]ll the time [...] when they thought they were free, they were in fact lost without knowing it" (168). Freedom here depends heavily on the direction-provider and accordingly becomes an illusion of freedom where the line between loss and liberation thins out. This scene denotes the illusory state of freedom and implies that the definition and perception of freedom is subjective and morally ambiguous because it is mainly self-centered. This form of self-assertive freedom "is perhaps the most prevalent form of freedom in personal relationships and [...] presents all the moral ambiguities of freedom in the institution of heterosexuality" (*The End of Love* 20).

This self-obsessed form of intimacy which is promoted by modernity reinforces the prioritization of the emotional and physical needs of the self while disregarding the other. The narrator summarizes this view in her description of a wedding in the lobby of the hotel

> Their faces [the wedded couple] wore an expression of self-consciousness, almost of culpability. I noticed that everyone there was around the same age as the married couple, and the absence of anyone older or younger made it seem as though these events were bound neither to the *future* nor the *pas*t, and that no one was entirely certain whether it was *freedom* or *irresponsibility* that had untethered them (*Kudos* 33, emphasis added).

The fine line between freedom and mutual responsibility in marriage is redrawn in this instance. Unbound, the couple enter the marriage with the belief in the absence of any guarantee that it will last. This loose tie assures that they do not fall into the trap of commitment and that they are able to untie the knot and exit the relationship at any moment. Zygmunt Baumann pinpoints that this form of relationality is the byproduct of "liquid modernity" which constantly highlights "the pleasures of togetherness in one breath with the horrors of enclosure" (*Liquid Love* xi). These forms of connections that come unburdened with the mandates of responsibility and ethical commitment leave the doors of entry and exit into intimate relationships open and transform accordingly relations into fragile grounds where acts of cruelty are pleasurably and inconsequentially enacted.

Consequently, the individualized pursuit of freedom accompanies the belief in the centrality of the subjective experience as well as the self-infliction of choice. If a marriage ends, the responsibility for its failure lays necessarily on the choosing subject. The repetition

of the story of marriage as confining and self-limiting, throughout the trilogy, emerges from a narrative that sidelines the notion of responsibility towards the other from the narrative of intimacy. Because the narrative of intimacy is predominantly self-centered, it undermines the presence of the Other within its own structure and assumptions. Precisely, this form of responsibility, which emanates from a recognition of the other, gestures towards an ethical or moral act that urges the individual to consider the other's interest in the narrative and personal decisions they make. In other words, the trilogy amounts to an act of sharing between fictional narrator and a real reader instead of being a mere act of enunciation.

2.2.3 The Narrative of Repetition: Gendered Bodies and the Cruel Performance of Intimacy

All the marriages and families that the narrator alludes to in the trilogy are heterosexual, touching heavily on the disparate gender views that the male and female speakers maintain. While the focus on heterosexual relationships dismisses other sexual identities and forms of relationality, the analysis does not aim at elucidating that this choice is discriminatory or exclusionary. On the contrary, such a choice narrows down the focus of the trilogy to heterosexual bonds and crosses with problems of gender polarities, to provide a flexible platform where the intertwined themes of feminism, intimacy, gender inequality, marriage, and divorce line up and converge. Together, these connections show the substantiality of the use of the body and sexuality in marriage markets and in the creation of unequal partner's intimate experiences.

In comparing herself to her divorcee's "glamorous lifestyle", Paola, as a matter of example, sees that her body is "getting older and barely seem[s] like a woman at all any more" (*Kudos* 210). She goes on to summarize all her romantic life in the constraining performance of her aging body

> I am no longer interested in having a man. *My body is asking for privacy*. It likes hiding under these loose clothes, just as if it was covered with the most disfiguring scars. It has finally cast out my lifelong belief in romantic love [...] because even at fifty I had somehow kept the idea of finding my true mate, as though he were the hero of a novel who had failed to turn up and had to be tracked down before the novel ended. But *my body knows better* […] *and it demands to be left alone* (*Kudos* 210, emphasis added).

The body becomes the locus of gender performance and the enactor of the intimate relation. The female body is portrayed in most of the female characters' stories along the trilogy as the carrier of the scars of motherhood, suffering, historical inequality, and domestic miseries. It exists

according to male guidelines and continues thriving in a patriarchal territory. The body's prime mission is to succeed as much as possible to conceal its wounds, display beauty, and continue to be a mystifying subject of desire. As one character observes: "[t]hese bodies continue to exist, getting older and uglier and telling them the truth they don't want to hear" (224). The female body in its entanglement between the pressure of performance energized by the competitive free market and the suffering incurred on the body as an object of desire becomes a carrier of a story of inequality that shows itself best in heterosexual forms of intimate relationships. Yet, as the stories of aging, rejection, and withdrawal reappear across the trilogy, they begin to form a shared language of recognition. The very repetition of these experiences -so often silenced in the public sphere- creates a subtle solidarity among women who inhabit the same narratives of confinement and loss. Repetition thus transforms from mere reiteration of pain into a collective act of witnessing, a narrative intimacy that connects even in its cruelty.

Another interviewer explains that "the job [she] do[es] [...] involves being looked at, and part of the reason [she] was given it was because of [her] ability to manipulate [her] appearance"(*Kudos* 194). Even though her male counterpart in the show does not have similar requirements for looking attractive or manipulating his appearance, she finds that the inequality does not stem from such a polarized demand. The locus of inequality is rather cultural and historical, and the notions of the body and beauty are tightly linked to their depiction in cultural contexts. The journalist states accordingly that "the power of beauty is a useful weapon that too often women disparage or misuse. My background is principally the visual rather than the literary arts […] because that is where these politics are decided and where the battles of life are mainly fought and it is also […] where the nature of male superiority is at its most exposed" (194). By describing beauty as both weapon and liability, she highlights the paradox of female agency within patriarchal systems of representation: women's presence depends on aesthetic attributes that are themselves defined and controlled by the male gaze. Beauty functions accordingly within male-defined parameters of value, making women's self-expression complicit in the very hierarchies it seems to challenge. In this sense, beauty becomes a metaphor for narrative visibility itself -the way women's bodies, emotions, and stories circulate as objects of perception and judgment. Faye uses the journalist's insight to reveal how both intimacy and representation are battlegrounds of visibility and control, where the female subject remains caught between self-assertion and self-objectification. Through this reflection, the trilogy

exposes the illusion of freedom within the aesthetic and emotional economies that structure gendered experience, showing how the politics of seeing and telling are inseparable from the politics of intimacy.

Furthermore, the interviewer ties together themes of gendered visibility, artistic creation, and narrative form. She foregrounds that the systemic inequalities extend from the domestic and professional realms into the artistic space and looks into how the "problem of recognition for female writers and artists" displays "the same inequalities that beset the home and the workplace could dictate what was presented to them as art" (189). Interestingly, she gives the example of the artist, painter and sculptor Louise Bourgeois whose work "concerned the private history of the female body, its suppression and exploitation and transmogrifications, its terrible malleability as a form and its capacity to create other forms" (189). Commenting on her famous spider sculptures which embody both the generative and entrapping dimensions of female creativity, the speaker opines that the female invisibility of the artist is what lies behind the public success of these works.

The ordering, patterning, and shaping of the different materials like bronze, granite, and steel in the creation of the huge spider sculpture reverberates the distinct forms it contains. Problematizing the relation between the inside and the outside, the personal and the social, and the artistic pleasure and repulsive fear of the gigantic body, the artist succeeds in bringing together distinct forms and materials while distancing herself from her artful project. In the act of aesthetic creation and similar to the spider, the artist is willing to efface her own self in favor of the other to find shape along the lines of her work. The spider, at once maternal and monstrous, represents the duality of the female artist's role -productive yet bound, visible only through the labor she leaves behind. This paradox mirrors the narrator's own aesthetic practice throughout *The Outline Trilogy*: like the spider, she spins intricate webs of stories that connect disparate lives while trying to maintain her own self-effacement. Like the spider, however, the handiness of her work cannot be concealed because the complex intersecting forms unveil a long process of weaving and nesting of disparate webs and networks together. The act of storytelling becomes, much like weaving, both an act of care and a form of entrapment. Indeed, Rachel Cusk views Bourgeois's spider as "benevolent and productive, a worker, a provider, but she is fundamentally unfree. She traps things in her web; she embroiders her tiny corner of the universe" (*Coventry* 144). Cusk thus aligns artistic creation with a gendered ethics of invisibility: the female creator,

while architect of form and meaning, remains fundamentally "unfree," caught within the very webs she weaves. After all, the reader is left with multiple distinct forms tightly layered together into a fictional web, unable to fully determine whether the work of the spider is finished or still incomplete. This handiness and fabrication are furthered by endless stories-within-stories and voices-within- voices about human hostility in intimate relationships. Through this analogy, the trilogy exposes the tension between authorship and erasure, production and constraint -an aesthetic of intimacy and entanglement that resists completion.

Seeing her sister's divorcee, Linda relays "when we drew close enough, I opened my mouth to speak, and only then did I see the expression of utter hatred on his face, so that for a moment I thought he might actually be about to spit at me" (*Kudos* 82-3). Another character comments that "[i]t was human nature [...] for people to wish *cruelty* on one another simply because they had been shown cruelty themselves, the repetition of behavioral forms was the curious panacea with which most people sought to relieve the suffering caused by precisely those same forms" (91 emphasis added). The idea of cruelty accompanying love is contingent upon the social organization of marriage and romantic relations. While the psychotherapeutic explanation provided by the speaker pathologizes suffering and explains it according to childhood traumas and individual experiencing of pain, it is shown to be a recurring pattern related to a certain discourse of self-blame for the failure of a relationship. The idea of self-infliction which holds the individual responsible for their own romantic miseries and pain individualizes the suffering and burdens the psyche with any potential failures that accompany the process of "not making the right choice" when choosing.

The self-infliction and the belief that accompanies the decision is expressed by Luis -one of the writers in the literary festival- who speculates that "they [the children of a divorce] are wounded [...] Wounded, and I don't know why this particular wound has been so deadly in the case of my son, but since I gave him the wound it is my job to tend him" (*Kudos* 159). Yet, he overtly argues that the cause of this wound is the selfishness of the partners; "it is impossible not to feel [...] that we have broken him, not out of malice but out of our own carelessness and selfishness." In another conversation, Linda describes the pain of separation which she ironically felt only because she thought that her husband is having an affair

> In that moment […] I felt our whole life cleave apart, as though someone had cut it open with a great bright blade; I almost felt I could see the sky and the open air through the ceiling of our kitchen and feel the wind and rain coming through the walls, I had watched

> other couples separate […] and it was usually like the separation of Siamese twins, a long-drawn-out agony that in the end makes two incomplete and sorrowing people out of what was one (79).

Once she learned that, it is not divorce that he is asking for, but a confession about his chronic illness, she avows that it "was so swift and sudden […] a mere slicing of the rope that tethered us, that it felt almost painless" (79). Opening to such brutal scenes of intimacy shows that cruelty becomes an intrinsic identifying variation of the intimate and urges for a reconsideration of the conventional notions of love and intimacy as exclusively, harmonious, private, and idealistic constructs. The underlying politics of intimate bonding show that the intimate is, in a way, a site of hierarchical play that implicates the heterosexual couple in an unjust terrain of action and experience. Love, whether at its inception or dissolution, is represented as a site of exploration of gender asymmetries, turning heterosexuality into one dimension of understanding how the discourse of intimacy helps naturalize the inequality in relationships.

Another enactment of this naturalization finds its expression in the family stigmatization of divorce. The idea of divorce as a stigma for women reverberates along the stories of the characters, who admittedly complain that society constantly inflicts blame on them for the end of the relationship. As a matter of example, Sophia, an accomplished writer, comments "[m]y mother is very kind to us [she and her son] […] despite the fact that I am the first member of my family to get divorced and that this is a stigma on her, which *she can't quite bring herself to let me forget*" (*Kudos* 133, emphasis added). Commenting on her sister's divorce, Linda remarks that "it was then that our mother's cruel words- that my sister hadn't deserved her husband- came back to me with their altered meaning. At the time it had seemed inexplicable to us all that my sister would leave such a husband, driving him into acts of whose callousness she was clearly the catalyst and doing irreparable harm to her children" (75). Felicia's divorce has had a tremendous financial impact on her, aggravating her conditions and care for her daughter. She recounts the difficulties she had the day her husband took the car from in front of her apartment without any prior notice.

However, she realizes that even though it was morally unacceptable for her divorcee - Stefano- to take the car without her permission and to impede her daily life with their daughter, it was legally permissible. She concludes that "Stefano does nothing on the basis of what is right or wrong, but instead acts only according to what the law will allow him to do. He understands that

the law can be used as his weapon, where I only think of it in connection with justice, by which time it is far too late" (219). This form of binarism which is generationally inherited and transmitted is translated in most public, social, and legal systems; "[t]hose laws are for men and maybe for children. But for women it's just an illusion [...] In law the woman is temporary, between the permanence of the land and the violence of the sea" (225). All the stories of separation uncover another dual aspect of intimacy in play, that of a gender-performing love story in which men are usually more privileged than their female counterparts even after exiting the relationship. Marriage and divorce have accordingly become "contested site[s] for the performance of gender identity" (Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* 9). According to the stories of divorce, most women explain that they ended up in less advantageous and more critical positions after the end of a marriage, a position that is socially, culturally, economically, and legally dictated. They find themselves, accordingly, under the moral, social, intimate, and legal obligations of taking care of the children while continuing to work, keeping "beautiful" and desired, legally fighting during the divorce proceedings and even after the legal end of the marital contract.

This disadvantageous position is solidified by cultural and social discourses that inflict significant repercussions on women at the end of a marriage. Beyond the legal and personal struggles accompanying separation, women face familial and societal censure that magnifies their vulnerability. Felicia's mother, for instance, asks her to remove her stuff out of the family home attic even though they are "disturbing nobody" (*Kudos* 220). Reiterating the narrative of self-infliction, the mother put the blame on her daughter and insists that "it was not her fault" to take the "mess" that Felicia has put herself into. With striking cruelty, she adds "you came from a nice home […] and yet you expect your child to live like a tramp [...] look at what all your *equality* has done for you- the men no longer respect you and can treat you like the dirt in their shoe […] I can't believe I brought such a woman into the world" (221). This accusation gains legitimacy through cultural narratives that attribute the success of marriage to the couple's unity but its failure to the woman's shortcomings. Likewise, Sophia summarizes the post-divorce struggle for women as follows:

> It seemed so unfair, she said, that while his father was driving around in his sports-car and visiting his girlfriend at her villa on the coast, I was stuck in a tiny flat in my hometown with a sick child and my mother calling me five times a day to tell me it was all my fault for being too outspoken and continuing to work after I got married. In this country, she said, the only power women recognise is the power of the slave, and the only justice they understand is the slave's fatalistic justice (*Kudos* 137).

The mothers' condemnations of their daughters' divorces reveal the societal fetishization of marriage, womanhood, and motherhood, exposing how women's rejection of the marital bond is framed as moral failure rather than personal agency. This unmasks the machinery of injustice within intimate relationships and notes its reiterative nature, showing that the gender politics are at the heart of the structures of beliefs and power in the intimate relation. As Sophia notes, after Stefano absconds with their daughter without warning for ten days, "his theft of Alessandra was a show of strength and a way of proving his power to me, that he could take her away and bring her back when he chose to […] this was what he was making clear to me by removing the child at will, that if I thought I had power- even if only the old power of the mother- I was completely mistaken" (223). The collision between the private and the public in women's experiences thus becomes the very backbone of intimacy and the shaper of gender politics, revealing how the structures of domestic life are saturated with gendered hierarchies and moral double standards.

The inequality that finds its roots in the bureaucratic, financial, and juridical practices becomes the engine of the heterosexual intimate relationship. For Faye -the writer-narrator-, these stories of polarized forms of intimacy translate to the literary world, where women writers, unlike their male counterparts, are constantly put under the pressure of proving comparatively the valence of their work. For them to be recognized in the literary circle, women writers are encouraged to grapple with "serious" topics and to depart from their concentration on "feminine matters" such as domesticity and intimacy (138). The struggle for recognition is distinctly gendered, as the expectations imposed on female authors differ fundamentally from those applied to their male counterparts. In fact, the latter are appreciated when tackling similar subjects. Giving the example of Luis who is praised for his "honesty" in approaching these matters, the critic notes that "if he were a woman [...] he would be scorned for his honesty, or at the very least no one care" (147). The same question, which surfaced in Chris Kraus's quotations at the beginning of this chapter, is raised by numerous other contemporary woman writers who find themselves continuously justifying their choices for writing about such a classified-as-feminine topic. In "The Second Shelf", American novelist Meg Wolitzer wonders

> If "The Marriage Plot," by Jeffrey Eugenides, had been written by a woman yet still had the same title and wedding ring on its cover, would it have received a great deal of serious literary attention? Or would this novel (which I loved) have been relegated to "Women's Fiction," that close-quartered lower shelf where books emphasizing relationships and the interior lives of women are often relegated? (Wolitzer)

Writing about domestic matters becomes an audacious act for women writers and an area worth avoiding if looking for literary recognition. The problems of domestic gender inequality translate consequently into aesthetic and literary problems of writing about these polarities.

The focus on writing about intimacy and domestic matters emerges as a public way of seeking legitimacy for these modes of private investigations. Commenting on the male-dominated panel in the literary festival in *Kudos*, Sophia remarks

> as though a woman's relationship to truth were at best unconscious, when in fact it might simply be the case that female truth- if such a thing can even be said to exist- is so interior and involuted that a common version of it can never be agreed on. It's a saddening thought, she said, that when a group of women get together, far from advancing the cause of femininity, they end up pathologizing it (132).

The question of femininity is shown to operate counter the agenda of feminism(s), in the sense that it is largely excluded from its main corpus of study. The deviation is explained by the normative approach to the feminine subject and by the overriding concern with the question of equality. By focusing on parity with men, the feminine quest is drained of its particularities and its distinctive trajectories. In her criticism of the coupon-based value exchange system at the conference, a writer notes that

> we invent these systems with the aim of ensuring fairness [...] yet the human situation is so complex that it always evades our attempts to encompass it […] chaos has arisen, and there are many regimes that have come to the conclusion it is human individuality that causes all the problems. If people were all the same [...] and shared a single point of view, it would of course make us much easier to organise (*Kudos* 104).

Working on these issues along the thin lines of imagination and reality, the trilogy teases the intricate processes and formations of woman's authority. Lauren Berlant, for instance, ponders that the persistence of inequality lies primarily in the "normative heterofemininity" which evokes generalization and overdetermination while sidestepping the specificities and multitude of the feminine (*The Female Complaint* 7).

This view is reinforced by the revelations of the #MeToo movement, which demonstrates that feminism -unlike other social or "democratic" struggles- is a distinct form of fight, requiring singularization and careful contextualization. Being the only form of "oppression" in which the oppressed is intimately related with the oppressor, marriage should be looked at across the recognition of the eruption of the private and the public. In fact, MeToo uncovered the

ambivalence that is previously seen as banal or as exclusively relevant and revelatory to the private domain. In that process, observation is the main route to understanding such an entangled phenomenon. As writer and historian Rebecca Solnit puts it, "MeToo was not the beginning of women speaking up, but of people listening", and it is precisely this attentive listening that the narrator of the trilogy cultivates to uncover the workings of gender injustice within intimate life(5). In a similar vein, Berlant pinpoints that

> Addressing femininity from the perspective of the mediated fantasies that magnetize many different kinds of women to the scene of suffering, sacrifice, survival, criticism, and sometimes sublimity that has historically provided the narrative of women's culture thus shows us something about the operation of mass-mediated identity-that is, how it manages to sublimate singularity on behalf of maintaining proximity to a vague prospect of social belonging via the generic or conventional plot that isolates an identity as the desired relay from weakness to strength, aloneness to sociability, abandonment to recognition, and solitary agency to reciprocity (*The Female Complaint* 11).

The creation of an elaborate imaginary of intimacy groups women along bonds of communal longing or what Berlant calls "lateral identification", which constrains them further in a shared narrative of "cruel optimism" or unfulfilled fantasies. Far from being sites of collaborative activity, these shared narratives entangle women in illusory communal promises and pursuits and in continuous states of disappointment as these narratives fail to align with their singularized experiences of the self. Such hollow communities embed the disillusionment into the ordinary experience of love, isolating women further and separating them from the everyday "real" struggles and concerns of femininity.

The "lateral identification" with a pre-written narrative of love disrupts forms of solidarities between women and furthers the development of loose communities, bound together by disguised identities. In her collection of non-fictional essays *Coventry*, Rachel Cusk complains that

> Marriage, motherhood and domesticity are regarded as so many choices, about which there is a limited entitlement to complain. If a woman feels suffocated and grounded and bewildered by her womanhood, she feels these things alone, as an individual: there is currently no public unity among women, because since the peak of feminism the task of woman has been to assimilate herself with man. She is, therefore, occluded, scattered, disguised (174).

Eager to depart from the structures and forms that oppress them, women unite through the quest of becoming equal with men, forfeiting in the process their own individuality and the specificity

of their quest. According to Cusk, there are two forms of women's writing: one is the "book of repetition" and the second is "the book of change" (*Coventry* 176). While the book of repetition revolves around writing "honestly" about the repetitive subjects of domesticity, motherhood and family life that are highly politicized, the book of change consists in a form of writing that attempts equivalence to masculine writing and negates the distinctiveness of both genders. However, a woman's writing should express the distinction instead of denying it and be unavoidably politicized because the subjects of her concerns are themselves politicized. To the question "why should she be politicised when she doesn't feel politicised?", Cusk elaborates that the answer lies primarily in the female body; "She can look at her own body: if a woman's body signifies anything, it is that repetition is more powerful than change" (164). By the ascending urge to be "equal to men" and to make a change, women's writing has bypassed the female subject and excluded it from their writing.

The pressure of getting their writings published and the fear of failure, rejection, or being less deserving than their male counterpart make twenty-first-century women writers, namely *writers of change*, more interested in denying their dependence than their distinction. Cusk eventually concludes that "the woman writer looking for work will still find plenty in the task of demystification, of breaking the silence that forms like fog around iterative female experience. She won't win the Man Booker Prize for writing the book of repetition: she will, as De Beauvoir perceived, irritate and antagonize rather than please" (176). In this type of writing that celebrates differences and singularities instead of similarities, acts of solidarities and collaborative acts of artistic and social creation are re-invented. The reward should accordingly be plural to encompass the gender differences and the specificities of the feminine. As suggested by the title of the final installment, *Kudos*, which denotes reward in the plural form, the book's central concern revolves around the pluralism inherent in the pursuit of justice. To assess the fairness of this endeavor, any rewards must likewise be understood as plural, distributed across multiple experiences, perspectives, and acts of recognition.

In *The Outline Trilogy*, Cusk vies away from the romantic representation of love as a transcendental emotion and from the enticement of romantic love in contemporary society. The dissolving of relationships, the "unloving" and the cruelty that accompanies the acts of intimacy construct her own storyline. She reinvents a form to contain the story of "unloving", a story where the narrator distances herself from the narrative and becomes instead an observer in an

attempt to understand the intersecting webs and nodes in these stories. From her own experience of the chaos of love emerges the irresolvable paradox that binds intimacy to the act of writing it. In a self-referential conclusion about the aesthetic and literary valence of the trilogy, a journalist asserts

> A work of art could not, ultimately, be negative: its material existence, its status as an object, could not help but be positive, a gain, an addition to the sum of what was. The self-destructive novel, like the self-destructive person, was something from which in the end you remained helplessly separated, forced to watch a spectacle- the soul turning on itself- in which you were powerless to intervene" (*Kudos* 181-2).

Despite the repetition of stories of cruel intimacies and unmaking marriages, the trilogy does not make a claim about the impossibility of connection but looks instead into unpredictable lines of encounters between the stories of characters -who never crossed paths- through the distanced presence of the narrator.

In fact, the connection becomes a possibility energized by the exchange of these stories and by the shared tools of storytelling. These are stories that connect through their ability to bring the other along the lines of the self. One of Faye's students asserts in *Outline*

> Since no one, amazingly, was hurt, it wasn't a story that would shock people and that you would tell for that reason. Nor did it really affect the friend who had told it to her in the first place, except by association, because she had a panel in her ceiling of the same type. So I received it, as it were, third-hand, but it is as real to me as if I had experienced it myself (155-6).

Another speaker in the second book affirms that "she remembered things as if they'd happened to her personally when in fact they were only things she'd read. She could swear on her life that this or that scene existed in her own memory, and actually it had nothing to do with her at all" (*Transit* 245). The recognition of connections and shared experiences amid scattered frames and storylines testifies to the view of narrative as a collaborative site, in which different subjects connect despite cruelty and unfamiliarity. The story of connection emerges accordingly from the repetitive stories of separation. The possibility of a shared common experience opens up the self *unto* the other, not through "lateral identification" but through the collaborative work of creative imagination.

Throughout the trilogy, the narrator rigorously experiments with a form of writing that brings numerous distinct forms of communication. As these forms gradually unfold, crossing back and forth between fiction and the social world, they testify that no form dominates or has a

priority over the others. The fictional world cannot fully organize the social one, nor does the social world lend itself to being entirely represented, organized, or mimicked in aesthetic form. The cruelties that characterize human intimate connections are contained in a narrative that enables connection through the repetitive acts of storytelling and through the collaborative aesthetic of narration. The choice of the narrative power of listening and ordering over the power of opposing, criticizing, or revealing interiorities, and construing subjectivities allows the narrator to seek relational and situational acts of narration instead of individual ones. In this sense, Cusk captures the paradoxes of intimacy in their relational, non-reciprocal exchanges, disrupting the conventional notions of emotional engagement and self-revelation. As a result, intimacy emerges as a layered and relational concept formed through the sharing of other's emotional experiences and not through the narrator's inner explorations. The trilogy urges readers to approach love and relational bonds analytically, rather than taking them for granted.

Resisting progress towards an end or toward arrival and completeness, the paradoxes of intimacy in the trilogy remain irresolvable, redundant, and hauntingly resonant. These are stories that seek connection through analytical scrutiny despite the unsettling weight of their revelations. Cusk's *Outline* Trilogy challenges the traditional novel form by dissolving the boundaries between narrator and listener, fiction and reality, self and other. Through the lens of relational storytelling, the trilogy exposes the limitations of conventional character-driven fiction and reimagines intimacy as an aesthetic and social construct. By rejecting plot-driven narratives and embracing an architecture of transient connections, Cusk crafts a radical literary experiment that redefines the role of fiction in capturing human experience. Her novels propose that the self is not an isolated entity, but an ever-evolving construct shaped by the act of listening and being heard. In addition, the narrative resists conventional autobiographical or confessional approaches to intimacy, favoring instead the meticulous analysis of human interaction and affect. This can be read as a form of "female style" in Namwali Serpell's sense in "Such Womanly Touches": a style that is neither decorative nor performative but emerges from ethical attentiveness to others, privileging observation and relational complexity over self-assertion. In this way, the *Outline Trilogy* exemplifies how women writers may develop formal strategies that respond to, rather than merely inhabit, the gendered expectations of literary style and subject matter.

In the next chapter, I look further into how the collision of aesthetic and social forms permits the construction of imaginative intimacies that turn the social world into an unpredictable field of possibilities for human and non-human (dis)connections.

3. Rational Hearts, Irrational Systems: Allegorical Satire and the Designing of Love in Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*

"'An android,' he said, 'doesn't care what happens to any other android. That's one of the indications we look for'" (Dick 86).

This line from *Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* encapsulates one of the novel's central questions -and a recurring preoccupation in contemporary cultural thought: the role of robots in human society and the ethical cost of their increasing likeness to human beings. The distinction between human and android, Dick suggests, rests on the capacity for empathy -that is the ability to feel *with* others. Yet this very distinction is unstable: if empathy can be simulated, the boundaries between human and machine, the real and the artificial, collapse. Such a paradox lies at the heart of *Margaret Atwood's The Heart Goes Last* (2015)[48], which reconfigures Dick's dilemma in a post-recession world of emotional automation. Through her heroine Charmaine, who "majored in Gerontology and Play Therapy, because […] she had empathy and a special gift for helping people" (14), Atwood revisits Dick's concern from a different angle, extending Dick's ethical dilemma beyond content into *form*. *The Heart* not only depicts the automation of empathy but also stages it through a narrative that simulates intimacy while withholding it. In so doing, it interrogates the mechanisms through which empathy itself becomes technologized, commodified, and performed, blurring the distinction between human *feeling* and programmed *affect*. In a sense, *The Heart* stages a laboratory for testing intimacy itself.

Set in a post-recession America where citizens trade freedom for security and comfort, the novel imagines a highly structured community -Consilience/Positron- that promises happiness, employment, and security through tight emotional management. Behind the pastel rhetoric of "*meaningful life*" and "*togetherness*", however, Atwood shows what happens when intimacy itself becomes programmable. The text thus functions both as dystopian satire and narrative experiment: it performs the same managerial logic it exposes, regulating the reader's

[48] Henceforth referred to as *The Heart*

emotional investment through parody, exaggeration, and abrupt narrative twists. Setting *The Heart* in an entangled chain of eerily experiments, the narrator unveils what happens when *market economies*, technology, and literary genre coalesce around the *matters of the heart*. Unlike Rachel Cusk and Marilynne Robinson's literary realism, Atwood's world appears deliberately "borderline literary" -flirting with popular culture through its action-driven plot and saturation of pop culture references. It is precisely through this flirtation that Atwood forces us to reconsider the boundaries of "literary intimacy". *The Heart,* however, does not lament intimacy under late capitalism; it stages it rather as something designed, managed, and optimized -and then shows how design is destined to fail. Following Frederick Bogel's conception of satire as "a poetics of disequilibrium," the novel refuses stable moral positions, oscillating between empathy and derision, nostalgia and negation (Bogel 246–57). Atwood's satire thus dismantles the binary between sentimental authenticity and cynical critique. Her narrative insists that the sentimental and the systemic are mutually constitutive: the very longing for "real feeling" fuels the economy that commodifies it.

The chapter unfolds in two major sections. The first examines the allegorical dimensions of Consilience as a satirical microcosm of emotional capitalism -its marketing of happiness, its architectures of surveillance, and its fabrication of synthetic emotions. The second turns to narrative form, exploring how Atwood translates social panopticism into a panoptic narration in which characters become puppets of an omniscient managerial voice.

Across both parts, the analysis teases out a major paradox: the tension between the novel's apparent faith in love and its simultaneous demolition of that faith. Rather than resolve these contradictions, this chapter argues that Atwood's achievement lies in sustaining them. Her dystopia of the human heart refuses to let the reader distinguish clearly between the satire's target and its complicity in the very structures it mocks.

First published as an e-Book serial entitled "Positron series" on Byliner platform in March 2012[49], *The Heart* started as an online experiment by its author who wanted to explore the

[49] The first installment was published in March 2012 and followed by a sequence of interconnected installments published progressively over a year (The four installments came as follows: *I'm Starved For You:* Positron 1 (2012), *Choke Collar:* Positron 2 (2012), *Erase Me*: Positron 3 (2013), *The Heart Goes Last*: Positron 4 (2013). Margaret Atwood describes her experiment with online series writing as an attempt to revive the literary tradition of serialization which is a popular form that finds its traces in the Victorian serial novels, mainly those of Charles Dickens. In addition to the numerous edits to the online version of *The Heart*, the second part of the book was never pre-published online.

affordances of the new online form of publication and its emerging readership. Soon after it found its way to print, the novel has been mostly condemned for being a "slapped-together pastiche" full of "dystopian clichés" (*The Heart Goes Last: Kirkus Reviews*). Grace Z. Li, for instance, criticizes that "because Atwood makes finding a hero so difficult, her accumulating plot twists can become tiresome and confusing." In Julie Judkins' view, the novel "devolves into a campy sexual farce complete with sadomasochism and men lusting after chickens." In the same vein, Sarah Lyall in *The New York Times* sees in *The Heart* a narrative that "loses control of itself" and "emerges as a strange quasi-sex romp concerned almost exclusively with erotic power, kinky impulses and the perversity of desire." This reception history itself testifies to the difficulty of locating *The Heart* within the hierarchies of literary value that its own narrative interrogates.

Far from being evidence of the author's waning narrative skills, such criticism reflects unease with the novel's resistance to maintaining a stable literary form and genre. By filling the text "to the brim with antic lovers and their stand-ins, seething brains, fantasies, mischief, and other inventive plot machinations", Atwood pushes the boundaries of intimacy itself, testing human relationality against its aesthetic representations (Rubenstein).

3.1 An Allegorical Satire of the Human Heart: "A Poetics of Disequilibrium"

The Heart resists a neat summary. Its multiple interwoven plotlines, extravagant twists, and dense web of cultural allusions[50]- ranging from Hollywood musicals and Doris Day to Milton and Shakespeare- create a deliberately labyrinthine structure. References to organ trafficking, baby-blood rejuvenation shots, euthanized outlaws, sex slavery through neurosurgery, customizable sex androids, Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe's impersonators, and even bestial sexual relations all at once signal the grotesque excess and ludicrous fictional world of the book. However, this mishmash world is somehow recognizable and serves a s a parody to cultural memory itself.

The novel opens amid economic collapse: "Then everything went to ratshit. Overnight, it felt like. Not just his own personal life: the whole card system, the whole system fell to

[50] The mixing of "high" and "popular" art in *The Heart* testifies to the vast intertextual and eclectic repertoire from which the writer draws, as well as to the question of the literariness of the work. *The Heart* includes literary references to T.S. Eliot, Milton's *Paradise Lost,* and William Shakespeare' *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It flirts simultaneously with pop cultural references ranging from Hollywood musicals, Doris Day, Mills Brothers, Bing Crosby, TV reality shows, and Disneyland characters such as Snow White, the Seven Dwarves, Winnie the Pooh.

pieces"(*The Heart* 7). From this blunt pronouncement of ruin, the text pivots toward an experiment in restoration. Consilience/Positron advertises itself as a closed-circuit utopian social experiment, providing financial security, a secure suburban house, and a full employment rate in return for voluntary work in the private prison of the town every alternating month. Couples like Stan and Charmaine, stripped of property and security, volunteer to alternate each month between domestic comfort and incarceration. The town promises perfect equilibrium -half freedom, half imprisonment -but this very symmetry constitutes the novel's central joke: in economizing life, Consilience converts feeling into currency. This economy of emotion turns intimacy into a measurable transaction, aligning love with the logic of exchange. In that sense, the crisis that is introduced as economic at the outset testifies to be primarily a social one, revolving around individuals' intimate relationships and their durability in times of crisis.

Soon after they join Consilience and regain the security of a stable job and the comfort of a home, the couple gets involved in extramarital affairs with their alternates, meaning the couple with whom they share their house when they serve their monthly time in the prison. Even though Consilience forbids any contact between the alternates of each house, Charmaine manages to start a physical affair with Max (or Phil, as his real name is revealed later in the narrative) while Stan's involvement with Jasmine remains a fantasy ignited by a note with a fuchsia lipstick that he finds behind the fridge and presumptuously identifies with the co-resident of their home. The note reads as follows "*Darling Max, I can hardly wait till next time. I'm starved for you! I need you so much. XXOO and you know what more- Jasmine*" (46). Only after months of fantasizing about Jasmine does Stan realize that Jasmine is not their alternate but his wife Charmaine.

Jocelyn -their alternate and the co-manager of the Consilience project- breaks the news by showing him the recorded videos of the infidelities. She coerces Stan into re-enacting the affair with her, then plots his escape from Consilience in an attempt to expose the underlying atrocities of the private town to the public outside. To "ship" him outside and uncover all the downsides of the experiment, Jocelyn uses the help of Charmaine who, ignorant of the plan at this point, euthanizes Stan during the Positron Prison's Procedure. The Procedure is Charmaine's main job as chief medication in the prison, according to which she sends outlaws away by giving them "merciful" injections (68). She is reassured afterward that she did not actually kill Stan and that the latter is "shipped" in a coffin to Las Vegas by Jocelyn -who will help her eventually join him. After enduring neurosurgery that conditions the subject to imprint with a love object,

Charmaine reunites with Stan; they have a second wedding and a child with a cartoonish name - Winnie Stanlit.

From the outset, the narrative sounds close to a drollery fraught with an irreverent tone, yet the reading of the book from a satirical viewpoint uncovers the seriousness and dark humor it embeds. The satirical intent is implied in Stan's realization mid-narrative that he is "finding it hard to take it seriously. But it is serious" (200). Merging elements of dystopian fiction with traits of satire, it allegorizes a futuristic space that refers to contemporary American society in its economic and social structures. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams defines satire as

> the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself (275).

Abrams' concise definition highlights two main characteristics of satire, which are the ridicule and laughter, yet it undermines one of the major generic problematics. It presents the criticized object of satire as a coherent entity that exists outside the textual world, against which the satirist and the reader align in their scorn. The satirical instance in *The Heart*, however, does not simply emerge from the act of derision of its object, which is placed outside its linguistic structure. Instead, it extends its satirical intent to its own narrative structure. In other words, it criticizes the social structures that exist in the real world as well as the aesthetic forms that narrate the problems of these structures. The object of satire becomes accordingly double-edged and defiant of any claim to univocal reading.

Both formalist and historical approaches treat satire as an attack whose end is self-evident, assuming the reader shares the satirist's moral stance (Bogel 14, 16). In *The Difference Satire Makes,* Frederick Bogel argues that both approaches suggest the univocality of textual meaning and undermine the reader's position, especially that the latter is expected to be compliant with the satirist against the criticized object[51]. This moral position undermines the specificity of the act of reading and maintains a belief in the singularity of identities and the consensual and pre-categorized view of right and wrong. Bogel promotes a view of satire as "the

[51] Criticizing both approaches to satire and calling for a different reading of satirical texts, Bogel asserts that the "criticism of satire is still […] poised guiltily between a formalist analysis that seems incomplete and a historical analysis that seems retrograde and antiliterary" (23). What Bogel suggests in his reading of literary texts from the Renaissance to the 19th century is that the compliance of the narrator and the reader against the satirized object is not devoid of problematics.

poetics of disequilibrium" because it is "an exploration of the structure of identity and difference that make political, social, and artistic change intelligible at all" (246-257). Satire, thus, provides the reader with spaces of negotiation between distinct structures of identity and encourages them to trace and explore their own connection to the satirized object, instead of passively identifying with it. The formalist unilateral requirement of the reader to go from text to context to decode the elements of satire is consequently dismantled in favor of a more negotiatory reading, especially since the boundary between the referential world and the fictional one is problematized. The context remains of interest to the fictional text, yet it does not unproblematically translate into a holistic representable unity.

In Margaret Atwood's fiction, multivocality is a structural choice as the writer believes in the impossibility of a unified truth asserting that "[n]obody can claim to have the absolute, whole, objective total, complete truth. The truth is composite, and that is a cheering thought. It mitigates tendencies toward autocracy" (in Van Spanckeren, Kathryn and Castro 232). In the same way, *The Heart* displays this "poetics of disequilibrium" in its structure as it suggests that the object of satire is not degraded, and the reader does not occupy the privileged position of judgment with the satirist. Since the reader is not intended to share the narrator's contempt for the criticized object, the satirical intention becomes devoid of any attempt at moral correction. The narrator withdraws from the moralist position to occupy instead the analyst one, refraining from political correctness and gesturing instead towards exposing the irresolvable paradoxes of intimacy and exploring the limitations and potentialities of writing about relationships at the turn of the millennium.

Far from drawing a clear-cut line between the moral and unethical, rightful and wrongful, fact and fiction, the narrative explores deformity as an integral part of the form. Put differently, the fictional world is constructed along the lines of the real one, and the shocking exaggeration is a springboard for ontological and epistemological inquiry into intimacy and its literary representations. As the narrator foreshadows at the beginning of the book,

> comedy is so cold and heartless, it makes fun of people's sadness. She [Charmaine] prefers the more dramatic shows where everyone's getting kidnapped or raped or shut up in a dark hole, and you aren't s upposed to laugh at it. You're supposed to be upset, the way you'd be if it was happening to you. Being upset is a warmer, close-up feeling, not a chilly distant feeling like laughing at people (17).

The quotation encapsulates the narrator's double-edged use of empathy and satire. Charmaine's preference for "warmer" dramatic shows, where the viewer is "supposed to be upset," exposes her desire for a scripted and consumable form of empathy -one that remains mediated by spectacle rather than genuine affective engagement. This longing for "closeness" is ironized by framing it within a mass-cultural grammar of sentimentality: empathy here is no longer spontaneous but pre-programmed, an emotional commodity to be consumed. Simultaneously, the narrator's remark that "comedy is so cold and heartless" draws attention to the ambivalence of satire itself, which oscillates between critical detachment and emotional engagement. The passage thus foregrounds the paradox at the heart of *The Heart*: intimacy and empathy are both desired and distrusted, simultaneously humanizing and dehumanized by their circulation through mediated and performative forms.

The commodification of emotion is dramatized through three main intersecting allegories. First, Consilience's rhetoric of happiness and nostalgia reproduces the language of neoliberal self-help and positive psychology. Second, its surveillance infrastructures literalize Shoshana Zuboff's "instrumentarian power," turning emotional life into data. Third, its manufacturing of sex robots and neurosurgical love operations extends Eva Illouz's concept of "emotional capitalism" to its grotesque extreme, where intimacy is both a product and a prototype. Across these allegories, *The Heart* turns sentimental desire into the raw material of satire.

3.1.1 Saving the Contemporary Soul: Marketing Happiness

In the narrative, Consilience is depicted as a utopian space that promises a better life to its inhabitants and an escape from the economic meltdown and crime-laden life outside of its walls. It offers permanent jobs, a cozy house, and a secure suburban life modelled after 1950s America "because that was the decade in which most people had self-identified as being happy. Which is one of the goals here: maximum possible happiness. Who wouldn't tick *that* box?" (41, italics in original). The choice of the fifties as a temporal frame is pointed: the decade marks the fusion of consumer capitalism with domestic sentimentality. The United States witnessed considerable economic prosperity during the 1950s, although this period was simultaneously marked by pervasive political and social conservatism, conformity, and the reinforcement of rigidly defined social roles. These norms structured private life and constructed an idealized image of the nuclear family, grounding polarities and segregation firmly in place. Encapsulating

the paradoxical character of the decade, cultural and literary scholar Martin Halliwell describes the 1950s as

> the decade of popular and avant-garde music; of abstract and commercial art; […] and of the growth of big corporations and increased membership of workers' unions. The decade was vilified in the 1960s for its conservatism, particularly by those who saw themselves as its victims: the young, black, female, and gay all found collective voices to denounce a decade that promised so much, but delivered little to those on the margins (4).

The Heart's reimagining of the 1950s through Consilience thus converts nostalgia into infrastructure: the yearning for happiness becomes the architecture of control. To account for this, Consilience rebrands the decade as the age of economic prosperity, social stability, and individual happiness, locating the satire in the nostalgic view of an overtly idealized temporal frame.

Built upon the nostalgia for a "once-beautiful country" and its "ideal" past of "RESILIENCE" and "security" and on a promise to retrieve these ideals, *The Heart* resonates powerfully with contemporary American discourse, particularly during the Trump Era. (Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* 39). The invocation of a return to greatness -embodied in slogans such as "Make America Great Again"- relies on the same mythologizing impulse that Atwood exposes: the selective remembering of prosperity and stability and the erasure of systemic exclusions that underpinned them. In Consilience and in the attempt to make "America […] a better place", the radicals and activists are executed during the Procedure because, as Ed warns, "you can't eat your so-called individual liberties, and the human spirit pays no bills" (38). By exchanging liberties in return for security, Consilience ensures its inhabitants' acquiescence to the narrative of communal good and profit accumulation. Laying out the problem in the adherence workshop, Ed hints at the crisis at play,

> Oblivion is increasingly attractive to the young, and even to the middle-aged, since why retain your brain when no amount of thinking can even begin to solve the problem? It isn't even a problem, it's beyond a problem. It's more like a looming collapse. Is their once-beautiful region, their once-beautiful country, doomed to be a wasteland of poverty and debris? (39)

In the fictional world of Consilience and in the contemporary political scene, the ideals of a "*meaningful life*" and "common good" are contingent upon submissiveness to rigid social structures. The desire for restoration accordingly results in creating deeper anxiety about insecurity, reducing the past into a single teleological narrative and stripping it of historical

complexity. From this lens, Atwood's satire teases the cultural logic of Trump-era America in which nostalgia is made into a means of legitimizing exclusion and reasserting hierarchical systems under the guise of national and individual prosperity.

Ed's speech to new adherents to the project unfolds as a salesman's pitch built on emotional manipulation:

> Who wouldn't rather eat well three times a day, and have a shower with more than a cupful of water, and wear clean clothes and sleep in a comfortable bed devoid of bedbugs? Not to mention the inspiring sense of *a shared purpose*. Rather than festering in some deserted condo crawling with black mold or crouching in a stench-filled trailer […] you'd have a gainful employment, three wholesome meals a day, a lawn to tend, a hedge to trim, *the assurance that you were contributing to the general good*, and a toilet that flushed. In a word, or rather three words: A MEANINGFUL LIFE. That was the last slogan on that last slide on the last PowerPoint. Something to take home with them. Their new home, right here inside Consilience. And inside Positron of course […] There is the final picture: a nest, with a golden egg shining within it (Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* 42 emphasis added).

The repetition of "last" at the end turns corporate language into a redundant chant. The recourse to metaphor ("a nest, with a golden egg shining within it"), rhetorical question ("Who wouldn't rather"), and comparison ("rather than festering in some deserted condo") fuses literary devices and managerial discourse with humor. The latter arises not only from the pronounced exaggeration but mostly from the collapse of the motivational pitch into theological promise: salvation is granted through compliance. Ed merges emotions and affect (*pathos*) on the one side and rationality and cognition (*logos*) to persuade his audience mainly through emotional arousal. The use of cognitive categories of comparison and causation, framed in affective and emotive language, highlights a major strategy in the social experiment: its dependence upon, and overabundance of, prescribed feelings to ensure its functionality. In short, the system must cultivate positive affect to function. As a result, happiness turns into a civic duty and unhappiness into treason.

Consilience is, in fact, not framed as a dictatorship as its techniques of power and control prove to be more diffuse and dissipated. The managerial discourse, for instance, allegorizes the communicative ethic and the management role advocated by the contemporary modern corporate discourse of the self. The manager of the project is characterized by what Illouz terms "communicative competence" that is, the "technology of self-management" and the skill to "coordinate actors *between and within themselves* […] with the aim of engineering inter- and

intra-emotional coordination" (*Cold Intimacies* 19). The manager attests to the salience of communication to market-based economies and to its substantiality in creating impact with the use of emotive language to generate instrumental action. Commenting on how the emotional and economic discourses shape each other, Eva Illouz writes that "[t]he economic sphere, far from being devoid of emotions, has been on the contrary saturated with affect, a kind of affect committed to and commanded by the imperative of cooperation"(23). By asserting that the economic sphere is "saturated with affect," Illouz challenges the traditional dichotomy that positions rationality and emotion as oppositional. Instead, she reveals how emotions are mobilized as productive resources within the capitalist systems -primordial for cooperation, loyalty, and motivation. The "imperative of cooperation" signals how affect is no longer merely a private or interpersonal matter but a structural requirement for economic functioning, particularly in service-oriented and neoliberal economies that depend on emotional labor and affective engagement.

Similarly, Ed's managerial discourse appropriates the emotional life of the adherents and turns feelings into instruments of control and productivity. Entangled in an echo chamber of his own creation, the Consilience manager rallies to impose a shared narrative. The solution for regaining social security and economic prosperity lies accordingly in the free labor that the latter offer in the prison of the town, especially that

> American slave workers couldn't outperform the slave workers in other countries. Competitiveness in the slave labour market was linked to the price of food, and Americans who remain goodhearted despite everything, stray-puppy rescuers every one- here Ed smiles indulgently, contemptuously- weren't ready to starve their prisoners while working them to the bone (39).

This overstatement highlights the salience of free human labor for the construction of a solid economic structure. Ironically relating exploitation with "good-heartedness", the discourses of competition and hierarchies are naturalized, in an attempt to deliver a form of corporate selfhood that is oriented toward self-optimization.

In this highly optimized space, Consilience ensures the centrality of happiness for its "working ants" (43). The register of positivity is overabundant: the currency labelled "Posidollars", the restaurant called "Together", the hotel named "Harmony", and the prison's name is changed from "the Upstate Correctional Institute" to Positron because "as a word, it just sounded, well, positive. And positivity was what was needed to solve our current problems" (41).

This register fetishizes happiness, flagrantly appropriates the discourse of psychotherapy and self-help, and transforms emotional lexicon into economic capital. This linguistic saturation exemplifies what Illouz refers to as "emotional capitalism".

In *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, Illouz and Cabanas opine that "[t]wenty-first-century capitalism has indeed given birth to a huge and powerful economy of happiness" (115). The promise of happiness dictates behaviors as well as directs human lives by maintaining their interest in the job, the commitment to corporate values, and the efficient management of emotions. They further argue that the science and industry of happiness, which feeds from the neoliberal alliance between psychologists, economists, and self-development gurus -namely self-help writers, coaches, positive psychologists, happiness experts, management trainers, learning consultants, motivational speakers- has weaved happiness and positive psychology into the fabric of power and have contributed to providing new channels of control and management of individuals (23). The emotional management of individuals ensures their containment within the market economy as well as their own recognition of self-worth. As Illouz and Cabanas further explain,

> happiness is now generally seen as a mindset that can be engineered through will power; the outcome of putting into practice our inner strengths and authentic selves; the only goal that makes life worth living […] Most importantly, happiness has come to be presented as the very epitome and incarnation of today's ideal image of the good citizen (Cabanas and Illouz 3).

Happiness as an imperative urges workers to be more productive and to feel more engaged with the corporate ethos of competition and creative labor. Therefore, making "'happy workers' […] has become a first-order concern for many corporations", turning happiness into a form of oppressive imperative (96). This tyranny finds its roots in the "positive psychological capital"(94).

Happiness has turned into capital by corporate governments because "[t]he notion suggests moving beyond the idea of 'human capital' [...] and focusing instead on the development of happiness-related aspects such as personal strengths, autonomy, self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience to increase workers' odds of success in challenging tasks" (94). The discourse of functionality, redemption, and communal success emerges from the mechanisms of emotional self-management, constant self-making, and personal optimization. Workers are trained to adapt their emotions to fit market demands, learning not only *how to act*

but *how to feel*. The constant emotional and cognitive adaptability of workers dictates and shapes the way that individuals should feel about others and even about themselves, turning happiness into an economic dictum. By embedding these references in bulk in the fictional world of Consilience, Atwood weaves a space of *emotional pornography* and implicates literary language itself in the mechanisms of persuasion. The satire doubles back on its medium: just as Consilience manufactures happiness, the novel manufactures irony. However, the reader's laughter, much like the adherent's positivity, risks becoming compulsory. In this sense, *The Heart* exposes the reader's own complicity in the economy of affect it satirizes: enjoying the irony means embracing this form of engineered happiness.

3.1.2 Watching the Heart: An Allegory of Surveillance Capitalism

If happiness in Consilience is marketed, intimacy is closely monitored. Unlike "the Eyes" who control the Handmaids in Atwood's dystopian theocratic Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the systems of surveillance and control are more diffuse in Consilience. The "Eyes" in Consilience are digitized personal data and information technology. Residents receive trackable scooters, code identities, and digital lockers to store their personal belongings during their prison months. The chains of surveillance are mainly servers, data collectors, facial-recognition readers, and enclosed internet networks, to the point that "you never know what the central IT people are tracking. The whole town is under a bell jar" (51). The bi-town operates under what Foucault calls "the Panopticon" in *Discipline and Punish*- the multiplicity of "see/being seen dyads" (6). However, Atwood updates the Panopticon for the digital age: data, instead of architecture, becomes the instrument of power.

The depiction of Consilience as a profitable penal facility blurs the boundary between punishment and autonomy, showing how mechanisms of surveillance and control are internalized by the subjects themselves. The view that "citizens were always a bit like inmates and inmates were always a bit like citizens" reveals the internalization of incarceration as a form of existence (145). Consilience is constructed in a way that subjects are monitored but incapable of negotiating the terms of their surveillance because "[i]f [they] signed up, it would be of [their] own free will" (33). Ironically, the deliberate choice of incarceration becomes the expression of free will. The citizens' voluntary participation in their own confinement reflects this logic of self-management: they become complicit in reproducing systems of control by managing their

own emotions. This observation mirrors one of the characteristics of late capitalist societies, according to which the pursuit of security justifies the erosion of intimacy.

Stan and Charmaine internalize the panoptic gaze, and the internalization of the disciplinary function makes their actions and behaviors permanently guided by pretense and performance. Their erotic life becomes performative under the imagined gaze of hidden cameras: "what if that TV sees [them]", and "they're watching her" (82, 153). However, this awareness of exposure does not simply result in anxiety; it generates pleasure and confirms their presence. Charmaine's defiant invitation -"Let him stare"- reveals the longing for visibility and the blurring of desire and surveillance (19). The internalization of the gaze transforms subjectivity itself: the self-display becomes inseparable from selfhood. As Byung-Chul Han argues in *The Transparency Society*, late-modern subjects seek visibility as validation through exposure, blurring the boundary between display and authenticity. *The Heart* ironizes this pursuit, showing how defiance -"Let him stare"- becomes a performance policed by the gaze. In this sense, the narrator's portrayal shows that exposure becomes both a mechanism of control and a source of pleasure, revealing how surveillance and self-expression converge in the economy of transparency.

The merging of digital means of surveillance and the prioritization of individualities to communities allegorizes the marriage of technology and capitalism in contemporary society and the interference of what Zuboff describes "instrumentarian power" in the private spaces. By that, Zuboff means the algorithmic governance of behavior through prediction (8). This form of power encapsulates the economic logic in action, especially when associated with digital technologies such as smartphones, online platforms, artificial intelligence, wearables, and digital wallets. Implementing predictive algorithms of human behavior, the instrumentarian power feeds primarily off the intrusion into the private experience of individuals and their translation into behavioral data. "Surveillance capitalism," therefore, "unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (Zuboff 8). Different in its dynamics, yet congruent in its ends with industrial and market capitalism, surveillance capitalism's use of behavioral patterns as capital builds a new economic model. As a result, Zuboff singles out the persistent dilemmas of knowledge, authority, and power within this economic order, concluding that the intimate practices resulting from this contemporary form of surveillance are "less immoral than amoral" (220). Atwood literalizes these dilemmas, turning every affective gesture

into data to be restored and tracked. The interpenetration of the private space with the public one takes accordingly the shape of the translation of emotional knowledge into forms of marketable experiences. The result is that the "entangled dilemmas of knowledge, authority, and power are no longer confined to workplaces as they were in the 1980s. Now their roots run deep through the necessities of daily life, mediating nearly every form of social participation" (4).

Shoshana Zuboff's "instrumentarian power" -the algorithmic governance of behavior through prediction -finds its fictional equivalent in Consilience's seamless integration of data and desire. In fact, every affective juncture becomes data. Charmaine's worth as an employee is quantified through "trustworthiness" metrics. Her personal and data self blur. Aurora, her supervisor, assures her, "It's not about you personally… It's your data. I'm sure you yourself are completely trustworthy in every way" (96-7). Ironically, the over-politeness of this reassurance covers the underlying atrocity it embeds. By separating the self from its data double, the system erases subjectivity while maintaining the rhetoric of autonomy. In this formulation, subjectivity is hollowed out and replaced by measurable entities such as trust indicators and behavioral predictions that determine one's social and economic value. The illusion of distinction between the "real" self and its data double functions as a mechanism of control, enabling surveillance capitalism to appropriate emotional life while maintaining the rhetoric of autonomy. As Zuboff argues, the commodification of experience transforms individuals into sources of predictive information, rendering interiority transparent to systems of extraction.

Different from industrial capitalism, surveillance capitalism threatens human nature itself and its ability to create uncontrolled and unpredictable forms of relationships. Instead of the workplace and the market, the capital is diffused to encompass the human private experience and intimate relations. Commenting on the heart management operation performed in Consilience, Budge reassures Stan, "'That way nobody feels exploited.' 'Wait a minute,' says Stan. 'Nobody's exploited?' 'I said nobody *feels* exploited, says Budge. 'Different thing'" (204, emphasis in original). By controlling and managing the feelings and behaviors of the workers, surveillance becomes integral to their intimate lives, blurring any boundary between the private and the public. Warning against this emergent form of digitized surveillance in the technological era, Atwood states that "with the notorious 9/11 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks in 2001, all that changed. Now it appears we face the prospect of two contradictory dystopias at once- open markets, closed minds- because state surveillance is back again with a vengeance"

(Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 148). "But now", the writer asserts, "it seems that we in the West are tacitly legitimizing the methods of the darker human past, upgraded technologically and sanctified to our own uses, of course. For the sake of freedom, freedom must be renounced. To move us toward the improved world- the utopia we're promised- dystopia must first hold sway" (148-9). In her call for denouncing freedom in the name of freedom, Atwood does not obviously root against free will but warns instead against ready-made freedoms. In other words, to overcome the caging restrictions, one should embrace, understand, and deconstruct them from within. Atwood's reflection in *In Other Worlds* thus contextualizes *The Heart* within a continuum of Western complicity in surveillance -freedom traded for its pre-given versions.

By aligning the management of the heart with the management of data, *The Heart* translates the logic of surveillance capitalism into an affective thematic and formal cage. In Consilience, love itself becomes predictive, optimized, and sold. The novel's satire thus exposes not only the loss of unpredictable intimate bonds but the algorithmic colonization of feelings.

3.1.3 Commodifying Feelings: Emotional capitalism and "Emodities"

That love is the central theme of the narrative is already palpable at the margins of the book. *The Heart* opens with epigraphs that combine quotes from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* with Ovid's "Pygmalion and Galatea" and a quote from Adam Frucci's "I had Sex with Furniture" from the Gizmodo online blog. Though unrelated in their historical, thematic, and generic affordances, these epigraphs set the tone of the novel and resonate a cluster of its major themes: love, sexual desire, and the attempts at replicating and controlling them. The mixing of high and popular art anticipates the eclectic repertoire from which Atwood draws, while underscoring a misogynistic view of love that objectifies women and paints them as commodities of desire[52].

Commenting on the social context of Elizabethan society in which it was developed, Shakespeare's comedy, for instance, reflects on the complexities of love and its artful representations. Likewise, the structure of *The Heart* echoes the plot of the play, culminating in a

[52] Outraged by women after witnessing the prostitution of the Propoetides of Cyprus, Pygmalion sees perfection in an ivory sculpture of a woman that he carved. Falling in love with his own creation, he kisses her, and she turns into a real being. Echoing the figure of Pygmalion in the narrative, Ed works on developing a line of customizable female sex robots to deliver to the global market to gratify the sexual and emotional desires of (namely male) customers (178). He even orders his own "extra lifelike" sexbot modelled after Charmaine (194). Fearing rejection, he resorts to artificial emotional intimacy, which proves to be a failure after his first trial with the robot goes wrong and he ends up hospitalized.

seemingly happy ending after a series of improbable plot twists and revised modern technologized forms of love potions[53]. The three paratextual epigraphs[54] capture the paradox of modern desire- the longing for intimacy coupled with the drive to mechanize and replicate it- revealing a world in which emotional connection is increasingly mediated by artificial forms of attachment. By juxtaposing these sources, *The Heart* frames love not as an eternal emotion but as a reproducible mechanism, a system of scripts and repetitions that traverses both literary and historical narratives.

Love in Consilience is not abolished but industrialized. The rationalization of the heart dramatizes the paradox at the core of the satire: the more perfectly intimacy is engineered, the less human it appears. In that light, the title phrase -the heart goes last- acquires layered resonance. It refers not only to the physical persistence of the organ but to its symbolic resistance: after every system of control, something unruly remains.

"Better than real" Sexual Robots

To resolve the need for intimacy, Consilience creates alternative non-human forms of physical relations, such as sexual robots or Possibilbots. Jocelyn defines the latter as a "line of exact-replica female sex aids" while the male characters refer to them as "[r]eplica women; slut machines" (Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* 165, 178). These robots are manufactured meticulously and aim to resolve an intimacy problem by granting men's sexual demands and immunizing them from the fear of rejection. Stan considers "the real-life pain they might prevent, the money they might make. Maybe all women should be robots, he thinks with a tinge of acid: the flesh-and-blood ones are out of control" (178). These emotional androids are

[53] These technologized "potions" take the form of neurosurgeries designed to imprint patients with the first object or subject they see post-surgery. However, the procedure results in a deceptive failure when one of the operated subjects imprints on a blue teddy bear rather than on the person who purchased her emotional modification. In a later instance, the surgery is performed on Charmaine, who is meant to imprint with Ed, but Jocelyn intervenes to ensure that Charmaine imprints with Stan instead.

[54] The third epigraph is a multimodal hypertext by journalist Adam Frucci, made possible by the affordances of digital platforms. Published on the website *Gizmodo: We Come from the Future*, the short online article ironically reproduces the consumerist logic of product reviews, as users rate and comment on buyable goods, services, and experiences. Participating in a different form of libidinal economy, Frucci's "I Had Sex with Furniture" humorously explores impersonal alternatives to human sexual relationships by touting and reviewing sex toys in the idiom of online commerce. The pursuit of sensual and sexual connection with non-human objects here stems from a fear of the irreducible paradoxes of real human intimacy. This epigraph directly echoes the narrative's own depictions of erotic alternatives -such as sexual encounters with chickens in the Positron prison or with sex robots in Las Vegas - where technologically mediated desire produces new configurations of intimacy that reinforce isolation and commodified eroticism.

designed with "heartbeats" to give the illusion that they "can actually *feel* you" (179, 186 emphasis in original). In addition to facial expressions and voice, some other human characteristics are attributed to the personalized robots to appeal to the customer's tastes: they can be "Welcoming […] Timid and Hesitant […] Lustful and Shameless […] Angry and Belligerent [...] Virgin […] plus a fewer other adjustments" (193). The manufacturing of customizable sex robots exposes the fusion of emotional desire with industrial production, testifying to the capitalist exploitation of affect. The book's depiction of this technological fantasy foregrounds society's belief that machinery can repair the fractures of intimacy it has itself produced.

As one of the workers remarks, "Possibilibots is for everyone" (192). On the surface, this remark echoes the inclusive rhetoric of consumer capitalism -suggesting accessibility and equality. However, beneath that inclusion lies a more unsettling implication: the normalization of emotional commodification and the democratization of artificial intimacy. In a broader sense, this literalizes what Zuboff and Illouz describe as the colonization of affect by market logic: emotions are no longer personal experiences but resources to be optimized, reproduced, and sold. Intimate sexual needs become therefore a new commodity circulated and customized by the market in order to be translated in the form of buyable utopian sites of gratification.

Touring the assembly line, Stan contemplates "[t]here are moving belts conveying thighs, hip joints, torsos; there are trays of hands, left and right. These body parts are man-made, they're not corpse portions, but nonetheless, the effect is ghoulish. Squint and you're in a morgue, he thinks; or else a slaughterhouse. Except there's no blood" (187). The grotesque depiction of the physical amputation and the bloodless morgue shows that the price for immediate gratification is the erasure of the other as other. In this light, the fear of loneliness collides with horror at its mechanization.

The reference to mechanistic dehumanization, the reduction of human interpersonal relationships, and the cognitive openness to automata disintegrates empathy for the actual human and transforms the latter into subhuman work-bots. To recall Philip K. Dick's opening quote to this chapter, the empathy which distinguishes human relationships from artificially constructed emotional intelligence in robots is absent to the point that the boundary between human and non-human becomes blurry and indistinguishable. The continuous malfunction of these "*better than real*" alternatives to human intimacy stresses the fact that artificial intelligence is destined to fall

short of human emotional intelligence (178 emphasis in original). The factory of love object visualizes what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism"- the attachment to fantasies that impede our flourishing (1). Stan's attraction to mechanical affection is precisely such optimism: he desires emotional safety at the cost of empathy itself.

Neurosurgical Intimate Operations: Rationalizing The Heart

The narrator pushes the logic of emotional management to its absurd and chilling extreme through Consilience's neurosurgical interventions, which literalize the rationalization of affect under neoliberal capitalism. The operation that imprints subjects with a fixed love object exemplifies the fantasy of total control over emotion, a fantasy that merges scientific rationality, therapeutic discourse, and market ideology. Explaining the urgent need for this intervention with his sales rhetoric, Ed states that "The human body is complex, my friends -more complex than we can hope to duplicate with what is, and can only be, a mechanical contrivance […] why not take an existing body and brain, and by a painless intervention, cause that entity -that person […] come across for you- cause her to home in on you and you alone (262). Reducing love to a Pavlovian response, the operation literalizes the fantasy of total management of the heart: transforming love into a programmable response and eliminating any emotional malfunction. Caught in psychobabble, Ed's pitch uses a therapeutic jargon while installing a market logic of guaranteed bonding. The managerial fantasy is here made literal: operating on the brain of a subject, they become "fixated on you. Only you. It can be done, they do it by changing the brain, it's like a magic love potion" (256). These potions aim at conditioning the heart by interfering with the cognitive functions of the individual, that is, by rationally managing the heart. "The thing is," Aurora explains to Charmaine, "people get lonely; they want someone to love them. That can be arranged for anyone now […] Why should anyone have to endure that kind of emotional damage?" (255) Aurora's question -whether love is choice or compulsion- echoes the central irony of the novel: the pursuit of control annihilates the very spontaneity and uncertainty that make love "human".

The narrator underlines the rationalization drive in Consilience's very branding - "CONSILIENCE = CONS + RESILIENCE. DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE" (Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* 41, 103, 116, 119). The capitalization of the logo, the use of mathematical operators, the mechanical precision in the numbering of the chapters, the linear causality, and the formulaic happy denouement all together emphasize the over-

rationalized nature of the project and its attempt to call attention to its algorithmic reasoning. Even narrative structure mirrors managerial efficiency: “It was time-share taken to its *logical* conclusion” (40 emphasis added). Moreover, the emphasis on the monetary transaction in the “buying” of time reverberates the capitalist impulse to colonize the future. The marketability of that future depends on the commodification of essential human experiences, namely, individual freedom and intimacy. Likewise, the over-rationalization of *The Heart*’s plot, through its reliance on linearity and causality, encloses the reader within a system of logical persuasion that mirrors the ideological confinement of Consilience itself, only to have this rationality disrupted toward the end. Mirroring the ideological confinement of Consilience, the narrative’s use of Roman numerals and subtitles further disciplines the reader’s movement through the text, compelling them to progress methodically within the novel’s tightly regulated narrative architecture. In this sense, these structural choices expose the algorithmic logic of late capitalism, wherein life itself becomes quantifiable, emotions programmable, and narrative -like labor- subject to the mechanisms of prediction, control, and optimization.

By imposing perfect narrative order, Atwood ridicules the reader’s expectations of emotional closure. In this sense, *The Heart* reenacts its own allegory of control. The same mechanisms that structure Consilience -positivity, surveillance, and optimization- govern the novel’s form. Not only do the married couple find themselves trapped within enclosed spaces -their car, the Positron prison, their ideological confines of monogamous marriages, and their own sexual fantasies- but they are also confined within a sequentially ordered narrative that denies them any genuine possibility of voice or agency. This entrapment mirrors in the same way the reader’s entrapment in a meticulously structured narrative.

Allegorizing both romanticism and intimate relations in fictional forms, the narrative demonstrates how love, as represented in the dystopian world of Consilience, becomes subject to mechanisms of surveillance and regulation, resulting in a panopticon-like construction of intimacy. It is a feeling already programmed by the systems that claim to protect it. The second part of this chapter shifts from context to text to analyze how the paradox of intimacy is aesthetically rendered by the narrator. It argues that panopticism operates not only within the diegetic world but also within the narrative structure itself-governing the relations between narrator(s) and characters. The excessive formal constructedness of the text, its self-conscious design, and calculated precision render its mechanisms of narration strikingly opaque, exposing

the very processes of surveillance, containment, and emotional regulation that the novel thematizes.

3.2 The Panoptic Narrative of Intimacy: Consensual Characters and the Mastermind Narrator (s)

Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* exposes not only the erosion of intimacy in the dystopian, hyper-capitalist world of Consilience but also the narrative mechanisms that reproduce this erosion within the text itself. Atwood's satire does not stop at representing systems of surveillance and emotional management; it *performs* them. Through the lens of its androgynous narrator, who alternates constantly between the points of view of the heterosexual couple, the reader is granted access to both characters' fractured interiorities. This shifting focalization delineates not only the dysfunction of intimacy but also how each gender participates in and perpetuates that dysfunction. While both Stan and Charmaine share ideological investments in similar normative narratives of love and marriage -the rationalization of emotion and the utopian faith in romantic redemption -they diverge sharply in the gendered views through which they perform and interpret intimacy. The narrative's alternation of focal points thus functions as a diagnostic tool, exposing how emotional regimes are internalized differently along gender lines while converging in reproducing the same illusion of freedom.

The dystopian setting of Consilience is staged through Stan's early apprehension of his own imprisonment within the experiment. His anxiety encapsulates the claustrophobic atmosphere of Atwood's world, as he confesses to feeling "[p]anic of a rat in a cage, with ample food and drink and even sex, though with no way out and the suspicions that it's part of an experiment that is sure to be painful" (*The Heart Goes Last* 92). Although Stan is partially aware of the experiment's horrors, he never attempts to rebel against or escape from the increasingly constrictive narrative that cages him. He excels at internalizing the disciplinary script. He becomes, in Foucault's terms, the subject who "inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline and Punish* 202). Charmaine's moments of doubt are, by contrast, brief and infrequent, underscoring her complicity and emotional compliance. Their participation is "out of free will", but this willingness exposes the paradox of power in late capitalism: subjection is sustained not through coercion but through self-regulation.

In Butlerian terms, both characters are inscribed in the performative reiterations of the normative discourses of love and intimacy. They know that taking part in the experiment does not set them free; it only reproduces *performance*. However, they never stop performing. They accordingly perform their pre-given cultural scripts of the dutiful wife, the repentant husband, the "textbook" couple, love, guilt, and rebellion (*The Heart* 170). They enact what Judith Butler refers to as the constitutive paradox of "performativity": their gender identities are produced by the same discourses that constrain them (*Gender Trouble* 187). Stan and Charmaine's performances of love reproduce the exact norms that confine them; they act intimacy in order to appear human within a dehumanizing system. Yet, their performativity "is not a singular act, but a reiteration of a norm" (*Bodies That Matter* 95). In that respect, the couple's conflict exposes not only the erosion of their humanity but, more crucially, their fatal malleability under the manipulative control of the narrator. The latter, assuming the role of a puppeteer, orchestrates their actions and emotions with calculated precision through irony and free indirect discourse, feeding on their resilience, fractured attachments, and passive submission to an increasingly hostile environment. Through this dynamic, *The Heart* transforms the act of narration itself into a mechanism of domination, where narratorial control mirrors the ideological and emotional confinement experienced by the characters. Atwood thus extends the logic of surveillance from the social to the aesthetic domain: narratorial omniscience itself becomes an allegory of power.

The novel is narrated by a third-person omniscient voice that alternates between the husband's and wife's interiorities through multiple focalizations. The lack of reciprocity and the distance between the couple are expressed earlier in the narrative, where Stan "feels so lonely, and sometimes having Charmaine with him makes him feel lonelier" (5). The couple's rift is reinforced through the divided focalization and the long passages of narrated and reported interior monologues. While the recourse to free indirect style recalls the modernist psychological novel, it here serves a satirical function: it ironically amplifies the characters' shallowness, predictability, and their own compliance with the narrator. Their predictability, however, does not help anticipate their destinies; it plays against any expectation. As tedious narrative arcs accumulate and plot twists proliferate, the reader's expectation of emotional depth gives way to ironic detachment. In fact, the choice of guinea pig protagonists, lacking psychological depth and plausibility, prevents any readerly identification with them. Instead, it invites their consideration

as symbols or motifs, urging the interpretation of the novel mainly through the lens of allegory or archetype.

In this hostile setting, the couple's only salvageable asset, according to them, is their said love for each other

> '[l]et's concentrate on the things we have' […] 'We have each other.' She's started to reach her arm from the back seat into the front, in order to touch Stan, to reassure him, but then she thought better of it. Stan might take it the wrong way, he'd want to get into the back seat with her, he'd want them to make love, and that could be so uncomfortable with the two of them squashed in together because her head would get jammed up against the car door and she'd start to slide sideways off the seat, with Stan working away at her as if she was a job he had to get done really fast, and her head going bump bump bump. It was not inspirational. (13).

Rich in irony, this passage juxtaposes sentimental language with mechanical physical image. It opens with an emotional reassurance of the redemptive power of love, which is shortly after undercut by the industrial register of labor and efficiency. Moving from the ideal of love to its depiction as a "job," intimacy becomes a ritualized performance of obligation rather than an act of connection. By employing the language of labor and positioning herself as a "job" to be completed, Charmaine exposes the dehumanizing, transactional quality of her relationship with Stan. This metaphor of *marriage-as-labor* underscores the emotional exhaustion of their partnership and the ideological rift between them: while Stan equates intimacy with physical satisfaction, Charmaine clings to its idealized, romantic version. The result is a portrait of love as both a site of work and disillusionment, where desire is shaped by duty rather than connection.

Their love functions as a signifier without a signified -an empty linguistic symbol that derives meaning only from occasional reminders of its supposed existence. In convincing herself of love's presence, Charmaine desperately clings to verbal affirmations such as "'Love you too,' maybe, though it came out more like a mumble […] Probably the poor man was almost asleep. He does love her, he said he'd love her forever. She was so grateful when she found him, or when he found her. When they found each other" (14). Her insistence on interpreting these gestures as proof of affection reveals the hollowness of their bond. The symbolic order of language, rather than fostering connection, only deepens the separation between self and other, erasing any potential for reciprocity or shared intimacy. To say that differently, language becomes a mechanism of containment or another system of signs for emotional compliance. Moreover, the narrative's constant alternation between Stan's and Charmaine's perspectives

mirrors the fragmentation, reinforcing how their internalized discourses of love and marriage trap them in isolated fantasies, denying them any chance of reciprocity and sharing. The narrative is, in this sense, a field of rivalry or a stage of competition, where empathy is reduced to surveillance.

In this sense, the couple's disconnection operates on both the diegetic and narratological levels. Their story is individualized to the point of isolation; cooperation gives way to competition, and the rhetoric of love is replaced by the pragmatics of survival. Charmaine's admission that "if she doesn't eliminate, she'll be eliminated" (150) captures this transformation succinctly. Survival supplants solidarity; affect becomes an instrument of self-preservation. The willingness to die for love -long a hallmark of romantic idealism- is exchanged by the willingness to *annihilate and outlive the other* in the name of love.

Intimacy becomes, here, a win-lose game: one's survival depends on the other's erasure. The romantic ideal of mutual devotion gives way to a logic of competitive endurance, mirroring the neoliberal ethos that underwrites Consilience itself. Yet this economy of love is not confined to the story world. The narrator's manipulative omniscience turns narrative form into another arena of domination, where the characters' gestures of affection are scripted, monitored, and optimized for effect. In this sense, *The Heart* exposes not only the emotional but also the aesthetic mechanisms of surveillance, transforming narrative omniscience into a panoptic gaze that entraps both characters and readers alike.

3.2.1 "Actors", "Puppets", "Fools", or "Rat[s] in the cage": Theatrical control and Satirical performance

The satire reaches its most cutting edge when -in an implied reference to the characters in *The Heart*, the narrator calls them "[c]lowns, jugglers, singers with guitars, zombie dancers, pirates, Batmen, whatever. Actors" (282-3). This self-reflexive commentary exposes the machinery at work: Atwood's characters are conscious fabrications forged by the artificiality of the emotional scripts they enact. Calling overtly for the acknowledgment of its illusory character and the amplified dramatization of its characters, the narrative refers metafictionally to its own diegetic and narrative constructedness and to the qualities of theatrical performance implied within. It eventually alludes to its resemblance to a stage where characters -like actors- show up and disappear alternatingly and are urged to "act" or to "[t]hink of it like acting" (233). Even their stage props are made available for them; "there it is, her coat: hanging on a hanger, ready

for her. It's like a stage prop" (172). The novel insists on showing its own strings, forcing readers to confront the mechanisms of manipulation behind fiction and intimacy.

Reminiscent of Beckett's theatre of the absurd, the omniscient narrator stages Stan and Charmaine as actors in a grotesque play of the human heart, showing their extreme shallowness, moral frailties, and narcissistic self-absorption. By pushing their own frailties to the point of extreme, the characters lay bare the "darkness" they attempt to conceal -the capacity for betrayal, violence, and even the will to annihilate the beloved in order to survive. They are caricatures more than characters, and their design is mostly structural, a function of narration that denies them interiority. Stripped of any depth or subjectivity, they cease to invite empathy and instead provoke discomfort or disdain, transforming readers into witnesses of affective failure rather than participants in empathetic readings. The allusion to the conflating readerly response and the confusion of the characters surfaces explicitly when the narrator notes that the audience "take hold of the strings, some with confusion, some with distrust, others maybe with pleasure, though it's hard to tell […] 'Isn't this nice?' they coo, in case there's any doubt, which there is. But no one has protested yet, so the act must be doing well enough, or at least well enough to convince" (283). In this instance, Atwood collapses the roles of spectator, reader, and character, implicating all within a shared mechanism of manipulation. The passage foregrounds the illusion of reality in the narrative and its simultaneous dismantling, producing a deliberate oscillation between immersion and distance.

This oscillation evokes Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect", whereby the reader's suspension of disbelief is continually interrupted to expose the artificiality of the performance and, paradoxically, to heighten critical engagement. Christopher Lasch captures this double movement:

> Brecht, instead of attempting to disguise the convention of the stage, deliberately called attention to them in order to subvert the suspension of disbelief. In the same way, experimental novelists have done whatever they can to alienate the readers in their works, and to remind him at every opportunity that art -like life itself- is a fiction: the arbitrary imposition of meaning on experiences otherwise meaningless. Modern writers have reversed Ibsen's formula: the reality they wish to re-create in their works is that of illusion (88).

The creation of the illusion and the breaking of the creation is what characterizes the fictional world of *The Heart*, transforming it into an "operating theatre" that dramatizes the creative forms of writing human intimate relationships (*The Heart*, 200).

However, the degree of rage and disdain at the characters' action is not absolute as it is alleviated by the intervention of a co-narrator who arrives mid-plot to strip the main narrator of some power and play and to divert the destiny of the in-their-way-to-be-"falling" characters (131). This results in the creation of a bifurcated narrator who oscillates between satirical distance and empathetic glimpses, between enslaving the characters and granting them occasional gates of escape. This tension creates another metafictional allegory of authorship: the narrator as both the jailer and liberator at once. Ultimately, Stan and Charmaine are rendered as caricatures rather than psychological subjects, their aesthetic function subordinated to the novel's satirical stance. They propagate narratively controlled illusions, embodying the paradox of modern intimacy: emotions designed by systems that both promise and foreclose freedom.

3.2.1.1 The Female Charm: "The poor mouse" performing positivity

Charmaine embodies the convergence of gendered performance and emotional capitalism at its best. Unlike Atwood's more defiant heroines -Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* or Elaine in *Cat's Eye*- Charmaine is not a rebel but a model subject. She is the perfect product of what Eva Illouz calls the "therapeutic emotional regime" (*Cold Intimacies* 10). Her docility, far from incidental, is the key object of *The Heart's* satire. She is described as "sweet, big-eyed, kiddie-faced blonde", a "fluffpot", "too vanilla", and "baby-powder scented" with a "chirpy childishly Barbie-doll voice" (Atwood 19, 101, 194, 67, 94). These infantilizing descriptions expose how femininity is aestheticized as innocence and compliance. Charmaine is highly domesticated into the role of the "good wife" and identifies herself unproblematically with normative gendered obligations. Her selfhood is not merely constrained by patriarchy but *manufactured* through it. She internalizes patriarchal clichés one after the other and retrieves her own worth from within the system of value judgment that she internalizes. Her self-construction revolves around what she calls her "I-am-a-good-person smile", a smile of an absent-minded angel with a childish lisp" (146). This smile, a mask of moral virtue and affective compliance, is her passport through life - "a Get Out of Jail Free card," she believes, "a universal security password like being in a wheelchair. Who would question it?" (146). The metaphor is telling: her face functions as a commodity in a culture where positivity is the supreme virtue. In this sense, Charmaine

personifies the neoliberal subject of emotional capitalism: her affective labor -visible through her cheerfulness, compliance, and charm- operates as both moral capital and mechanism of control. As Arlie Hochschild might observe, Charmaine's emotional performance is a form of work- an emotional labor. The smile, accordingly, is not merely expressive but self-regulatory- an emblem of how intimacy, under capitalism, becomes a form of self-surveillance**.**

The protagonist's constant internal monologues -"Cheer up, surely life is not so bad," "focus on positive thoughts," "think about flowers"- echo what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the "tyranny of optimism" (99, 137, 198). The voice of Grandma Win, Charmaine's internalized superego, operates as an algorithm of self-help, translating trauma into toxic positivity[55] or into "the tyranny of optimism". The internalized commands to "let go of grudges" and "not look back in anger" parodies the neoliberal management of emotion, where negative feelings must be repackaged into motivational assets (138).

Charmaine's sentimental compliance, however, is not mere stupidity. It dramatizes the gendered burden of affective labor -the expectation that women must sustain emotional equilibrium even within dehumanizing structures. Her compulsive reassurance that Stan is "a good man underneath" and eagerness to be "pleasing" and "grateful," enact what Hochschild calls "the managed heart" (4). According to Hochschild, the management of one's emotions to create a publicly observable emotional display results in the commercialization of human feelings. This kind of management is amplified in the narrative through the coegraphing of Charmaine's grief. Rehearsing with her Stan's funeral, Aurora a Consilience's superior, dictates Charmaine's mourning like a script: "I do feel your pain. It must be so, well so painful. The pain that you feel. We've booked a trauma counselor for you, because of course you will be experiencing survivor's guilt" (163). The therapeutic jargon, overdetermined and absurdly redundant, underscores the emotional management at play and the main frailty in Charmaine's character: her willingness to be an emotionally managed character.

[55] In "Pitch", the second part of the novel, Charmaine describes Lucinda Quint's show *The Home Front* as "encouraging" until "Lucinda got cancer and went bald and started streaming video of herself being sick, right from her hospital room". At this point, Charmaine finds it "depressing" and stops watching to preserve her "positive energy" (140). Her reaction exemplifies the novel's critique of affective self-regulation: she deliberately retreats from empathy to maintain her emotional equilibrium. The same logic of positivity pervades her physical appearance -her preference for "floral patterns," bright "nail polish," and daisy wallpaper- until, at Stan's funeral, she realizes she owns no black clothes because "black has never been her colour" (188).

The protagonist's theatrical femininity is at once her capital and her cage. She performs womanhood as spectacle, internalizing the male gaze to the point of appropriating it. Haunted by her reflection(s), she rehearses her gestures and strives to please others and to pertain to their tastes; she "widens her eyes in the mirror […] Her eyes are still a little puffy […] Alluring, or not? That would depend on a man's taste: whether he's aroused by fragility with a hint of smouldering underneath, or perhaps a hint of a pinch in the eye" (188). Her obsession with her appearance anchors her in the role of an actress, continuously performing herself to be appealing to her spectators. Susceptible to the "male gaze", to use Laura Mulvey's terms, Charmaine -and as her name suggests- becomes an epitome of female charm, a "Barbie doll", and a sexual object designed for consumption (94).

Her existence is, in a way, defined by her visibility and performativity. If the act ends, so does Charmaine. For instance, when Ed shows up to pick her up for Stan's funeral, her grief dissolves under the thrill of being seen: "Does Charmaine feel flattered? Yes, she does. This feeling is not a good thing morally, she knows that. She should be too distraught by the death of Stan to feel flattered about anything. But still. She smiles uncertainly" (191 emphasis in original). The irony here is pointed: this female portrait falls squarely in a social paradigm that codifies and guides female subjectivities by the male gaze. The character's latitude and projection of a form of plastic femininity place her at the heart of performativity: she is the actress and the audience. In Laura Mulvey's terms, Charmaine embodies "to-be-looked-at-ness". "The determining male gaze," Mulvey writes, "projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness"* (Mulvey 837).

Flattered by surveillance, the female protagonist subscribes fully to the fetishized fantasy that works to objectify her. "Straightening up," Charmaine "sees herself in the mirror -she's still in good shape, not too tired-looking despite the restless night- and catches the man staring at her. She turns her eyes away. Was she teasing, was she flaunting it, bending over like that? No, she was only doing her job. Let him stare" (19). She gazes at herself being gazed at, finding pleasure in being the object of the gaze. Her obsession with her "to-be-looked-at-ness" takes the form of a subject surrounded by mirrors, shadows of the self, or shattered reflections in which she continuously seeks reassurance in her power to impress others and captivate their attention (19,

188, 191, 222). The need for the other, only as a mirror of the self, reduces their otherness to the point of eroding it. According to Byung-Chul Han, "the erosion is occurring in all spheres of life; its corollary is the mounting narcissification of the Self" (1). Charmaine's obsession with self-presentation exemplifies this collapse of intimacy into visibility. The other becomes merely a mirror, eroding alterity in favor of self-confirmation.

Performing herself as a gendered subject or an object of (male) desire, she is often reminded by her reflection that her performance furthers her fractured being; "[s]he checks herself in the mirror, refreshes her lips. Why is it she's finding Ed so hard to be with? It's because he's like that weirdo psycho nerd who admired her so much in high school […] Get real Charmaine, her reflection says to her. He didn't just admire you. He had a nauseating sexual crush on you" (222). Indifferent to such realizations, she is immune to any attempt at questioning her self-centered world of fantasies and contends with projecting the picture that others admire. In fact, her narcissism prevents her from seeing beyond herself. The overt staging of socially prescribed roles in the portrait of Charmaine and the making visible of the performance outline the view of the self as a masquerade unable to forge other than performative relationships. "Womanliness", in fact, "tends to be portrayed in many of Atwood's novels as a mask, a disguise that stubbornly resists interpretation; woman's adornment becomes merely a simulation to please a masculine scopic economy of pleasure" (Rao 132). By being reduced to an object of desire and by her acceptance of identification with this object, she becomes a mere stranger to herself, an actress performing for the other.

Furthermore, Charmaine's adultery reproduces, rather than resists, the parameters of her imprisonment. Her affair in Consilience is not an act of romantic transgression but a reenactment of patriarchal pre-given narratives. Torn between Stan—the emblem of "solid ground," the logical extension of the "good girl" paradigm -and Max -the embodiment of desire and rebellion- Charmaine performs the virgin-whore dichotomy that structures female identity in patriarchal culture. Reflecting on her lipstick, she notes: "that lipstick kiss was so tawdry. […] Stan would never put up with her wearing a garish hue like that -Purple Passion is its name, such bad taste. Which is why she bought it: that's how she thinks of her feelings toward Max. Purple. Passionate. Garish" (54). Charmaine's affair is less an act of liberation than a reiteration of cultural scripts that equate female passion with moral decay.

The Heart deploys adultery ironically. The leitmotif of romantic transgression only reveals its exhaustion: love becomes a genre as hollow as the positivity Charmaine performs. The narrator's free indirect discourse blurs sympathy and critique, trapping the reader between laughter and pity. "Women with overactive romantic imaginations" are not mocked but mourned as byproducts of the same emotional capitalism that demands constant emotional labor from them (85). The love triangle ultimately expands into a "sexual spaghetti" and collapses into farce -"not Max, but a shadow of Max. A Max-like person" -dissolving into a formulaic "happy ending" (211, 306). The novel's structure thus mirrors Charmaine's own fate: intimacy routinized into predictability.

The narrator's exploration and construction of femininity using free indirect style in *The Heart* takes an ironic turn. It redefines the power relation between narrator and character where the narrator performs a form of mind-framing instead of a mind-reading of the character, resulting in confusion between the ideological and aesthetic stances in the narrative. In sum, the narrator constructs a female protagonist and makes it hard to sympathize or identify with her while overtly refusing any attempt to victimize her. As Roxanne J. Fand argues in *The Dialogic Self*, "the hope in Atwood's tales is not explicit, but implied mostly by way of cautionary emphasis. 'Progress' for her protagonists is usually minimal or nonexistent, and ambiguous in any case […] Atwood's hope lies in 'a new way of seeing' for the victim, the way of being a 'creative non-victim' by imagining positions between the voices of power and victimization" (157). Charmaine, however, achieves no such vision. She is neither victim nor villain but the perfect instrument of satire, both symptom and mirror of the world she inhabits. She is the "poor mouse" of Consilience -docile, trained, and willingly complicit in her own containment (145).

The experiment of the female heroine culminates when she is ordered to perform the Procedure on her husband, a scene that crystallizes the narrative's criticism of emotional rationalization. Testing her loyalty to the social project that she signed herself up for, Charmaine is warned, "you have now chosen. There are only two kinds of people admitted to the Medications administration wing, those who do and those who are done to. You have elected the role of those who do. If you fail, the consequences to yourself will be severe. You may find yourself playing the other role" (150). This threat is indicative of the larger role Charmaine plays within the novel; it defines acting as oppression. For the female character to survive and to have a story, the male character needs to be effaced. This condition uncovers one of the puzzling

aspects of the narrative of intimacy and of this marriage, which appears to be destined from the start to be a failure. Attending to the hostility and strangeness of the experiment, she puzzles over her ability to carry on with the act: "[g]et hold of yourself, Charmaine, she tells herself. Don't be sentimental. Remember it's a test. They're watching her. They can't be serious about this. They can't expect her -not to kill, no she will not use the *kill* word. They can't expect her to relocate her own husband" (153). Recalling Joseph K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial,* who is prosecuted for a crime that is never revealed to him or to the readers, the Procedure is an act of incomprehensible punishment that complicates the feeling of guilt, only this time for the prosecutor and the criminal at the same time. In that sense, Charmaine becomes both executioner and accused, condemned for her humanity and rewarded for its suppression.

Commenting on Charmaine's performance of the execution, Aurora exposes the absurd act of emotional control:

> we happen to have taped the entire process [...] It was very... it was touching. Watching you struggle with your emotions. I was moved, I really was, we all were! We could see you faltering, it was only natural, I mean, who wouldn't? You'd have to be inhuman. But you did overcome them, those emotions! Don't think we haven't noted that. The overcoming. Of the emotions (162).

Charmaine's 'overcoming' of emotion is the novel's ultimate irony: a moment of moral triumph that signals complete dehumanization. In a Kafkaesque moment, the narrator pushes the experiment to the extreme and tests the viability of the narrative against the rationalized and inhuman forms of intimacy. The crime, like Joseph K.'s in *The Trial*, is never specified because it is existential and never physical: the couple's crime is their deliberate rejection of their own humanity and their helplessness in front of an overwhelming and incomprehensible authority. In performing the Procedure, Charmaine annihilates not only her husband but the principle of intimacy itself. The rational conquers the emotional; the mind symbolically conquers the heart. Ultimately, Charmaine's story allegorizes the collapse of relational ethics under surveillance capitalism. Her survival depends on erasure -of love, of guilt, of the other. The "I" in Atwood's dystopian experiment can only persist by eliminating the "you." In betraying the heart, Charmaine enacts the novel's title: it is the heart that goes last -sacrificed on the illusion of happiness, the reiteration of pre-given norms and ideologies, and the performance of feelings.

3.2.1.2 The Male panic and the Narcissism of Fantasy

If Charmaine's world is defined by her compulsive submission to the language of positivity and control, Stan's inner life exposes the opposite pole of Atwood's satire: the collapse of masculine subjectivity under the pressure of desire, competition, and loss of narrative agency. His arc transforms the logic of dystopia into a study of *male panic*, where fantasy becomes both the symptom and the substitute for intimacy. He is portrayed as "too soft", "*pussy-whipped*", "a dupe of the system, an ass-kisser, a farce, and a coward" (*The Heart Goes Last* 35, 36, 4). Like Charmaine, he is a product of the same disciplinary machine- but his rebellion is a mirror image of her compliance.

Stan's habitual "grouch[iness]" functions as a defense mechanism masking his financial breakdown and deep sense of emasculation (27). Charmaine's relentless cheerfulness, far from alleviating his despair, intensifies it: "But why is he being so negative? *Honey, why are you being so negative*? he hears in his head: Charmaine's chirpy, childishly high Barbie-doll voice. *Surely your life isn't that bad*! The implication being: with her in it. *Stuff it*, he tells the voice. The voice gives a little shocked *Oh*, then pops like a bubble" (94). This brief interior scene exposes the full machinery of emotional capitalism at work within the couple's intimacy. Charmaine's performed positivity becomes oppressive- a hollow voice that mocks Stan's disempowerment and despair, turning reassurance into control. The devastating implication of her being "with him" reveals how optimism, meant to sustain intimacy, instead erodes it. Her empathy becomes narcissism: love turns into a performative feedback loop in which she wants to be the *proof* of his happiness rather than its *partner*. The "pop" metaphor signals the collapse of this artificial construct, like a hologram of happiness dissolving. For a fleeting instant, Stan's defiance ("Stuff it") gestures toward liberation, a refusal of the internalized demand for positivity. Yet this proves to be a sham moment of liberation: the only way to silence the voice is through its destruction- through the destruction of intimacy. The scene literalizes how emotional surveillance operates within relationships: when emotion becomes a system of management, intimacy can survive only as an *illusion*.

The narrative is largely focalized through Stan, granting access to his uncertainty and loneliness. His wordiness, though, does not reflect psychological depth so much as it depicts him as a lethargic person unable to decide for himself or alter his own fate. Despite all his suspicions, "Stan has never heard so much bullshit in his life. On the other hand, he sort of wants to believe

it" (37). The longing for belief, despite all the signs that obstruct such a belief, is not an act of faith but a symptom of dependency on illusion. Even when he realizes that "this place is some sort of pyramid scheme, and [...] those who fail to understand that will be left empty-handed", he immediately notes that "there's no obvious reason for this feeling of his. Maybe he's ungrateful by nature" (44). He does not attempt to escape this scheme and instead recurrently "'agree[s],' [...] because agreement is called for", overlooking every opportunity to re-invent or re-create himself throughout the narrative and consenting with others to take charge and responsibility to decide his own fate (130). This consensual passivity is a form of self-regulatory mechanism that embeds the oppression within the subject. Collapsing into a paralysis of action, he is a content bystander in his own marriage and in his own story.

Stan's imagination is saturated by the logics of marketing and consumer fantasy. His fantasies about Jasmine, the mysterious woman of the lipstick note, expose how desire itself has been colonized by commodity culture. He eroticizes not a body but an image -the text and the purple lipstick kiss on it, "fuchsia. It has a moist, luscious feel to it. *Oh hurry, that mouth says. I need you, I need you now! I'm starved for you!* But it's speaking to Stan [...] Not to Max" (47). Desire turns into possession in this sense. The lipstick, the hidden note, the secrecy- all these elements belong less to erotic intimacy than to the iconography of what Baudrillard calls the *simulacrum*: a self-referential system of signs that replaces lived experiences (6). Stan imagine Jasmine as a fantasy product:

> Jasmine isn't a sheet ironer, nor does she make up the bed […] What a slut, that Jasmine. Flaming hot in an instant, like an induction cooker. He can't stand it. Maybe she's ugly. Ugly ugly ungly, he repeats like a charm, trying to exorcise her – her and her maddening bubble gum lipstick smell and her musky voice, a voice he's never heard. But it doesn't work, because she's not ugly, she's beautiful (48).

Stan's erotic fantasies are reinforced by his obsession with the stories he invents and reimagines. They are mere repetitions. Ironically, his repulsive libidinal fixation becomes his escape from the highly structured world of Consilience. However, this liberation remains false because his fantasy incarcerates him in a form of inaction and self-absorption as he wonders, "Can you stop thinking like a pre-human sex-crazed baboon for maybe just one minute? It's his hormones, it must be his hormones. Is he responsible for his hormones?" (228). In fact, Stan projects onto Jasmine what he has already internalized from cultural scripts of masculinity and romance. The

fantasy is, in that sense, less creative but mechanical, very similar to Zuboff's "instrumentarian power": operating by turning spontaneity into predictable behavior.

What the narrative stages, then, is a parody of agency. Stan thinks he acts, but he only performs what the surveillance system has pre-written. Revealing his wife's infidelity to him, Jocelyn destabilizes Stan' traces of male narcissism. His outrage is not rooted in love but in the panic of losing his place as protagonist- a male hero at least, wonders "Charmaine! Right under his nose, the slutty cheat -withholding sex from him, or doling it out in chilly slices between clean sheets [...] How dare she show herself to be everything he was so annoyed with her for not being?" (85) The sexual intimate obsession has consequently turned into a "fatal fantasy" when Stan figures out that his wife is the writer of the note and that Max's wife -Jocelyn- is Consilience vice manager (208). To punish them for their infringement of the town's laws, Jocelyn forces Stan to watch Charmaine's videotaped adulterous encounters with Max and to re-enact them with her. The irony is cruel: his punishment, forced to reenact his wife's infidelity on camera, turns performance into penance. The satire reaches its sharpest point here: performance outperforms intimacy and agency.

This confusion between intimacy and spectatorship defines the protagonist's paralysis. Stan's internal monologues unpack him as a disoriented actor: "Charmaine won't kill me, says Stan firmly. 'If she thinks it'll kill me, she won't go through with it […] *Charmaine loves me*"' (131). Reflecting on his role, he "concentrates on the chain of causes and effects and lies and impostures […] that has stranded him in this tedious or possibly terrifying cul-de-sac" (142). He concludes that the plot is not driven by any logic and realizes that he lacks authority over his narrative. His consensual surrender to the narrator, however, does not result in him being a victim, as this is not a victimizing process but a creative play of power and lack of it. "He can't believe it. He's hurt. He's mad. He loves her anyway," these repetitions produce the effect of a mechanical emotional life, a life formatted by what Illouz calls the emotional templates of capitalism. The parody of emotion here is doubled: Stan imitates the emotional realism that the reader expects, while the narrator exposes the hollowness of that performance.

When Stan is restrained on the hospital bed awaiting his wife to perform the Procedure, he reflects:

> 'I should have done everything more. I should have cut loose from… from what?' Looking back on his life, he sees himself spread out on the earth like a giant covered in tiny threads that have held him down […] Debts, timetables, the need for money, the

> longing for comfort, the earworm of sex, *repeating itself over and over* like a neural feedback loop. He's been *the puppet of his own constricted desires*.
> He shouldn't have let himself be *caged in here* and *walled off from freedom*. But what does freedom mean anymore? And who had caged him and walled him off? He'd done it himself. So many small choices. The reduction of himself to a series of numbers, stored by others, controlled by others [...] There isn't any place without fences, roadways, networks. Or is there? And who would go with him, *be with him*? (150-1 emphasis added).

What emerges from this extended passage is the major paradoxes that sustain the conception and understanding of intimacy in the text: the lack of exits from its confinement. Bewildered by the choices he has made during his life and depending on his wife's fateful decision of whether she would exterminate him, Stan faces the outcome of their love's experiment. His fate depends on the potential existence of an untouched in-between space outside the machine of emotional management and erotic fallacies. However, his faith on Charmaine's love is obstructed by his view of her as a robotized human version, as he thinks that "behind that blond puffball of hers there is something skewed. A chip missing, a loose connection" (101). Seeing Charmaine as a mechanical equipment, Stan unravels the prime issue of intimacy in and outside Consilience: they are not only imprisoned with and by androids and robots, but they are themselves the robots. In this sense, Stan's longing for a new form of love with all betrayals and past hostilities forgotten is itself another fetishized form of intimacy. This longing for a new beginning remains a form of hallucination harbored by a view of intimacy as able to unite lovers despite all their past failures, a common belief in the redemptive promise of the narrative of love and in the view that the end of love can be its new beginning. This flash of longing, which ignites a short moment of hope in the characters at the beginning, insinuates the reader with further doubt and skepticism about any possibility of redemptive love and forgotten pasts, especially after the execution of the Procedure by Charmaine. The loonging fro a anew beginning is nor freedom but nostalgia for the narrative structure itself.

Atwood's irony is that Stan's rebellion against the system -his dream of escaping Consilience, his affair, his distrust of authority-merely replicates the system's logic. His escapes, affairs, and reflections all echo the same managerial rationality that sustains Consilience: calculation, efficiency, control. His *freedom* itself is already designed. In this, Stan embodies the failure of liberal individualism to resist the emotional structures of capitalism. The more he

insists on being free, the more he reproduces the mechanisms of his containment- "he blocked his own exits", "falling deeper and deeper into the hole he dug for himself" (86, 88).

In Las Vegas, where he performs as an Elvis impersonator delivering love messages to dying women, Stan finally grasps the farce of identity itself: "Nobody ever said he would have to perform in this Elvis racket. Are they laughing at him?" (240). His humiliation is also his revelation -he has become the caricature of the male lover he once imagined. Watching himself "assigned" to roles "as if he's a member of an army in which he's never enlisted" (159), he recognizes that the self has become a *performance* of obedience.

By the time he observes the "Green Men" show in Las Vegas -" It's relaxing to *see other guys making fools of themselves*. But *if they're doing it on purpose, maybe it doesn't count*"- Stan grasps that the play's absurdity mirrors his own (268, emphasis added). Even though he finds the performance unconvincingly abrupt, he alludes to the fact that the tediousness is part of the act itself. To be unable to see beyond the performance, is to be unable to see beyond the self. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch explains that this "indifference betrays the erosion of the capacity to take any interest in anything outside the self. Thus the worldly child, unmoved, stuffs herself with cotton candy and 'wouldn't care' even if she knew how twenty-four clowns managed to fit into a single car" (Lasch 87). Likewise, both protagonists are numbed by their indifference to the abruptness of the events, portraying an exaggerated amount of self-absorption, narcissism, and incapacity to love.

In sum, the characters, who consciously refuse to venture into depths and are content with their projected surface images and existence on the pages, are self-absorbed to the point of narcissistic collapse, "[f]alling, falling. Gone" (*The Heart* 277). Their shallowness impedes them from having a relationship with each other, turning them into mere ciphers. The lack of grammatical complexity, the overt division of chapters, and the avoidance of poetic language in the free indirect style reveal that too much form is imposed on the text to the point that it reads as robotic and non-human. The narrative itself becomes the social experiment it depicts. Playing with the female "poor mouse" and the male "rat in the cage" characters, it becomes a narrative panopticon, testing how intimacy and fiction alike can survive under total management and surveillance (143). If Charmaine and Stan are puppets of emotional systems, the real puppeteer remains the narrative voice itself. The next section turns to this omniscient narrator- Atwood's

metafictional double- whose ironic detachment and orchestrated empathy expose how authorship, like intimacy, operates through the same technologies of control it seeks to critique.

3.2.2 Salvaging the Intimate? "I love you, baby. Get me out of this!"

At the midpoint, the narrative introduces Jocelyn as a disruptive narrative force or a co-narratorial presence whose intervention unsettles both the dystopian world of Consilience and the novel's own narratological design. Jocelyn's arrival shifts the text from a deterministic satire of surveillance and emotional capitalism toward a metafictional inquiry into authorship, complicity, and the illusion of agency within systems of control. In that sense, she performs a double function: within the plot, she is the conspiratorial insider attempting to destabilize the mechanisms of Consilience; within the narrative's self-reflexive frame, she becomes Atwood's androgynous alter ego -a "mastermind narrator" whose interventions blur the boundaries between detachment and empathy. The narrator's narcissism and will to annihilate and punish their creations divulge a destructive obsession: a will to expose that intimacy and fiction can only exist as managed systems. In that respect, they interrogate the category of character as a textual construction as well as a symbolic one. Despite her characters' overt voluntary submission to the diegetic and narrative orders, Jocelyn harnesses an unconventional form of power that redistributes control along the gendered lines. The female figure, long the passive subject of dystopian experimentation, now becomes the orchestrator of illusion, while the male character is increasingly immobilized -caged both literally and narratively. Through this reversal, the narrative constructs a feminist allegory of authorship: the female as authorial force and the male as text, written and rewritten by her fabrications.

The omniscient narrator presents two grotesquely flawed protagonists who go to extremes in their ambition to survive their own financial and narrative crisis. They are enslaved in a dystopian space without exits and in an enclosed-circuits narrative of omniscience and degrading ironic portrayal. However, the narrator does not simply succumb to a position of distance from, and disdain for, the characters. Despite the withering faith in the characters, glimpses of hope in their potential transformation are, though rare, present. It is through Jocelyn, a literary major quoting Milton and Shakespeare, that these glimpses surface. Her ability to invent "an entire subversive plan" positions her as both narrator and actor, a figure of the female artist who intervenes mid-narrative to salvage her the in-their-way-to-be-falling characters. Even though Stan and Charmaine greet her schemes with skepticism, they cling to her as a "beacon of

hope," a promise that their story might yet escape its machinery (122). Yet Jocelyn replicates precisely what she resists: the illusion of choice.

The etymology of her name underscores her duality: derived from the Old French *Joscelin* and the Goth German tribes in Europe -once a masculine name- Jocelyn embodies androgyny in both form and function. Her physical depiction as a "sturdy"," "butch" with "Powerful glutes", "sinister and most likely hairy-legged ball crusher", and "hard-shelled", turns her into a hybrid gendered presence (135, 38, 44, 86, 123). She unsettles Stan and emasculates him through obsessive acts of control; the latter sees her as "the source of his panic: Jocelyn, the walking Vise-Grip. She's got him chackled to her ankle. He's on her invisible leash, he's wearing her invisible choke collar. He can't shake free" (92). Jocelyn becomes ironically the embodiment of the third-person omniscient narrator who crisscrosses between the protagonists' point of view and incarcerates them further in servitude and inaction. For Stan, her presence is dystopian, while for Charmaine she represents "a strict but loving mother," a utopian fantasy of guidance (81, 107). This dual perception mirrors the text's bifurcated narration: what appears as tyranny to one becomes salvation to another.

By coercing Stan into a sexual relationship that mirrors Charmaine's betrayal, she stages domination as a narrative strategy. Stan perceives her belligerent acts of control as a kind of sadomasochistic revenge, commenting that "she wants something that can feel resentment, and even rage. Feel it and have to repress it" (109). However, the feelings of rage and resentment do not emanate from a revengeful act caused by the betrayal itself, but is mostly a vindictive response to the compliance that Stan enacts. "Jocelyn could erase him," the narrator writes, "She could just wave her hand and reduce him to zero" (110). The metaphor of erasure fuses sexual power with narratorial control: the female narrator literally holds the capacity to unwrite the male character. Even Stan's fantasies of rebellion are framed as scripted performances within her plan. "He's been drafted," he laments, "as if he's a member of an army in which he's never enlisted" (159). His freedom, like his love, is pre-scripted.

Acknowledging the power of the narrator over him, Stan delineates the two alternative plots that can decide his destiny within the narrative. Thinking about the surprise that Jocelyn promised, he wonders "will it be a red cake plus tawdry heart-sprinkled crotchless lingerie for Jocelyn […]? Or will it be Option B- *We're done here, you fail* […] She's capable of either" (123-4 emphasis in original). The two alternative plots foreground the self-reflexive structure of

the narrative, where the events unfold by means of cliché after cliché. In fact, *The Heart* does not tell the love story between two characters, but rather dramatizes how they *perform* love by adhering rigidly to generic and cultural expectations. This surrender to the narrator's authority results in a hierarchical relationship that exposes the artificiality of their romance and the futility of their marriage. Paralyzed by passivity and inaction, Stan clings to love as a means of transcendence culminating in his despairing plea: "*I love you, baby. Get me out of this!*" (139 emphasis in original). Yet this outcry becomes hollow -if not absurd- once the narrative lays bare the mechanisms behind these emotional performances. There is no alternative beyond Option A -the conventional romantic plot- or Option B -the dissolution of character altogether. In this sense, the novel ceases to narrate love and instead dramatizes the *impossibility* of narrating love without succumbing to cliché. Intimacy itself becomes a staged repetition of failure, constrained within a narrative that mirrors its own entrapment.

Given this diegetic and structural entrapment, Jocelyn functions as a reminder of the love impasse. She informs him that Charmaine's affair is "on record, every minute of it […] Then [her] own degrading and jealous attempts to re-enact that affair and punish Charmaine through you. Why do you think we had to go through all that theatrical sex in front of the TV?" (129). The affair becomes itself an enactment, a fake performance, a pivotal yet fabricated narrative trope. Even Charmaine's apparent sincerity -her docility and tears -is reframed as performance. "Your grief had to be genuine," Jocelyn tells her; "Facial-expression recognition tech is very precise these days" (212). Here, sincerity itself becomes a simulation, engineered for affective plausibility. The narrative doubles back on itself, revealing that the experiment of Consilience is indistinguishable from the experiment of fiction.

As co-narrator, Jocelyn offers Charmaine temporary relief from alienation. The two women share moments of conspiratorial intimacy: "Working in secret with Jocelyn like this was exciting in a way" (224)- yet even this solidarity is conditional. Charmaine fears disposability: "If Ed dies, she'll lose whatever power she's got" (235). Jocelyn, too, becomes trapped in her own dramaturgy, unable to "break the story" she is writing (127). In her attempt to rescue the couple by eroding Consilience and exposing the facades of the Positron prison and the constraining narrative, she, in fact, creates more fiction. The couple ends up in Las Vegas, a hyperreal landscape of simulation, happily married and raising a child with a cartoonish name. The image of the happy family is caricatured as an empty and false facade that reflects a

narrative incapacity to go beyond the fetishized forms of intimate relationships. In that sense, it does not aspire to go *beyond* the closed-circuit structures but tightly walks *through* them instead.

Consequently, Jocelyn's interventions have produced only further layers of performance. Her "exit strategy," which supposedly liberates the protagonists into the illusory freedom of Las Vegas, amounts to a transfer from one spectacle to another. Stan's "happy ending" as an entertainer for the elderly recasts him as a perpetual actor, performing love messages in an Elvis costume in a commodified theatre of emotions. Jocelyn's authorship culminates in a paradoxical success: she saves the characters from death by condemning them to *artifice*. Contending with the claim that "the show must go on", the characters do not want to escape the narrative; they only want to be reassured that the narrative still wants them. In doing so, Atwood exposes the play of doubles: every attempt to "salvage the intimate" reinforces its mediation. To write love is to commodify it; to stage freedom is to reproduce the cage.

In this regard, the satire implicates the reader as well. By compelling them to watch, judge, and occasionally pity these caricatured lovers, she exposes their complicity in the same mechanisms of surveillance and emotional consumption that sustain Consilience. The reader, too, is part of the experiment, deriving aesthetic pleasure from the spectacle of degradation. Jocelyn's co-authorship thus becomes emblematic of the novel's broader critique of authorship itself: the act of narrating intimacy is always already an act of domination, a subtle manipulation of empathy and control. The possibility of salvaging the intimate lies, paradoxically, in acknowledging its artificiality -in recognizing that love, under emotional capitalism, survives only as performance, and that performance, for all its constructedness, is what is left.

3.2.2 The Gift: "Nothing is ever settled"

The Heart concludes with the spectacle of Charmaine's neurosurgical intervention, which works to intimately imprint her with Stan and erase their past traumas and infidelities. For Stan, the surgery "'[w]orked like Charm.' In fact, he's walking on air. Charmaine *loves* him! She *loves* him *again*. She *loves* him more than before" (288, emphasis added). His language, saturated with clichés of romantic reconciliation, is rendered absurd in context: the transcendent love he celebrates is a medicalized act. Through this final act of neurosurgical conditioning, the narrative dramatizes the mechanization of intimacy and its dependence on mechanical efficiency. The novel's earlier depictions of "emodities," self-help rhetoric, and therapeutic consumerism now

find their dystopian culminations in Charmaine's surgical reprogramming. The act of love is no longer a mystery or an ideal; it is a service that can be repaired, reprogrammed, and optimized.

On her part, Charmaine is "so happy"; it is "as if someone has taken an eraser and erased the pain of those memories. […] It must have been something the doctors did when they were fixing the inside of her head so she would love Stan, only Stan, and nobody else […] It's so amazing what can be done with lasers!" (292) The mechanical description of Charmaine's feelings after the operation reveals the irresolvable nature of her intimacy. Her feelings are mostly a scientific exploration, subject to erasure, neurological "fixing", and programming through lasers. Nothing new or different emerges from the operation for the protagonist except her literal transformation into an emotionally programmed human-machine. There is indeed no escape from the economy of regulated or managed emotional behavior; in the same way that there is no space outside the machine.

The erasure of painful memories and production of new intimate feelings turns the latter into marketable merchandise. In fact, Charmaine "does have a lingering doubt. Does loving Stan really count if she can't help it? Is it right that the happiness of her married life should be due not to any special efforts on her part but to a brain operation she didn't even agree to have? No, it doesn't seem right. But it *feels* rights. That's what she can't get over -how right it feels" (294). Within the space of the narrative, it is now made explicit that nothing is more than a *fantasy*. In other words, the character moves from being implicitly emotionally guided to becoming aware of this mechanistic form of interference. Here, the narrative articulates plainly its core paradox: under emotional capitalism, feelings are most authentic when they are successfully engineered.

In a second allusion to Shakespeare's A *Midsummer Night's Dream,* Jocelyn replicates Theseus's benediction[56] at the couple's second wedding, "So, joy and fresh days of love" (296). This scene replays Shakespeare's love-potion plot as neurosurgical farce. Titania's enchantment in the play becomes Charmaine's programming; the "happy ending" is both granted and exposed as artifice. The narrative's caricatural figures and improbable turns culminate in a finale that satirizes mass-market optimism. Leading to a second "happy ending" and a "charming"

[56] When the lovers Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena enter, Theuseus announces:
"Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth [...]
Joy, gentle friends! joy and fresh days of love
Accompany your hearts!" (ACT 5. Scene. 1) (Shakespeare 145)

resolution, this turn of events highlights the forceful metaphor of new beginnings and the play-within-play in the depiction of the course of love between the couple. The latter are manipulated into thinking that they clearly achieved triumph over the horrors and atrocities of the social experiment they confronted. The vicious circularity, however, ends on a meta-joke: "'So I'm the lynchpin,' he says. 'Mind if I ask why?' 'Fucked if I know,' says Connor" (273). The characters indifferently acknowledge their instrumentality. Where Shakespeare concedes that "the course of true love never did run smooth," Atwood suggests the more radical verdict: the course itself is pre-formatted and unable to exist outside design and performance.

Formally, this conclusion replays the entire novel's dialectic between satire and nostalgia. On one hand, the text mocks the liberal humanist ideal of authentic intimacy -the belief that love can exist outside systems of mediation. On the other, it cannot entirely renounce that ideal. Stan's hallucinated vision of "the two of them, hand in hand, walking into the sunrise" and the narrator's brief tenderness toward Charmaine reveal a *residual* yearning for connection that refuses to vanish. The novel's paradox, then, is not simply that intimacy fails under capitalism, but that the very *desire* for intimacy becomes capitalism's most effective instrument. The metafictional experiment, in short, exposes how narratives of love -whether in romance, realism, or dystopia- have always functioned as technologies of social governance. To imagine "true" intimacy is, paradoxically, to reproduce the ideological machinery that renders it impossible.

One year after their second wedding, Jocelyn visits the couple in Las Vegas and gives Charmaine a final gift: the revelation that she never underwent the neurosurgery. "The human mind is infinitely suggestible," Jocelyn explains (305). The gift reconfigures everything: Charmaine's renewed devotion to Stan is not mechanical but imagined -a triumph of narrative suggestion. Yet her immediate succumbing to the fantasy of a "shadow of Max. A Max-like person. Someone who isn't Stan waiting for her in the future", shows that she cannot break free from the pattern of reiterations (306). Spiraling between sham happiness, cold intimacy, and looming fantasies, the narrative overtly resists any form of closure. In fact, these characters are not meant to ultimately triumph as they remain prosaic and consensual, a shadow of a shadow destined to be destroyed by their creator.

The phrase "Nothing is ever settled," which marks the narrative's end, functions as an ironic statement. It signals that, despite the appearance of resolution, neither the characters nor the reader can escape the unresolved paradoxes that structure intimacy. Love is both authentic

and artificial; freedom is both chosen and imposed; intimacy is both a site of resistance and a tool of control. By ending where we began, the narrative forces the reader to inhabit the space of "unsettledness", rather than resolving its contradictions.

Thus, the narrative refuses to offer the comfort of a happy ending nor the moral conclusion of a tragic one. The allegorical satire replicates the power structures of the dystopian society that it produces and wields absolute narrative control over the lives and destinies of the characters it incarcerates. It does not aim at providing moral corrections but it, firstly and foremost, provokes unease and occasionally even anger from the consensual characters who get enclosed in their own object identity, selfish endeavors, and the narrator(s) who find(s) excitement in the disfiguration and even dismemberment of their creations. The protagonists choose the security of living in a world of their creator's creation, and that world is, by their own withdrawal from and not lack of action, resistant to change. Wavering between being playful and ponderous, this narrative approach locates intimacy in an economy of discourse production, manipulation, and reception.

The dynamics of intimacy in the narrative of *The Heart* show that the paradoxical discourses of intimacy in the context of free-market capitalism and individualizing tendencies govern the narrative of love. It also argues that the enclosed circuits of narration further reflect that the over-intellectualization of intimacy and its turning into an act of enunciation or a constrained narrative result in its disintegration. The narrator's lack of sympathy and compassion, and the emphasis on the illusory character of intimate bonds, dissolve relationships and reverberate the enclosure of the narrator in a narcissistic form of narrative that refuses to lose control of itself. To go back to the notion of "poetics of disequilibrium" with which the argument opens, satire works by holding identity and difference in tension rather than resolving them. The refusal of closure is thus not an evasion but a deliberate strategy: to keep both character and reader in a state of critical suspension. "Unsettledness" becomes the narrative's politics and poetics- a recognition that empathy, like freedom, can exist only in flux.

While the argument sustains that *The Heart* is a satire, it shows that the satirist is not fully superior to the object of the satire but is torn between the jouissance that the characters' dehumanization brings and the lashes of sympathy that come in the figure of a co-narrator who comes to direct the destiny of the protagonists and to save them from the over-empowered manipulative narrator. Accordingly, the univocal moral position of the narrator is a mere fantasy

because the latter destabilizes any chance of being believable. Therefore, the quasi-counter-dominant presence of the supplanter narrator, who attempts to save the falling characters and their love, drains it further in fictitiousness and illusions. Her conclusion is that it is all fiction; there is no way out. For the protagonists to reach the goal of overcoming their enemy, they must first acknowledge the narrator's power within, as well as over, them.

The narrative's style reinforces this claim. The predominance of free indirect discourse blurs the boundary between narrator and character as well as empathy and irony. Rather than revealing depth, this style exposes shallowness; it reveals how language itself has become the medium of control. The prose, overloaded with sentimental lyricism and banality, enacts the mechanization it describes. As a result, the free indirect style is an exploratory style that permits the investigation of the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the modern ideals of intimacy and its tight dependence on narrative forms and frames. However, *The Heart* is not looking to provide a love potion that aims at correcting human intimate relationships, nor at giving an alternative to deteriorating human intimacy. It is rather an invitation to reflect on the absurdity of intimate relationships in an accelerated technological capitalist age and to negotiate the discourses of the givenness of love.

The narrative invites the reader to traverse the paradoxes and to inhabit the discomfort it imposes rather than flee it. To get *over* these absurdities, the narrative gives us the sometimes horrifying, sometimes tedious task of going *through* them to unpack the underlying contradictions. Jocelyn's final invocation, echoing *Paradise Lost*[57] -"The world is all before you, where to choose" (306)- reframes this task as a challenge to narrative itself. To choose is to imagine differently. Atwood's closing gesture turns the novel's dystopian experiment outward, asking whether another poetics - a freer, less managerial literary mode of imagining connection -might yet be possible.

While *The Heart* remains committed to its own unsettledness, the next chapter turns to *Lila*, where this question of reimagining intimacy finds a different articulation. In *Lila*, the narrative experiments with *grace* instead of *control*, testing whether empathy can emerge from fragmentation rather than order.

[57] The allusion echoes the scene where Adam and Eve are sent away from Eden: "The world was all before them, where to choose. Their place of rest, and Providence their guide: They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, Through Eden took their solitary way" (Milton 457).

4. From "Utter Asociality" to "Imaginative Love" in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*

I feel I am with you now, whatever that can mean […] That is to say, I pray for you. And there's an intimacy in it. That's the truth.
Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

In a conversation[58] with Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson describes her fiction as the work of "ordinary minds [put] under scrutiny", namely the minds of the "non-socially assimilated" and "untypically lonely"[59] (*Yale Literature and Spirituality Series* 00:18:08). Her argument is that by simulating ordinary human experience, her fiction aims at fusing *acts of imagination* and *acts of sympathy*. Earlier in *When I was a Child I Read Books*, Robinson contends that "fiction may be, whatever else, an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification" (21). The exercise of identifying and sympathizing with these lonely and ordinary imaginary minds is the foundation to forging intimate bonds and the connecting energy that *"allows us to coexist with* the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us" (Robinson, *Gilead* 234). The concept of "imaginative love" is consistently at the heart of Marilynne Robinson's credo of intimacy. Set in the first half of the twentieth century[60] Midwest America, and focalized from the viewpoint of the title character Lila -the "untypically lonely" and barely lettered wife of Reverend John Ames- the narrative unravels the mystery of this rarely speaking character while non-chronologically piecing her past and present life together. Fueled with theological references and implications, the narrative models Lila's nonlinear journey from loss to grace into her intimate bond with her first and fierce guardian and

[58] The conversation is part of Yale University's ISM Literature and Spirituality series. It was live broadcasted on the 20 February 2020 on the University official website and made accessible on YouTube on February 27, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUNwdmVHZxc>

[59] This explains the choice of her characters in her five books of fiction: Ruthie in *Housekeeping* (1980), John Ames in *Gilead* (2004), Glory Boughton in *Home* (2008), Lila in *Lila* (2014) and Boughton's prodigal son in *Jack* (2020). What all these characters share, in varying degrees, is a sense of loneliness and estrangement. Akin to Lila who spends her most years drifting with Doll from one place to another, the orphaned Ruthie in *Housekeeping* accompanies Aunt Sylvie in her life on the roads, lacking any sense of belonging or any presence of a significant physical home to which they can return. Jack, Robert Boughton's son, is referred to in *Gilead* and *Home* and less frequently in *Lila*, as "the One" who becomes ostracized because he gets involved in a romance with an African American high-school teacher -Della Milles. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Jack is ousted from Gilead and seen as the disobedient son. Ames's loneliness in Gilead is different. A congregationalist minister, he is well-perceived in his community, his loneliness is due to his loss of his first wife and child.

[60] Roughly between 1920s to 1950s.

mother-figure Doll and subsequently with her husband- John Ames. By telling the story of the ordinary Lila, Robinson revisits the conception of love as *agape* and reworks its definition as selfless, non-physical, and unconditional. Merging the form of divine love with the earthly one, she locates love in the "imaginative" hospitable act of "opening unto" the other. Not only does the intimate occupy the borderline between the collective and the individual but it fluidly traverses the threshold of thought and senses, silence and speech, and secular and divine.

This chapter argues that *Lila* constructs an *agape*-centered framework for intimacy that builds on the Christian understanding of love while projecting them to the contemporary context of growing cynicism about language and religion. For that sake, the narrator uses old narrative forms to challenge the dominant discourse of intimacy and to detach it from the claims of the universality and timelessness of love and the individualizing romanticizing tendencies. The first part of this chapter looks at the formal and stylistic devices used to portray the contingency and fluidity of the intimate and its resistance to scientification. The second part of the analysis examines the salience of literary intimacy as a rhetorical strategy and social energy -and despite its limitations- in creating acts of hospitable welcoming of the human other.

The author of four books of fiction and numerous other non-fiction books and essays, Marilynne Robinson is the recipient of the 2015 National Humanities Medal for "grace and intelligence in writing" awarded by President Barack Obama. She has created a distinguished literary style and a more classical language that succeeds in anachronistically grounding her historical narratives in a contemporary climate without the risk of being obsolete. Her writings are far from being walled off from the present moment's timely realities and pressing issues[61].

Lila -Robinson's third book in her *Gilead* series- is another investigation into the fictional world of Midwestern America[62]. The first book, *Gilead,* is written in the first-person narrative

[61] This claim is further accounted for by her non-fiction writings, where she proves to be a diligent observer and critic of contemporary American society, cultural values, and the political scene. Among a plethora of contemporaneous thematic concerns, Robinson touches on the prominence of literature and narrative forms to the understanding of society and the pervasiveness of exploitative politics and amounting moral disintegration.

[62] According to Robinson, Gilead is in Iowa and has religious significance. In *Lila*, this significance is referred to by Lila in one of her internal monologues while addressing her unborn child: "This town's called Gilead, child. That's a Bible name. We're going to stay here till you're born. I figure we're safer here. We'll see what happens" (122). In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, Gilead denotes a mountainous place east of the Jordan river known for its production of healing balm "And Laban called it Jegarsahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. And Laban said, This heap is a witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Galeed" (*The Holy Bible* The Book of Genesis, 47:48) This place is known for producing healing balm in both the Old and New Testaments: "Is

and takes the form of a posthumous letter addressed by the seventy-six-year-old Congregationalist Reverend John Ames to his son Robert -his child from his second wife Lila. The second, *Home*, is focalized by Glory -Reverend John Boughton's daughter. The fourth, *Jack,* investigates the troubled life of the prodigal son -John Ames Boughton. The critical response to the relationship between these texts has been extensive yet inconsistent due to the continuous release of books in this sequence. Before the publication of *Jack*, Roxana Robinson and Lucy Scholes referred to the three first texts as the "Iowa trilogy". Others have denounced this nomination like Rowan Williams who sees them as "interrelated", Sarah Churchwell who reads them as "sibling" or "companion", and Rachel Sykes who opines that they "are better conceived as partner, parallel, or simultaneous fictions [...] than as a chronologically linear series or trilogy"(55).

In this study, I refer to Robinson's Gilead books as series because, albeit they all take place concurrently in the fictional Midwestern town of Gilead and refer to similar occurrences, they are not sequential nor conditionally referential. Each book stands by itself and can be read out of sequence. Therefore, Robinson's constant return to Gilead refers to the vastness of the terrain of possibilities of her fictional imagination as well as to her empathetic interest in each character of her books. In an email conversation with Megan O'Grady published in *Vogue* in 2014, the author claims "Gilead voices are still simmering in my mind. If one of them demands its book, I may well write it". Clearly, Robinson does not perceive her *Gilead* books in terms of sequels and quartet but more as series of narratives sharing the same setting yet focalized from different perspectives. Her claim also hints at the strong emotional tie that she establishes with her own fictional characters and shows her to be rather haunted by their voices. As Elmhirst contends, "Robinson has made a world -a place and its people- so palpable and full that each book can stand alone. The town of Gilead seems to exist beyond the author, enabling her to step in and out of it at will, telling any number of its stories". In addition, the relation between the religious ardor of the author and the narratives she writes explains Casey Cep's allegorical

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there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of my [God's] people?" (Jeremiah 8:22). The spiritual significance of Gilead is alluded to also in numerous hymns, the most famous of which is the traditional African American spiritual that appeared first in 1779. Its refrain cites as follows: "There is a balm in Gilead,/ To make the wounded whole;/ There is a balm in Gilead,/ To heal the sin-sick soul". This spiritual is frequently sung in churches and on worship occasions and is even considered a folk song among African Americans.

pairing of the Gilead books to the Gospels which tell the same story each time from a different perspective. The biblical metaphor here is inspired primarily by the theological fervor that informs Robinson's fictional as well as non-fictional writings.

Lila tells the story of its eponymous character, an abandoned child taken away by a drifter named Doll, who found her crying on the stoop of a boarding house on a rainy day. Together, they start a roaming journey of destitution and alienation, during which they join a group of itinerants and move together for eight years before they part ways because of the repercussions of the great depression. Shortly after, Doll attacks someone who claims to be Lila's father with her knife, gets arrested, then flees the prison and vanishes in the wilderness. Lila continues drifting alone to work shortly in a brothel in St. Louis, then as a housekeeper in a motel, and ends up walking a new path that leads her to Gilead. There, she meets John Ames, who -fascinated by her work in his garden and the graves of his dead first wife and child- wonders:

> '[…] I wish there were some way I could repay you.'
> She heard herself say, 'You ought to marry me.' He stopped still and she hurried away, to the other side of the road, the flush of shame and anger so hot in her that this time surely she could not go on living. When he caught up with her, when he touched her sleeve, she could not look at him.
> 'Yes,' he said, 'you're right. I will' (Robinson 80-1).

This brief and sudden request- that Ames refers to as an inexplicable act or a mystery[63] in *Gilead*- is uncommonly preceded by Lila's assertion that she "'just don[s]'t go around trusting people. Don[s]'t see the need'" (80). This scene captures the central paradox in the conception of intimacy in the text, the desire to bond with someone, and the competing conviction that in a world so unpredictable, bonding is beyond one's control. Narrated from a third person point of view, the story of Lila unpacks non-chronologically through an associative logic and through the abundant use of free indirect style. It traces the journey that Lila undergoes from being a lonely, mistrustful, and alienated, to her becoming a social being capable of loving, trusting, and

[63] The appearance of Lila in *Gilead* is described by Ames as follows "It wasn't much her appearance as it was the way she seemed as if she didn't belong there, and at the same time as if she were the only one of us all who really did belong there […] As though she might say, 'I came here from whatever unspeakable distance and from whatever unimaginable otherness just to oblige your prayers. Now say something with a little meaning in it.' My sermon was like ashes on my tongue. And it wasn't that I hadn't worked on it, either […] but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt outside the mystery of it" (Robinson, *Gilead* 24).

opening *unto* the other within, despite the accompanying uncertainties and ambivalences of the act.

4.1 Forms of *Imaginative Love*: Going Beyond the Scientification of Intimacy

From the opening lines of the narrative, the reader encounters Lila as an abandoned child struggling to keep herself warm on a cold winter night

> The child was there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping. She couldn't holler anymore and they didn't hear her anyway […] She was afraid to be under the house, and afraid to be up on the stoop […] there was a moon staring at her, and there were sounds in the woods, but she was nearly sleeping when Doll came up the path and found her like that, miserable as could be, and took her up in her arms and wrapped her into her shawl, and said, "Well, we got no place to go. Where we gonna go? (Robinson, *Lila* 3–4)

Helpless as she is, the child is taken by the stranger Doll who does not give her act of stealing any forethought. Driven mostly by sympathy towards the nameless and sick child and despite her lack of resources and destination, she inexplicably decides to steal Lila. Doll's act is distinguished by its abruptness and by the lack of any prior rational thinking. It divulges initially as a random act of stealing then grows progressively to denote an act of mysterious instinctive generosity, particularly that Lila "had thought that she had been born a second time, the night Doll took her up from the stoop and put her shawl around her and carried her off through the rain" (12). This moment of rebirth for Lila reiterates throughout the narrative echoing her transformational experiences. From then on, the child "was Doll's girl, always at her side if she could be" (39). Even though others know or suspect that Doll is not Lila's mother -"She ain't your mama, I can tell"- they refer to them as "the cow and her calf" because Lila "was always with Doll" (12, 52, 160).

Taking Lila to accompany her in her drifting journey, Doll is convinced that what she shares with Lila is loneliness. In fact, what sets them apart from others is their loneliness in the world because "Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world, and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, the two of them together, keeping each other warm in the rain" (5). The water, a recurrent motif in the novel, is referred to here and after when Doll bathes Lila and the latter curses her and when the reverend baptizes Lila twice. Carrying a biblical symbolism of regeneration, the water in Lila does not seem to wash sins but instead marks her transition from being lonely and unwanted to becoming welcomed by the other. After the disappearance or the presumable death of Doll, Lila suffers again from the loneliness which "was bad, but it was

better than anything else she could think of. It was probably loneliness that made her walk the mile or so into town every few days just to look at the houses and stores and the flower gardens. She never meant to talk to anybody" (*Lila* 27). Lila's pronounced loneliness is subverted again when she arrives at Gilead and marries the Reverend. The following part looks into how *Lila* uses the Puritan narrative of conversion to mold an *agape*-centered renewed conception of intimacy that captures the sociality and paradoxicality of love.

4.1.1 *"Whispers of Faith"* in an "Asocial" World

The unorthodox view of the fluidity of religious discourse and theological belief is displayed in Lila who can "see the light in the room with her eyes closed" and sense "the sorrow of [...] happiness" and the "fondness" in "sadness", "the darkness is as light" (Robinson, *Lila* 238, 29, 248). For her, "[f]ear and comfort could be the same thing" and "weariness and ugliness [are] as beautiful as light!" (240, 258). Perceiving the world in its complexity and continuity instead of irreducible opposition further complicates Lila's comprehension of existence and impacts her actions and judgements. At times, she sees "meanness" in the "kindness" of the reverend and in the charitable gestures of people in Gilead and sees "goodness" in the "meanness" of Doane who "finally took to stealing", in Doll's killing of a man -who is presumably Lila's father- and in a "dirty, weary" escaping child[64] who avows to her that he might just have killed his father (56, 111, 149).

This use of oxymorn to denote continuity instead of contradiction locates the narrative in a state of liminality, subject to seeing things in and beyond their continuity and not in their binarism. In attribution to Robinson's style in fiction writing, Shanon Mariotti defines this rhetorical device as *merism* and explains it as follows

[64] According to Lila, what Doane, Doll, and the child share is their pride. Despite their extreme precarious situations, they hold on to their "pride". She wonders "why does it matter if some ignorant man [Doane] nobody would ever notice loses the pride he has been so careful of all his life?" (111) She believes that the child's "pride was going to kill him" (157). "And she thought, I couldn't bear to be without Doll, or Mellie, or Doane and Marcelle. Even Arthur and his boys […] because fair was fair and none of them ever had any good thing that the others didn't have some right to, even Deke. If there was goodness at the center of things, that one rule would have to be respected" because "the children are just folks trying to get by" (258, 157). "Now here she was again, worrying about people who were long past help. You can't even pray for someone to have his pride back when every possible thing has happened to take it away from him" (234). She concludes then that "if she ever took to praying it would be for that time and all those people who must have wondered what had become of them, what they had done to find themselves without so much as a good night's rest to comfort them. She would call down calm on every one of them, on the worst and the bitterest ones first of all" (235).

> Merism is a rhetorical term where two opposing terms are used to indicate that an entirety is encompassed. For example, if you search "high" and "low," that indicates you've searched everywhere. Merisms are especially used in biblical criticism to refer to concepts like heaven and earth or good and evil, opposites that should nevertheless defy dualistic thinking and instead imply a continuum, an entirety. This concept of merism affirms and enriches many of our authors' readings and gives us a new way to understand Robinson's own life and work. In a way that, as she notes, is sympathetic to the concept of a merism, Robinson cultivates a habit of mind that questions the typical oppositions we tend to set up between different and disparate things, to work against dualistic thinking and instead approach seemingly different things as points along a continuum (Shannon L. Mariotti and Lane Jr. 14–15).

Writing from the vantage of the twenty-first century, not only does Robinson challenge her peers with the choice of her "untypically lonely" characters, historical reference, and plain style but she also courageously ventures into the realm of the religious in a time deemed to be "irreligious"[65] in many aspects. The author is a strong believer that our present-day approach and views of religion and theology should be questioned and thoroughly reworked instead of being fully discarded and muted because they strongly impact our relationships with others in the world. In so doing, she advocates a religious view that cuts clearly with the monism and dogmatism of what Derrida refers to as a form of Western metaphysical logocentrism or what Lyotard terms the totalizing grand narratives of modernity (*Of Grammatology* 49). Her revisionary intake initiates from a critique of the "creationist position" of the "religious Right" and the "Darwinist position" of the "Irreligious Right" (*When I Was a Child*, 22).

According to her, conservatives are making religious discourse a less appealing and more fearful terrain while liberals are, on their part, dismissing religious groups while furthering secularism. Explaining her position towards the two dominant political parties in the United States, she claims that "[t]he defenders of 'religion' have made religion seem foolish while rendering it mute in the face of a prolonged and highly effective assault of the poor. The

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[65] In "Sacred inwardness: Why secularism has no meaning", Robinson defines secularism as "the ground gained in society and culture by agnosticism or atheism as religion recedes." She relates this lack of faith to the diminishing faith in humanism commenting that "Perhaps the real lack of faith in modern society comes down to a lack of reverence for humankind, for those around us, about whom we might consider it providential that we can know nothing -in these great matters that sometimes involve feigning or concealment, that are beyond ordinary thought and conventional experience, and that can in any case be minutely incremental, since God really does have all the time in the world. Perhaps it is a gross presumption to try to imagine a God's eye view of things, but I can only think these encounters, every one unique, must be extraordinarily beautiful. If it is hard for us to believe that the God who searches us and knows us also loves us, perhaps we should learn to be better humanists." (Robinson, "Sacred Inwardness ")

defenders of 'science' have imputed objectivity and rigor to an account of reality whose origins and consequences are indisputably economic, social, and political" (22). Instead, she perceives faith and intimacy as fluid entities, contingent rather than absolute and their complexity and fluidity stem primarily from their symbiotic dialogism.

Among many others, Diana Johnson views this approach as audacious and remarks that "[i]t's courageous of Robinson to write about faith at a time when associations with religion are so often negative and violent" (The New York Times). The debate over "religious" American literature in the wake of secularism and postmodernist ethics of skepticism and pluralism is present in several critical books such as Amy Hungerford in *Postmodern Belief* (2010), John A. McClure *Partial Faiths* (2007), and Norman Finkelstein in *On Mount Vision* (2010). Altogether, these works explore the challenges of writing about faith in contemporary literature and amid the politics of pluralism and ongoing skepticism. The result is a "heterodox, syncretic, and revisionary" writing that translates faith into fiction in form of "whisper[s] rather than shout[s]" as Gregory Wolfe[66] opines (Wolfe). The "whispers", in contradiction to "shouts", place the narrative of faith in a newly emergent literary conception of contingency and pluralism. By whispering instead of shouting, these writers cut with the absolutist approach to religion as a doctrinal belief and adhere to the existentialist view of religion as a subjectively lived experience.

In her *Gilead* books, for instance, Robinson narrates the life of religious and non-religious characters in its ordinariness and locates their belief in the divinity of the everyday and in the complexity of intimate relationships. Her characters *practice* their belief in their daily life experience, through their familial kinship, and social interactions. Their faith grows from this position with others in the worlds: faith, henceforth, unfolds slowly through the commitment to the daily and mundane as well as in the liveliness of the intimate relationships between the characters. The intimate bond between individuals becomes crucial to the understanding of the religious and "spiritual"[67]. In her "whispers of faith", Robinson avowedly fuses the religious and

[66] In the same article, Wolfe argues that Marilynne Robinson, Annie Dillard, Elie Wiesel, Christian Wiman, Mark Helprin, Franz Wright, Mary Karr and Robert Clark, Christopher R. Beha, Alice McDermott, Nathan Englander, and Jonathan Safran Foer are "serious writers who engage faith in serious ways".

[67] In this context, the term "spiritual" is used in the same way as Robinson, not as antithetical to "the material" and the bodily or physical. She investigates this connection in *When I was A Child* and remarks that "there is a deeply rooted notion that the material exists in opposition to the spiritual" (9). This assumption "precludes or repels or

the aesthetic resulting in the creation of a unique aesthetic experience of belief-as-being-lived. It is her credence -as articulated through Reverend Ames in *Gilead*- that "[d]octrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief" (*Gilead*, 239).

In *What Are We Doing Here?* Robinson goes further with her argument and differentiates between theology and religion to conclude that "a theology for our time" should be "a theology that would embrace rather than exclude" (36). In this called-for politics of inclusion, she makes recourse to a poetics of quietness that not only grants the "lonely" characters voice but also permits them to explore their consciousness in an unusually slow-paced narrative. This part of analysis argues that Robinson's literary endeavor is unthinkable without her religious perspective, and so is her comprehension and conceptualization of intimacy. Accordingly, Lila's journey from loss to faith is not distinguished by her religious belief but instead is tightly related to her faith in the human other.

4.1.2 Old Forms, New Usages: Conversion Narrative Revisited

The spiritual conversion narrative[68] is a Puritan tradition that aims at publicizing the transformational experience of the convert from loss to grace, with the primary objective of making an impact on their community. While it is structurally and formally valid to consider *Lila* a *Bildungsroman*, a fictional memoir, or even a historical romance, such readings are rather reductionist in the sense that they leave out most of the narrative's implications and mostly undermine its explicit theological groundings. While it bears traits of the *Bildungsroman* genre, especially in its encompassing of the elements of life transformation or a coming-of-age story, these literary patterns do not result in a process of individuation as much as they contribute to one of socialization. This means that while the narrative includes an account of individual life

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trumps the sacred as an idea. This dichotomy goes back to the Manichees, who believed the physical world was the creation of an evil god in perpetual conflict with a good god, and to related teachings within Christianity that encouraged mortification of the flesh, renunciation of the word, and so on" (9). She views that this dichotomous assumption "persists among us still, vigorous as ever". "If the old, untenable dualism is put aside," she concludes "we are instructed in the endless brilliance of creation" (11).

[68] Historically speaking, the conversion form of expression finds its roots in the story of Paul the Apostle in the Book of Acts (in The New Testament) and is therefore mostly associated with Christianity. Saint Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus is a journey of spiritual and miraculous transformation from Judaism to Christianity known as "the Pauline" or the "Damascene" conversion. The biblical significance of this form continued later with the oft-referenced St. Augustine's *Confessions* which helped position the conception of the conversion in the trope of the sudden momentum and even prodigious transformation. In the sixteenth century, the conversion as a form of expression was used extensively in New England Puritan settlements where it did not uniquely serve to strengthen the spiritual personal faith in Christianity and hence the individual salvation but also and most importantly to solidify the communal bond in the Puritan milieu by perpetuating the belief in the notion of the common good.

events, it grounds them in the act of transformation from being lonely and alienated to becoming a social being capable of trusting and welcoming others. In that sense, it is a social construction rather than an individual one, anchored in the trope of transformation from loss and alienation to faith in the other. Cultural anthropologist Henri Gooren defines conversion as

> a social construction and not necessarily as a factual description of the main events in an individual's life […] This transformation […] is reflected in the most important indicator of conversion: *biographical reconstruction*. People who undergo a conversion experience literally reconstruct their lives, giving new meanings to old events and putting different emphases in the bigger "plot" of their life stories (93).

The conversion narrative propels an ethic of community that investigates society and the complexity of social relationality rather than individuals as such. For this reason, I suggest that an analysis from the lens of conversion narrative brings out the most of the narrative's literary strategies as well as the writer's literary writing aesthetics and shows that *Lila*'s structure, theological themes, plain style, and religious allusions are highly indebted to the Puritan cultural tradition of spiritual autobiography.

The emphasis on the communal groundings of conversion finds its expression in a Puritan "morphology" of a unified community "knit together" by "ligaments of love" in John Winthrop's words (in Van Engen 55). Henceforth, it has taken its way as a mode of narration in religious as well as literary fictional accounts and its defining features are the trope of transformation from loss to salvation, the religious significance, the communal aspiration, the confessional tone, and the triggering of sympathy or "fellow feelings". In *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, conversion is defined as a "form of passage, 'a turning from and to' that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach" (Austin-Broos 1). The studied texts in this anthropology show that this narrative practice is continued nowadays and that it takes mainly the form of a processual passage rather than a sudden and complete break[69]. This passage is mainly "constituted and reconstituted through social practice and the articulations of *new forms of*

[69] It has also taken different forms in the history of literature and has become not only exclusive to Christianity but stretches out to encompass other religious denominations around the globe. This form of writing is equally used metaphorically to portray a political transformation from one political sect to another, or also a cultural or social one. Christopher Leise, for instance, convincingly reads Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as a politico-religious conversion narrative or more aptly repeated conversions, "a nearly constant process of rediscovering and redefining the self against agents and institutions that would pit individual persons against humanity itself" (88). Likewise, Gerald Peters interprets Orwell's *1984* in *The Mutilating God: Authorship and Authority in the Narrative of Conversion* as a form of a spiritually political passage and Kevin Flynn reads Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* as a political conversion narrative that uses spiritual language to attain political transformation.

relatedness. An anthropology of conversion must focus on representation and phenomenology but invariably will return to the practice of *social life* in which the various embodiments of meaning are sustained in *relational* ways" (9 emphasis added). Accordingly, the central attribute to this passage is the social experience and the communal groundings of the experience of the convert. The sociality of conversion and its emphasis on forms of relatedness and on relational beings makes this form an interesting choice for Robinson to write on intimate matters.

In this narrative form, the focus deviates from the act of conversion and the converted self to the process of how the relational self transforms from loss to grace. This means that the protagonist's transformation from loneliness to sociality does not depend solely on her willingness or motivational impulse for conversion but on the presence of other social elements that make this transformation possible. These social elements are mainly depicted using the plain language of the minutiae and its juxtaposition to the language of the sacred showing that the sacredness and divinity lie in and emanate from the sublimity of the ordinary. Bryan Taylor expresses this aptly

> We should investigate the minutiae of 'the interplay between, on the one hand, the 'social technology' of everyday life as the latter is manifested in situational contexts and, on the other hand, trans-situational points of reference for making sense of the one situation in relation to another' can be taken up in the empirical context of conversion considered as just such a 'situational context' in which the interplay is of relevance for converting individuals themselves (18–19).

The use of the conversion form has several implications for *Lila*. First, it aims at reconciling and redefining the relationship between literature and religion by conjuring the religious discourse with the secular one, marking its possible relative presence within the contemporary politics of difference and growing secularism. Second, it highlights the importance of a fluid religious experience in the lives of individuals and, most importantly, to communities[70]. It delineates

[70] This renewed interest in conversion amongst postwar American writers is mainly explained by the substantiality of the religious discourse in social life and its transformational potential, surely not in its own but in its congruence with other cultural discourses. Needless to say, the theological discourse is like all the other cultural discourses and should therefore, not be fearfully excluded nor muted. It is also Robinson's aspiration to revive Puritan narrative forms and themes and revisit them to show their continuity and persisting relevance. With all the negative references to Puritanism and its former cultural forms, the conversion narrative has become a highly non-desirable terrain for writing. She argues in *The Death of Adam* that the conversion narrative is avoided and criticized essentially because it is viewed as a Puritan residue, a residue that she assertively claims and revives.

religion not as an authoritative text but as a heterogeneous pluralist discourse in which faith is unthinkable without skepticism.

In *The Story Upon a Hill*, Christopher Leise asserts that, like Thomas Pynchon, "Marilynne Robinson offer[s] more liberal roots of the Calvinist tradition by reworking the conversion narrative and spiritual autobiography. These two authors also mark a turn away from generalizing about a Puritan past in favor of highlighting New England's manifold approaches of Calvinism" (20). He further argues that Robinson is among the postwar American writers who contribute to several postwar aesthetics engaged with history "not to free us from the past as much as to replace a privileged narrative's priority in determining the future with a more responsive -because more inclusive- story upon a hill" (20). Bringing new elements to the conversion and widening its conception is detectable in the use of the female underprivileged convert voice and a sympathy-loaded mediated third person form of narration. This contemporary revisited narrative form aims at reshaping human views of themselves, their situatedness in the world, and their relations with others.

From a structural point of view, the conversion spiritual form "imagines a four-part structure to human life: the fall into bondage, redemption from bondage, the exodus years of wandering and temptation, and the discovery of the Promised Land" (Engebretson, 81). In the narrative, Lila rummages retrospectively through "the bondage" in the form of a childhood of neglect and abandonment. The arrival of "ugly old Doll" who "had come to her like an angel in the wilderness" approximates a redemption "from bondage" (47, 30). Only then, does she realize that "there were arms around her to let her know that she was safe, and there was a whisper at her ear to let her know that she shouldn't be lonely" (5). Weak and "sickly", Lila "just lay against her, hoping to stay where she was, hoping the rain wouldn't end" (5). The "exodus years" can refer to the years that she spends drifting with Doll together in the face of destitution and precariousness before and during the years of the Great Depression, or what they refer to in the narrative as "the dust" or "crash" (199, 15, 108). Her stay in a brothel in St. Louis after Doll's disappearance in the cornfields, her work as a cleaning lady in a motel in St. Louis, and her stay in the shack at the perimeter of Gilead can also be seen as part of the years of loss and wandering. Reaching the "Promised Land" stands for Lila's arrival in Gilead and her unlikely marriage to the Reverend and the birth of her own child.

Following a standard conversion process of oscillation between belief and apostasy, Lila relates her faith to her instinctive humanist belief in human justice and continuously reads her present life in the light of her past. She is baptized by John Ames twice, once at the river before their marriage and another time after the birth of their child. For Ames "Baptism is [...] a fact" that implies the rebirth of the baptized, their cleansing of older sins, and their conversion to Christianity (237). Pouring water on her head, Ames declares, "Lila Dahl, I just washed you in the waters of regeneration. As far as I'm concerned, you're a newborn babe" (90). He, therefore, reiterates the religious doctrinal view of baptism as a miraculous regenerative act that leads to the initiation of the individual to Christianity. This accentuates the idea that the

> ritual of baptism, which socially validates conversion to Christianity, combines an age old symbolism of death and rebirth found in many primitive rituals of initiation. In the first place, submersion in water symbolizes a ritual drowning of the old self the 'old Adam'[…] making way for the rebirth of the newly 'converted' self, cleansed of its sins (Peters 25).

Lila, who is often troubled by doctrinal thinking and who candidly admits, "I don't understand theology, I don't think I like it", finds fault in accepting the idea of baptism as an act of initiation (Robinson, *Lila* 101). Instead, she continuously relates Ames's and Boughton's conception of baptism to her own empirical understanding of it

> He was going on about baptism. A birth and a death and a marriage, he said. A touch of water and these children are given the whole of life. The sacraments remind us. She was thinking what sense did that make, but his eyes drifted across the congregation and rested on her face, as if he thought she might now know what he meant and could say yes, it was true, what he meant if not the words he could find to put it in. Jesus drank from our cup and shared our baptism, he said, which meant He suffered and died like everybody else. And she was thinking how strange it was for them to be singing for somebody who lived and died like anybody [...] They could as well be singing to Doll (222).

The religious explanation of baptism bewilders Lila who finds it hard to believe in the sacredness of the practice. It only makes sense to her in so far as it echoes her encounter with Doll which she interprets as rebirth. The relation between the divine and the human is complicated to her, especially since her knowledge emanates primarily from the immediacy of earthly experience and not from the spiritual abstract realm of knowledge.

Recalling or echoing Vardaman Bundren's famed five-word-chapter "My mother is a fish" in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Lila catches a fish during her first baptism by the river (84). In the text, the fish is referred to when Ames gives Lila his mother's necklace; "'We spoke about marriage […] But if we're engaged, I want to give you something. And if we're not,

I want you to have it anyway'" (83). He baptizes her and Lila "felt her face warm. And the fish kept struggling, jumping against her leg. She said, 'Damn catfish. Seems like you can never quite kill'em dead. I'm going to just put it here in the weeds for a minute.' And there it was, flopping in the dust" (84). Like the young Bundren who -incapable of understanding death- believes that his mother has instead transformed into a fish, Lila refuses to accept the death of Doll and her baptism is inexplicable outside her relationship with her nurturing God-mother figure. Fusing hope and imagination, she dreams about Doll coming back to her, announcing to her "I'm resurrected" (96). Accordingly, grace finds manifestation and significance in Lila's love for Doll, a relation that is incomprehensible to others and especially to her husband.

The relationship between the fish, birth, and death complicates the earthly and divine relationship and alludes to the pragmatic appropriation of faith and rebirth. To Lila, baptism is only significant insofar as it models an earthy experience; "[r]esting his hand three times on her hair. That was what made her cry. Just the touch of his hand", centering the conversion around the human other instead of the divine one. In that respect, the regeneration that she undergoes is accordingly one of inarticulate intimacy towards the human other (88). She keeps on reminding herself that "I am baptized, I am married, I am Lila Dahl, and Lila Ames. I don't know what else I should want. Except for the shame to be gone, and it ain't" (94). Overhearing Ames and Boughton discuss the destiny of non-believers once, she refutes the thought that the women in St. Louis and her "tribe" -Doll, Arthur, Mellie, Doane and Marcelle -who have always warned her against churches and refused to adhere to any religious community- are destined to divine punishment in their afterlife. Thus, "[t]he next morning, before it was morning, she had gone to the river […] She put on her old dress, and she went to the river and washed herself in the water of death and loss and whatever else was not regeneration" (103). Because doctrinal faith seems socially unjust, Lila unthinkably tries to un-baptize herself. To her, if religion cannot be inclusive and accessible to less privileged human beings, then she would rather remain irreligious -yet *with* others.

Even though Lila finds sense in Ames's stumbling to find answers to her life questions, she comments "[f]or a preacher you ain't much at explaining things" (99). Unable to retract any comforting answer from her religious husband, she concludes that her assumption that preachers are connoisseurs of all human-related matters is only misleading. This conclusion complicates the question of grace further and leaves Lila with more existential wonders beyond the comfort

of a clear-cut determined answer. After all and as Ames warns her "but you might never get done. Thinking is endless" (127). In the spirit of existential theologism, Ames and Lila's argument help locate the question of salvation and grace in the realm of human worldly experience and not in the divine and godly. Thus, the preacher comfortably reassures Lila that "if the Lord is more gracious than any of us can begin to imagine, and I'm sure He is, then your Doll and a whole lot of people are safe, and warm, and very happy. And probably a little bit surprised'' (101). Lila clings to the idea of "goodness at the center of things", particularly that "there was no one to help them with any of it. Their sins" (258, 98-99). Therefore, her sense of justice is instinctive and emanates primarily from her knowledge of the human other.

Resorting to a plain style and ordinary language, the narrative propels a view of the theological discourse in conveying human uncertainties and the empiricism of belief. By modeling the form of conversion writing to the experience of Lila and her relationship with Doll, Robinson grounds the individual story and her intimate bonds in the communal and relational form of expression, echoing her belief that "[a]s individuals and as a species, we are unthinkable without our communities" (Robinson, *When I Was A Child* 22). Literature, in that sense, should be seen as "the liberation of the human individual as a social value" (xvi). According to her, this liberation is only possible when replacing the "utter asociality" of the present moment with a "true social behavior", that is "behavior designed to exploit the benefits and satisfactions of attending to collective well-being, of valuing others irrespective of issues of survival" (Robinson, "Darwinism" 37–38). By "utter asociality", Robinson refers to individualizing acts of bonding and relating to others, which have made the current forms of attachments insufficient and incompatible with modern life. She similarly alludes to the abundant contemporary use of the literary techniques of distance and detachment -namely irony and parody- which tend to distance readers and strengthen their sense of alienation from the literary worlds. What she calls the "Darwinist selfish gene" has resulted in the creation of individuals incapable of selfless love, or of loving one's neighbor as oneself (Robinson, "Darwinism" 58). Through *Lila*, she attempts to show how sociality can be maintained through the literary arts and proposes that communities are primarily constructed by acts of the imagination, particularly those of writers and readers.

Giving a voice to otherwise incomprehensible and inaccessible consciousness and situational and relational experiences generates "fellow feelings" of empathy. The author's conception of "imaginative love" is accordingly implemented by rhetorical sociality as implied

in sympathy, that is, moments of feeling *with* and not feeling *for* the protagonist. In this sense, she claims that the fiction that she writes approaches acts of grace in its attempt to portray the intimate experience in its wildness and incomprehensibility. She avows,

> I feel justified in this speculation by the importance of love in Shakespeare. The great acts of grace at the end of many of his plays are the restoration of lost loved ones. Human love in the purest forms we can know it, wife and husband, parent and child, has the aura and the immutability of the sacred. And it is surely to be noted that the settings of these plays are typically non-Christian (48).

Relating acts of love to those of grace and forms of the sacred with those of the earthly is one of the prominent features of the narrative. It builds on the concept of intimacy the notions of divinity and *agape* while placing it on the threshold of human and divine, applying consequently an ancient idea of love to contemporary experiences.

Theologian Anders Nygren explains the Christian idea of *agape* according to four main features: spontaneity, indifference to value, creativity, and initiation of fellowship with God. *Agape* love is an "unmotivated" form of love that resists a grounded explanation; it denotes God's love for human beings not because of their sin but despite them. In this case, the object of love does not have to be worthy of love, as the sinner and the righteous are not limiting characters to this love. The creativity of *agape* lies in the randomness of the act of love and its accordance of value to beings with no inherent value, so that "the forgiveness of sin is a creative work of *Divine power*" (in Soble 88). In this way, "agape does not recognize value, but creates it" (87). Fourth, *agape* is a descending form of love which means that God offers beings fellowship by descending to them in the form of the human other. Even though the narrative form of intimacy is patterned on *agapeic* love -namely in its randomness and creativity-it does not contrast or value *agape* over eros. In contrast, it merges both forms showing that the human and divine forms of love are complementary rather than eliminatory or competitive. While Nygren claims that eros is "rational, comprehensible, unmysterious" contrasting it to the randomness and mysteriousness of *agape*, Lila maintains the interpenetration of both erosic and *agapeic* features through the ambivalences she displays (89). Even though she acknowledges the necessity of sharing with the other, she is frequently reluctant and skeptical about how much of herself she wants to share. In this way, she fears and resists a full submersion into her loved ones and prefers to keep parts of the wildness and strangeness of her life and emotions to herself.

The use of first-person narrative and autobiographical accounts[71] serve, in fact, to underline the authenticity and sincerity of the text and to establish the apologetic incentive through the confessional intent as well as the sympathetic response. In *Lila*, however, the recourse to a third person narrator[72] does not stray away from or compromise any of these effects in the narrative.

The central passage that Lila traverses is from "utter asociality" to a form of intimacy and sociality generative of social justice, or in other words, a leap of faith in the other. The change is not linear, progressive, or brusque; it is rather incessantly constructed and reconstructed along the narrative. She, in fact, converts from "pretend[ing]" and "act[ing] as though [she] belonged there" to becoming a social being (*Lila* 23). Though the transformation is not simple nor absolute, it remains grounded in contradictions and uncertainties; it is "like a house where you knew you belonged though you just hated to go there and doubted once you were there you'd ever leave" (231). The house does not refer to Ames' physical home in Gilead but to Lila's transformation into a social being who trusts and acknowledges the need for the other despite the difficulty and risks this acknowledgment incurs. In this context, "conversion is a type of passage that negotiates a place in the world […] it is *not a quest for utopia* but rather for *habitus*" (Austin-Broos 2 emphasis added).

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[71] *Lila* bears numerous earmarks of the conversion narrative, especially in its confessional tone, testimonial account, theological queries, scriptural allusions, referential biblicism, plain style -that is the "morphology of the conversion" as termed by Edmund S. Morgan in *Visible Saints* (97). It uses, however, a third person narrative point of view. The conversion is usually written in the third person "when the accounts were published after the convert's death or recorded by third parties. These conversion accounts […] usually cite the converts themselves extensively, reporting the contents of letters and of other autobiographical records, in order to emphasize the authentic nature of the description" (Schaser et al. 15). Other reasons for the recourse to the third person narrative perspective is the lack or minimal educational capacity of the converts. As the conversion form was primarily written in the New England settlements for a didactic reason, they were also preached in churches and thus reported by ministers in third person for the same purposes. In the narrative, Boughton who draws a strict line between salvation and belief is emblematic of doctrinal faith, whereas Ames displays another form of humanist faith. His faith, mostly grounded in Calvinist thinking perceives the relativity of things and touches upon the complexity of spiritual salvation and human theodicy. Yet, there are also few instances of third person narration in classical canonical literary conversion narratives such as: John Bunyan's *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* and John Wilbur Chapman*'s S. H. Hadley of Water Street: A Miracle of Grace,* Henry Suso's *The life of the Blessed.*

[72] Some of the examples of third person accounts include William McCulloch transcripts in the 18th century where he reported the conversion experience of more than a hundred persons, while respecting the common narrative structure of transformation and the biblicism of the form. In this instance, McCulloch reported the conversion mainly because of the low educational background of the converts and their inability to express themselves in print. While in literature, the conversion form reached its zenith in the eighteenth century, most literary conversion narratives take the form of autobiographical reconstructions.

Habitus, for Lila, lies in her presence in Ames's thoughts, in her knowing that "he cares if she stayed or left", that he "feel[s] the lack of her, the loss of her" and that "he couldn't bear to be without her", in the secret and the "never-ending joke" she shares with Doll, in the unborn child who similarly brings meanings of hope and loss with it because the child "might not want the world at all" and because there "was always a story of a lost child" (258, 2, 230). Accepting the potential presence of loss in any act of intimacy is an acknowledgment of the paradoxical nature of any act of bonding. "The more she might seem like a wife to him," Lila realizes, "the more he [Ames] would fear the loss of her" (105). *Habitus* is, therefore, located in love and the endless waiting for the other despite their potential non-arriving. Embracing a reality in which the other is a necessary presence for the self to be is the conclusion of the conversion that Lila expresses as follows, "You. what a strange word that is. She thought, I have never laid eyes on you. I am waiting for you" (243). In this respect, otherness "would be the only thing that mattered, because no one else could say 'you' and mean the same thing by it" (244). While the love for the other comes with the potential risk of losing them at any time for any reason, it is in the "brave" acceptance of the loss, risk, and limitation that comes with the intimate pact that belief commences. This form of literary *imaginative love* that acknowledges the presence of limitation within any act of intimate encounter is maintained through a style that resists the univocality of meaning and the rationalization of feelings in the narrative.

4.2 Styles of Imaginative Love

4.2.1 Paratactic Style: Resisting the Rationality of Love

Lila fuses a simple grammatical structure with a plain register and juxtaposes them to overt pervasive biblical allusions. The Scripture is overtly referred to and frequently cited in the narrative and verses from Jobs, Jacob, Ezekiel are quoted

> She had picked up the Bible and read at the place it fell open, and she found this: *In the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither was thou washed in water to cleanse thee… No eye pitied thee*. And she fell to thinking that somebody had to have pitied her, or any child that lives. *I passed thee, and saw thee weltering in thy blood*. Lila had seen children born. They were just as naked and strange as some bug you would dig up out of the ground (Robinson, *Lila* 36–37 italics in Original).

The plain style reverberates the connection of the literary text to the Puritan spiritual narrative and the ongoing incapacitating character of this cultural form of expression. Characterized by the use of simple diction and simple sentence structure, it is referred to as parataxis. In *Pen of Iron,*

Robert Alter studies the influence of the King James Version Translation of the Bible on American literature and concludes that one of the major achievements that this version has is the paratactic style of writing. From Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner to Cormac McCarthy and Marilynne Robinson, Alter's close reading shows that the simplicity of style and syntax reverberates the Scriptural cadence and eloquence of the 1611 Bible. The common stylistic distinctive feature of these classical and contemporary texts lies therefore in their use of parataxis which means the minimal use of subordination and complex syntax and the leaning towards simple sentence structure. Subordination is rarely used and when there is a sequence of related sentences they are usually put together in the form of conjunctive propositions "and"; "but"; and "or", or short sentences followed by a period. Some of the sentences are just one word reflecting the monosyllabic speech pattern of Lila. This style of narration is reiterated frequently throughout the narrative and usually reads as follows

> Then after a few days they found Doane and Marcelle. Doll might have been looking for them. They all said Doane had a good name, he was a fair-minded man, and if you hired him you could trust him to give you a day's work. Of course it wasn't just Doane. There was Arthur with his two boys, and Em and her daughter Mellie, and there was Marcelle. She was Doane's wife. They were a married couple (10).

The sentences are simple, short, and mostly laconically terminated by a full-stop and linked by simple conjunctive modalities. This rhetoric of brevity and clarity reiterates along the narrative in the narration of events and description of inner states as well as outer landscapes.

The use of paratactic style in the description of nature and spaces, and in the depiction of the emotional logic results in a pictorial rendering void of lyricism and figurative elaboration yet catches in its minimalism the meticulous sensory and material details. An example of this is the description of Ames's house after the wedding,

> There was food in the icebox and the pantry and on the kitchen table, and there were little gifts on the counters, embroidered tea towels and pillowcases and aprons, and a needlework picture of apples and pears and grapes with the words *Bless This House*. There were flowers in every room. The windows were all opened to let the day in. Everything that could be polished shone (94 emphasis in original).

The photographic nature of narration captures pictorial images and objects in their materiality and renders them with a slow shutter speed giving a longer exposure to the bareness of the scene. The accumulation of details in the description of the space gives the illusion that the narrator is solely performing camerawork drawing visual images by giving names and labels to objects in

the imagined fictional space. The assembly of material objects and sensory images by means of inclusion and exclusion of certain details not only makes things visible but goes beyond that to flesh out embodied responses. The enactment of corporeal response illustrates how affect circulates around and through these photographic images. It aims at going beyond the visible to settle in the inarticulate or unsaid. In that regard, the significance of the metaphor does not emanate from the linguistic signs, or the labels provided by the narrator but is rather triggered by the affective responses of the juxtaposition of the said and the unsaid, which point the reader's attention beyond the visible. To say it differently, it does not intimate feelings but enacts affective exchange of meanings instead.

Firmly rooted in domesticity, the house remains largely uninhabitable to Lila, who draws her sustenance instead from the smell of rain and the wildness of life. She, in fact, never feels at home in this domestic limiting space and keeps returning back frequently to the peripheral cabin, "the great, sweet nowhere" (217). The ungroundedness of the place, its wildness, and its closeness to nature and resistance to domestication are the appealing factors that make the shack more accommodating and habitable to Lila. By avoiding the overloading of the reader with interpretive syntax and metaphorical rendering of spaces and events, the narrator refrains from creating a romantically suggestive reading and proposes instead an affective one. This affective reading is triggered by a form of quasi-neutral narration that acknowledges the presence of matters without a prior emotional overload, capturing the experience in its vividness as it is being lived. The effect of using parataxis in the description is

> to give us the landscape in its sensuous concreteness, uncomplicated by strategies of interpretation, which, for example, is what figurative language would do, and with no gestures of lyric heightening or sentimentalization, which, at least since the Romantic movement, landscapes have often invited: we get the road, the forest, the sun in the trees, the cattle, the plains, the mountains, the fences. The passage gains a certain strength through its very resistance to elaboration (Alter 152).

While it echoes the religious ardor and the biblical cadence of the narrative, the resistance to elaboration equally underscores the narrator's refraining from dominating the mind of the protagonist or forcing any emotional readerly response. It reflects the effort to intimate the simple -however never simplistic- nature of Lila's thought and perception, by capturing her experience as it would be coming directly from her.

Likewise, the attention to minute details in the description catches the experience of nature in its composite material reception, creating accordingly a composite sensory image where all the senses are at work (sound, material, odor, vision). This composite depiction is illustrated in the following passage,

> She settled the child on her hip and carried her into the dark house, stepping as carefully and quietly as she could, and found the bundle she kept in her corner, and then they went out into the chilly dark again, down the steps. The house was rank with sleep and the night was windy, full of tree sounds. The moon was gone and there was rain, so fine then it was only a tingle on the skin. The child was four or five, long-legged, and Doll couldn't keep her covered up, but she chafed at her calves with her big, rough hand and brushed the damp from her cheek and her hair (*Lila,* 5).

After stealing Lila from the boarding house, Doll "made her a couple of dresses out of flour sacks with holes cut in them for her head and arms. They were stiff at first and smelled of being saved in a chest or a cupboard, and they had little flowers all over them, like Doll's apron" (7). These two passages, which render the scene when Doll takes Lila from the foster house and bathes her, draw on the bareness of language and grammatical structure and locate the sublimity of its portrayal in the mysticism of the ordinary.

This translates Robinson's aesthetics of perception and her constant interest in the everyday and mundane as the source for the divine. Expressing the relation between the numinous and ubiquitous in fiction writing, she contends that one "can draw from perception the same way a mystic would draw from a vision" and that "a mystical experience would be wasted on [her]. Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to [her]" (in Fay). In fact, the mysticism of the everyday is

> Robinson's enduring subject, the one for which she has the truest feel. She has a way […] 'of restoring to "dowdy, common words -words like courtesy and kindness, shame and forgiveness, transgression and grace . . . a startling measure of their old luster and gravity.' It is easy to miss what is radical in this, but it is, indeed, radical in a world that so often turns its back on history. Anyone who has experienced loss knows that when something is on the verge of disappearing, old words become newly meaningful. What is amazing is how fluidly Robinson is able to resurrect them (O'Rourke).

It could be concluded here that the fusion of a paratactic biblical style with a colloquial register reiterates Robinson's unorthodox theological convictions and grounds her narrative in an aura of the sacredness of the ordinary. The numinous emanates from the immediacy and vivacity of the worldly and ordinary and from the avoidance of abstraction. Intimacy, in this respect, is not

abstracted but constructed through the brief yet affective language which captures the materiality of experiences.

The use of parataxis is also paired with the use of Midwestern colloquialism, resulting in an invisible form of mediation and a reduced distance between the narrator and the fictional world of the protagonist. This is mostly visible through the narrated dialogues between Ames and Lila:

> 'You're still loyal. You're up all night writing to her [the reverend's first deceased wife]'
> 'Well, yes. In a way I suppose that's true. And writing to you. You asked me that question.'
> 'It don't matter. She must have been a sweet girl.'
> He nodded. 'She was. She was. He said, 'so you covered her grave with roses. That was a wonderful thing.'
> She shrugged. 'No folks of my own.'
> 'I can't tell you what I felt when I saw that. I don't think there's a name for it.'
> 'you didn't know it was just me doing it.'
> 'just you,' he said. 'If it had been a miracle, if an angel had done it, no one to give that old locket to' (225).

Through its use of the vernacular, the narrative pays close attention to the minutiae of everyday speech, lending the dialogue both realism and rhythm. This conversational flow imbues the characters with authenticity and a vivid sense of individuality.

Like the choice of non-figurative style, Lila as a character is not beautified and her weaknesses are not camouflaged in any ways. Looking into the etymology of her name, one of the inherent paradoxes discloses. Lila derives mainly from the Latin word "Lilly", a word heavy with biblical and literary connotations. In the Bible, the lilies are referred to in the Gospel of Matthew as well as the Gospel of Luke as wildflowers which grow and blossom because God provides for them "And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin"[73] (Matthew 6:28). The lilies, in this sense, suggest

[73] The verses that follow further explain the relation between the lilies and ascetism "(6:30) Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, [shall he] not much more [clothe] you, O ye of little faith? (6:31) Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (6:32) (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. (6:33) But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (6:34) Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day [is] the evil thereof" (The Gospel of Matthew *The King James Version of the Holy Bible* 6:30-6:32)

that the need for the bare necessities and material objects in the world is ephemeral and that the belief in God is the most substantial. It warns, in a way, that faith should not be supplanted by the multiplying transient necessities of life. The choice of the name Lila is, accordingly, not random as it bears religious significance to it. In the narrative and like the lilies, Lila is wild and untamed, feeding from the fields, sleeping in a shack by the river

> She knew how to get by so long as nobody bothered her. Plenty of fish in the river. There were dandelions greens. Mushrooms. You can chew pine sap if you want to. You can eat the roots of things. Cattails. Wild carrots. Nettles are very good if you know how to pick them and cook them. Doll said you just had to know what wouldn't kill you. Most folks don't eat squirrels, but you can. Turtles. Snakes, if need be (Robinson, *Lila* 27).

Her wildness is further alluded to by Ames in the image of the bird that once found its way to his house during a windy storm. For Ames the bird "left a blessing in the house […] The wildness of it. Bringing the wind inside" (19). Likewise, Lila came to him from nowhere bringing her wildness and strangeness. The wildness is not fully tamed afterward, as she occasionally withdraws back to the shack and eats vegetables from the ground because "she wanted the feel of real dirt on her hands" (204). She is, in fact, barely disturbed by the ephemera of life, constantly reminding herself to never "go on wanting things" and that "the more you get, the more you want" (72). Rather, she invests in her own observations of the world and transient identity to seek comfort in the groundlessness of her experiences.

In the literary context, the lilies connote beauty, purity, and love. However, all the attempts to beautify Lila prove to be pointless and unproductive. While, ironically, her "pretty name" is randomly given to her so that "maybe she'll turn out pretty", she is continuously described as a grotesque character (10). In fact, Lila "brought hard hands and a face she can barely bring herself to look at in a mirror" (242). Driven by the conviction that she is unattractive and even unwomanly, Lila wonders how she can be alive at all. Her "ugly face and hands", make her wonder why Doll would think about "stealing" her "as if she were a child someone could want" (47). In the brothel in St. Louis, "they had made a sort of game of it, trying to pretty her up" (34). However, and despite all their effort to make her more "appealing" using makeup on her face, henna on her hair, high heels and a red dress, "[e]verything looked wrong" (34). So, they simply tell her "Just *pretend* you're pretty". In fact, she is not meant to be nor to become *pretty* as her roughness is not masqueraded but rather emphasized. Likewise, in the narrative Lila

is meant to arrive to the reader in her bareness, wildness and ugliness revealing her vulnerabilities and voicing her imperfections. By bringing up her strange and ambivalent inner thoughts and feelings and her untamed character, the wilderness of the female consciousness and of her experience of the other is highlighted.

The reader is granted access to Lila's mind in its bareness, and in its perplexing contradictions and uncertainties. One instance of how Lila's thought is expressed in the narrative reads as follow

> (Two or three times she had even had the thought of stealing him [her child], carrying him away to the woods or off down the road so she could have him to herself and let him know about that other life. But she imagined the old man, the Reverend calling after them, "Where are you going with that child?" The sadness in his voice would be terrible. *He* would be surprised to hear it. You wouldn't even know your body had a sound like that in it. And it would be familiar to her. She didn't imagine it, she remembered that sadness from somewhere, and it was as if she would understand something if she could hear it again. That was what she almost wanted.) (16-17, parentheses and italics in original)

This quote displays the protagonist's unorthodox consideration of stealing her own child only in the hope of bringing her husband to experience her own puzzling and unsayable feelings. Because of her inability to conversely express her own conflictual feelings and because of their resistibility to be expressed, Lila perceives her bond with her husband to be a missing one. In that sense, her attempt to flee Gilead and make him suffer stems from her own unordinary understanding of the act of sharing itself. Her love for Ames and eagerness to connect with him and communicate this love pushes her to hope that he can share her feelings of sadness, loss and loneliness as she believes that these experiences cannot be fully understood by being labelled. Instead, feelings acquire their significance from the unmediated lived experience and perceptions and from their resistance of being fixed in preexistent linguistic structures. This in-between space of sharing between the self and the other is identified by the unsaid.

While she is aware that Doll is accustomed to those experiences, she believes that the reverend writes and speaks about suffering and pain in his sermons and lectures from an abstract and intellectualized standpoint. His knowledge emanates from theological, historical and philosophical texts (aside from the bible, he often quotes John Calvin,[74] Saint Augustin, Ludwig

[74] Contemplating Ames's fervor when discussing his favorite theologians, Lila wonders, "I didn't even know he was dead. Calvin. The way you and Boughton talk about him" (Robinson, *Lila* 131)

Feuerbach), and from folktales and therefore are necessarily mediated. In contrast, Lila derives her knowledge from her own life in general with its inevitable ambivalences, roughness and unpredictability. Where the preacher sees "sound theology", Lila finds insignificance and interpolates "'I don't understand theology. I don't think I like it" (101). Unlike the preacher, she ignores the linguistic signifiers that relate emotions to their meanings but recognizes these emotions by inhabiting them. A different type of theologian, she perceives the bible as an insignificant text except for the places where it "touched earth" (226). In this way, the meanings of words for Lila are arbitrary and defy fixedness because they can only be understood by experiencing and living them. The experience versus doctrine dilemma in *Lila* hints at the main dilemma in the use of the Christian form of *agape* in the text: the mapped knowledge that structures our understanding of human love is different from *agapeic* love.

The narrator skirts a rootless and uncontained character who never feels at home anywhere and who resists any attempt of camouflage and pretense. The ugliness and wildness that Lila bears make any act of identification with her character hard to achieve. The slow cadence and bare style, therefore, plunge the reader into an apparently placid surface that is profoundly agitated. The agitation uncovers gradually through the unbeautified rendition of the character's physical appearance, thoughts, and speech.

4.2.2. The Aesthetics of Quietness: The Unsayable Character of Intimacy

Lila is depicted as a quiet character who lacks communicative skills and deliberately avoids social interactions. Her mistrust and fear of others hinder her from establishing social bonds to the point that she favors living at the outskirts of society and remaining distant from others. Her quietude accompanies her throughout the story since her drifting days with Doll

> They never spoke about any of it, not one word in all those years. Not about the house Doll stole her away from, not about the old woman who took them in. They did keep that shawl, though, till it was worn soft as cobwebs. But she felt the thrill of the secret whenever she took Doll's hand and Doll gave her hand a little squeeze, whenever she lay down exhausted in the curve of Doll's body, with Doll's arm to pillow her head and the shawl to spread over her (13).

This short passage shows that Lila does not use language to establish relationships with others and communicate with them. Instead, the symbolism of the shawl as a generator of warmth and as a physical thread that binds the two characters together accords to the unusual bond the qualities of quietness and silence. The untranslatability of the shared secret suggests that their

relation exceeds the linguistic order, and that language is incapable of containing it. It is also exclusionary because no one else knows the codes nor the signifying signs of this bond. It is a relationship beyond words, and beyond any familiar structure; "[t]here she was, missing Doll again. For many years she had belonged to somebody [...] The way they used to laugh together, half the joke being that nobody else would know what the joke was" (199). Their bond is incomprehensible to others, yet they enjoy its inaccessibility and non-normative order.

This clandestine character, which extend to all Lila's relationships, can be partly explained by the latter's ignorance or lack of words, especially since there "was a long time when Lila didn't know that words had letters, or that there were other names for seasons than planting and haying" (10). She "is very quiet", "[she] got feelings [she] do[es]n't know the names for" and she "doe[s]n't know the words to say" (17, 184). Ames frequently comments on her reticence to speak: "you are so quiet", "if you did tell me about them", "oh Lila, please tell me more" (23, 31,128). "I don't much like to talk" is most of the time her answer (29). Here, the reticence becomes a choice explained by a skepticism of language and its ability to express feelings and authenticate experiences.

The references to Lila in *Gilead* and *Home*[75] already introduce this character as inarticulate, "unschooled", and even enigmatic. As Rowan Williams puts it, "we have encountered Lila as a quizzical voice on the edges of conversations, almost on the edge of our vision" (Rowan Williams). She is, accordingly, a reclusive character who feels lonely almost all her life, a character who "had never been at home in all the years of her life. She wouldn't know how to begin" (*Lila* 107). She, in fact, lacks any sense of belonging or relatedness and even her name is arbitrarily accorded to her,

> There were graves in Gilead with his name written out on them, and there was no one anywhere alive or dead with her name, since the first one belonged to the sister she

[75] Lila appears midway in *Gilead* when John Ames is delivering a sermon on light (162). He reflects on the arrival of Lila to Gilead as follows "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance -for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light [...] I have reflected on that sermon, and there is some truth in it. But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration" (Robinson, *Gilead* 245). In *Home*, Glory refers to Lila as "the improbable bride" of the Reverend (Robinson, *Home* 42). Seeing her putting flowers on the graves of Ames's first wife and child, she ponders that "[s]he would tell him, if he asked, that the flowers were Lila's, so he would not think they meant endless mourning so much as the wish to somehow compensate a child for missing seventy springs, or perhaps to offer delight to her perpetual childhood- she wondered if Lila would ever tell her what all the flowers meant, except kindness, and love of the lives, past and present, into which she had chosen to adopt herself, as if finally at home" (161). However, Lila is not mentioned at all in the fourth installment -*Jack.*

> never saw of a woman she barely remembered and the second one was just a mistake. Her name had the likeness of a name. She had the likeness of a woman with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had a likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and roof and door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is there might be something to it (*Lila* 68).

The process of nomination is arbitrary and even in its arbitrariness, it managed to deprive Lila from the conventional meanings associated with familial belonging, private possessions, homely security, and social credentials. It turns her into a free-floating sign that cannot be seen in association to any outside social or cultural system. However, she deduces that the strangeness of her thoughts cannot be random. As a matter of fact, it is this strangeness that accords significance to the loneliness and ungroundedness of the character.

The nonfamiliarity of her thoughts generates a dilemma in the protagonist who grows skeptical of the significance and representability of language and acknowledges that her name acquires its significance from its groundlessness. She confesses to the transience of her identity and contends that this rootlessness allows her to pivot between *likeness* and *reality* or between thinking and dreaming. The transience of her identity conveys a character who constantly investigates the meaning of words in relation to her own imagination and to the relation these signs have in between their physical nature and their individual cognition. In this regard, names make sense to her only when they are lived; as matter of example, she "heard about the Crash years after it happened, and she had no idea what it was even after she knew what to call it. But it did seem like they gave it the right name" (15). Names accordingly resonate with lived and felt experiences. She concludes that "[e]verything has a name. Everybody else knows the name and they think you're stupid if you don't know it. Don't matter" (209). Despite her fear of speaking, Lila displays a fascination with language and especially with the written word. During her stay in Gilead, she often pauses to speculate on words and on the Scripture and she tries to rewrite verses numerous times in her tablet (68, 74, 82). This fascination explains that Lila's silence is partly the result of her ignorance of words and their signification but mostly because of her skepticism of the medium itself.

Even though she frequently admits the need for language to express her own thoughts and feelings, she often criticizes the system of signification itself; "It had begun to seem to her that if she had more words she might understand things better" (113). To her, abstract words that are

not derived from individual experience are only capable of providing short-lived moments of contentment. She, for instance, finds fault with the authority of the priest and disparages people who unquestionably find comfort in his words. In these lines, she wonders

> Why did they waste candles on daylight? Him standing there, talking about people dead who knows how long, if the stories about them were even true, and most of the people listening, or trying to listen. There was no need to any of it. […] Finding comfort where there was no comfort, just an old man saying something he'd said so many times he probably didn't hear it himself. It was about the meaning of existence, he said. All right. She knew a little bit about existence. That was pretty much the only thing she knew about, and she had learned the word for it from him. It was like the United States of America- they had to call it something. The evening and the morning, sleeping and waking and weariness and still wanting more of it. Existence. Why do I bother? (74-5)

Here, Lila's skepticism about the signification of language and its capability of offering epistemic justice to its users bewilders her, especially since she finds it insufficient to articulate her own intimate relations with others in the same way as she experiences it. She consequently resists this epistemic order of knowledge and refuses the givenness of these meanings. According to her, the epistemic authority of these "comforting" words is derived primarily from the social rank of the reverend and not from any other processes of sense-making, and therefore she rejects the way in which knowledge is appropriated and mediated.

This confluent approach to language as a paradoxical tool of in/expressivity is touched upon frequently in the narrative. Language in *Lila* becomes a means of expression while at the same time a hindrance to communication, a way of "[f]inding comfort where there was no comfort" (*Lila* 74). The text does not succumb totally to the view of language as a barrier to communication or as a skeptical medium that breaks the chains of communication instead of creating them. It self-consciously confirms that language preoccupies a precarious position yet tries to use "language as a solution to the problem of language" (Holland 6). In this attempt, it ascertains that it does not regress to the pre-modern view of language as a representative tool nor does it deny the poststructuralist conception of language as a self-referential system of signs. Instead, it exposes language as an intricate medium of communication that incapacitates a form of communicative intersubjectivity. This resonates with Ames's avowal in *Gilead* that "language isn't sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do" (189). In the same vein, Lila concludes "you best keep to yourself, except you never can" (70).

Literature and religion emanate consequently from the matrix of experience and praxis, and this explains the reason why Lila, despite her skepticism, reads the Scripture and ruminates incessantly over the lines of Ezekiel rewriting them numerous times. She finds solace in Ezekiel's verses as she senses that they reverberate the story of her life of precarity and wondering. The insertion of the primary biblical intertext and its projection to Lila's life with Doll, further grounds the theological view in the realm of the quotidian and the worldly. The simplicity of Lila's flow of thoughts and its avoidance of abstraction captures the corporeality of objects amid an aura of spirituality. She consistently draws parallelism between the biblical story and hers, concluding that "Old Ezekiel […] seemed to know all about them" (83). Style, here, becomes a mode of thinking that has formal implications and significance to the subject of the story as well, illuminating the character's moral dilemma, existential uncertainties, and complicated reasoning.

In her plain and reduced language, Lila attempts to relate words to her own personal felt and lived experiences to reconcile the physical sign to their cognitive meaning. However, she concludes that the relationship between signifier-signified resides in their inability to be reconciled. Coming to terms with the irreconcilability, she decides to read more, to work on her own handwriting, and to reflect on the written word. She, consequently, concludes the complementary relation between senses and thought or sensuousness and consciousness. In one of her conversations with the reverend, she assumes that the latter prefers not to talk to her because of her incapacity to express herself properly. The reverend, however, replies

> 'I like to look at you, Lila. Lila my wife. There's a lot of pleasure in it for me. Of course I also like to talk with you.'
> 'Well, that's probly because I never tell you nothing.' She thought, Anything. I can talk better than this. I guess I just don't want to […]
> But she felt those words in her mouth and her heart was thumping (185).

The discrepancy between what Lila says to her husband and what she thinks to herself is marked here by the transition from direct dialogue to indirect narration. It signals a major gap between thought and speech, one that accompanies the protagonist along the narrative and continuously resists reconciliation. Lila's acknowledgment of the need for language to express her thoughts to others is inconsistent with her consciousness of the problematic representability of the medium. In that sense, the boundary between thought and imagination is blurred, and the intimate

connection to the other occurs in the continuous oscillation between these two realms and not from a rational understanding of language appropriation.

As a fictional character, Lila privileges from the vastness of possibilities energized by the creative use of language. She, accordingly, understands her bond with others in terms of sensual qualities of experience and affective logic and not according to ritualized contextual use of words. This gap is highlighted by Marilynne Robinson who asserts

> In my fiction my characters are not simulations of 'actual people,' whatever they are. They're much more like figures in dreams to me, in the sense that the meaning they have is nuanced and modulated in relation to the emotional logic of the thing being imagined, rather than in terms of some sort of interior logic or motivation of the kind that 'realistic characters' are assumed to be possessed by. Which I think is probably as bad model (Schaub and Robinson 242).

Assuming that characters are the product of the imagination of the writer, their words -in the case of Robinson's fiction- tend to follow an "emotional logic". They speak along the lines of their respective fictional imaginative creation and not according to prescribed conventional systems of expression. The protagonist claims "I got feelings I don't know the names for. There probly ain't any names. Probly nobody else ever had'em. I tell you what, I wouldn't wish'em on a snake'" (184), or in another instance, "'I can't tell you what I felt when I saw that. I don't think there's a name for it'" (225). Unable to articulate her feelings, she intuits their signification from her own simulated experience and compares them to the means of expression that exist prior to them. She even wonders "Did she feel annoyance before she knew the name for it? Would she have felt she had the right to it?" (112). In addition, she criticizes epistemic knowledge for being inevitably reducing and external to lived and felt experiences. This suggests the primacy of the affective in the narrative and the salience of photographic images, which are not logically connected to the content in any straightforward sense. They emerge instead as visceral forces unbound to any familiar linguistic or social structure, forces that produce meanings instead of constructing them out of already-existent categories.

The narrator argues that following a rational logic based on expectation deprives experiences of the quality of spontaneity and limits the bounds of creative imagination. In that sense, the narrative attempts to go beyond the hyper-intellectualization of emotions and rationalizations of feelings by capturing the affective experience of the protagonist in its spontaneity and liveliness. As Robinson argues, "there are structures of meaning that do not align

themselves with reason" (*When I Was A Child* 193). Accordingly, the narrative is less driven by plot and causality than by Lila's perceptions and ambivalence about the expressivity of language and its conflictual capacity to render and create binding intimate relationships. Likewise, Ames explains to Lila, "life on earth is difficult and grave, and marvelous. Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts don't add up. They don't even belong in the same calculation. Sometimes it is hard to believe they are all parts of one thing. Nothing makes sense until we understand that experience does not accumulate like money, or memory, or like years and frailties" (*Lila* 223). To disassociate the realm of literary intimacy from the economy of relationships which informs and structures most approaches to relationships in romantic narratives, and to account for the uniqueness and singularity of each relationship are the main drives behind this aesthetics of quietness.

The logic that informs Lila's relationship with the other is that of inarticulate emotions or "emotional logic". Ironically, this logic does not encourage the articulation of emotions or the use of sentimental rhetoric but invites the experience of affective responses. The protagonist's understanding of warmth and bonding emanates from her perception of the world and not from the non-subtraction of emotions from the realm of knowledge-making. To her daunting question "why things happen the way they do", the answer is not concluded from Ames' sophisticated response in the letter addressed to her but lies primarily within her own perceptions of the world (29). She indeed perceives her own quietness not as matter of ignorance but rather as the result of an "emotional logic" of thinking that fuses senses and thoughts and signifies in and through the creative margins of imagination that silence allows. That being the case, Lila confidently asserts at the end that "Someday she would tell him what she knew" (261). Despite of the ambiguity of her claim, the implication that Lila knows more than she says locates her active attempts to grasp the meaning in her silent thoughts and unspoken words. The temporal indeterminacy in "someday" grounds the narrative in the openness of the possibility and the never-ending processes of imagination. Meaning, in that regard, never reaches fullness insofar as epistemic revelation can never be attained. The fictive possibilities opened by withholding knowledge display the intimate connection between imagination and knowledge in the narrative. The indeterminate promise that Lila makes at the end, regardless of whether it will be communicated or not, grounds the narrative in the state of being a mere possibility, a possibility that resists fulfillment. This possibility can only be accessed by means of imagination and by going beyond

what Robinson calls the "utter moral passivity", that is the lack of imagination and acceptance of the givenness of narratives (Robinson, *The Death of Adam* 61). In her attempt to catch this perplexing experience, she uses a speculative from of introspection that permits the access of the various possible worlds of the character.

4.2.3 Lila's *Introspective Musings*: The Optative Mode and Alternative Worlds

The underlying contradictory feelings and unsettling thoughts of the protagonist divulge through the narrative's abundant use of free indirect voice and introspective narration -visible through the interior monologues, and the speculative or conjunctive mode of writing. Lila moves, accordingly, from the edge of narrative silence to that of "quiet noise"[76], anchored in a laconically simple style and diction. The introspection reveals Lila's haunting uncertainties and existential dilemmas, as the reverend asserts "Lila, you always do ask the hardest question" (99). Ricocheting between childhood memories with Doll and present life in Gilead, the boundary between past and present thins out to the point that it becomes unnoticeable at times. One example of the interpenetration of story time and narration time occurs when Lila reflects on her stay in the brothel in St. Louis,

> Those women in St. Louis […] He [Ames] probably had a meeting at the church, so he was wearing a necktie. You fool, Lila [...] St. Louis. Much better to be there in the shack by herself. In the evening with her potatoes roasting outside. Doane used to push a spud out of the fire with a stick, and they'd toss it one to another until one of them could stand to hold on to it, and then it was his. One of Arthur's boys, always. They'd just go to sleep when it got dark. She should buy some candles (73).

In less than half a page and in Lila's spare language and simple style, she reminisces over her time in the brothel in St. Louis, returns to her present with Ames, then flashes further back to a distant past of wandering with the tribe, to a less distant past of living in the shack in Gilead, then lands back in the present when she reminds herself to buy more candles. The temporal

[76] I am here using François Julien's terminology from *Of Intimacy,* where he differentiates love from intimacy portraying love as cacophonous and loud due to its embeddedness in cultural normative discourses and attributing to intimacy the criterion of quietness and linguistic inaccessibility (184). In fact, he argues that intimacy occurs at the threshold of speech and silence, bringing together both forms of noise and silence. He writes that "Because speech and silence are fundamentally equivalent to touching the intimate, intimacy reabsorbs their difference […] At the same time, silence has become a perfectly conductive element, in the same way, that one speaks of a conductive body in physics, allowing the slightest vibration to propagate from one another. Speech exercises a tacit function which consists of […] making the agreement audible and resealing it. Oscillating between the frontiers of the sayable and from its opposite, unsayable, the self and the other, speech and silence, it operates obliquely together to generate complicity" (196 Translation mine)

blurriness is explained by the absence of temporal logic or causality in the narrative. The movement to the past is not, therefore, linear but circular and repetitive.

The significance of events is not cultivated from their chronological order but from their interpenetration and overlapping boundaries. Formally speaking, *Lila* is narrated uninterruptedly with no chapter breaks or ruptures to the flow of the narrative and with sections occasionally divided with a blank line, suggesting a fluid continuity of thought and speech. This gives the narrative a meditative style whereby the character does not chronologically nor progressively move towards an end but rather continuously spirals between disparate occurring or -as Mark Scott refers to- as Lila's "introspective musings" (207). Spiraling from one time to another is usually marked by the temporal deixes which refer to the unordered sequence of events. The four seasons, for instance, are usually depicted to mark a narrative section yet they do not follow chronologically; "Life is hard in the spring, and still it all felt like something she had almost died for the want of" (218)/ "It got to be Christmas time" (227)/ "Fourth of July"/"there was more snow after that one, sugar snow, the old man called it"(245)/ "June day" (251). This out-of-order depiction parallels the free-floating flow of consciousness of Lila. Every season, in fact, carries an inherent paradoxical significance to it. The winter is, for instance, a "hollow of cold" and an impediment to Lila's life outside in the shack (160). Yet it is also the season of the warmth of encounters with Ames and with Doll; "Winter nights Doll would pull her against her, into her own shape, and she would pull the quilt up over her, and her arm would be around her, and Lila would only feel warmer for the cold that was everywhere in the world" (160). Her child is also born during Christmas on one of the coldest days of the year, and his birth marked another miraculous moment of conversion in Lila; "This was the moment before everything changed" (247).

Like Lila's contradictory and nomadic nature, words become nomads of unsettled meanings that regress continuously in her memory to encompass opposites and paradoxes. This leads her to question "[w]hat use was there in calling a day by a certain name, or thinking of it as anything but weather? They knew what time of the year it was when the timothy bloomed, when the birds were fledging. They knew it was morning when the sun came up. What more was there to know?" (21) When the reverend asks her to speak more "'Perhaps you could help me understand […] you are so quiet'", she responds

> but she would not know how to explain, and if she told him how strange and alone she felt, and wanted to feel, he would wonder why she stayed with him at all. Now that there might be a child she'd best try to act like she belonged there, at least for a while. Her hands still smelled like river water, and her hair. She still felt a little more like who she was, that was a help (23).

The ineffaceable traces of the past in the present emerge in the narrative in the form of a smell of wildness in Lila's hands and hair, ensuring the continuity of the past in the present. Consequently, the frontiers between the past and present overlap and blur at times grounding the past in presentness. This loosening of the chronological lines has its impact on the intimate relation of Lila and Doll whose constant presence -even after her death in the form of reminiscence- in Lila's life situates intimacy in repetitive patterns of the memory and not in the nostalgic form of it. The intimate, here, is not uniquely in the memoirs of the past but is a substantial constitutive of the present bonds with others. In her recollection and reconstruction of the past, Lila is continuously interrupted by the baby's movement inside her belly. As a matter of example, "[t]hat night on the stoop was the first time Doll ever took her up in her arms, and she still remembered how good it felt. Those shy little presents made of nothing [...] Now motherhood forced itself into Lila's breasts. They ached with it" (175). Not only do these bodily movements slide her back to her present life but they also remind her of her imminent future. In this passage, the movement of the mind intersects with the movement of her body reworking again the idea of continuity of thought and perception. Lila's memories blend with her body grounding the abstraction of her thoughts in the materiality of her body and in the lived experience.

Like M.R. Neukirchen in Joyce Carol Oates' *Mudwoman* who unsuccessfully attempts to bury her destitute childhood as an abandoned child and adopted teenager and her near-death drowning by her father in the mud, Lila is unable to hide her past from the Reverend despite all her attempts. Her past haunts her and keeps resurfacing in the form of scattered pieces, constituting an unconcealable part of her identity and because of that "Lila remembered more than she ever let on" (47). The haunting memories of the past are unpacked according to an associative logic that thins out the temporal proximity between past and present. For instance, the narrative goes back and forth to childhood memories (1-10, 12-16, 23, 38, 47, 61, 65, 102, 111, 176, 219, 260), references to the temporary stay in St. Louis after the disappearance of Doll (22, 51, 73, 98, 124, 188, 193, 204, 210, 218, 255), life in the cabin at the outskirts of Gilead (68, 71,

103, 154), life with Ames (16, 23-26, 40, 74-77, 84, 222), the child in the shack (148,157, 258-9), the scene when Doll left her on the stoop of a church (27, 54, 69, 70, 179). Lila, in fact does not try to escape her past nor to surpass it. She comes to the realization that the past is constitutive of her present and is substantial to her experience of making sense to the world. The recalling and bringing together of the memories of the past flows unorderly and reiteratively, recalling Robinson's protagonist -Ruth- in *Housekeeping* observes,

> every memory is turned over and over again, every word , however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that wanderers will find a way home, and the perished those whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long (*Housekeeping* 195).

Like Ruth who tries to "knit together her past", Lila resorts to the knitting in order to make sense of the world she inhabits and in order to feel a sense of belonging. Trying to find her way home, she realizes that her past continuously haunts the present, manifesting itself every time differently so that it forcefully resists amnesia. This temporal continuity intertwines with the spatial quest for habitus, resulting in the intersection of both in the moments of encounter with the other. To Lila, every encounter is a home that encompasses, as it reconciles, temporal and spatial axes.

Doll is not uniquely a pleasant memory in Lila's past but is mostly a constitutive part of her present and a regulating force in her existence. Lila, in short, lives for Doll and in the hope that she reunites with her

> Well, the old man's house was full of books. She would work on her reading. Doll would want her to. When she thought this way, she could almost begin to enjoy her life. She was stealing it, almost, to give it to Doll. People might think she liked the old man's house and the Boughton's clothes and all the proprieties and the courtesies […] But she just imagined how all of it would seem to Doll -a very good life, a comfortable life that she had because Doll had stolen her, and had taken care of her all those years. She lived for Doll to see. Lila made the old man smile for the pleasure in his eyes, because Doll would have been so happy to see it. When she put her arms around him, when she slipped into his bed, Doll would have smoothed the pillow and whispered to her, 'He'such a kind old man!' (97).

Lila's ability to love the reverend is cultivated from her own experience with Doll and the latter's random act of stealing. The inarticulate form of intimacy shared with Doll defies any normative conception or logical explanation of the domain of the intimate and grows instead to be a shared mystery. Like the Christian understanding of *agape* as God's love extending to humans, Doll's

love for Lila -despite her frailties- is the energizer of the latter's faith in the connecting bond with others.

When rummaging through her past, Lila often hypothesizes about other possible outcomes of her experiences of loss, precarity, and solitude. Philosopher Stuart Hampshire refers to this type of experience as the "optative mode" of self-understanding which is a mode of contrastive and counterfactual self-reflection and highlights its substantiality in making sense of the self and the world (101). He further explains that the optative is

> a type of situation in which judgments of necessity and both theoretical and practical possibility become urgent and important, a type of situation to which poetry and fiction are always recurring: the situation of retrospection and regret. Any person's actual history can be seen in retrospect as a track between two margins. Just over the left margin are all those things that could have or might have happened to him, and that nearly happened to him, stretching back along the margin into the past. On the right-hand side of the track are all those things that he might have done, and that he nearly did, and that were real possibilities or options for him, stretching back into the past.

Using for this mode of writing about the past, the self is constructed by what happened as much as by all the other accompanying counterfactual possibilities. By constantly hypothesizing and going back and forth in her memory, Lila actively reworks her understanding of the world of the other along the lines of the real and the possible.

Usually introduced by "what if", "say that", "imagine that", the optative mode saturates the narrative and bespeaks the thought that Lila carries in their rawness and strangeness. "So many times she had thought," for example, "if she had just said a word to that old man, if she hadn't stood there staring at his boots, Doll could stayed somewhere nearby, and Lila would have taken food to her and made sure she was warm, sneaking out at night to find her. They'd laughed with the pleasure of the secret" (116). These counterfactuals refer to things that did not happen but are possible realities in the fictional worlds or the "possible worlds" of *Lila*. They constitute an outside reality through the visionary speculation and the contrastive emotions of the main character because they allow the experience of what has happened in tandem with what has not. These contrastive emotions interrupt the linear relation between fictional worlds and real life because the retrospection over one's action, thoughts, or words and their alternatives challenges the cognitive exercise of reading and receiving these emotions. Instead of tracing the thoughts and feelings of the character to a given past memory, the reader oscillates between what is felt

and experienced by the character and by what could have been felt and experienced by them at the same time.

By creating these possible alternative plots, Lila reaches some spiritual insight, especially that she never tries to stage-manage her consciousness to deflect the vulnerability that the optative self can reveal

> If she had been a ghost watching Doane and Marcelle, so close she could have seen the change in their eyes when they looked at each other […] She imagined a wedding for them, both of them young, Marcelle with her arms full of roses. What to imagine of Doll. That she had never cut that old man. That she'd never held a knife or spat on a whetstone. That she was wearing a new shawl that was really the old one on the day whoever owned it first had bought it. She couldn't wish that scar away, or how Doll never forgot to hide her face from anyone but Lila. The ghost couldn't really be part of that dream. Lila would just be there, so close seeing that tender, ugly face. Just her. Nobody else would even want a dream like that (209).

It is through the optative mode and through the privileging of the hypothetical, that the reader is granted partial access to Lila's relational thoughts. By wishing to be a ghost or marrying an old man to save Doll, most of Lila's speculative musings divulge her altruistic character and her deep interest in the other, despite her non-verbalism and minimal social contact. In her dream, which she suspects to be everyone else's nightmare, the inner self that is displayed is a highly relational self that unveils only in accordance with the presence of the other within. By imagining all these possible worlds, Lila visualizes a world where the other is not made more appealing or less deformed and scarred but re-imagines a new shawl- that is a more solid and durable intimate thread- that relates her with others.

The use of optative introspection, as a result, succeeds in slowing down the pace of the narrative and in temporarily muting the cacophony and hyperactivity of the present moment. Written in the twentieth-first century, it courageously contrasts what David Foster Wallace terms the "total noise" of contemporary American society by intentionally eliminating the crowdedness of technology and chaos of the present (302). In so doing, it does not attempt to disengage from the realities of the present as much as it creates another perspective of looking into its ascending complexities and uncertainties, a perspective that entails slowing down and looking carefully around to dissect the puzzling conundrums that surround us. Consequently, the subtleness of the style and mysticism of the prose does not deny its anchorage in the contemporaneity of the present moment. Firmly rooted in a time of ascending exclusionary practices, distrust in

humanity, and pervasiveness of sameness, it provides an alternative space for backward reflection: questioning older paths and reconstructing new ones. While it momentarily freezes the time, it constantly reminds the reader that it emanates from the nucleus of the moment and emerges as a backlash to the moment in which it is written. Void of the noises of consumption and progress, the narrative flows slowly and serenely portraying a human while being human. In that sense, it adapts a poetics of quietness that translates Lila's conversion as an inarticulate outcast who gradually grows up from and into a society that is unable to contain her.

Lila grounds theological concerns like grace, existence, and faith in experiential worldliness by fusing an introspective and meditative mode with the ordinariness of the quotidian. It captures the ephemerality of matters by rendering spiritual concerns through a paratactic stylistic structure, non-figurative plain diction, sensorial depiction, and slow-paced narrative rhythm. This results in the construction of aesthetics of *quietness* whereby the protagonist engages in an experience of conversion through a meditative mode of *being-with* in the world. Maintaining an active perception of the minutiae of the objects of the world surrounding her and silences that condition her relationship with others, she slowly transforms into a *believer in the need for the other*. This transformation is propelled by the presence of an empathic narrator who grants the otherness of Lila a space and a voice in the narrative.

4.2.4 The Empathetic Third Person Narrator: Writing as Praying

Lila is narrated from the lens of a third person narrator who mediates the story from the exclusive viewpoint of the main character -Lila. Stripped of any narratorial commentary, the narrator reports the narrative arcs uniquely from the viewpoint of the title protagonist, using interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness technique. As a matter of example, the tightly filtered third person presence in the narrative reads as follows

> And she turned and walked away, instantly embarrassed to realize how strange she must look, hurrying off for no real reason into the dark of the evening. The lonely dark, where she could only expect to go crazier, in that shack where she still lived because it was hard for her to be with people. It would be truer to say hid than lived, since about the only comfort she had in it was being by herself (35-6).

This close-filtered narration by the heterodiegetic narrator whose presence is only detectable by the presence of the third person pronoun and the use of the simple past of narration gives the impression that they tell the story of Lila and her past verbatim as if coming directly from the

character herself. This covert presence of the narrator makes Lila's voice more prominent and her mind rather transparent to the reader.

Reminiscent of the writings of Gustav Flaubert, Nathalie Sarraute, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Mary McCarthy, this narration marks a closeness between the narrated subject and the narrating one. Making recourse to subtle language and bare prose, the latter mediates with precision the subjective experience of their characters, giving their feelings and thoughts dominance and stark presence. In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn explains this overdominance of the character's voice in the third person narration as follows

> It may be most succinctly defined as the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration. This definition implies that a simple transposition of grammatical person [from third to first] and tense [from past to present] will "translate" a narrated into an interior monologue. Such translation can actually be applied as a kind of litmus test to confirm the validity of a reader's apprehension that a narrative sentence belongs to a character's, rather than to a narrator's, mental domain (8).

Placing the reader in the consciousness of Lila's calls for an empathetic reading of this voiceless character in the same way that it uncovers a form of an affective narration that implies a vicarious sharing of affect between the narrator and the character. This readerly response is not triggered by the identification with the character nor by presenting the reader with an array of emotions that stipulate their sympathy. In fact, empathy is not triggered by one specific narrative technique in the text but is the outcome of various narrative choices (namely the slow-paced narrative, the paratactic style of narration, the optative mode, and the empathic narrator). Due to her wildness and reticence, the protagonist is outside normative spectrums of identification. However, her depiction as an altruist figure with depth uncovers the presence of an empathetic narrator who feels *through* and *with* their character. While *Gilead* is narrated from the autodiegetic voice of Reverend Ames and imbued with eloquence and meditative oration, Lila's mediation aims to render the same eloquence, mind-wandering, and biblical cadence of a barely educated character without being intellectualized. Robinson comments on this choice of narrative in the *Chicago Tribune*

> Yes, I had to create a certain kind of mind, a character who had a very narrow frame of reference, a limited vocabulary and so on. I knew the novel couldn't be in first person, and it couldn't be close third person, really. She's a very stoical character, and there are a lot of things she just wouldn't talk about, even to herself.

In that sense, the third person narrator provides another face of intimacy working on another dimensional narrative level- that of the narrator-narratee. In *Lila*, the narrator is haunted by the fictional character to the point of inhabiting her, yet aware of the limitation of this inhabitation.

However, the narrator remains rather effaced by emphatically helping a character who happens to be on the margins, muted by her lack of linguistic and intellectual knowledge, to speak and to narrate her own life, because her life- like all others- is worth telling and worth being narrated. The narrator's voice, in a way, fuses with the character's one, reducing -but never concealing- the distance between the narrating mind and the narrated voice. The mediation is masked here by the character's strong presence and the visibility of her relationality to others as a marginalized self. The narration becomes an exercise of writing the other into the world, making the muted speak and providing a voice and a place to the outcast. In that sense, this mode of narration is a vehicle for narratorial empathy that enables the reader to hear the inner flow of the inarticulate character. The hearing, in this instance, dominates the narratorial act of telling, portraying the narrator as being present, yet only at the service of the character. The recourse to free indirect style in all its three basic forms of psycho-narration, quoted interior monologues, and narrated monologues incapacitates the narrator to penetrate the subliminal spaces in the mind of the protagonist without monopolizing them.

Trapped in inarticulacy toward the other, the levels of consciousness of Lila are incapable of being verbally presented by the fictional mind itself. Not only does Lila lack linguistic skills but she is mainly emptied of any social competence to help her open to the world and look *into* society and not against it. However, Lila wants her thoughts to be known and understood by others. She yearns for a sense of understanding of her controversial ways of thinking

> Sometimes she wished he could know her thoughts, because she believed he might forgive them. Because the Good Lord would forgive them. Because the Good Lord would forgive them, practically for sure, she thought. If the old men knew anything about the Good Lord. If there was a Good Lord. Doll had never mentioned Him. Lila's thoughts were strange sometimes. They always had been. She had hoped getting baptized might help with it, but it didn't (17).

The controversy and strangeness of her thoughts -even to herself- prompt the protagonist to question their validity and value. However, it is this strangeness that the narrator approximates, trying to divulge the thought-as-being-thought and feelings-as-being-felt without ironizing or overstating them. These contradictions are meant to come as they are in the character's mind, as

they intertwine with the latter's situational context, without an attempt to invalidate or resolve them. In that respect, the narrator strives to validate these thoughts in their unlikeliness and ambivalence and grants a voice to the outcast because without language, they remain inaudible; "*There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard*" (134).

The ethical ramifications that Robinson envisions are we-oriented rather than I-oriented, an ethic that revolves around society as a whole rather than individuals in their autonomy. Therefore, the narrative is narrated in third person except for one brief exception towards the end of the book where it transitions directly to the first-person plural "we". The use of the "we" towards the end is conditioned by the physical appearance of the second person "you" and Lila's acceptance and welcoming of their presence (243). In coming to terms with the strangeness of the "you", Lila avowedly perceives herself as a part of a society and as belonging to the world. While the "you" refers primarily to the unborn child that Lila directly addresses at the end, it also implies all the others that are different from the mainstream normative social groups. She goes on noting, "There *you* are, right against my heart, with a shawl around *us* both. Nobody but the two of *us* knew how plump and beautiful *you* were" (251 emphasis added). The moment Lila's voice is granted unmediated accessibility it takes the form of a "we" and it overtly pronounces her acceptance and belief in the "you" in its strangeness and difference from her. It, in short, comes packed with the communal ethics of "with-ness" and encounter.

By modeling the conversion story in the protagonist's passage from loss and non-belonging to being in the world and to trustfully relating to others, it could be said that Lila's life is narrated in the form of a *prayer*. The narrator *preaches* the conversion by tightly mediating Lila's consciousness and oscillating thoughts between belief and distrust and by avoiding any interruptive narratorial commentary or judgment. This view has its allegorical implication for the author whose narrative translates an aesthetic of theological cadence and biblical eloquence. The narrative is, in that sense, similarly preached by Robinson who, in the words of the reverend Ames in Gilead, perceives the act of writing as a form of prayer. She accordingly summons up her writing aesthetics in the words of Ames for whom "writing has always felt like praying. Even when I wasn't writing prayers as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone" (Robinson, *Gilead* 20). Writing is, in a sense, close to praying because it implies "being *with* someone". The presence of company and togetherness in the act of writing hints at the degree of intimacy that the opening quote to this chapter invokes. Claiming that there is intimacy in prayer,

and by extension in writing, could be explained by the empathetic relationship that the narrator has with the protagonist. The writer, in fact, intimates her characters, to the point that when finishing her book, she feels loneliness of the non-writing. In a conversation to *The Nation* in October 2014, Marilynne Robinson avows "that when you write a novel, a character never actually leaves you from that point on." The accompaniment is also applicable to the implied reader whose absence, at the moment of writing, is a constant presence in the mind of the writer. The act of writing is, therefore, empathetic in its implication of "with-ness" and sharing to the point that the written character gains dominance over the narrator and the writer. This form of writing becomes a devotional and other-oriented rather than self-centered. Modeling the writing process on the theological experience, *Lila* becomes an act of devotion to the other, a disturbingly unconventional cry for justice, humanism, and inclusion. This devotional writing hints at an act of unconditional intimacy that implies the sharing between the writing consciousness and the written mind. In fact, writing *Lila* as a third person narrative empties it from the apologetic dimension of spiritual autobiographical self-reporting and diverts the emphasis from the subject of conversion to the process of conversion and to its ethics of "with-ness". While the writer gives the fictional mind a voice and space, the latter provides endless zones of possibilities along the lines of imagination to be created and re-invented throughout the narrative, and so does her relationship with others.

The form and styles of writing about intimacy in *Lila* unveil the solid yet problematic relation that love bears to otherness. The use of optative mode, paratactic style, and conversion narrative all show the constant rhetorical and stylistic need for the other in the act of writing the self. The relation that the text seeks to establish between the self and the other attempts, however, to go past the empty truisms of "loving thy neighbor" and the utopian promises it embeds. Instead, the selfless form of love that it revises and reinvests in warns against the impossibility of fusion with and absorption by the other. In other words, it acknowledges the need for otherness yet the risks and dangers that accompany that need concluding that love does not have redemptive powers, marriage is incapable of settling characters down, and creative imagination exceeds the idealism of love. The forms of this "imagined love" which exists beyond the norms and constraints of romantic narrative and ritualized stories of marriage are strengthened by the ethical acts of relationality. How this relation to otherness is constructed in the text is the main focus of the last part of the analysis.

4.3 Acts of "Imaginative Love": Hospitality and the Gift of the Other

The act of hospitality can help better understand the relation between otherness and intimacy in the narrative. A complete taciturn stranger, Lila is unquestionably welcomed to Gilead by the town's elderly and most respected minister. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's argument and his extensive investment in the questions of religion and hospitality, this part argues that Lila is not only a *welcomed guest*, but she is also simultaneously a *welcoming host* to the other. In that respect, hospitality becomes one of the conditions that enables the possibility of an intimate space of encounter and the accessibility to the other. To open *unto* the other, the self needs to be hospitable for and accepting of the presence of the otherness within. However, for the intimate encounter to be possible, the hospitality needs to be reciprocal. Intimacy becomes, in a way, a shared act of hospitality, a reciprocal invitation and visitation of the other. To account for this claim, the following section attempts to unpack the concept of hospitality further and to relate it to the representation of intimacy in the narrative.

4.3.1 Hospitality and Intimacy

In *Of Hospitality* -the source-text to Derrida's argument of hospitality-, Derrida distinguishes between two forms of hospitality: conditional and unconditional. The difference stems from an entangled Latin etymology of the word which derives from the Latin "*hostis*" and "*potis*" with "*hostis*" meaning "stranger" ("étranger") and "hostile" and "*potis*" referring to power and domination (45, 53, 54). The derivational meaning positions the act of hospitality in the dialectics of hostility and power relations. Thus, the separation line between hospitality and hostility is an extremely thin one implying the presence of hostility[77] in any hospitable act. Accordingly, hospitality is stripped from its inherently morally derived value. In addition to hostility, the root *hostis* translates to *Höte* in French and refers to both the guest "the one who receives" ("*celui qui recoit*") and the host "the one who gives" ("*celui qui donne*") (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 125). This tangled etymological analysis problematizes the determination of who is the giver and who is the receiver in the act of hospitality.

Inviting others can give the self the impression that they are performing a moral act of a superior state and thus gives them a sense of recognition. The welcoming becomes therefore, an

[77] At this juncture, Derrida provides the example of the hospitality of a given nation towards immigrants and how the act of welcoming is regulated by laws that define who can enter and on what grounds. As he explains, once laws and regulations are imposed on the act of hospitality, the latter becomes limited, conditioned, and ceases consequently from being.

act of self-love and self-appreciation and not a way of incalculably connecting with the guest. In *Relational Being: Beyond Self and community,* Gergen addresses this question in the following way

> Consider the common appeal to be charitable, to love others, or to care for them. We are all drawn by such appeals; at one time or another many of us have wished to dedicate our lives to helping others. The invitation, then, is to play out a grand narrative of moral worth. We achieve a sense of transcendent value through dedication to the well-being of others. However, we must also realize that this is a narrative in which the giver is the privileged one. It is "I" who gives, and who is therefore blessed. In this narrative the receiver is only advantaged in a material way. There is no gain "in heaven" to have one's hunger satisfied or illness cured. And woe unto the receiver who is ungrateful. To scorn the donor who has sacrificed for you is to invite the scorn of all. The story of loving your neighbor, then, is not a story about relationship, but a hero story of the self (356).

When loving and inviting the other has a individualizing tendency or is "a hero story of the self", the relationship turns out from being hospitable to becoming hostile. In fact, the moment hospitality becomes a logic, a regulated act, or a calculable performance, it blocks any possibility of reciprocity. The reciprocity defies any logic and goes beyond any limiting law that implies an empowered other and a less privileged self.

In *The Gift of the Other*, theologian Andrew Shepherd draws the Levinasian influence on Derrida's argument and explains that "the offering of hospitality is not an act of autonomous, sovereign freedom, but rather is a response to the Other, who is already within us. Heteronomy and alterity, not autonomous freedom, are the basis of human experience" (34). Critically building upon French phenomenology, Shepherd makes a case for a notion of hospitality that fuses theology with poststructuralism. He opines that the fear of the unknown other is impeding the development of strong social relationships and is particularly soaring in the age of global capitalism -where the other is merely appreciated only in its being an extension of the self. The recognition of otherness, which takes place by loving the stranger within us rather than commodifying them, opens to possibilities of relatedness in human life.

To further explain the inherent presence of hostility in every act of hospitality, Derrida differentiates between conditional and unconditional hospitality- both forms are contradictory yet continuously overlapping (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). The differentiation stems from the two stimulating acts for hospitality: "invitation" and "visitation". While invitation implies an expected and regulated visit by the host, "visitation" has a sense of randomness and unpredictability to it. It is never pre-planned nor regulated in any manner but sudden and

interruptive and therefore in "visitation" -contrastively to "invitation"- the host does not expect the guest nor are they prepared to "receive" them. Noncompliant with any law or preset rules, visitation embeds the non-foreseeability of the visit and the welcoming of the other, not on one's own term, but in the spontaneous and abrupt terms of the encounter.

Derrida places "unconditional hospitality" within the realm of the impossible because it is inherently contradictory (continuously overlapping with conditionality) and also because it implies the risk and hostility of any visitation, since unconditionally welcoming the other can be a threat to one's space. "Unconditional hospitality," Derrida writes, means "that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation […] For unconditional hospitality to take place you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone" ("Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility" 71). The moment one opens a door to the nameless other, they enter into a pact and agree to the risk they can bring with them. However, for intimacy to occur each party of the pact should be simultaneously the host and the guest. The reciprocity is not a condition of the welcoming but a voluntary act of sharing that the guest-host unconditionally attunes. Hospitality, in this sense, builds the meanings of risk and hostility in intimacy and alludes to a major contradiction in the working of the latter, that which binds negativity and positivity to the intimate. In this context, the intimate encounter always embeds its own risks.

Consequently, hospitality turns out to be impossible because it permeates that the self unquestionably believes in the unknown other. Like the messianic belief and its centeredness on the act of waiting, the arrival of the other is never complete nor final; it is based on the wanting and waiting yet never on the arriving. The inherent contradiction of absolute hospitality is that it remains an impossibility because of the continuous negotiations between its forms of conditionality and unconditionality. The moment hospitality is conditioned by rights and rules that decide who remains in and who stays outside, it ceases from being and it contradicts its ethics of "incalculability" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). Therefore, hospitality remains trapped in an "aporia of regress" whereby it never reaches the comfort of becoming a possibility. The welcoming is even more inclusive as it comprises the nameless other, the unknown other, and the stranger. This form of welcoming constitutes "the impossible" for Derrida because

> absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let

> them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity or even their names. The law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by right, with law or justice as rights. Just hospitality breaks with hospitality by right; not that it condemns or is opposed to it, and it can on the contrary set and maintain it in a perpetual progressive movement; but it is as strangely heterogeneous to the law to which it is yet so close, from which in truth it is indissociable. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 25–27)

While absolute hospitality is, by definition, unattainable because it defies its own possibility by the same laws that construct it, the unattainability in real life is challenged in the narrative. The text, in fact, engages with the possible as opposed to the factual and challenges meanings and so-called truths by its own use of unorthodox theological nuance to hospitality. Hospitality urges the self to go beyond the confines created by society and by other normative narratives of selfhood, to look for the other outside. The recognition of this otherness is the gift that generates voluntary reciprocity and intimacy as Lila's continuing bond with the dead Doll speculates.

4.3.2 The Continuing Bond with the Dead

The proximity that hospitality introduces in the relationship between the self and the other transcends the material boundaries of a geographical space to encompass temporal categories. In the continuous presence of the dead Doll in the memory of Lila, the past resists any attempt at forgetting. In the narrative, it is never clearly mentioned whether Doll died or not after she fled the prison, but her scene of disappearance is dramaturgically rendered. Like a ghost, Doll "lost herself in the woods or in the cornfields" (36-7). Sick and beaten, she simply disappears in the woods leaving no trace of her except a constant presence in Lila's memory. Her trace in Lila or continual presence in absence makes the latter a relational being unable to think or act outside the bounds of this close bond, especially that "[n]ever once had she taken her to be dead, plain and simple" (259). Doll does not provide a secure ground nor a stable home for Lila; yet she never ceases to be a hospitable other in whom all of Lila's existence is anchored. This relationship stretches to include traces and absences, rethinking physical proximity and bodily connection as the preconditions of intimacy. Doll's prominent presence in the text and in Lila's thoughts constructs an atypical form of intimacy beyond presence and speech and suggests a societal type of grief based on the continuing bond with the dead.

It is mainly through Doll's absence and the silences and gaps that haunt the narrative that Lila reaches the stage of being a social being capable of loving and getting closer to others. She, in fact, finds in loss and absence an energizing power which awakens her capacity to love the

unknown other. In Gilead, she unexpectedly takes care of the graves of Ames's first wife and child and plants roses in their garden, an act that shows her attempt to surmount the temporal boundaries and connect with the unknown other despite their absence. Alongside these connecting efforts, she gives an anonymous boy she finds in the shack all the money she has saved, takes care of an expecting mother in St. Louis brothel, and considers stealing her child and raising him by herself. This type of humility and selflessness shown in the act of taking care of Ames's dead wife and child testifies to a form of selfless love that is other-oriented rather than self-centered, a form of love energized by empathy towards others and creative of a form of "imaginative love". According to Robinson, any community "consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly" (Robinson, *When I Was A Child* 21). This form of intimacy, which finds its seeds it in the *agape*ic form of love, has the capacity of disrupting cynicism and extending faith and trust to future generations,

> In the same way we diminish the worth of the institutions of society -law, journalism, education, and religion as well- when we forget respect and love for the imagined other, the man or woman or child we will never know, who will take the good from these institutions that we invest in them, or who will be harmed or disheartened because our institutions are warped by meagerness and cynicism (21).

Lila's constant feelings of loneliness and non-belonging wither and her belief in the capacitating power of "imaginative love" strengthens. Gaining a newly emerging confident voice at the end, she reassures her child "'[w]e'll be nowhere, and it will be alright. I have friends there'" (251). Claiming that she has friends in nowhere, Lila alludes to her friendship with people she knows as well as those she ignores. It becomes evident that this bond with the absent other can help establish new modes of social adjustments in the individual as well as it can energize new forms of encounters. The uncanny relation that binds Doll to Lila is not to be read along the lines of loss and nostalgia but rather in the threshold of the continuity of presence in absence or in the continuing bond with the dead. This form of continuity allows for the bereaved individual to better understand and relate to others, while resisting the urge to forget. Grief is not meant to be suppressed or surpassed, neither to be individual nor private. Rather, it is tested for its capability of exploring new forms of relatedness in the fictional world of Gilead.

The continuity of the bond is further accentuated in the narrative by referencing Doll's Knife and its significance in Lila's life. Doll "carried it [the knife] open, tied to her leg, so there wouldn't be any problem in using it fast if she had to" (112). Doll carries the knife principally to

protect Lila from external threats during their lonely days of drifting on unknown roads. The knife is a recurrent motif for Doll's unbounded love for Lila; it is their compass that keeps them in a constant state of motion, walking in the "no-name towns," "from place to place" (203). Ironically, the knife becomes an oxymoron of bonding and insecurity, violence and love, and death and life. It illustrates the risk and impermanence that accompanies any act of intimacy and frames a conception of love that is incapable of making one's life whole or coherent. The nomadic state of the knife reverberates the restless and endless nature of signification in the narrative.

Doll has used the knife once to defend Lila when some people who claim they are Lila's relatives tried to claim her back, murdering a man who is likely to be Lila's father. This crime is solicited by Doll's unconditional love to a child she stole from the stairs of a foster house "or maybe the other crime was just some desperate kindness, like stealing a sickly child" (98). The unboundedness of Doll's bond to Lila resists any form of concealing or forgetting, since "the more [Lila] tried to wash the blood away, the more of it there was" (174). The knife ironically becomes a symbol of humanism, love for the other, and unconditional altruism; it is not an object of violence or a symbol of death as much as it is a constant reminder to Lila that while "other people had houses and towns and names and graveyards. They had church pews. All she had was that knife. [...] That was her dowry" (241). Lila acknowledges that the "knife is a potent thing" and that its potency emanates from its resistance to amnesia and to determinacy. Indeterminacy becomes the guiding thread of the narrative whereby love is imbued with "meanness"; "guilt"; "shame"; and anger", hospitality comes with hostility, and belief is always embedded in disbelief (56, 261,181, 80). By choosing to keep the knife with her, Lila chooses to keep the past alive in the present, to believe that the risk is always eminent yet to, nonetheless, believe:

> So when she told him she meant to keep that knife and he nodded, she could explain to herself why she meant to keep it. There was no way to abandon guilt, no decent way to disown it. And the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them. Doll hunched in the firelight whetting her courage, dreaming vengeance against her. Thinking terrible thoughts to blunt her own fear. That's how it is. Lila had borne a child into the world where a wind could rise that would take him from her arms as if there were no strength in them at all (261).

Doll is a reminder that the past is always haunting the present and that the present is unthinkable without the past in as much as the self is unthinkable without the other. In the narrative, she occupies a contingent position whereby she is alive and dead, close and distant, absent and

present to the point that she emerges as a ghost in the narrating consciousness of the protagonist. She never fully crosses the dividing line between death and life and between imagination and reality as she indeed remains in between, constantly reminding the protagonist of the contingency of her own life upon others. Therefore, the haunting inheres irrefutably within imagination and language, questioning individuals and communities why it has been always excluded, muted, and put on the margins of language and society.

The concept of hospitality in the fictional world of *Lila* diverts slightly from the Derridean conception discussed above. While both approaches meet on the idea of the inherently paradoxical nature of hospitality and its impact on the performance of the ethical encounter and on the definition of the ethics of the intimate, they partially diverge in their view of otherness. While the theological conversion narrative of *Lila* grounds the other in the idea of selfless love, it constantly relates it to the Christian notion of resurrection and after-life. According to Derrida, on the other side, the other as a parable of the Messianic figure will always remain in the threshold of waiting and non-arrival. While the other in the figure of the Messiah is meant to never arrive, in *Lila* the possibility of resurrection remains part of the belief that makes Lila continue to live her life confident of the realization of the deferred re-bonding with the other. In other words, the arrival is a deferred possibility in the imagination of the protagonist who ponders "[y]ou can say to yourself, I'm just a body that thinks and talks and seems to want its life, one more day of it. You don't have to know why. Well, nothing could ever change if your body didn't just keep you there not even knowing what it is you're waiting for. Not even that you're waiting at all" (179). The waiting for the other to arrive becomes a state of being, an existence in itself that presupposes a faith in the other and in their potential arrival and prospective proximity. This belief explains Lila's self-warning: "Don't hope, just wait" (229).

4.3.3 The Guest-Host: "I can't love you as much as I love you"

Lila's theological grounding places the question of intimacy in a specific framework of religious reference. Accordingly, hospitality becomes an integral act generative of intimacy and an indispensable diegetic component to Robinson's poetics of inclusion in her Gilead series. It assesses the forms of the relationality of the self to the other in the narrative from the insight of ethics of encounter. Therefore, the impossible act of unconditional hospitality is made into a possibility in the fictional world of *Lila* when John Ames welcomes this completely uninvited stranger to his house and then adheres to her marriage proposal without procuring the minimum

knowledge about her. To her avowal "'I ain't what you seem to think I am. I done some things in my life,'" he trustfully answers, "'You are the only person in this world I want to have sitting here beside me. That isn't what I think, it's what I know'" (25, 26). As illustrated in the first part of the analysis, Lila is a rootless character with no familial origins nor historical lineage and whose name is randomly accorded to her. To others, she is an unwanted stranger everywhere she goes," [t]hey wouldn't let her near them" in the foster house where she was raised before Doll took her; "they didn't hear her anyway" (3). In St. Louis, "Mrs. treated her like she was nothing at all" (193). To people in general, "she was nothing to them, they were nothing to her" (47). Even to her "tribe" or "folks" with whom she spent years of drifting and working in cornfields, they abandoned her on the stoop of a church once Doll left them for few days (79). When she first arrives in Gilead, she chooses to live in a cabin at the edge of the town while working occasionally in other people's gardens.

Unmindful of Lila's rootlessness and nonbelonging, Ames refrains from interrogating her past or anything that might interfere with his act of unconditional welcoming. As a matter of fact, Lila's arrival to Ames's home and life in general is close to a miracle; "it might be that she seemed to him as if she came straight out of the Bible, knowing about all those things that can happen and nobody has the words to tell you" (*Lila* 227). He even prays for the unknown fellow wanderers whom Lila mentions hazily every now and then to him (147). Ames's unconventional marriage with Lila is unsettling to those who know him. He is the elderly minister of Gilead and the descendant of a long familial lineage of ministers and she is the unknown monosyllabically-speaking wife coming from nowhere, the least expected to be Ames's wife; "People were still surprised at him that he married her. She could see it surprised him, too, sometimes" (19). Lila is equally as skeptical of the incompatibility in their marriage, wondering

> 'But I can't see how it's going to work.' He nodded. 'There can be problems. I've thought about that. Quite a lot.' 'What if I got the law after me? All you know about me is what anybody can tell by looking. And nobody else wanted to marry me.' He shrugged. 'I guess you don't know me very well, either.' '[…] Somebody like me might marry somebody like you just because you got a good house and winter's coming. Just because she's tired of the damn loneliness. Somebody like you got no reason at all to marry somebody like me' (84).

Up to this point in the narrative, the reader does not similarly have much information about Lila, except the fact that she is suffering from loneliness in the world. However, the acceptance of Lila

despite her strangeness by Ames and by the reader is achieved by means of empathetic characterization.

By acknowledging the alterity of Lila to others and to the fictional world in which she is constructed and through which she grows, the reader is invited to be overtaken by the unexpectedness and strangeness of the experience, to be on their own terms hospitable, or not, of the strangeness of this aesthetic experience. Afterall, to be hospitable, as Derrida speculates, is

> to let oneself be overtaken [surprendre], to be ready to not be ready, if such is possible, to let oneself be overtaken, to not even let oneself to be overtaken, to be surprised in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped, stolen… precisely where one is not ready to receive- and not only not yet ready but not ready, unprepared in a mode that is not even that of the 'not yet' ("Hospitality" 261).

Accordingly, Ames's relation with Lila and his welcoming to her in his house, in Gilead and more importantly in society is an act of unconditional hospitality, or of "impossible possibility". In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida relates the social force of faith to that of hospitality concluding that "[t]he knight of faith must not hesitate. He accepts his responsibility by heading off towards the absolute request of the other, beyond knowledge. He decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge" (77). He concludes that this is "the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion or explication". Here, Derrida disassociates ethics from the system of presence and prior knowledge and displaces them from the realm of the epistemological to that of the ethical. Ethics is not a predetermined category organized along a set of laws and obligations or a given moral response, it is rather the possibility of the impossible that emanates from the intimate encounter of the self with an other, of an unexpected encounter between an invited visitor and a welcoming self. The ethics of encounter generated by an act of "the" (and not "a") impossible hospitality grounds ethics in the presence of the other and the responsibility of the self towards them. It is in the acceptance and acknowledgment of the alterity and singularity of the other that the ethical encounter becomes regenerative. Every encounter, thus, calls for a particular ethical bond because each encounter is different in the same way as every individual is. What this ethic promotes is a sense of a leap in faith, in its infinitude and deferral, in its openness and impossibility, a leap into the unknown accompanied by an awareness of the permanence of its unknowability.

Reflecting on her name, Lila Dahl concludes its void referentiality, except in its relation to Ames and Doll

> Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl. She had four letters in each of her names, and he had four letters in each of his [John Ames]. She had a silent h in her last name, and he had one in his first. There were graves in Gilead with his name written out on them, and there was no one anywhere alive or dead with her name, since the first one belonged to the sister she never saw of a woman she barely remembered and the second one was just a mistake. Her name had a likeness of a name (9).

While John Ames's name carries with it the weight of three succeeding ministerial generations of familial bondage, and historical lineage, *Lila Dahl* is an empty arbitrary signifier that delineates the randomness and ostracism of the person carrying it. Lila's name has no familial reference nor a socially-recognizable value to it except insofar as it resonates with Doll's and Ames's names. Her sense of belonging emanates primarily from these two hosts who have unconditionally welcomed her despite her namelessness and strangeness while taking the risk of the welcoming. Lila herself is aware of the threat that a stranger can pose to others. She knows well that "talking to strangers was putting yourself within the reach of sudden harm. What might they say? What might they seem to be thinking? Then you were left with it afterwards, like remembering a bad dream, and nothing to do about it except to hate the next stranger a little bit more" (253).

Aware of the circumstances that separate her from others, Lila's acknowledgment of the danger she poses as a stranger is what makes her aware of the possibility of a durable bond with others. Her constant accompanying feelings of strangeness and loneliness and her curious exploration of them lead to the acknowledgment of the illogical possibility of love despite the rational need to prevent risks (23). While she ironically avows that she is a stranger capable of positing harm to the other with the knife she carries "in [her] grater," she reflects on the potency that Ames' invitation of her to his life and his home has on her (220). She intuited her meaning of intimacy as a condition of reciprocal hospitality and an acceptance of risk and harm from her own daily experience with others. In fact, the resonance of her four-letter name with Doll and Ames elicits another resonance with the ultimate inexplicable four-letter word *love,* a word that Lila never herself rationally comprehends. After a long journey of confusion and self-discovery and unable to go beyond the shadow of the past, Lila avows to Ames "I can't love you as much as I love you. I can't feel as happy as I am" (255). This confession emanates from Lila's

ignorance of any frame of reference against which she can compare her love or measure her happiness, except from the ordinariness of the present.

She frequently questions Ames's unconditional welcoming to her and even purposefully "forg[ets] to thank him for that" (31). She describes her arrival to him as "trouble" and when she asks him "you come creeping to my house at night?" he confirms that, yet surprisingly wonders about her conjecture (59). She spontaneously answers with a rhetorical question "'Who else would go to the trouble?'' admitting that she -as a stranger- poses a potential trouble to him and to his "kindness" (60). However, Ames's unconditional welcoming is not perceived as a generator of self-worth to the giver nor as a positive act by the receiver. On the contrary, it causes Lila to feel "anger" and "shame" at times to the point that she once ironically imitating his prayers, prays "Let him stop making me feel so damn broke all the time" (71). The feeling of subjugation brought by Ames's inexplicable hospitality withers only towards the end when Lila herself converts into believing in others and being more trustful of them. This trust, however, does not translate into conformity or obedience to the collective norms of conduct in the group but emanates primarily from a belief that the feelings of alienation and loneliness widen the distance that separates the self from the other.

Despite his ignorance of the minimum details about Lila, the reverend claims "[t]hat first day you walked into the church, that rainy Sunday, I felt as though I recognized you somehow. It was a remarkable experience. It was" (166-7). The recognition of the remarkability of the experience is not prompted by any prior knowledge, intention, or expectation, so it attests to the gift-character of recognition. It bestows a gift in the sense that it does not seek any immediate or obligatory response or recognition from the other, but it is something capable of being given without its being warranted at any time. The gift of recognition does not imply or require any exchange and can be received even though it is not anticipated. Paul Ricoeur refers to this form of unconditional reciprocity in *The Course of Recognition* as "the truly mutual recognition" and contrasts it to the "logic of reciprocity" that is any exchange susceptible to reciprocal return (Ricoeur 219). This form of giving is derived, as Ricoeur argues, from the Christian *agape* form of love which "refute[s] in advance the idea of mutual recognition, inasmuch as the generous practice of gift giving, at least in its 'pure' form, neither requires nor expects a gift in return" (219). The gift of recognition of the other here approximates a leap in faith in and an acknowledgement of their otherness and of their non-obligatory return of gift-giving.

On her part, Lila does not act upon the logic of counter-gift or debt in her choice of reciprocating the giving. On the contrary, she gradually understands that Ames's love for her and leap in faith in the ubiquity of their encounter are the driving forces of this unconditional hospitality. She consequently finds *habitus* in his welcoming of her so she wonders

> I know there's more to it, and so do you […] But then her husband smiled at her, and she could see in his face that he had had every one of those thoughts, that he knew everything about them. These thoughts were waiting and familiar, like a house where you knew you belonged though you just hated to go there and doubted once you were there you'd ever leave. He said, 'You and I-' and shrugged. (Robinson, *Lila* 231)

It is in the silence and in the absence of words to describe what relates the 'You and I' that a dialogue of another degree between them commences and that the *gift* of an intimate in-betweenness is mutually shared. Ames, in the Derridean sense, opened his door to the other to welcome her in her strangeness, difference, and potential threat and without any prior knowledge of the pre-scripted rules of visitation. As Derrida speculates,

> If, in hospitality, one must say *yes*, welcome the coming [*accueillir la venue*], say the 'welcome; one must say *yes*, there where one does not wait, *yes*, there where one does not expect, nor await oneself to, the other [là oû l'on ne s' attend pas soi-même à l' autre], to let oneself be swept by the coming of the wholly other, the absolutely unforeseeable [inanticipabIe] stranger, the uninvited visitor, the unexpected visitation beyond welcoming apparatuses. If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the hôte as invited, there is no hospitality. (Derrida, "Hospitality" 361–62)

Only when the welcoming expands beyond the realm of the familiar and anticipated that hospitality occurs. In other words, the otherness of the other is only perceivable when there are no prior rules or regulations that determine the scope of the relationship between them. Once they are known and the visitation follows a specific pregiven script, the otherness dissolves into the realm of the self and turns into a mere extension of the "I", intensifying the *individualizing* processes instead. That is to say, the world does not arise from the vantage point of the other, their difference and singularity but extends accordingly from the unique viewpoint of the self. If the welcoming is unable to interrupt the world of the self in favor of the other and to pull the ego outside of their own territory to venture into the unknown territory of the other, then the encounter is uncapable of generating anything more than sameness and repetition.

In the narrative, the hospitable encounter between the self and the other is made into a possibility that challenges *the narrative of the self* to provide a space for *the narrative of the*

other within its layered structure, to welcome the other beyond debt and beyond ability. In this respect, Robinson's views of intimacy in *Lila* bear resemblance to, and exceed, the *agape* form of love. Revisiting an ancient notion of love to convey contemporary experiences of intimate relationships, she argues that intimacy is not just a mutual exchange of selves because an exchange implies the necessity of a conditional return of value. Instead, she presents her readers with a conception of intimacy based on the bestowal of a gift that is granted by the unmotivated and spontaneous act of hospitality. Making the self into a gift to the other creates value in the latter regardless of their worth or merit. This value arises instead because of the act of opening unto and loving of the other. As Lila asserts "I'll make up all the difference between what you are and what you could have been *by loving you so much*" (160, emphasis added). Lila -who ignores the words to express her ambivalent feelings and relationships with others- acknowledges the change that can occur by *loving* the other *so much*. In that sense, her conversion takes place at the moment when she realizes that the self is the gift of the other and that intimacy is only attainable by taking a leap of faith toward them, despite the limitations this leap incurs.

Intimacy, in this context, does not result from the belief in God or the certitude of belief as much as it emanates from the *belief in belief* and the endlessness of the waiting. In the narrative, the intimate bond is not derived from pre-given discourses of love but is rather an ongoing exploratory act of welcoming the other in their otherness and an endless act of hospitality achieved along the lines of the mutual recognition of the singularity of, and difference between, the "I and You". The permanence of the state of non-arrival and the impossible fusion of the I and you make this form of intimacy resistant to any fixity. In fact, it is in the recognition of the impossibility of fixedness and impermanence of status that Lila intuits her own understanding of the importance of the intimate presence of the other in her life. Understanding the inherent paradoxes in the nature of the act of hospitality, the latter becomes unconditioned to the procurance of a physical space for welcoming the other, nor to the holding of a privileged power position. The host can welcome the guest by accepting them despite their differences and foreignness and by giving them an immanent space in their thoughts and actions. Therefore, Lila turns herself into a hostess trusting Ames and welcoming him to her life of secrecy, shame, precarity, and guilt. She, in a way, takes the risk of the encounter and grants the other access to the "strangeness" of her thoughts and emotions.

In her inarticulacy towards her husband and in embracing the uncertainty of relational being, Lila welcomes him into a new territory of otherness where the relationship is not defined by words but acknowledged by personal experience and perceptive consciousness instead. In contrast, Ames' knowledge of marriage and existence is derived primarily from the religious text

> And her life was just written all over her, she knew it without looking, because that's how it was with all the women she used to know. And somehow she found her way to the one man on earth who didn't see it. Or maybe he saw it the way he did because he has read that parable, or poem or whatever it was. Ezekiel. The Bible was truer than life for him, so it was natural enough that his thinking would be taken from it (226).

Drawing upon biblical narratives, Ames concludes that -despite all their irreconcilable differences -he is "married to Lila now. Extremely married to her" (226). From her side, Lila ignores the meaning of the word *married* and strips it of its conventional significance, grounding it instead in her own lived experience and perception of others: "'They're married people.' Lila had no particular notion what the word 'married' meant" (75). To her, words do not make any sense unless they are lived and sensed. In that respect, she defines marriage as "an endless pleasant joke between them (Doane and Marcelle) that excluded everybody else and that all the rest of them were welcome to admire" (75). Whereas everyone in Gilead sees their incompatibility as a couple, Lila sees in their unusual companionship an endless joke and inarticulable comfort. She remarks

> All of them probably wondered now and then how the two of them passed the time together, what in the world they could find to talk about, different as they were. All of them thinking how sad any sadness that came to him would be, how sweet any happiness, the poor old fellow. And there they were, the two of them, waking and sleeping through the long afternoon, in the crisp sheets that smelled like snow, the baby stirring a little sometimes, the old man young in his sleep and his comfort and she as still as could be, wanting nothing (241).

In her abrupt marriage proposal to Ames and in her unordinary union with him, Lila ventures into bringing the other into her life of secrecy, quietude, and suffering. In avowing to him that she can't love him as much as she loves him, Lila redefines the boundaries of the intimate and locates it in the silences and absences of language and beyond its wordiness (255). "Then it might be that she seemed to him as if she came from the Bible," she mediates, "knowing all about all those things that can happen, and nobody has the words to tell you" (227).

It becomes evident that Lila, who carries the shame and guilt of being an outsider, transforms gradually into a host who accommodates the other despite her placelessness and

liminality (111,110). The ethical encounter does not presuppose the submergence of the self in the other or the effacement of one's identity. It draws an intersubjectivity of difference by turning into a site of solidarity where the other exists in their alterity whereas the self exists in their potential relationality. As Lila concludes

> You don't need somebody standing beside you. You don't, *but you do*. Take away every pleasure -but you couldn't, because there can be pleasure in a sip of water. A thought. There was no reason for Doane to tie a ribbon on Marcelle's wrist, and that was why she laughed when he did it, and loved him for it. Why they all loved them both. There was no reason to let an old man dip his hand in water and touch it to your forehead, as if he loved you the way people do who would touch your face and your hair (76, emphasis added).

The intimate practices that translate these bonds do not derive from a predefined cultural, social, or linguistic repertoire yet from a constant belief in the need for the other, a need that the protagonist -despite her loneliness- manages to grasp and yearns for.

The immanent longing for connecting with the other in the narrative despite the projected solitude and rejection has a literary potential. It aims at dissolving loneliness through the creation of literary empathic processes and by the enlarging of human imagination to encompass new forms of relatedness and sociality. It challenges its readers to grasp the potentiality of an intimate relationship with the stranger in the book, despite their unfamiliarity, wildness, and strangeness. While the close third person suggest that Lila is looking at her own life at a distance piecing it together and making sense of it, it puts the reader in the same way in a proximity to her, yet never inside her. The distance, in this sense, can never be fully overcome yet only approximated, concluding that intimacy comes always *with* distance.

The ethics of hospitality that *Lila* portrays through the relationship of Ames and Doll to Lila places intimacy beyond the logic of self-interest and meaning-making. The inherent paradoxes of intimacy are accentuated by exposing the protagonist's inconsistent thoughts, incomprehensible emotions, and unveiled vulnerabilities while refraining from (ironic) narratorial commentary. In the crossing of the distance between the self and the other, the 'I' does not fuse nor dissolve into the world of the other but welcomes them in their uniqueness and in the risks implied in the act of hosting and welcoming. This assertion could be extended to the space of fiction, itself, which becomes a space of creative encounter with the other. The interpretive position afforded by this reading of *Lila* extends beyond the romantic narrative's conventional claims about amorous relationships. It approaches intimacy not as a force that

produces coherence or bridges gaps, but as a wild, unruly, and untamed energy that binds the self to a radically different other. There is, therefore, no escape from the other, the fear and cynicism that their presence -and even absence- can entail. Because otherness is everywhere -even within- there are no divine powers to save or redeem the individual or the world. The hostility, risk, and wilderness of filling the distance that separates the self from the other, defy the universality and idealism of love. Only by acknowledging the singularity, unpredictability, and negativity and by engaging with the paradoxical structure of that recognition can these gaps be distilled. There are only alternative ways of thinking about this otherness and about accepting the wilderness it brings along.

The first part of the analysis tried to outline the style and recycled Puritan forms that the narrative uses to assess the question of *how* the distance between the self and the other can, or cannot, be crossed in the literary text. The second part aimed at dissecting *what* it takes for this distance to be overcome. It argues accordingly that *Lila* provides one constellation of an emergent discourse of intimacy in post-postmodern contemporary context from an *agape*-centered point of view. While the working of this form suggests that intimacy sustains the unconditional forms of love and places them in the sharing and selfless love of the human other, it does not place intimacy exclusively in the realm of the divine and abstract. On the contrary, it roots it in the earthly experience and in the material ordinary objects of the world, turning each intimate encounter with the other into a moment of rebirth or conversion. It locates accordingly intimacy in the strangeness of things, in the irrational gaps and silences, and in the subtle acts of sharing with the other. The possibility of the intimate encounter in the narrative, is accordingly, granted through these acts of shared hospitality and creative imagination.

Through its form and content, *Lila* traces the route to the intimate via the channels of the other. By going beyond the comforts of sameness and the bounds of the self, the subject can relate, embrace the other and thus socialize. The epigraph of this chapter summarizes the literary conception of intimacy in *Lila*. The presence of intimacy in prayer suggests that the prayer is not an individual act but a relational one that implies the constant presence of the other within and beyond the self. As concluded in *Lila*, "*Family* is a prayer. *Wife* is a prayer. *Marriage* is a prayer" (237). Intimacy finds its frame in a revised Christian narrative that uncovers similarly to an unconventional prayer in its double-edged use of *agape* as the locus of the leap of faith in the other and in faith. This *agapeic* conception is questioned and reworked within a framework of

skepticism of language and its ability to create bonds that last. In that respect, the text enables a reading of *agape* as being other than redemptive. Its connecting potential helps claim the otherness within without suffocating it in sameness and familiarity; the result is an otherness over which the characters (and the narrator as well) have no control. Following the struggle of the silent protagonist, the narrative does not succumb unproblematically to a form of connection that defies normative definitions, it rather fuses old styles and new perspectives to denote a literary need for the presence of the other and for a hospitable in-between space of encounter in an ascending age of skepticism and loss of faith. Behind Lila's voice is an author who prays for her character to exist, to be heard, and mostly to be felt. To feel *with* Lila not *for* Lila is her prime literary endeavor.

Conclusion: What Remains of Intimacy

The dissertation has shown that contemporary women's fiction investigates intimacy as a terrain of paradox, relational risk, and narrative uncertainty, rather than as an inward private sanctuary. If anything, these works recast intimate relationships as the nexus where the sexual and political, social and personal, economic and ethical incessantly overlap and collide. While the primary texts resist being subsumed under one uniform model, they share a commitment to interrogating intimate bonds precisely where dominant discourses -romantic, neoliberal, therapeutic- claim mastery. The core contention is that intimacy is paradoxical, dynamic, and resistant to containment –a problem of form as much as a problem of life.

In the opening chapter, I developed a working definition of *intimacy* as the in-between space between the self and the other- a threshold site of liminal encounters between the private and the public, the inside and the outside, the real and the fictional. I, then, traced its historical genealogy through sociological and cultural theory (Luhmann, Giddens, Baumann, Beck, Illouz), showing that technological accelerations, information technology's overabundance, and neoliberal policies' expansion have all together rationalized emotional life and encouraged self-management. Using Raymond Williams' *residual*, *dominant*, and *emergent* framework, I argued that literature intervenes within the scientific discourses and reinvests in residual forms of love (*eros* and *agape*) while asserting emergent relational frames.

While literary intimacies have traditionally been predicated upon confessional modes and individualized forms, the analysis shows that the use of interior monologues and indirect style in contemporary women's fiction no longer conveys psychological depth but exposes the sociality of emotional life. These intimacies resist privatization and instead operate as modes of thinking about relation itself. Rather than simply reflecting macro-social processes, they co-produce and refract them. Drawing on allegorical satire (Atwood), quasi-autofictional narration (Cusk), and puritan conversion narrative (Robinson), these works use genres not as vehicles for intimacy but as proof of the entanglement between writing and living it. They are accordingly affirmations that intimacies are relational and situational (*Outline Trilogy*), puzzling and performative (*The Heart*), communal and solidary (*Lila*).

Reading these texts as *aesthetic experiments with the paradoxes of intimacy* testifies to the growing interest in exploring the nature of human relationality and refrains from making an

aphoristic case about the annihilation or erosion of this in-between space. They, instead, start from the conviction that this space has been loaded with either over-romanticization or scientific intellectualization and that the literary approach to the subject is incongruent with the social and cultural changes. Consequently, they do not make the point that the disintegration of intimacy is the outcome of the scientification of emotional pursuits or the economization of relationships, but they argue instead that intimacy is nesting and nested into the very economic and political structures that sustain it.

In reading Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy*, I examined the collision of problems of writing and problems of living in the depiction of intimate matters. The narratives' bifurcated narrator, poised between transparency and opacity, turns intimacy into an act of mediation rather than revelation. I proposed that the trilogy occupies a zone of *collaborative telling*, where intimacy lies not in self-expression but in shared acts of narration. The liminality attests to the fact that human intimate relationships are tales we tell, listen to, and re-tell ourselves -not private confessions but social negotiations between self and other. Cusk's repetitive and circular form exposes intimacy as performative and iterative -an experience produced through narrative repetition rather than authentic disclosure. Faye does not turn *inward* to interpret her life; she turns *outward* to listen. This narrative stance resists the modernist pursuit of depth and order, instead embracing fragmentation and paradox as the true texture of relational life. The act of listening becomes a mode of writing that lives with, rather than resolves, intimacy's contradictions. Through the recursive exchange of stories, the trilogy generates a fragile solidarity among strangers -a bond grounded not in empathy or love but in shared disillusionment. Even as its stories circle endlessly around cruelty and failed connection, their acknowledgment itself becomes connective. Cusk's fiction exposes the impossibility of intimacy while revealing how its repetition, distance, and echo sustain relation.

By contrast, Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* transforms intimacy into a technology of control. The dystopian community of Consilience literalizes the neoliberal regimes of surveillance capitalism and affective management (Illouz, Zuboff). Through satire, Atwood stages what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism": the attachment to fantasies that sustain the very systems that harm us. The couple's emotional life becomes a site of biopolitical control: love is programmed, desire is medicalized, and autonomy becomes indistinguishable from submission. Yoked together in an endless and sadistic experiment, the married couple performs

intimacies tainted by normative and clichéd assumptions and expectations about love and marriage. In scripting every emotional gesture and intimate choice, the narrator becomes the narrative's most sophisticated algorithm, demonstrating that the management of intimacy is inseparable from the management of narrative. This panopticon-like narrative structure uses intimacy as a structuring principle of human lack of empathy, alienation, and asymmetrical power relations.

In Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*, intimacy emerges as faith in the other's unknowability. Drawing on Puritan conversion narrative and its aesthetics of "fellow feelings" or *feeling with*, the text explores a conception of intimacy as inspired by the Christian and religious motif of agapeic love. Alongside the artistic tension between materiality and spirituality, sensuousness and consciousness, sacredness and ubiquity, the narrative testifies to the irreconcilability of the literary forms of *being-with*. Rethinking intimacy along the lines of these residual forms of love, Lila refuses to inscribe herself in any pre-given script of love; instead, she learns to inhabit its silences, its gaps, its risks. Against social imaginaries of shared stability, Robinson imagines relationality as inclusion of the unruly, the unassimilated, and the other. As Sarah Ahmed observes, contemporary culture instrumentalizes emotions as "tools" for self-formation; Robinson resists this logic by embracing the wild, the unmastered, and the unmeasured. (3) To love, here, is not to absorb the other but to take a leap of faith toward them. This fragile leap allows unruly emotions to circulate freely, transforming uncertainty into a condition of relation. Far from idealizing intimacy, *Lila* exposes its contradictions -oscillating between belief and doubt, connection and solitude. In this ambivalence, Robinson affirms love's imperfection as its deepest truth. In her "attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said", Robinson argues that fiction can open the "frontiers of the unsayable and the avenues of approach to those frontiers" (*When I Was a Child* 20-21). Creating acts of "imaginative love" amid the spaces of what cannot be said, literature and imagination turn into "the basis of community" (21).

Across these readings, the dissertation contends that intimacy in women's postmillennial fiction functions as both a *social diagnosis* and an *aesthetic practice*. These narratives insist that the personal cannot be disentangled from the political, nor the emotional from the economic. Yet they also reclaim the *literary* as a privileged site for testing how attachment endures within systems that commodify feeling. The strength of this work lies in its interdisciplinary reach: it

brings together cultural sociology and literary form to illuminate how narrative itself becomes a laboratory for reimagining relation. Dismantling the view of love as a burden, they explore the possibilities of connecting amid the limitations, especially that "what the postmodern romantic lover is left with is either the ironic self-suspicion that one imitates Hollywood glamour or the therapeutic suspicion that one does not 'work hard enough' to reveal the true essence of love beyond its dull appearances" (*Consuming the Romantic Utopia* 183). Rather than propelling a nostalgic view of love as unity or redemption, these texts confront their failures and cruelties by tracing the impasses in the stories of the self-in-relation. They attempt, consequently, to de-romanticize the dominant discourse by underlying the constraints that the romantic forms have imposed on the study of intimate relationships and gesture towards the affordances of other forms of experimental fictional writing. Therefore, they refrain from subordinating to a narrative convention while recycling older forms and approaching adjacent lines between the aesthetic and the political, the personal and the social, the formal and the historical.

What, then, remains of intimacy? In Cusk's fractured conversations, what remains is the faint echo of connection after communication collapses -stories repeated until they hollow themselves out, yet still insist on being heard. In Atwood's over-controlled dystopia, what remains is the residue of desire after intimacy becomes an instrument of power, a persistent trace that survives beneath systems of regulation. In Robinson's theology of conversion, what remains is unsettled faith -in the other, in language, and in the silences that both divide and bind. Across these texts, intimacy endures not as reconciliation or wholeness but as what persists after loss: a fragment, a gesture, a controversial continuity between separation and belonging. To ask what remains of intimacy, then, is not to seek restoration, but to acknowledge its unfinished form -the *paradox* that sustains both literature and life.

The dissertation's weakness, or rather its self-imposed limit, lies in its concentration on heterosexual intimacy within Western contexts. Future research might extend this inquiry to queer, diasporic, and non-Western intimacies that challenge Western temporalities of love and recognition. Writers such as Elena Ferrante, Annie Ernaux, Han Kang, and Leïla Slimani explore similar tensions between exposure and opacity, desire and detachment, showing that the paradoxes of intimacy are not culturally bound but transnationally resonant.

In sum, the paradoxes of intimacy find their expression in an aesthetic representation that embraces impermanence, cruelty, and uncertainty as part and parcel of the experiences of

security, warmth, and stability generated by intimate bonding. They, in fact, embrace the risk that comes with the quest to go beyond the conventional forms of writing intimacies. “The ultimate result of all these theories of language, literature, and reality,” as Mary K. Holland concludes, “is renewed intimacy -between reader and writer, between language and reality, between beings in the world- an intimacy produced not in spite of but because of the productive engine of poststructural realism” (*The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* 260). These texts are, accordingly, energized by the need to connect while retaining the intellectual awareness of the difficulty of representing and traversing the spaces between the self and the other.

What connects Cusk’s fragmented conversations, Atwood’s dystopian experiments, and Robinson’s theological tenderness is not a shared ideology but a shared conviction: that intimacy survives precisely through its fractures, contradictions, and formal reinventions. In times when emotional life is increasingly commodified and digitized, contemporary women’s fiction keeps open the space of encounter -however unstable- where literature and the social world still meet. Because a study of intimacy is not about the organization of personal attachments or social roles, but a way of world-making, the way we rethink and re-invent our forms of *being-with* in the world can re-invent the world itself. In that sense, the inroads this argument opens are manifold as the crisis of relationality continues, and so “[t]he world is all before [us],” as Atwood reminds us, “where to choose” (*The Heart* 306).

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Appendix A: English Abstract

The Paradoxes of Intimacy explores the formal and narrative possibilities and limitations of writing about intimate human relationships in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In an age marked by globalization, growing social and environmental insecurities, and intensification of capitalist markets (Jeffrey Nealon), the ways we bond with each other have come under increasing scrutiny in scientific research -not least for its links to problems of alienation, solipsism, and social disintegration. Recent sociological research on intimacy has attested to a crisis in the subject describing contemporary forms of close relationships as dramatically cooling (Eva Illouz), unbinding (Zygmunt Baumann), and even eroding (Byung-Chul Han). Meanwhile, the emergence of new forms of intimate bonding, such as same-sex relationships, the #Metoo social movement's public exposure of private harm, the rise of emotion-aware technologies, and the sentimentalization of capitalist markets have radically transformed the ways intimacies are created and experienced both in actual life and in artful practices. While the subject has been extensively studied in sociological and philosophical disciplines, it is still underexplored in literary scholarship, where intimacy is often used interchangeably with *love* to refer to either romantic or erotic relationships.

Performing a cross-generic analysis of Rachel Cusk's *The Outline Trilogy*, Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*, and Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*, *The Paradoxes of Intimacy* argues that contemporary women's fiction reimagines the aesthetics of intimacy by moving beyond the exhausted structures of romantic and confessional narratives. Investigating the *emergent forms* of literary intimacies as they are problematized and re-invented in postmillennial women's fiction, it critically addresses the question of how literature navigates the liminal spaces of (textual and narrative) encounters and temporalities (of imagined futures and old forms) to dismantle the fictional representation of intimacy as a private matter. While literary intimacies are traditionally predicated on an individualized point of view in which the interiority of the narrator or a character is rendered through introspection, contemporary women's fiction uses interior monologues and indirect style not to deliver psychological depth, but to reveal the sociality, artificiality, and paradoxicality of connection.

In tracing these formal and thematic transformations, the dissertation contends that contemporary women's fiction does not seek to restore intimacy or propose new modes of authentic bonding. Rather, it reflects and aestheticizes the pervasive disconnection that defines the postmillennial world. Cusk's autofictional narratives turn intimacy into a performative repetition of stories that reveal the emptiness of self-disclosure; Atwood's dystopian satire renders love as an apparatus of emotional and economic control; and Robinson's *Lila* gestures toward a fragile fleeting alternative that neither resolves nor escapes this crisis. In this sense, *The Paradoxes of Intimacy* argues that intimacy in contemporary fiction becomes not a site of resolution, but a literary form of crisis and paradox -a mode that exposes the limits of relation, the failure of reciprocity, and the persistent yearning for connection in an age increasingly hostile to the intimate.

Appendix B: Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation untersucht die formalen und narrativen Möglichkeiten sowie die Grenzen der Darstellung menschlicher Intimität im einundzwanzigsten Jahrhundert. In einer Zeit globaler Verflechtungen, wachsender sozialer und ökologischer Unsicherheiten und der Intensivierung kapitalistischer Märkte (Jeffrey Nealon) geraten die Formen menschlicher Bindung zunehmend ins Zentrum wissenschaftlicher und kultureller Aufmerksamkeit- insbesondere im Hinblick auf Entfremdung, Solipsismus und soziale Desintegration. Zeitgenössische soziologische Studien sprechen von einer „Erkaltung" (Eva Illouz), „Verflüssigung" (Zygmunt Bauman) oder gar „Erosion" (Byung-Chul Han) intimer Beziehungen. Zugleich verändern neue Formen intimer Bindung -etwa gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaften, die #MeToo-Bewegung, emotionssensitive Technologien und die Sentimentalisierung kapitalistischer Märkte -die Erfahrung und Darstellung von Nähe. Während das Thema in Soziologie und Philosophie breit erforscht ist, bleibt es in der Literaturwissenschaft unterbelichtet, wo Intimität häufig mit Liebe gleichgesetzt wird.

Die Arbeit bietet eine vergleichende Analyse von Rachel Cusks *Outline Trilogy*, Margaret Atwoods *The Heart Goes Last* und Marilynne Robinsons *Lila*. Sie zeigt, dass zeitgenössische Frauenliteratur die Ästhetik der Intimität neu denkt, indem sie überholte romantische und bekenntnishafte Erzählmuster aufbricht. Postmillenniale Autorinnen erforschen Intimität als erzählerisches und soziales Spannungsfeld, das sich in Schwellenräumen von Begegnung und Distanz entfaltet. Anstelle psychologischer Tiefenschau und individueller Innerlichkeit setzen sie auf narrative Verfahren, die die Sozialität, Künstlichkeit und Paradoxalität menschlicher Beziehungen sichtbar machen.

Die Dissertation argumentiert, dass zeitgenössische Literatur keine neuen Formen „authentischer" Nähe anbietet, sondern die Krise der Beziehung selbst ästhetisch reflektiert. Cusks autofiktionale Erzählungen machen Intimität zu einer performativen Wiederholung leerer Geschichten; Atwoods dystopische Satire entlarvt Liebe als Instrument emotionaler und ökonomischer Kontrolle; Robinsons Lila deutet eine fragile, glaubensbasierte Alternative an, die jedoch unvollständig bleibt. Intimität erscheint hier nicht als Ort der Auflösung, sondern als literarische Form der Krise und des Paradoxons -ein ästhetischer Raum, in dem das Scheitern von Gegenseitigkeit und die Sehnsucht nach Verbindung zugleich erfahrbar werden.

Ben Hania, Rabeb

Name, Vorname (bitte Druckschrift)	Matrikelnummer

Erklärung zur Dissertation

mit dem Titel The Paradoxes of Intimacy in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy*, Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*, and Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*

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