FROM TWITTER TO PERFORMED LIFE: SELF-DEPRECATING IRONY AS AFFECTIVE MEDIATOR OF SOCIOECONOMIC PRECARITY

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Abstract

This project conceives of what I call "Twitter voice" as the sociological backdrop to changing registers of literary texts and evolving shapes of online humor and critique. This thesis contends that ironic Twitter is a funny place to be: it has brought communities of people together who all speak in a similar voice, whose features I describe using computational methods. This voice is at once disembodied, self-aware, and hyperbolic. It is a way to mediate the disorientation of being online, as well as the chaos and crisis of the everyday. Drawing on the work of Ted Underwood, Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, and Timothy Bewes, this thesis moves across disciplines to investigate the role of irony in mediating daily life under capitalism; the limitations of irony when it moves from a register of speech to a mode of living; and the ways in which irony collapses multiple written forms into one another. Further, this thesis argues that Twitter irony acts as a coping mechanism for our precarious material conditions, and that this voice seeps into literature and back out again as an indication of its dominance across forms and "real life." Twitter has changed the form of what we might conceive as a novel and, just as importantly, it changes the tone of how we talk about daily life or art, and what we do in reaction to the things we talk about. Yet the ironic affective orientation of Twitter can also create the self-fulfilling prophecy of nihilism: if everything is ironic, then nothing is, and what once acted as a salve begins to desensitize.

Résumé

Ce projet conçoit ce que j'appelle la "Twitter voice" comme toile de fond sociologique des registres changeants des textes littéraires et des formes évolutives de l'humour et de la critique en ligne. Cette thèse soutient que Twitter ironique est un endroit amusant: il a réuni des communautés de personnes qui parlent toutes d'une voix similaire, dont je décris les caractéristiques à l'aide de méthodes informatiques. Cette voix est à la fois désincarnée, consciente d'elle-même et hyperbolique. C'est un moyen de médiatiser la désorientation d'être en ligne, ainsi que le chaos et la crise du quotidien. S'appuyant sur les recherches de Ted Underwood, Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai et Timothy Bewes, cette thèse traverse les disciplines pour étudier le rôle de l'ironie dans la médiation de la vie quotidienne sous le capitalisme; les limites de l'ironie quand elle passe d'un registre de parole à un mode de vie; et la manière dont l'ironie effondre plusieurs formes écrites les unes dans les autres. De plus, cette thèse soutient que l'ironie de Twitter agit comme un mécanisme d'adaptation à nos conditions matérielles précaires, et que cette voix s'infiltre dans la littérature et en ressort comme une indication de sa domination à travers les formes et "la vie réelle." Twitter a changé la forme de ce que nous pourrions concevoir comme un roman et change le ton de la façon dont nous parlons de la vie quotidienne ou de l'art, et de ce que nous faisons en réaction aux choses dont nous parlons. Pourtant, l'orientation affective ironique de Twitter peut aussi créer la prophétie auto-réalisatrice du nihilisme: si tout est ironique, alors rien ne l'est, et ce qui servait autrefois de baume commence à se désensibiliser.

Acknowledgments

Like raising a child (so I am told), labors of love take a village. It has taken a village for this thesis to come into the world, and, more accurately, for *me* to bring this thesis to fruition.

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“ ... you’re not gonna feel good about yourself. And you know it, the kids know it. Like, the whole joke on the Internet is everyone’s like, ‘this place sucks, right?’ I mean like, that’s like, kind of the thing. That’s why their memes are all ironic and detached and self-referential and 12 layers deep. Because truth is completely dead to them, and they know it. They look at the president, they look at the culture, they go ‘what the hell is this?’ They look at, like, Coca-Cola commercials that are winking at them and smiling. And they go like, ‘forget it!’ You know? So like ... Ugh, I have no idea what’s going to happen.” —Bo Burnham

Introduction

"[The] present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another."[1]

A tweet from a now-deleted account on Twitter reads, "how am i supposed to live laugh love under the conditions of the working class."[2] Another tweet states, "I apologize for not reading your email sooner. One day all of us will have to convince ourselves we spent the gift of time on earth well."[3] Merely one part of an ecosystem, these two tweets speak to the mundanities of life under late capitalism. The first borrows from the aesthetic of, typically, white suburban mothers who use inspirational quotes as home décor. Chief of these is "live laugh love," a seemingly innocuous phrase that the user co-opts to critique class structures. The second decries neoliberal office culture, and was tweeted two years into the pandemic. The user speaks to the seeming incomprehensibility of going to work and answering emails amid climate change, the Delta wave of coronavirus, skyrocketing rents, and a deteriorating political situation. Twitter "mediates the conditions of mediation";[4] as such, both these individuals use some form of irony and self-deprecation to mediate the cognitive dissonance of the present.

I realize that it is easy to discuss "capitalism" as an abstract bogeyman responsible for everything. Speaking in simple abstractions makes it easy to dismiss its pernicious effects. So, to briefly enumerate: in the United States, it is nearly impossible to rent a one-bedroom apartment

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[1] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.
[2] reem !!, "How Am i Supposed to Live Laugh and Love under the Current Material Conditions of the Working Class?," Tweet, *@ramoumaaa* (blog), October 5, 2021, https://twitter.com/ramoumaaa/status/1445197363719680004.
[3] Sufferer of Mental Lillness. "I apologize for not reading your email sooner. One day all of us will have to convince ourselves we spent the gift of time on earth well," Tweet, *@onyxaminedlife* (blog), November 2, 2021.
[4] Mark B. N. Hansen, "New Media," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago ; The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 181.

on a minimum-wage salary;[5] our most essential workers get paid the least; the wealth transfer over the course of the pandemic to the world's richest people is something to the tune of trillions of dollars;[6] the concept of rest is conceived of only insofar as it can produce more labor; it is seen as admirable to work endlessly and constantly, rather than utterly antithetical to meaning-making and human flourishing. The dystopian headline, "Coronavirus Limits California's Efforts to Fight Fires With Prison Labor,"[7] is one only possible under a system that over-incarcerates its population in order to extract money-saving slave labor to fight a climate crisis caused by overconsumption and endless growth. As Ann Cvetkovich explains, "neoliberal economic and social policy is characterized by the shrinking of the public sphere and that affective life is forced to bear an increasing burden as the state divests itself of responsibility for social welfare and affective life is confined to a privatized family."[8] Capitalism creates a "culture whose violence takes the form of systematically making us feel bad."[9] It is no surprise, then, that "the affects that predominate in late capitalism are fear and cynicism,"[10] the latter of which I explore through the excavation of irony as a coping mechanism for life under this socioeconomic system.

I use the term "feeling bad" as an umbrella term for the affective states inspired, created, and circulated through the proliferation of Twitter activity and the description of ordinary lives in the novels central to this project. I borrow my explanation for doing so from Cvetkovich, who explains that "colloquial blandness is an invitation to further elaboration, which can consist in an anecdote […] rather than a clinical category or even a theoretical term. Accounts […] require

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[5] Anna Bahney, "Minimum Wage Workers Can't Afford Rent Anywhere in America," CNN Business, July 15, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/15/homes/rent-affordability-minimum-wage/index.html.
[6] Mark John, "Pandemic Boosts Super-Rich Share of Global Wealth," *Reuters*, December 7, 2021, sec. Business, https://www.reuters.com/business/pandemic-boosts-super-rich-share-global-wealth-2021-12-07/.
[7] Thomas Fuller, "Coronavirus Limits California's Efforts to Fight Fires With Prison Labor," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2020, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/22/us/california-wildfires-prisoners.html.
[8] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 11-12.
[9] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 15.
[10] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 76.

new ways of talking about affective states and making them publicly significant rather than new terminologies."[11] An analysis of the affective structures producing Twitter discourse—a place where life is mediated, processed, or created—and a new generation of novels affords us greater understanding of what people's concerns are *right now*, the ways in which they deal with those concerns, and the limitations of their coping mechanisms.

My aim here is to establish the conditions from which art and criticism spring right now, and to which they react, especially since "[modern] mass media have not only extended and sped up communication; they have increased or reinforced its internal varieties."[12] I discuss reactions to a system under which "[rest] is scarce, and all treatment under health-capitalism is rationed along class lines […] care is designed around billable encounters […] and our cultural imaginary frames disease as something which is episodic."[13] These are the conditions for what Lauren Berlant calls a "crisis ordinary"—a series of "happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change […] Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming."[14] Cvetkovich uses "depression" "to describe [these] affective dimensions of ordinary life in the present moment,"[15] and to describe how capitalism feels. Indeed, she notes that "[depression], or alternative accounts of what gets called depression, is thus a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms."[16] This project thus assumes that the crisis ordinary serves as the backdrop of the characters in the novels I discuss

[11] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 158.
[12] John Durham Peters, "Mass Media," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago ; The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 273.
[13] Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant, *Health Communism* (Verso, 2022), 43.
[14] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 10.
[15] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 11.
[16] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 11.

and of tweets or Twitter threads. Art and criticism react to barely carved-out time of the world of work. On this point, Mark Fisher writes that

> Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems. To function effectively as a component of just-in-time production you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events, you must learn to live in conditions of total instability, or 'precarity,' as the ugly neologism has it.[17]

It is wage-labor—a prerequisite of paying rent, purchasing groceries, and consuming experiences and material goods—that determines contemporary life. I argue that its totality, flattening of experience, and seeming lack of an end are the conditions that give rise to the ironic stance that Twitter users adopt.

This thesis, then, is one interested in how people cope with a "sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility"[18] through moments of comforting ironic laughter. Such laughter is a reaction to cruelly optimistic conditions, defined as a situation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. […] [This kind] of optimistic relation [is] not inherently cruel. [It becomes] cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially."[19] This laughter, also, becomes cruelly optimistic in itself when it goes on for too long, placing Berlant's conception of "the good life" out of reach. It must be made clear that the nonsense of capitalism is a feature, not a bug: "[the] 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high."[20] I investigate the blurring between novelist, Twitter user, literary critic, and cultural

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[17] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 34.
[18] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 7.
[19] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.
[20] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 19.

critic according to Pierre Bourdieu's framework of the field of cultural production: as capitalist conditions flatten (and eliminate) the range of possibilities for life that exists beyond work, so too do these roles within the field collapse into each other, and thus collapse the forms and voices that might have once distinguished them from each other.

This thesis thus argues that Twitter irony acts as a coping mechanism for our precarious material conditions; that this voice seeps into literature and back out again as an indication of its instability across forms and into "real life." Like Sianne Ngai's depiction of the interesting, self-conscious self-parody as an aesthetic is one "without content, and thus ideally suited to the idea of the modern subject as a reflective, radically detached or 'ironic' ego."[21] Twitter has changed the form of what we might conceive as a novel and, just as importantly, it changes the tone of *how* we talk about and *what we do* in reaction to the things we talk about. This project takes inspiration from *Ugly Feelings*, in which she calls "for a more fluid reading across forms, genres, and periods than is the norm."[22] Ironic Twitter is a funny place to be: akin to "a tiny act of human kindness," it can "set things right again as if any sign of human contact releases an unwanted tension."[23] Yet this ironic orientation can also create the self-fulfilling prophecy of nihilism: if everything is ironic, then nothing is, and what once acted as a salve begins to desensitize. As such, Twitter forms a sociological backdrop that diffuses into literary texts, evolving shapes of humor and critique, and the limits of the voice itself.

Brief commentary on my methods is necessary, in order to explain the logic underpinning this project. I draw together multiple strands of critique to accompany the bread and butter of close reading—not because close reading is not useful, but rather because the novels and tweets I

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[21] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 120.
[22] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674041523, 7.
[23] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007), 47.

examine can also be read as representative of a shift in expectations of the written word. As Alexander R. Galloway argues, "a new model of reading will have to be explored … based on cybernetic parsing, scanning, rearranging, filtering, and interpolating."[24] Tweets are not only cultural artifacts, but also a form of criticism, and that the novels discussed in this thesis are not just novels, but rather extended critiques *masquerading as novels.* Position-taking within cultural production has acquired another dimension—namely, that the expectations for cultural producers seem to be the same no matter the medium. That is, a novel should sound like a tweet, and a tweet should sound like cultural criticism.

One of my primary ways of reading these texts is through an affective lens. Irony is a mode of organization: "ethics, politics, aesthetics—indeed, lives—must be enacted in the definite particular. […] reading specific affects as having and being bound up with specific forms gives us the vocabulary for articulating those many differences."[25] The examination of the affective response to reading or writing a pithy tweet can inform us about the motivations behind the voice that seems to drive contemporary discourse: I call this "Twitter voice," for the reason that it is instantly recognizable to not only Twitter users, but users on other social media platforms. This register is ironic, self-deprecating, and self-defeatingly funny. Thus, I am interested not only in the affects of the production of this voice, but also the affects of reading text written in this voice over and over again.

A few definitions of affect have influenced my work. Kathleen Stewart calls it "the commonplace, labor-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they come into being."[26] Cvetkovich describes it "in a generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a

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[24] Alexander J. Galloway, "Networks," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago ; The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 290.
[25] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Duke University Press, 2014), xv, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376774.
[26] Kathleen Stewart, "Worlding Refrains," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 340.

category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways,[27] while Berlant argues that

> affect theory can provide […] more than a focus on orthodoxies of institutions and practices. It can provide a way to assess the disciplines of normativity in relation to the disorganized and disorganizing processes of labor, longing, memory, fantasy, grief, acting out, and sheer psychic creativity through which people constantly (consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour their historical situation.[28]

As such, we can see affect as a process through which individuals perceive the rhythms of the everyday amid its emotional and material disorientation. Susanna Paasonen describes affect as "a matter of impact, force, and contact that builds up, modulates, and oscillates in daily encounters with people, spaces, images, objects, and heterogeneous networks and transforms them in the process"[29]; that is, how the circulation of these "matters" at once constitute life and destabilize it.

Crucially, like Sara Ahmed, I do not distinguish between affect and emotion. My primary reason for not doing so is that such debates have played out over decades in the field of affect theory; there is little else to say. "Drawing on Marx," Ahmed argues that "emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value."[30] As such, scholarly discussion of the interplay of emotion and affect, or the moment when emotions become affects, is less interesting to me than the application of such ideas to objects or areas of cultural production. The lens of affect theory gives way to studies of laughter and comedy, which have their own specific affective structures and contradictions. As such, an examination of affects as reactions to "[crisis] […] enables a dialectical reading of comedy and tragedy at the level of the world-system; comedy and tragedy, when applied to systemic crisis, illuminate in turn that most elusive of intellectual objects, the

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[27] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 4.
[28] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 53.
[29] Susanna Paasonen, "As Networks Fail: Affect, Technology, and the Notion of the User," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 8 (December 1, 2015): 702, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414552906.
[30] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 11.

dialectic";[31] in this case, the dialectic of irony and sincerity, feeling and numbness. Some laughter deflects, putting distance between the self and the uncomfortable situation that laughter must cover up. Indeed, Anca Parvulescu notes that most of the laughs we laugh are non-comedic in nature; we laugh by way of punctuating conversation, out of nervousness, embarrassment, awkwardness, and shock and, indeed, often gratuitously."[32] Madeline Lane-McKinley "[looks] to comedy as symptomatizing a set of problems, more than presenting us with any direct solutions,"[33] and it is from this position that I excavate Twitter voice as a coping mechanism. Like Lane-McKinley, I look "to comedy as a complex terrain of capitalist work ethics and antiwork longings."[34] In this project, I thus use irony, parody, and satire loosely, as interchangeable terms: they all participate in distancing the self from the unpleasant affects of everyday life.

Significantly, this project also draws on methods from cultural analytics to look at Twitter data in aggregate. Like Tess McNulty, I "attend not only to the content's thematics, but also to its aesthetic, narrative, and generic elements, as revealed by 'close' and 'distant' reading. … the meanings encoded in a medium are very real contributors to its cultural effect; and that the aesthetic forms through which those meanings are conveyed make a difference, too."[35] On research involving text on social media platforms, Nathan Rambukkana writes that "risks might be mediated by taking precautions, […] erring on the side of treating research participants as authors of texts rather than subjects, or by according them pseudonymity as

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[31] Joshua Clover, "Genres of the Dialectic," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (January 2017): 431, https://doi.org/10.1086/689668.
[32] Anca Parvulescu, "Even Laughter? From Laughter in the Magic Theater to the Laughter Assembly Line," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (January 2017): 507, https://doi.org/10.1086/689673.
[33] Madeline Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 1st ed. (Common Notions, 2022), 10.
[34] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 4.
[35] Tess McNulty, "Content-Era Ethics," *Post45: Peer Reviewed*, April 21, 2021, https://post45.org/2021/04/content-era-ethics/.

author/subjects—even if treating the data they have generated only as texts."[36] Accordingly, to maintain the privacy of Twitter users in my data sets, most of whom are not public figures, I analyze the data in aggregate only, and tweets that I *do* close read are anonymized. The methods I employ in chapter one help us look at large quantities of data to detect patterns that would otherwise not be intelligible or detectable otherwise; close and distant reading are two methods that, rather than competing for space, can work together to nuance the ways in which texts make their meaning. Methods used to compare these two types of speech *must be* varied and reliant on computational analysis to detect the patterns akin to those found in traditional literary scholarship.

These patterns constitute impasses that irony makes legible. Berlant understands them as "a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things."[37] They note that, problematically, in daily lives arguably governed by the affects of cruel optimism, "it may be that, for many now, living in an impasse would be an aspiration, as the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically–are crumbling at a threatening pace."[38] I argue that irony is the dominant affective mediator of the present. It is funny and relatable because "[comedy] helps us test or figure out what it means to say 'us.' Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear."[39]

I focus on novels modeled on the voices and affects of this corner of Twitter because such works represent the convergence of two different media—with different purposes, forms, and

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[36] Nathan Rambukkana, "The Politics of Gray Data: Digital Methods, Intimate Proximity, and Research Ethics for Work on the 'Alt-Right,'" *Qualitative Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (2019): 320, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418806601.
[37] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.
[38] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4-5.
[39] Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (January 2017): 235, https://doi.org/10.1086/689666.

interests—that contribute to the other *unevenly*. That is, Twitter invades the novel, formally and topically, but the novel does not do the same thing to Twitter; arguably, it cannot. I explore what this formal collision does to the scope and concerns of an older form that has only ever been "adapted"—to TV or movies, for example—rather than "absorbed." At stake in this project, then, is a discussion of the Internet's colonization of a form—the novel—that is by definition slow and complex. This project works to understand the effects of Twitter and Internet discourse on the novel. In a way, this project also attempts to explain, in part, the reasons for the shift to "postfiction," about which Timothy Bewes posits "there is no formal […] criterion with which to differentiate a piece of fiction from a piece of nonfiction writing, nothing, therefore, that formally guarantees that the nonfiction writing I am reading at any moment is not operating as fiction, that the ideas or viewpoints I am responding to directly, in sincere absorption, are not, in fact, the discourse of a fictional character."[40] I argue, then, that its infiltration at the formal and content levels of the novel mark a shift in reader expectations and imaginative capacity vis-à-vis a novel's ability to grapple with the difficulties of the contemporary and the possibles of the future. The affordances of Twitter voice are vast, generating amusement and momentary ease—but perhaps it also has led to the literary institutionalization of malaise, of resignation, of the inability to dream.

[40] Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, Literature Now (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 10.

Chapter 1

"forms move across contexts, taking their own range of affordances with them"[41]

Introduction

In the first half of Patricia Lockwood's novel, *No One is Talking About This,* her unnamed heroine laments the sudden meaninglessness of words derived from their overuse. One such word, "toxic," has "been anointed, and now could not go back to being a regular word. It was like a person becoming famous. They […] would never eat a Cobb salad outdoors without tasting the full awareness of what they were. *Toxic. Labor. Discourse. Normalize*."[42] The repetition of such words critique their erroneous overusage. Toxic, normalize, discourse: Lockwood now deconstructs these words in the novel, which typically saturate Twitter speech. This novel in particular can be read as an allegory of the cacophony of voices on Twitter. Ted Underwood writes of Raymond Williams that "literary culture is never a unified object, but rather a palimpsest of emergent and residual formations, transformed retrospectively by processes of selection."[43] In migrating Internet-speak to the novel, considered to be more highbrow, the lines of genre blur, and the forms of irony and satire move back and forth between the online and the analog. Since Lockwood's novel is written as many short "tweets," the two spheres are no longer distinct. Indeed, this merge speaks to the growing need to address the growing reach of Twitter into the novel. The anointment of "toxic" is but one of the many frontiers in ironic speech, as is the novel's speech as a thematic position.

Moving across sites of literary culture that speak to each other through and across forms, I read for and pay attention to the affects that arise from repetitive and compulsory irony as a

[41] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 135-136.
[42] Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021), 53.
[43] Ted Underwood, "A Genealogy of Distant Reading," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 011, no. 2 (June 27, 2017).

coping mechanism. Hynnä et al. write that "the affective body politics of social media involve interplay and communication between human and nonhuman bodies. It takes seriously the way that affect, as the capacity to relate, impress and be impressed, creates dynamic connections between them."[44] I add the novel to the category of "non-human" bodies. This chapter proceeds from Madeline Lane-Mckinley's notion that "comedy is a mode of estranging and interrogating the very idea of work and its brutality,"[45] and from Lauren Berlant's and Sianne Ngai's discussion of comedy. They understand it as "both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure."[46] While comedy is different from satire, I borrow from this characterization to examine satire's simultaneous inwardness and expansiveness. On Twitter, and for Lockwood's narrator, ironic self-deprecation is a crutch, a life vest, and a dizzying spell.

I look at tweets because Twitter has changed how we write and the forms of comedy we accept as being comedy, given that "[technologies] are perhaps best understood, not so much as agents in their own right, but as thought-objects for the collective enactment and exploration of hopes, desires and political visions."[47] Tweets confront multiple overlapping forms of capitalist, commercialized crisis, itself a form that "was already something people could think of as ordinary by the late nineteenth century."[48] Like Berlant, I "read patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to derive what's collective about specific modes of sensual activity

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[44] Kaisu Hynnä, Mari Lehto, and Susanna Paasonen, "Affective Body Politics of Social Media," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (October 1, 2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119880173.
[45] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 6.
[46] Berlant and Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," 233.
[47] Thomas Streeter, "The Internet as a Structure of Feeling: 1992-1996," *Internet Histories* 1, no. 1–2 (2017): 86, https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2017.1306963.
[48] Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 31.

toward and beyond survival,"[49] seeing the deployment of irony across genres and its ubiquity as a "pattern of adjustment" to precarity and the twenty-first century unknown. Marwick and boyd write that tweets "serve a social function, reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds."[50] This chapter is unusual in its structure, yet it reconciles its two parts through its concept from the first section: a data analysis and discussion of tone and affect in a specific group of tweets, as the necessary prerequisite for understanding the movement of irony from Twitter to the novel. This chapter, and this project more broadly, puts Twitter into conversation with the novel to bridge the gap between two areas of criticism that treat each medium individually. I argue that to talk about the contemporary novel is to talk about Twitter, and it is impossible to understand the former without contending with the effects of the latter on speech, social issues, and the politicization of cultural concerns.

Data analysis proceeds in the vein of distant reading methods dating back to Janice Radway who, Underwood explains, "uses numbers simply to count and compare."[51] Like Radway, I also situate my research within a broader ethnographic context. This chapter puts tweets from two Twitter datasets in conversation with *No One is Talking About This* to examine how satire and self-deprecating dark comedy move from Twitter to structure and define a contemporary novel. Here, I argue that a large volume of these tweets can be read as both paratextual and a text unto their own; we can read them as the necessary sociological conditions for Lockwood's "novel" to appear. At the center of this discussion is both content and form—the 280-character length of a tweet makes it the ideal vessel for a hastily dashed-off joke or jab at one's misery. If indeed the novel can absorb another written form, then the novel initially appears

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[49] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 9.
[50] Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 118, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313.
[51] Underwood, "A Genealogy of Distant Reading."

to be quite stable. Yet the migration of Twitter's format into a novel demonstrates an underlying *instability* if the novel can also "think" in forms different from itself.

Thus, the comedy of a tweet arises from the pithiness and density of 280 characters, compared to novel-length satire. That is, critiques of capitalism and labor conditions à la Twitter's self-deprecating and punchy dark humor become the constituent parts of the novel. This conservation of form then strengthens the humor sustained in compact vignettes that make sense for an ephemeral moment only if the reader or writer knows the underlying mimetic context. Lockwood satirizes the form, the content, and the knowledge necessary to make both those elements into intelligible speech in order to comment on the disorientation of transmuting one's life into the Internet. As Thomas Streeter writes of the Internet, "particular discourses function in (rather than merely reflect) society."[52] While Lockwood does not always write in the self-deprecating tone of many of the tweets in my dataset, *No One is Talking About This* speaks back to them to comment on their simultaneous absurdity of speech and their necessary structure to perform their cultural commentary. Twitter is now "real life" in its own way, and it is thus useful to understand its effect with how humor and language have changed to meet our needs today—that is, to begin to capture the absurdity of living through traumatic world events while also having previously-impossible access to the thoughts and inner workings of the minds of millions of people on Twitter.

I. Methods and notes on the datasets

I first analyze two datasets, one of which is my object of interest, and the other of which is my control, to use as an initial framework for understanding what I call "Twitter voice," a way of speaking on Twitter that is hyperbolic, self-deprecating, and dark. The parts of speech to

[52] Streeter, "The Internet as a Structure of Feeling: 1992-1996," 82.

which I pay attention are pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs, all of which have different functions in a sentence or paragraph; in this case, their frequencies signal differences in speech that can be used to identify Twitter voice. There are likely many other features that one might discuss, which lie outside the scope and interest of this project. My goal is to make an initial gesture towards describing some parts of Twitter voice, and to then shift from quantitative analysis to a reading of select tweets that make up my dataset; this initial work figures as a sociological and cultural backdrop for the novels I discuss.

I will clarify how each dataset was assembled. I aim to "pose broad historical questions about literature, and answer them by studying samples of social or textual evidence. Those samples may range from a few dozen instances to a million or more."[53] Both datasets span the same length of time, from October 20, 2020 to October 26, 2022. The timeframe and length of time are both significant. First, I set my parameters to two years in order to have a large enough dataset from which I might be able to see discernible patterns in parts of speech frequency. I have tried to capture the most contemporary moment possible. Second, I chose October 26, 2022 as the end date, because Twitter was sold to Elon Musk on October 27, a day later. At that point, conversations on and about the platform shifted dramatically, and, although exact numbers are not published (and perhaps not even known), many people departed from Twitter. This project springs from many years of my own sustained use of Twitter, and of noticing patterns over time that I wished to examine more deeply.

Dataset A, my dataset of interest, is composed of 2,313,150 tweets, while Dataset B, the control, is composed of 2,390,399 tweets. Dataset A contains tweets that I understand to be written in "Twitter voice." This self-deprecating and darkly comic voice exists in reaction *to,* and is quickly recognizable to people who are "very online" and subscribe to its ironic outlook.

[53] Underwood, "A Genealogy of Distant Reading."

Dataset B is composed of tweets that are written in an otherwise "normal" register. To minimize too many differences between the users of each dataset, I attempted to preserve the backgrounds of the people tweeting in Dataset A; namely, Dataset B is also composed of people who are on the political left, dominate Twitter "space" within this area, and have similar occupations (e.g. white collar work, creative work) or *pre*-occupations (e.g. voting rights, civil rights, equality) as the individuals in Dataset A.

To give an example of how this dataset was constructed, see the tweets in Table 1. These tweets are exemplary and typical of the ironic voice that this thesis examines. These tweets are not in my dataset; I use them as examples to illustrate my procedure. The classification of A and B marks the ways in which a tweet might have ended up in my dataset. Tweets marked as Dataset A typify the kinds of tweets that would go viral and end up in my feed. To add the tweet author to my dataset, I would migrate to their timeline to see if this voice was the predominant one in their tweets; if that was the case, I added that user's name and user ID to a list. I then searched through the accounts that such users follow, making the process recursive. I repeated this process for Dataset B. The tweets in Dataset B are characterized by their comparative lack of irony and hyperbole, their more straightforward descriptive tone, and an absence of an implicit referral to a distinct affect of malaise or self-deprecation. They do *have* a voice, but it is one concerned with the third-person, remaining evaluative and distinct from its subject; this "voice" is not that of the novels I examine throughout this chapter and the next. Through my initial impressions, by extrapolating the irony of suspected Twitter voice in certain individual tweets to a long-term selection of these users' and many other users' tweets, I am able to see if this voice is marked by particular features.

Dataset	Tweet text
A	life is so hard. have to fill up humidifier etc
A	Who is hellofresh for, like demographically? Who doesn't know how to buy an onion
A	uhh your strike thing sounds cool but have you considered that i get sad if i can't have half an onion wrapped in 3 layers or plastic shipped halfway across the country to my front door
A	Human beings really said "yeah sure we could be swimming naked in gorgeous lakes and laying in the sunshine and eating peaches under trees drinking wine all day, but let's create a class system and kill the planet instead. spice things up a little."
B	It's easy to forget that the trans "debate" in the UK is about whether to make it easier to get an official government document that has been available for nearly 20 years. It would make trans people's lives easier and affect no one else.
B	Good clear thread on the latest ravings from GG
B	I think, if the very powerful and influential MirRam group was to give up lobbying for the check cashing industry, it would go very far in convincing me that they really care about our communities.
B	not really on here these days but I can see from my email inbox (and now my mentions) I should clarify that this article is by the senior philosopher of my same first name at Cornell. if it helps: the "O." I add to my pen name is for this.

Table 1. Examples of possible tweet classification.

Rather than "scraping"[54] Twitter for a keyword, such as has been done for information-rich hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter,[55] I manually went through my own Twitter timeline and the followers of those accounts that popped up to gather the preliminary dataset. Each dataset is thus based on the tweets of about 1,000 users. I then set my scrape parameters to "timeline" to scrape tweets from only their profile. I narrowed my search by removing retweets,

[54] "Scraping" is the term commonly used to refer to the practice of "downloading" tweets en masse onto one's laptop. I think of it as a metaphor for scraping cells, such as in a biopsy or cheek swab, as the process can net not only tweets that are useful for one's research, but also others that are extraneous and must be discarded. This term is used by many individuals who harvest Internet data for their research, such as Fiesler et al. and Melanie Klein, who have, respectively, written about web scrapers and social media, and written a textbook for cultural analytics students.

[55] See Richard Jean So, *Redlining Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

quote tweets, and replies, as including these would yield duplicates of an original tweet. Once scraped, each tweet comes with metadata, such as the tweet author; their unique Twitter ID; the date and time they wrote a specific tweet; the number of likes, quote tweets, retweets, replies it received; the language; and, if applicable, or if the user has provided the site with access to this information, the location where the tweet originates. From this point, I narrow down my view of the dataset, eliminating all tweets that are not in English, and then removing parts of tweets that contain URLs to an image or a video. These processes of data cleaning, or preprocessing, make it easier to see what I am interested in: the text of each tweet.

II. Looking at parts of speech

In this section, I discuss the data in the tables and the choice to examine parts of speech. As I have already described, and as we will see in later close readings and in Table 2, there is a difference between the tweets in Dataset A and Dataset B. This analysis is a form of distant reading, a term coined by Franco Moretti to describe textual analysis that "*is a condition of knowledge*" that allows us "to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems."[56] While Moretti concedes that distant reading can yield "abstract" and "poor"[57] concepts, analyzing text in this way can be useful to contextualize the minutiae of a text that we, as literary scholars, are so used to and which forms the backbone of our craft. I use the following analysis and insights of my corpora to serve as a sociological backdrop for better understanding some textual features of this way of writing tweets. This backdrop, I argue, can lead us to a discussion of *why* Twitter voice manifests in the first place and how it conditions new ways of thinking as a function of the rise of the Internet.

[56] Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 57.
[57] Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 58.

I am inspired by Moretti's term "comparative morphology."[58] Broadly speaking, morphology is the study of words and how they relate to each other, and my discussion of parts of speech contributes to this project through its juxtaposition of Twitter and the novel. For both datasets, I calculate the average length of a tweet, the results for which are present in Table 2. I then calculate the pronoun, adjective, and adverb frequencies per tweet, also shown below. From the table below, we can make a few observations. First, despite possible assumptions that tweets in Dataset A may not be as rich or information-dense given their pithiness, we can see that those tweets in fact tend to be longer than those in Dataset B. This larger value may also correspond to their syntax, in that they tend to be composed of one or a few run-on sentences that are not necessarily broken up with punctuation—thus leading people to write lengthy thoughts as streams of consciousness.

Dataset	Avg. length of tweet in words	Pronoun frequency per tweet	Adjective frequency per tweet	Adverb frequency per tweet
A	36.976532	2.768885	3.465087	2.395554
B	22.538659	1.438975	2.075163	1.369948

Table 2. Parts of speech (POS) frequencies across datasets A and B.

Notably, the frequency of appearance of a pronoun, adjective, or adverb is uniformly higher for Dataset A. While this may in part be due to a greater number of words per tweet, I argue that more frequent appearances of these parts of speech in Dataset A is evidence of these tweets' (1) increased focus on the self, or on individuals, or a group of individuals, and (2) hyperbolic, exaggerated, described nature. Pronouns act as proxies for an already-named subject, and mark the return of the writer or narrator to that subject or object. Higher pronoun frequency, then, can

[58] Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 64.

signal a sustained emphasis on the self, an “us,” or a “you,” implicitly indicating a preoccupation with the experience of that subject or object. Adjectives and adverbs enrich a text through their grammatical function. I thus direct my attention to them to examine how they might act as proxies for intensification, hyperbole, or exaggeration. In Table 3, I illustrate the pronoun, adjective, and adverb counts for tweets part of smaller datasets sliced from the larger ones; they consist of the top 100 most-liked tweets in Datasets A and B. I choose this particular subset because I interpret likes as a proxy for the most “relatable” and thus representative manifestation of Twitter voice.

Dataset	Tweet	Number of pronouns	Number of adjectives	Number of adverbs
A	“what if YOU were aborted?” bro does it look like I wanna be here rn	3	1	2
A	my therapist: you’re a good person me: oh no I’ve tricked you too	4	2	1
A	Girls actually text each other like, "I’m meeting a guy allegedly named Brian here 📍 If he murders me here’s his Bumble pic so he can be brought to justice" and then the reply's like, "You got it girl - have fun tonight! 😘😜"	7	3	5
B	A pregnant woman in Dallas was pulled over for using the HOV lane and is arguing that her unborn fetus should count as a passenger because of Texas' abortion laws. Let the mental gymnastics begin.	1	3	0
B	Yup, they can all afford it	2	0	0
B	Everything in this image that doesn't have spikes coming off of it is a galaxy. Every. Single. Dot.	1	0	1

Table 3. POS counts for selected tweets from top 100 most liked in datasets A and B.

Counts for these tweets do not reflect the exact values in Table 2—because those are averages across 2.3 million tweets in each dataset. I choose three examples from each dataset to illustrate the differences in tone, style, and focus of these tweets, as well as the corresponding variance of pronoun, adjective, and adverb use. My analysis of rows 1-3 proceeds not from an analytical stance that assumes "a text is withholding something of vital importance […] concealed in its recesses and margins,"[59] but rather that what I draw out lies in plain sight for those fluent in Twitter voice. It is the unspoken context that makes these tweets funny.

In row 1, the tweet creates a dialogue between a hypothetical person and the person writing the tweet to respond to common rejoinder among opponents of abortion. The usage of "YOU" and "I" center the focus on the self, particularly on the experience of the self that remains unsaid—namely, that there are some underlying circumstances that would lead the speaker to say, self-deprecatingly, that they do not "wanna be here rn." "Rn," as an abbreviated adverb for "right now", not only emphasizes the speaker's desire to not exist, which would be ironic and hyperbolic in itself, but also the immediacy of this desire. It is this immediacy, combined with the focus on the self, which leads to its classification as Twitter voice. Defining Twitter voice affords an understanding of what such a tweet does in a Twitter ecosystem. Twitter voice insists on hyper-personalization and extremes to manage off-screen conditions that structure the everyday.

The tweet from Dataset A in row 2 operates in similar ways. Fictional banter between "therapist" and "patient" is common on Twitter, often with a nihilistic end. Here the focus is claustrophobically on the tweet author and their supposed duplicity of someone with whom they should be honest. "Too" implies that the author feels they have "tricked" everyone else in their life into thinking they are a good person, when in fact they are not. There are larger concentric

[59] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

contexts here. First, that of the young person who needs a therapist, and is nevertheless, like the rest of their generation, open to talking about that need. Second, is the conceit of impostor syndrome, which many young people feel: that we are all faking our relative successes, and that no one, not even ourselves, knows who we are. Finally, this tweet, like so many others, is *relatable.* People who subscribe to this brand of irony can chuckle a little bit[60] before moving on with their day. As Akane Kanai writes, "[attaining] relatability requires the ability to produce an account of personal experience that assumes generality, and plausibly but *pleasingly* reflects this audience's experience in particular ways."[61] As such, the chronic malaise that underpins self-deprecation is *understood by the many people who read the tweet.* As such, Twitter voice is defined by hyperbolic stakes of the banality and unpleasantness of the everyday.

The final row from Dataset A uses this same premise to more overtly discuss being safe while dating as a woman. The tweet features a dialogue between generic stand-ins chatting about a quasi-universal experience for women on dating apps. In its fabrication of a separate self, it creates the conditions for hyper-fixation and the centering of relatable subjects. The man named Brian could be any man a woman is meeting for the first time. In this tweet the focus shifts from the tweet author to the "I," "you," and "Brian," rather than paying attention to a sole "I"; the "world" of the tweet remains limited in its scope. It remains fixed on a few people while simultaneously making those few people into caricatures onto which a typical experience is projected. The narcissism is narrow in its focus, but broad in its intended scope of relatability. Speaking to both the personal and collective, the tweet's irony reaches new heights with the uses of "actually" and "allegedly"; "actually" signifies the absurdity to such communication, while

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[60] One common meme, as reaction, is known as the exhale meme, in which a diptych of a man portrays him exhaling from his nose in supposed reaction to something funny (but not funny enough to laugh at). See: Stotan_, "*Exhales from Nose*," Reddit Post, *R/Memes*, January 23, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/esos87/exhales_from_nose/.

[61] Akane Kanai, *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019), 4.

"allegedly" is a nod to the simultaneously funny and dangerous fact of not knowing who this man is. "Have fun tonight" then deliberately deflates the heightened parody of the situation: despite all the necessary worries about safety, the imagined well-wisher still wants their friend to enjoy herself.

Finally, "here📍," conceived as one word, is an adverb that describes the meeting place, and the pictorial element stands in for the sharing of the woman's location with her friend. This adverb condenses other implied conversations that these two people would have about this man and the absurdity of using location sharing as an amulet against possible violence, into a compact textual-visual depiction of care. The effect of fixating on these two people, intensified by the adverbs' urgency, creates a tweet that operates on multiple levels of irony and reference. We see "the role of cultural imagination in the construction of the Internet; culture shapes technology as much as the other way around."[62] Twitter voice is thus inherently constitutive of not only narcissism[63] and hyperbole, but also layers (and layers) of irony and textual play that require lengthy explanations yet are immediately understood by those fluent in Twitter voice. As Sara Ahmed tells us, "'figures of speech' are crucial to the emotionality of texts,"[64] and I read the use of text and emoji as wordplay intended to heighten the ironic affect of the tweet. When being a woman in the world is so precarious, why not laugh at it? Why cry when laughing feels better?

By contrast, the tweets in Table 3 that belong to Dataset B have a very different tone. While of course these tweets contain pronouns, the pronouns do not serve the dual purpose of creating a main character *and* a totalizing universe for that main character. The tweet "[a] pregnant woman in Dallas was pulled over for using the HOV lane and is arguing that her unborn fetus should count as a passenger because of Texas' abortion laws" refers to an explicit event that

[62] Streeter, "The Internet as a Structure of Feeling: 1992-1996," 82.
[63] I mean this in the least judgmental use of the word.
[64] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

has happened to one specific person; discussion of this experience is not intended to stand in for the experiences of others. It is instead purely descriptive and matter-of-fact. It does not convey a theoretical scenario established by the introduction of the self-obsessed "I," "you," or "we." Likewise, while the tweet in row 5 contains pronouns, "Yup, they can all afford it" is literal. It has no other contextual referent other than the thing it describes. In the final tweet, in row 6, the author conveys a fact about the universe, a description in which "it" (the pronoun) and "coming off" (the adverb) refer singularly to the image or link, without further gestures to other contexts, broader circumstances of living, or irony.

Tweets in Dataset B, then, lack the requisite components needed to construct Twitter voice. Whatever these tweets describe, discuss, or debate, they do not establish a situation predicated on irony or self-parody. In the "worlds" of these tweets, no attempt is made to play off the situation as funny in some way, or to refer to deeper levels of meaning that make the tweet comprehensible. The connotative work of the relevant parts of speech is not self-deprecating, a social critique, or a lament. Instead, there is little connotation or non-literality. Common to the three tweets taken from Dataset A is their use of *hypothesis*. That is, they imagine hyperbolic scenarios to emphasize the incongruent affects of possibly undergoing such moments. Tweets in Dataset A speak to larger social, cultural, and economic memeified contexts; that is, the tweet authors gesture back to conditions that make sense to them and to their audience. Levine writes that "literary forms can lay claim to an efficacy of their own. They do not simply reflect or contain prior political realities";[65] that is, they are acted upon, internalized, used to shape affective orientations and methods of thought. Likes are a proxy for someone's identification with a tweet, its sense of humor, and the out-of-view referent: the material conditions of life and

[65] Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 16.

the disorientation of experiencing one's daily life through the governance of Internet situations that are not ultimately substitutions for reality.

I read Twitter voice similarly to Sianne Ngai's reading of "the gimmick": as "an *ambivalent* judgment tied to a *compromised* form, it underscores the fact that aesthetic categories have two sides—the judgment we utter, a way of speaking; the form we perceive, a way of seeing—sutured by affect into a spontaneous experience."[66] Twitter voice is thus generated by and bound to its length and pithiness, and these two characteristics in turn generate an affect of feigned detachment converted to palliative irony. In the next section, I transition to Lockwoood's novel-length incorporation of and reaction to aspects of Twitter voice, and to analysis of the concerns that often animate its use; transplanting the formal structure of Twitter into a novel creates a "hybrid" and "a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born."[67] In keeping with Ahmed's question regarding our "right to distinguish between the *formal* and the *social*,"[68] and bearing in mind that "forms […] can organize both social and literary objects,"[69] I argue that Lockwood's metaphorization of Twitter voice and affective experience of being on the platform belie this voice's inherent escapism.

III. Twitter voice to novel meme cacophony

No One is Talking About This grapples with iterations of Twitter voice and the extent to which it dictates online and offline reality, which seems to move towards "the technological extension of consciousness."[70] The novel exploits the self-referential system of tweeting and being on the internet, a system which is obscure and ephemeral. Irony is the affect that structures

[66] Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 1.
[67] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2001), 61.
[68] Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 1.
[69] Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 13.
[70] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 63.

the "intimate public" of being on Twitter and in "the portal," both spaces giving "a sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies."[71] These online worlds of "collective but individually experienced pain get turned into modern forms of entertainment."[72] One might characterize Lockwood's reproduction of the visual and mental barrage of a Twitter feed as post-ironic, containing both sincere and ironic elements that are difficult to distinguish. Every stance the narrator takes is one of ironic resignation, an affect that enables her to process online phenomena without thinking too deeply about them and their underlying unpleasantness. Madeline Lane-McKinley writes that for such comedic, satiric, or ironic speech under capitalism, "nihilism is the precondition"[73] that underpins the adoption of Twitter voice to explore contemporary humor. A rejection of meaning generates this irony as a reaction to disorienting or unpleasant phenomena.

Lockwood's narrator attempts to parse the nonsense of the Internet. Ironic ambivalence surrounds: "Capitalism! It was important to hate it, even though it was how you got money. […] she found herself moving toward a position so philosophical even Jesus couldn't have held it: that she must hate capitalism while at the same time loving film montages set in department stores."[74] This observation acts as a microcosm of "life" in the portal, the novel's metaphor for Twitter: even though capitalism is the source of misery, it can still be momentarily entertaining, making it impossible to remain ideologically pure. Her movement to a "position so philosophical" gestures towards an embrace of irony—she knows her actions are ironic, but so is her acknowledgement of their irony—as an affective stance. That is, capitalism is so all-encompassing, so total, that looking for a way to resist it becomes futile; instead, she must

[71] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 10.
[72] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 13.
[73] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 32.
[74] Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021), 4.

gravitate to an ideological position that necessitates milquetoast critique of its built-in systemic inequality before permitting grudging enjoyment of capitalism's fruits.[75]

The portal is a recreation of Twitter's sensory overwhelm: it is a site of deep meme lore, for which the narrator provides context before proceeding to a critique of ironic commentary. Participation in this "space" comes to "define modalities of belonging that are articulated as strangers connect and attach to each other."[76] Lockwood gives the reader a glimpse of "life" on the portal, portraying it as "[close-ups] of nail art, a pebble from outer space, a tarantula's compound eyes, a storm like canned peaches on the surface of Jupiter, Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters,* a chihuahua perched on a man's erection, a garage door spray-painted with the words STOP! DON'T EMAIL MY WIFE!"[77] She simulates the effect of being in the portal by reenacting the formal chaos of the visuals that the narrator might see, creating an affect that Jenny Odell sees as being "whipped into a permanent state of frenzy."[78] Each image has a backstory needed to grasp its humor,[79] making it, like Twitter, a "cold medium" requiring "participation or completion by the audience."[80] One reproduction of a meme simply reads, "*In remembrance of those we lost on 9/11 the hotel will provide complimentary coffee and mini muffins from 8:45-9:15 am*,"[81] a reference to a viral image of a sign bearing those words on a buffet table at a Marriott hotel. This meme gestures to the absurdity of honoring victims of 9/11 with a 30-minute period of free food. Contributing to the absurdity is the hotel's sincere belief

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[75] Here, we can look to Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, in which he argues that people have an easier time envisioning the end of the world than they do the end of capitalism. The idea is that capitalism is so total—and its propaganda so strong—that envisioning a world beyond this economic and social system is nearly impossible.
[76] Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics," in *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (Oxford University Press, 2014), 118, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.003.0006.
[77] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 3.
[78] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019), 59.
[79] LitHub has compiled every single "meme" in Lockwood's novel in case readers do not know the context. This compilation can be viewed here, https://lithub.com/all-the-memes-in-patricia-lockwoods-no-one-is-talking-about-this-explained/, though the amusement each one incites varies.
[80] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 25.
[81] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 24.

that this "gesture" graciously honors those who lost their lives. The chaos of now-canonized memes govern the portal. In this case, the Marriott buffet sign attempts to ritualize and comfort in the face of death, an attempt immediately deflated by its obvious stinginess. It becomes a meme through its sheer ridiculousness, and this meme is reproduced in Lockwood's novel to indicate the extent to which satire and parody is used to superficially engage with deeper questions of memorial and cultural memory.

The cacophony of online *things* is destabilizing yet acceptable, because at least this destabilization is amusing. The portal becomes another world to navigate. As Bruce Clarke writes: "if 'everything is information' […] then no piece of it is worth more than any other […] all of it is worthless."[82] The experience is entertaining and depressing. To manage this experience, the narrator capitulates, becoming a social media influencer. The narrator "became famous for a post that said simply, *Can a dog be twins?* […] [raising] her to a certain airy prominence. All around the world, she was invited to speak from what felt like a cloud-bank, about the new communication, the new slipstream of information."[83] Since "optimism involves thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition,"[84] the narrator's turn to hawking the wares of the Internet can be read as (cruelly) optimistic; the narrator now creates the content that overwhelms her.

Lockwood suggests that the narrator does not take this new "job" seriously, even if it does come with social capital within this space. She resigns herself to the "new communication," a new source of information that decentralizes other formats. Information in the portal seems random and incomprehensible; the narrator "had also popularized the concept of a 'sealing wax

[82] Bruce Clarke, "Communication," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago ; The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 138.
[83] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 13.
[84] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 43.

manicure' where you painted over your entire fingertip in a big careless red blob, and that this paved the way for 1776-core, an irony-based aesthetic where people adopted various visual signifiers of the Founding Fathers."[85] "-core" is a typical suffix used to describe increasingly atomized fashion trends, including, but not limited to, cottagecore, normcore, and ballet core.[86] The nonsense of coating one's finger in wax remains beside the point: indeed, its very absurdity lends the narrator cultural capital that signals knowledge of the portal's zeitgeist.

1776-core is explicitly motivated by its irony and rejection of logic. Anything that appears in the portal—words, images, videos—ultimately embraces a rejection of meaning. Nothing matters on the portal because the conditions outside it have rendered life offline affectively unnavigable. The narrator muses about "[context] collapse! That sounded pretty bad, didn't it? And also like the thing that was happening to the honeybees?"[87] Lockwood gestures to affected perceived powerlessness in the face of both online overwhelm and ecosystemic collapse, equating worries about the portal with the emotional severity of contemplating the extinction of bees. In their work on comedy, Berlant defines the "traumic" as a genre that

> milks the formal likeness of trauma and the comedic: in a traumic, the beings under pressure and disturbed by what's happened around them are usually destined not to be defeated unto death but to live with the light and heavy effects of damage, still acting, being acted upon, and trying to keep things moving, which is to say, surviving.[88]

The novel, like the tweets from Dataset A in Table 3, embody this genre. Honeycomb collapse is an intractable problem, but nevertheless she may well experience its adverse effects; likewise, if something happens to a woman on a date, and no one is around to intervene, there is not much a

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[85] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 22.
[86] For a more exhaustive list, see: https://fashionista.com/2022/08/core-style-aesthetics-fashion-style-glossary-gen-z.
[87] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 54.
[88] Lauren Berlant, "The Traumic: On BoJack Horseman's 'Good Damage,'" *Post45* (blog), November 22, 2020, https://post45.org/2020/11/the-traumic-on-bojack-horsemans-good-damage/.

friend can do. Per Berlant's definition, we see Twitter voice and the portal play out the dynamics of surviving through ironic self-deprecation in the face of "damage."

As such, the portal is both a trap and an escape. The flood of images act as a salve for painful things like dying bees, but also engender an affective experience of "too much" when confronted with the funny, the ironic, the depressing. I engage with affect theory precisely because of its emphasis on what it feels like to feel and to be reduced to feeling. The portal whittles the self down to emotion, and the most immediate way to process the flood of information is through ironic deflection. The narrator notes that "she loved to yell, loved to be inconsistent, loved to make no sense,"[89] projecting meaninglessness to downplay discomfortment and unpleasantness. Irony is a stance affected in the face of futility.

The overwhelm of the portal is cruelly optimistic. It brings people closer to some form of happiness (escape) while also bringing them close to the thing they flee (bee colony collapse) through the constant satire that it uses to facilitate these very escapes. Even if a situation is portrayed humorously to disarm its seriousness, it is still serving as a point of reference. Take, for example, "the dictator," also known as Donald Trump. The narrator muses about "[politics]! The trouble was that they had a dictator now, which, according to some people (white), they had never had before, and according to other people (everyone else), they had only ever been having, constantly, since the beginning of the world. Her stupidity panicked her."[90] This thought could be a tweet. The tone of the portal colonizes thought, to the extent that it replaces other affective responses and becomes thought entirely. The narrator's acknowledgement of her own ignorance of racial issues, and by implication the way she compartmentalizes these issues through irony *in*

[89] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 36.
[90] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 4.

her own head, points to the limits of using satiric deflection to cope with bad[91] material and civic conditions of day-to-day life.

Despite irony's role in flattening the narrator's affective response, it does not entirely succeed. While the narrator might be able to parody situations to cope, eventually incongruities emerge. Below are three moments of doubt about reflexive irony as a deflective coping method:

> The people who lived in the portal were often compared to those legendary experiment rats who kept hitting a button over and over to get a pellet. But at least the rats were getting a pellet […] When we hit the button, all we were getting was to be more of a rat.[92]

> Why were we all writing like this now? Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote. That these disconnections were what kept the pages turning, that these blank spaces were what moved the plot forward. The plot! That was a laugh.[93]

> Increasingly we were worried about the new sense of humor. Unlike the old sense of humor, which had mostly been about the difference between the way black people and white people drove cars, wasn't the new sense of humor just a little bit random?[94]

The affective allure of irony involuntarily replaces introspection. It is difficult for the narrator to extricate herself from a stance of affected disengagement and nonchalance despite the narrator's doubts about their ability to act as a salve for her concerns about the portal's effects on her brain. As a byproduct of digital media's move from "archiving of individual experience to the

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[91] As I briefly mentioned in my introduction, the word "bad" is chosen over "difficult" or "unpleasant," and especially instead of "unjust" or "violent." This is for a number of reasons, namely that life under capitalism for millions of people does not fall into the category of the first two adjectives, which downplay the conditions of life. The latter two are more accurate, but do not adequately capture the scope or the *feeling* of this kind of life. Indeed, capitalism is violent, but at the level of daily living, the felt experience is less one of immediate violence—which can be seen as more structural—and one of immediate *badness*. That is to say, all these adjectives have a degree of accuracy, but "bad" is an umbrella term for these varying experiences.

[92] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 90.

[93] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 63.

[94] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 64.

generation of collective presence,"[95] the narrator experiences the disquiet of not just being pulled towards connectivity, but *hyper*-connectivity.

The narrator is a rat at the mercy of the portal's cruel optimism: beyond the rush of dopamine or a quiet chuckle, the portal only creates emptiness. Portal users are subjects of experimentation. This experiment is the ability to withstand the portal's totality vis à vis writing and thought. The "blink, synapse, little space-between" is "the only way" to understand the world. The nonsense forms the basis for the narrator's turn from the portal to the problems of the material world. The "little bit of random" no longer satisfies, and where it once disoriented, it now unsettles. She comes to crave the "rhythms of flow and arrest"[96] of the everyday outside the portal, now understood as a source of avoidance that conditions and limits her life in the real world. While "laughter needs momentum[, and] maintaining the laughter, if it ever starts, involves a lot of adrenaline,[97] the narrator seems to intuit that even jokes or humor, like all forms of speech, must have a conclusion.

The narrator moves to a position of wondering what this irony is *doing* in the world—whether it has an end. Here, I mean "end" as stoppage, but also as a purpose. When the narrator worries that their very words have changed, she thinks "this was more frightening, [perhaps] it was the way the portal wrote. That these disconnections were what kept the pages turning, that these blank spaces were what moved the plot forward";[98] this conclusion, that perhaps the portal is both the repository and source of irony ran amok, that the lack of coherence had its own separate meaning from the way users deployed irony, disturbs her. Per Berlant on contemporary life, "the American dream does not allow a lot of time for curiosity about people it

[95] Hansen, "New Media," 180.
[96] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 19.
[97] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 42.
[98] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 62-63.

is not convenient or productive to have curiosity about."[99] It is easier to laugh at something random. One of the consequences of engaging with this "cruel object" is a weary mental exhaustion of that which originally distracted the narrator and felt safe. While Ahmed writes that "it is fear of death—of the death of oneself, one's loved ones, one's community, and one's people—that is generated by such narratives to preserve or maintain that which is,"[100] the new narratives of the portal—or Twitter—seek not to preserve the status quo, but rather stave off confronting the fragility and futility of that status quo.

This form of humor does have affordances: it brings users together in the face of offline disorientation. When the narrator asks her brother about children, he responds "'Oh, it's great,' he told her. 'Everything's on fire, so you no longer have to worry about doing a good job.'"[101] As Lane-McKinley notes, "comedy expresses a friction with the unknowable,"[102] and the narrator's brother satirizes the pointlessness of effective child-rearing because he does not know whether there will even be a world for his child to grow up in. Since "emotions do not positively inhabit any-body as well as any-thing, meaning that 'the subject' is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination,"[103] the narrator's brother moves towards affected nonchalance, which then pushes him to satiric dismissal to accommodate his lack of bearings. This affective stance helps him cope with the knowledge that things are literally and metaphorically on fire,[104] embodying McLuhan's observation that "the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy."[105] Likewise, the narrator's own political consciousness only exists as a meme: she says "[something] in the back of her head

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[99] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 30.
[100] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 133.
[101] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 79.
[102] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 12.
[103] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121.
[104] The brother seems to be referring to the famous "dog on fire" meme, created in 2012 by K.C. Green, and seen in full here: https://gunshowcomic.com/648.
[105] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 52.

hurt. It was her new class consciousness"[106] and "[inside] the portal, a man … was now exhorting people to open their eyes to the power of socialism, which suddenly did seem the only way."[107] Other possibilities are buried under irony and chaos, trapping the narrator in the meme-filled space of the portal. The narrow and immersive-in-order-to-be-funny space shrinks her world.

Yet Lockwood provides a promise for her chaotic heroine, establishing the portal in opposition to the real world and satire in apparent opposition to hope. Lockwood seems to recognize the affordances of satire, as well as the limits of these affordances. At one point, the narrator voluntarily steps out of the portal: "[as] soon as the brother rang the bell in the portal, they all understood that it was time to go home. So she stepped from her own formlessness into the squares of her mother's advent calendar, where there were soft white blankets on the ground,"[108] moving from one representation of snow to another. The portal simulates it and the advent calendar recreates its image, yet the physicality of the calendar makes the latter grounding and more approachably tangible.

Hope comes in the form of touch and gives way to pain and explosive joy. When her sister's baby is born, despite a terminal illness dooming her to pass away within the first year of her life, the narrator experiences her first meaningful connection with someone outside the portal.[109] When holding the infant, "[she] found herself so excited by the baby that she could hardly stand it. She was doing so well. […] It was a marvel how cleanly and completely this lifted her out of the stream of regular life."[110] For the narrator, "real life" is life in the *portal*. It is the possibility of new life that reverses this orientation. Here, "[cleanly] and completely," adverbs of intensity, do the opposite of their work in creating Twitter voice and composing the

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[106] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 8.
[107] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 10.
[108] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 73.
[109] Which is ironic, given that she is married and has no meaningful relationships in the portal anyway.
[110] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 145.

portal, and instead bring the narrator to a position of sincerity. The feeling of the child in her arms acts as a salve, to the extent that, later, when "[she] tried to reenter the portal completely, … inside it everyone was having an enormous argument about whether they had ever thought the n-word, with some people actually professing that their minds blanked it out when they encountered it in a book, and she backed out again without a sound."[111] No longer desirable, the overwhelm of the portal's discussion, which does nothing materially productive vis-à-vis systemic racism, is now repulsive, a stark contrast to the grounding nature of holding her niece.

Instead, Lockwood turns the narrator to the lush details of daily life otherwise overlooked by the narrator's non-life in the portal; this turn elevates the natural world over the sterility of an online platform. The narrator's "sister texted, I think she's hearing rain for the very first time. The first flake of the snow of everything, now wild and warm. Thursday in the rain; October in the rain; twist of a heavy red apple,"[112] conveying wonder, made all the more miraculous considering the baby's terminal illness. "The snow of everything" carries possibility, as does the first *Thursday* that one witnesses rain. The "everything" of the portal is incomparable to the everything of snow. Lockwood thus points to the ontological violence of living divided between screen and reality, a split that causes the narrator to experience reality at the barest minimum of affective participation; the "homogenizing, dematerializing effects of digitization […] [remain] mere process until the 'affective body' makes sense of the flow it has arrested and stabilized."[113] Indeed, as Odell notes, "the politics of technology are stubbornly entangled with the politics of public space and of the environment":[114] detached from the portal, the narrator can conceptualize

[111] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 163.
[112] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 165.
[113] Bill Brown, "Materiality," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago ; The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 58.
[114] Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, 199.

the wonder of a world the baby barely knew. Thus, conversely, detachment from the environment can yield over-dependence on fabricated Internet worlds.

Once the baby dies, the narrator thinks to herself that "[this] did not feel like real life exactly, but nowadays what did. What she was imagining was carrying the baby through the museum, the head in her arms unheavy."[115] Here, what disorients her is not the portal but the real-world, embodied grief of losing an infant. This world does not make the narrator feel better, nor does it always feel real to live through moments of pain or wonder, but it is a place where care and emotional investment can manifest.

IV. Where to?

We can read the above quote in a sadder way. The narrator appears to have lost some ability to feel, a numbness arising from unceasing irony and deflection. Since "[technologies] in the first instance perhaps work as ways for people to enact hopes and expectations more than realities; that is core to their social impact,"[116] the optimism of the portal is indeed cruel, for it not only fails to deliver on its promise—of utopia, connection, and discussion—but it also leads the narrator further away from the unnamed something she sought. She seems unable to verbalize it, a narrative choice dependent on formal structure. The novel mimics Twitter, with section breaks every 100-300 words to disorient the reader; in the McLuhanian sense that "the cooling of all sense tends to result in hallucination."[117] There is little plot, hardly any setting, and barely any characterization. This form mimics the contained nature of thoughts expressed in the portal and, by extension, on Twitter, where things are divorced from context as well as buried under layers of reference, irony, and backstory.

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[115] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 206.
[116] Streeter, "The Internet as a Structure of Feeling: 1992-1996," 86.
[117] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 35.

Lockwood uses this form as a vehicle of the kinds of "takes" or moments one might witness, such as when the narrator hisses, "'Colonialism' […] at a beautiful column, while the tour guide looked at her with concern."[118] Here, the narrator circumvents the exploitation and violence of colonialism, minimizing the gravity of its legacy and desensitizing herself to it. That is, Lockwood points to satire as a useful vehicle for relief in the face of despair or intractable forms of oppression, while noting that this Internet speech—analogous to Twitter voice—eventually runs up against its limits. Satire and irony are affective stances towards *problems*, and offer a brief respite from those problems. Lockwood offers us the idea that the very affective stances that seek to soothe us colonize the mind, warping our ability to even imagine a world where we do not have to retreat to such affects for protection.

In the next chapter, I will explore the movement of irony, self-deprecation from speech to a structure of daily life. The narrators, also unnamed[119] begin to *live out* the affective orientation of Twitter "thought" by making it the governing principle of their actions and leading to an affective and physical withdrawal from every aspect of daily life. I argue that they perform and embody the affective stance of "[a] bad guy, [who] has terrible internet poisoning," who says "*[saw] my daughter's tits on the ultrasound. I don't know how to act. I've been this way so long, I don't know how to* be *anymore.*"[120] Ahmed's words are prescient here: "[what] is ordinary, familiar or usual often resists being perceived by consciousness. It becomes taken for granted, as the background that we do not even notice, and which allows objects to stand out or stand apart."[121] In the following chapter, the two "heroines" perform irony until it is their only

[118] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 17.
[119] Suggesting that the experiences of the narrator, of succumbing to the portal, could, in fact, happen to anyone.
[120] Lockwood, *No One Is Talking about This*, 75-76.
[121] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 179.

remaining affective orientation. Satire and irony *can* open up emotional space to process feeling bad, but they can also shut down affects of mobilization, clarity, and hope.

Chapter 2

"[the] crazy thing is that this is about nothing! It's about the emptiness inside the screen, which is infuriating because only certain people and certain books get to be about fucking nothing."[122]

Introduction

Partway through Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts*, the narrator makes her goal very explicit: she wants "to express an alluringly evasive personality, and [she] knew [she] would have to do it through voice rather than content."[123] The reader watches her construct many personas through the voice of a "very online" person. Self-conscious and autofictional, the novel knows it is a novel, one intended as satire. It possesses the same self-awareness of a tweet, and is written in the dry, sardonic voice of the age. Yet as I illustrate, this voice undercuts itself through irony's inevitable dead end. While Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is not written in an identical voice, as the setting predates Twitter, it nevertheless relies on satire and resignation to the same conditions that Oyler attempts to confront through her narrator's painful self-deprecating awareness.

In this chapter, I draw on the work of the late Mark Fisher, a public philosopher, and Ann Cvetkovich, an affect theorist and feminist scholar, to sketch out the conditions that serve as the backdrop for the two worlds of the narrators. The narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* retreats from society from 2000-2001, and the narrator of *Fake Accounts* lives in post-Trumpian 2017. The preoccupations of Oyler's narrator—the frenzy of daily living, the meaninglessness of endless consumption and white collar work—that are the same as those of Moshfegh's narrator. Self-deprecating irony did not originate with the Internet, but its mass deployment on Twitter, in

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[122] "Chantel Nouseforaname's Review of Fake Accounts," accessed April 11, 2023, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3727535219.
[123] Lauren Oyler, *Fake Accounts* (New York: Catapult, 2021), 140.

particular, has normalized it and amplified its usage as affective response in the face of capitalist disorientation and malaise. Fisher notes that "[affective] disorders are forms of captured discontent; this disaffection can and must be channeled outwards, directed toward its real cause, Capital."[124] As such, Lauren Berlant explains that "[*alienation*] is a technical term for not being in control of the conditions of one's value or ownership of the products of one's labor. It is also an affective state that can be lived in many ways, from the negative sense of separateness from things to a range of feelings from rage to depression."[125] This depression, though not defined as such in either novel, is both psychic and political, stemming from the sense that "customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better."[126] I investigate how each novel belies real-world attachments and affective orientations. I move from an examination of the structures underlying Twitter voice—its limitations and affordances—to an analysis of how literary imagination has adopted that voice and I find that it restrains, rather than liberates, the structure and narrative concerns of a novel.

Most, if not all, of the moments encapsulated in the quotes I draw from each novel are profoundly *ordinary*. Individually, they do not seem to speak to fragmentation, confusion, or disenchantment with the necessities of material and metaphysical functioning under a capitalist system. My engagement with these ordinary moments speaks to Kathleen Stewart's work on ordinary affects, or the "shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life."[127] These affects arise from or are mediators of moments that constellate life, and "are the surging capacities to affect and to

[124] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 80.
[125] Berlant, *On the inconvenience of other people,* 26.
[126] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 1.
[127] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1.

be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies […] They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating."[128] In this context, I situate the depressive withdrawal of Moshfegh's narrator and the dulled emotions of Oyler's narrator within a framework that interprets "depression as ordinary" to "describe the present through attention to the felt experience of everyday life, including moments that might seem utterly banal."[129] These moments structure the daily life of each narrator through their attempts to evade affective attachment through irony. Oyler asks: what matters anyway? She and her narrator, a figure nearly indistinguishable from her own Twitter persona, suggest the answer is nothing.

I read avoidance through irony as affective management of the gap between the lives the narrators have and the ones they might want to have, but which nevertheless remain out of reach. These works of art "[produce] and [foreground] a failure of emotional release […] and [do] so as a kind of politics."[130] That is, these novels grapple with "the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on."[131] Fisher writes that "[such] anxieties [about the end] tend to result in a bi-polar oscillation: the 'weak messianic' hope that there must be something new on the way lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen."[132] I read Moshfegh's novel as the former part of this oscillation, and Oyler's as the latter: each narrator manifests her preoccupation with the failures of capitalism to yield a "good" life through a retreat intended that artificializes possibilities and relies upon a nihilistic outlook.

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[128] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1-2.
[129] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 12.
[130] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 9.
[131] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 8.
[132] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 3.

This chapter places the two narrators to examine literary satire of capitalism, labor, and chronic Millennial and Gen Z malaise. The world of *right now* is one in which "[the] promise of the good life no longer masks the living precarity of this historical present."[133] I argue that satire eventually gives way to depression, as, unlike an individual tweet, irony cannot be sustained through the affective actions of daily living. What was before a detached affect confined to online speech is now ostentatious performed (and performative) action. I draw on affect theorists who deal with depression and affects of the ordinary, both of which are reactions to failed promises of futurity, to discuss the transformation of satire from speech to lived detachment. This chapter argues that the very length and narrative qualities of a novel are part of this affective collapse, demonstrating that the movement of satirical speech to satirical *action* actually represents the limits of irony's affordances as a coping mechanism for the crisis ordinary.

I. "I have discovered that I actually have a passion for nothing. My dream job is no job and a mansion by the sea with lots of windows. Manifesting xoxo ✨"[134]

I first trace the conditions under which Moshfegh's and Oyler's narrators live. Each woman thinks that things are very bad. For Moshfegh's heroine, the sense of overwhelm stems from the "too much" nature of day-to-day life, and media's incessant background noise: "[…] TV aroused too much in me, and I'd get compulsive about the remote, clicking around, scoffing at everything and agitating myself. I couldn't handle it."[135] We can read her dislike of TV as analogous to contemporary dislike of social media, which personalize the addictive flashing images of Twitter voice according to an algorithm. Yet it is not just the medium that introduces precarity, but what it portrays: "floods in India, an earthquake in Guatemala, another blizzard

[133] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 196.
[134] This tweet is taken from Dataset A, and received 628,000 likes.
[135] Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (Penguin Books, 2019), 3.

approaching the Northeastern United states, fires burning down million dollar homes in Southern California, 'but sunny skies in our nation's capital today as Yasser Arafat visits the White House for talks with President Clinton aimed at reviving the stalled peace process in the Middle East.'"[136] The novel could have easily been set today, not 2000.

Oyler's narrator shows us that not much has changed. The novel opens with the following sentence: "Consensus was the world was ending, or would begin to end soon, if not by exponential environmental catastrophe then by some combination of nuclear war, the American two-party system, patriarchy, white supremacy, gentrification, globalization, data breaches, and social media."[137] The list, designed not to be exhaustive but to illustrate the emotional overwhelm of 2020s life, is almost laughable in its scope. If everything is the problem, then nothing is the problem, and there is thus nothing we can do. The problem then becomes depressingly funny, as the narrator notes that "[we] were transitioning from an only retrospectively easy past to an inarguably more difficult future; we were, it could no longer be denied, unstoppably bad."[138] She experiences the same resignation of one Twitter user who, in a moment of ironic despair, wrote, "constitution says u can't kill babies unless it's with a gun."[139] Despite the posturing, both narrators intuit that ecologically, politically, and culturally, things seem to be stagnant at best and decaying at worst.

The problem, however, is that not only are these systemic problems spiraling out of control, but also one's daily life acts as little reprieve. Oyler's narrator mocks neoliberal approaches to the problem while also reproducing them. Timothy Bewes, quoting Franco Moretti, writes that "when 'characters and narrator lose their distinctiveness' […] they 'are

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[136] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 179.
[137] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 5.
[138] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 5.
[139] All quoted tweets come from Dataset A and are anonymized for privacy.

replaced (almost) everywhere by the abstract voice of current ideology.'"[140] As such, she notes that "the political catastrophe seemed so dire that one's music and movie preferences were no longer considered the ultimate markers of one's moral fitness to fight *fascism*, which became, incredibly, a buzzword; […] we could always *do more* or *do better*, […] our embarrassment of privileges could be set aside to focus on the task at hand, though what that task was I wasn't really sure."[141] She views art preferences as the first frontier of political engagement, and in the absence of that approach's efficacy, is at a loss for how to conceptualize the rising tide of American fascism—except for a retreat to the ironic. Chris Maisano writes that this worldview has permeated "life and the world by creating individualized solutions to confront and transcend a traumatic past disconnected from any wider social context. This affective orientation is a generalized condition of neoliberal subjectivity across classes."[142] Avoidance occurs through the emphasis on the individual.

Critique focuses on the experience of the consequently atomized self. Moshfegh's narrator assesses the art world as a market "whose values hinged not to the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual— a value impossible to measure, anyway—but to what a bunch of rich assholes thought would elevate their portfolios."[143] Her discomfort with this structural issue is to "[wipe] that garbage from [her] mind"[144] in resignation. Moshfegh's heroine explains that "[she] had no big plan to become a curator, no great scheme to work [her] way up a ladder. [She] was just trying to pass the time. [She] thought that if [she] did normal things— hold down a job, for example— [she] could starve off the part of [her] that hated everything."[145] Life under

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[140] Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, 36.
[141] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 59.
[142] Chris Maisano, "Chicken Soup for the Neoliberal Soul," accessed February 6, 2023, https://jacobin.com/2014/01/chicken-soup-for-the-neoliberal-soul/.
[143] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 183.
[144] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 183.
[145] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 35.

capitalism can only be endured through desensitization, resulting from "the assault on working-class organizations and living standards [that] has led many young adults to adopt a profoundly individualistic and therapeutic view of the world and their personal development."[146] Our heroines thus avoid not just thinking about the collapse of democracy, but also the daily conditions of their lives.

Office work in particular elicits this reaction. Oyler's narrator writes that it "requires emptying your mind so that all the dumb shit people tell you to do doesn't meet any obstacle on its way to smooth execution," and that everything "you said or did was meaningless and impermanent as well as potentially hugely significant; the effect was that you were both neurotically tetchy and quietly demoralized all the time, constantly justifying your acquiescence to stupidity as relatively minor and in service of a greater aim."[147] In this light, strategies of avoidance appear as bleak acceptance. David Graeber calls this a "bullshit job," a position of employment that is meaningless to both the individual performing the labor and the corporation or system that necessitates that extraction.[148] Moshfegh's job is equally rote and lacks meaning: the narrator answers emails, accepts packages, and cleans up the back office.

The turn to irony and detachment, an affect transported from the Internet with which Oyler's narrator deals daily, attempts to elide this misery. As she puts it,

> We don't want to die, but we also don't want to do anything challenging, such as what living requires, so the volubility with which certain doom was discussed made a tedious kind of sense: the end of the world would let us have our cake and eat it too; we would have no choice but to die, our potential conveniently unrealizable due to our collapse. Until such time, the idea that everything was totally pointless now was seductive, particularly as a mantra you could take advantage of when it suited you and abandon when life actually started to feel alarming.[149]

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[146] Maisano, "Chicken Soup for the Neoliberal Soul."
[147] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 66.
[148] David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 9-10.
[149] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 6.

Oyler's narrator slips into the voice of the "traumic," which "faces its world with an almost unbearable realism[, which] is also surrealism in the place of injury's affective spread. The traumic draws on what's dark about the situation comedy and ludicrous in the situation tragedy."[150] Affected emotionlessness elides the need for "[doing] anything challenging." It is a way of treading water. To leave "potential conveniently unrealized" implies stasis and rejection of affective engagement with the self. Yet the narrators underestimate the difficulty of returning from a place of satirical, self-deprecating detachment. What is at first funny, amusing, "not that deep," a bit, a way of relating to and understanding the world, becomes a drug in itself. We can read the Internet and actual drugs as having the same effect.

II. "Am I high right now what is happening"[151]: Internet humor as numbing agent

The experience of the (narcissistic) self is central to both narrators' choice to *avoid* and thus to numb: their world is filtered through their emotions, reactions, and perceptions. Hence their numbness and experiences seem total. The conditions outlined in the previous section belie the beginning of the end for this detached, ironic stance: it is a rejection of community and possible sources of meaning. Moshfegh's narrator declares "[rejection], I have found, can be the only antidote to delusion."[152] The narrator suggests that accessing one's emotions fully, and feeling them fully, is in fact the delusion. She views withdrawal through drug-fueled sleep as an appropriate reaction to an incomprehensible world. Much like Bartleby, she would "prefer not to." The drug-induced withdrawal of Moshfegh's narrator is analogous to Oyler's narrator's Internet life and the eventual filtering of her every interaction through its possible perception by those well-versed in the Internet's characteristic ironic detachment.

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[150] Berlant, "The Traumic."
[151] This tweet is taken from Dataset A, and received 708,000 likes.
[152] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 153.

Oyler's narrator wears her irony like armor and wields it like a weapon. Akin to its Twitter voice origins, it is entirely focused on her experience. She tells us that "[this] writing is as much an effort to better understand myself, the person I can't help but feel is the most important figure in this narrative […] it is an effort to enchant an audience, promote certain principles I feel are lacking in contemporary literature, interpret events both world-historical and interpersonal,"[153] even though said world-historical events are interpreted through their impact on her. She deflects accusations of narcissism by uttering statements such as:

> although I too was a white woman living in Brooklyn, I of course did not identify as such, since the description usually signified someone selfish, lazy, and in possession of superficial understandings of complex topics such as racism and literature. Besides working in the media (also a bad thing), the weekly seventy-five-minute session of possibly culturally appropriative contortion was the most white woman in Brooklyn thing I did.[154]

In prefacing her words on any topic by acknowledging the unimportance of another white woman speaking on anything, she can evade accusations of the very narcissism that she goes on to exude. Her self-deprecating irony acts as insurance against external critique, making her appear more "relatable" and self-aware. Prefacing her words with "I of course" at once allies herself with the critical "other," even though the actual substance of her comments demonstrates her indistinguishability from that "other." Slavoj Žižek and Fisher note that: "[so] long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange."[155] Transitively, the narrator's *awareness* that being a white woman in Brooklyn doing yoga with other white women signals superficiality supersedes doing anything about it. Irony tries to make her palatable to everyone, flattening herself and eliminating the possibility for other

[153] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 21.
[154] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 59.
[155] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 13.

affective responses. She gives no indication that she even cares about the political stances she supposedly supports, and there is no reason to: it is all a bit, anyway.

Most striking is that the narrator's attempt to be ironic is no longer particularly funny. In eliminating pathos or personal investment, she affects nonchalance that acts the same way as Moshfegh's narrator's drug cocktail does on the body. The effect is one of a retreated self that cannot interact with the world meaningfully. Oyler's narrator explains that:

> While *grief* meant to them that I could only have one justification for my actions, that justification could be applied to anything, so long as it emphasized my prerogative to *feel my feelings*. It was not that I was running away from my sadness, or from myself; it was that I was running away from all the pressure my friends were putting on me to deal with that sadness in a way that was recognizable to them! Aha.[156]

This quote refers to the death of the narrator's boyfriend. The narrator is unbothered by his death. More important to her is the impulse to recycle performed ironic sadness into a façade of numbed pain. This void, however, is not socially acceptable: in feigning sadness to her friends, she converts that emotion into an ironic gotcha. Displaying a genuine emotion becomes distasteful to her, something that other people do and for which she looks down on them.

While Oyler's narrator hides herself beneath layers and layers of postured distance, Moshfegh abuses drugs to create distance between herself and her emotions. The effects of Internet speech, and its governing "sense of humor," has similar effects to use of substances; this comparison implies that the former is also addictive, separating the self from finding meaning. Moshfegh's narrator enacts a process of refusal that "requires a degree of latitude—a margin—enjoyed at the level of the individual (being able to personally afford the consequences),"[157] indicating that, while a collective may engage in ironic self-detachment to escape *something*, this escape morphs into an atomizing, alienating, and individual response that

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[156] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 105.
[157] Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, 82.

fails to be adequate in its notion of a cure. Like going on Twitter, drug use is ritualized. Moshfegh's narrator writes that

> I'd get two large coffees with cream and six sugars each, chug the first one in the elevator on the way back up to my apartment, then sip the second one slowly while I watched movies and ate animal crackers and took trazodone and Ambien and Nembutal until I feel asleep again. I lost track of time in this way. Days passed. Weeks. A few months went by.[158]

Twitter voice's "lighthearted" take on *everything* has a similar effect of accelerating time without noticing that it is passing. The coffee acts as a gateway to ritualized drug consumption; we get the sense that anything else the narrator consumes is immaterial. The result is noticeable to her therapist, who remarks: "'Your affect is very flat today.'"[159] This flatness leads to an alienation, or what Ahmed conceives as being "out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good."[160] Just as Oyler's narrator's affected disaffection places her at a remove from experiencing the support of people who care about her, Moshfegh's narrator distances herself from the problems she faces—as well as the good—in her preference for internal emotional absence. Much in the way that antibiotics kill both good and bad bacteria, in rejecting sadness and discomfort these women also reject contentment, joy, or fulfillment.

Once begun, it is difficult to stop. In worlds where the self is always visible on the Internet and other media, feeling bad is not sufficient: it is necessary to show others how bad one feels, how detached one is, and *how superior one is to a range of emotions.* In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation,* the narrator explains that "[there] was no sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I'd wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling

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[158] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 1.
[159] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 80.
[160] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392781, 41.

nothing. I'd been stupid to believe that employment would add value to my life."[161] She readily admits, then, that her drug addiction is crafted to avoid and thus cope with a job she hates. While Oyler's narrator does not hate her job nearly as much, her sarcastic approach to the "work" she does has the same effect of avoidance. In their rejections of real life, then, each woman has "no nightmares, no passions, no desires, no great pains."[162] The performance of this affected numbness begins as a coping mechanism and defense, but becomes a projection of one's perceived superiority. Moshfegh's narrator looks down upon her friend for her emotional range:

> Watching her take what was deep and real and painful and ruin it by expressing it with such trite precision gave me reason to think Reva was an idiot, and therefore I could discount her pain, and with it, mine. Reva was like the pills I took. They turned everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff I could bat away. And that was exactly what I wanted—my emotions passing like headlights that shine softly through a window…[163]

She concludes that it is those who do not retreat as ignorant, and perhaps weak. She thus lands in the same place as Oyler's narrator. The latter's emotional retreat, a stance of reduction generated from making everything ironic, ensures that nothing will be real or meaningful.

III. "ppl posting on instagram like '2020 was fucking awful but i made it through' and it's like 8 pictures of them on vacation"[164]

Through numbing of the self, action becomes performance. The sublimation of genuine emotion to constant irony yields to a gradual absence of any emotion at all. Twitter voice conditions disaffected movement through the world. We might say that the affected pointlessness of semi-humorous despair and indifference is the point, originally produced amid a lack of seemingly better options for coping. In this section, I look at a description of art in Moshfegh's novel, and a date in Oyler's to examine the extent to which irony governs emotions as they

[161] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 49.
[162] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 84.
[163] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 166.
[164] This tweet is taken from Dataset A, and received 577,000 likes.

manifest in cultural production and in relationships, both of which are transformed into sites deliberately void of meaning.

In Moshfegh's novel, the narrator previously worked at an art gallery, a job which she secured through generational wealth and its accompanying networks; in her time at the gallery, she notices that the art in question has begun to reflect the absurdity of disjointed and fragmented twenty-first century life. She describes one work as such:

> On a low pedestal in the corner, a small sculpture by the Brahams Brothers— a pair of toy monkeys made using human pubic hair. Each monkey had a little erection poking out of its fur. The penises were made of white titanium and had cameras in them positioned to take crotch shots of the viewer. The images were downloaded to a Web site. A specific password to login to see the crotch shots cost a hundred dollars. The monkeys themselves cost a quarter million for the pair.[165]

In keeping with the evolution of art from reproduction of the real to abstraction, the art that Moshfegh's narrator encounters also has the additional dimension of feigned depth. The concept of the sculpture is "interesting" in that its "actual destination is uncertain,"[166] instead "[throwing] the spotlight entirely on its own legitimation."[167] Moshfegh's hyper-real description of the art, betrays a subtle mocking tone. The very absurdity and value of the materials, as well as their purpose, hint at the resultant affects of being ironic: the art, and by extension the artists, takes itself incredibly seriously. It transports something private into the public realm, making both realms grotesque while also putting the viewer in a compromising position. Public and private become one and the same, "giving the ordinary the fantasy quality of a private life writ large on the world."[168] That it costs $100 to view images of one's crotch, renders the viewer part of the art, while leaving them wondering *what* idea the artist attempts to render. The monkeys have a shock value that elevates them to "fine art."

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[165] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 39.
[166] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 152.
[167] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 169.
[168] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 104-105.

Notably, the Internet is present and key to the art's "function," suggesting that art cannot be made without gesturing to it; like Twitter voice, the art becomes self-referential in its quest to affect some level of depth. The absurd price for the pair confers financial and cultural value. It cannot now be dismissed as pedestrian so easily, even to those offended by it: $250,000 suggests that even if the viewer does not understand what kind of commentary the art makes, it must be a work of art. Missing the point and asserting superiority over the viewer—that is the point. The composite details of the piece render it inaccessible and ironic on purpose. It is designed rather to gesture at a deeper level of meaning without truly being interested in anything beyond mere commentary.

I submit, then, that irony acts as one of the key mediating affects of the twenty-first century. If art is supposed to comment on the human condition in some way, or to provide insight, or to tell us about the state of what a culture values in a particular moment, then the pair of monkeys indicate the death of sincerity and the rise of disaffected, detached, emotionless art. It is this "radical detachment that makes the interesting so compatible with irony […] that makes it complicit in advancing the end of art."[169] I link the bit-ification of art to irony in order to indicate how satirical self-deprecation has transcended necessary self-soothing into an affective stance, governing forms of self-expression that one would otherwise expect to gesture to artistic fulfillment.[170] As genuine interaction is subsumed by humorous nihilism, interactions with art lack depth and meaning beyond holding a mirror up to the nonsense of everyday life.

Detachment purely for its own sake, as a desired end, hampers relationships, even if it initially arose to cope with uncertainty. The narrator in *Fake Accounts* meets a man on a dating app; he believes in practicing non-attachment as a way of life in order to better confront the fact

[169] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 127.
[170] It is this "end of art," and the resultant flattening of Twitter speech into the novel that I discuss in this project's conclusion.

that "there was no pretending things would last forever, no asserting certainties over another person's life."[171] In this part of the novel, the narrator has embarked on a quest to date 12 different men while embodying a persona that exemplifies each of the 12 signs of the zodiac. This middle part of the novel, called "Nothing Happens," gestures to the emptiness of relationships and the ways of relating to others; it satirizes the endless cycle of dates people on apps will go on to "find love" or "find a connection," but the joke abruptly ends because this satire has no target. The man tells her that "[romantic] relationships are not better than platonic or familial ones. The ingrained belief that romantic love should be life's organizing principle is inextricably linked to patriarchy and the oppression of minorities, the poor, and immigrants, among other populations."[172] This man crafts his speech such that it sounds aligned with tenets of social justice. But upon closer inspection, his speech devolves into nonsense, and it is this nonsense that he intends as ironic "insightful" commentary. By what logic is romantic love bad for the poor or immigrants? In speaking in "takes," the narrator's date reduces himself to a vessel of opinions that we cannot be convinced he actually believes in, thus impeding any kind of meaning-making from arising from the date. He fundamentally undermines the point of going on a date.

Since *everything* is ironic, Oyler's characters lose their ability to identify what it is that constitutes their very selves. Like the monkeys in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, irony shrouds underlying meaning to the extent that meaning disappears. The date explains his philosophy of non-attachment further:

> By defining our lives by what we don't believe in, we can get closer to freedom from pain and oppression; ideally, we envision our world as a constantly (and beautifully) turning kaleidoscope of not-friendships, not-affairs, and not-marriages. There are no commitments, and no guarantee that a sexual and/or romantic relationship will be more

[171] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 149.
[172] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 146.

> important than a friendship, because all relationships are free to grow or shrink or change as suits both parties, provided both engage in enthusiastic consent.[173]

Rather than identifying what it is he wants, he inverts the process of meaning-making to align himself with things he "doesn't believe in." The concept of "not-friendship," among others, critiques such relationships or institutions, but offers no further fulfillment beyond critique. Oyler's characters are thus faced with the conundrum of how to create meaning when on the one hand "friendship" equates to oppression, and on the other "not-friendship" means nothing beyond being defined in opposition to and as satire of something that is "problematic" yet which still offers a path to genuine human connection with others.

The characters remain stuck in an ontological framework that assumes "that 'something is missing.'"[174] Most notably, the date emphasizes that there are "no commitments," and thus no obligation to another person at all. Indeed, in order to (not) make a commitment to her date to indicate her (non-committed) interest, Oyler's narrator realizes that "[if she] wanted to see him again […] [she] had to confirm a verbal nonbinding noncontract to agree to agree to nothing."[175] Rejecting emotional depth and relationships to others that necessitate vulnerability and the possibility for loss, in order to perform irony for others, demonstrates the extent to which Internet posturing for likes becomes repackaged and reenacted in the "real world." As the narrator thinks later in the novel, "'I hate being dependent on people. It's so stressful. It also feels a little selfish?'"[176] She thus arrives at a position crafted for its shock value and superficial attention from others, precluding intimacy.

Thus, Oyler depicts not only the date, but also her narrator, as individuals who disdain relationships and a human need for their nurturing qualities, and as those who take their "bit"

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[173] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 147.
[174] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 22.
[175] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 153.
[176] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 241.

from joke to lived performance. The novel is voiced as a retelling to an audience of past boyfriends, and the narrator is hyper-aware of this audience's perception of her. As a woman who is terminally online, she thus constructs the narrative to mimic the Internet's voice and format. The novel's structure thus presents a quandary for her, but belies the meaninglessness of her ultimate performance—the novel itself. The narrator comments on the problem of the former, informing the reader that

> Another justification for this structure is that it mimics the nature of modern life, which is 'fragmented.' But fragmentation is one of the worst aspects of modern life. It's extremely stressful. 'Fragmented' is a euphemism for 'interrupted.' *Why would I want to make my book like Twitter? If I wanted a book that resembled Twitter, I wouldn't write a book; I would just spend even more time on Twitter. You'd be surprised how much time you can spend on Twitter and still have some left over to write a book.* Our experience of time is fragmented, but unfortunately time itself is not. […] Knowing this I can't help but feel the books of collected tweets you occasionally see displayed on tables at Urban Outfitters would be better as novels or memoirs that contain no tweets.[177] (emphasis mine)

The narrator affects a cheeky breeziness about the chaotic nature of modern life, and presents the reader with the very conundrum that novels about Twitter or the Internet present: why would anyone want to read something that approximates the affects and emotions of being online, when one can go online and feel the real thing? Bewes argues that this problem "comes about […] with the collapse of the categories of knowledge that literary forms are able to bring forth […] in the realm of thought. The collapse is manifest not as a subjective incredulity on the part of the work's authors, narrators, or characters but as a crisis of legibility of the work itself."[178] In questioning the difference between the novel and Twitter, the narrator attempts to subvert the form she has chosen, while also remaining confused at their seeming indistinguishability. And in doing so, she gestures towards the possible existence of deeper meaning that underpins why she chose this form, a meaning that never arrives.

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[177] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 191.
[178] Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, 27.

The narrator, and thus Oyler, does not create an ending to the joke of writing a "fragmented" style in the form of a novel. The gimmick, to borrow from Sianne Ngai, offers us no broader commentary because the commentary that the novel's existence provides acts as an analytical brick wall. If Oyler intends for us to interpret that a novel written like Twitter is not particularly insightful or pleasant to read, and that this unpleasant experience is *the point*, what have we learned that we have not literally been told? The recursion of Oyler's narrative choices point towards ironic commentary as the point in and of itself: satirical commentary existing merely to be heard. Indeed, the narrator admits to such, explaining that "[at] some point you have to admit that doing things ironically can have very straightforward consequences."[179] She is right: it leads to the deadening of the self, of performance gone on too long on the basis of reasons that have since become murky. Irony begins to impede the emotional range that characterizes living.

IV. "would've started saving money in kindergarten if i knew life was gon be like this"[180]

Moshfegh and Oyler's narrators, through rejection of the world and performed ironic stances on the conditions that make them feel bad, arrive at an impasse. Cvetkovich describes this as what happens when "things will not move forward due to circumstance—not that they can't, but that the world is not designed to make it happen or there has been a failure of imagination."[181] For the narrators' chosen methods of performing their irony are indeed failures: we can read retreat to an affective stance of "I can laugh at everything, because nothing really matters" as acquiescence to capitalist conditions, the flattening of emotion, and perhaps the death of the self.

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[179] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 184.
[180] This tweet is taken from Dataset A, and received 588,000 likes.
[181] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 20-21.

The foil to both these narrators is Reva, the "best friend" in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; Reva appears "less intelligent"[182] because she buys into capitalist excess to make herself feel good without thinking about its ontological implications. Oyler's narrator, for example, tells us of her adventure "[buying] ricotta, blackberries, eight-dollar grapefruit juice, maple syrup at a price I will not disclose, and two lemons, thinking that […] I could start drinking hot water with lemon in the mornings, a *wellness* tactic dumb celebrities recommended that also made some kind of sense."[183] The act of consumption is not enough to dull the senses; the speaker must narrativize every consumptive choice into a statement about one's detachment. The narrator's emulation of an influencer, moreover, "works as a sort of prophylactic against or antidote to identification: it makes manifest an incongruity or disjunction, enables one to forcefully assert one's difference from the other whom one emulates."[184] Unlike the embarrassing transparency of an influencer's need and goal to make money, the narrator's stance acquires meaning through its inscrutable intentions; her affective stance is one that moves "from the mimetic of an ideal to full-blown antagonism toward the subject embodying that ideal."[185] By contrast, Reva does not see the conditions of life as something to avoid through emotional repression, even if her acceptance of capitalism (and her emotions) depends on consumptive practices that are themselves a form of avoidance. Reva feels the full extent of negative emotions, refusing to conceal them in a stance of detached affect: "'these assholes think they can go around treating everyone below them like shit. And I'm supposed to giggle and look cute and send their faxes? Fuck them. Let them go bald and burn in hell.'"[186] Despite the limitations of consumption, she nevertheless embraces these "happy objects" produced by capitalism, which

[182] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 9.
[183] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 55.
[184] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 143.
[185] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 141.
[186] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 7-8.

Sara Ahmed explains are "[the] obstacle[s] to desire [that] hence [perform] a psychic function in preserving the fantasy that getting what you want would make you happy."[187] Consumption is the maintenance of this fantasy.

A dose of irony *does* serve a limited, cathartic purpose. As Moshfegh's narrator shows, some aspect of drug-induced sleep does reconfigure her outlook on her life and her ability to confront its uncomfortable facts, suggesting the limited affordances of satire in our world. After waking up:

> I sat for hours on a bench in Carl Schurz Park […] someone left a collection of books out on the curb one day on East Seventy-seventh street, and I brought them home and read them all cover to cover. […] I passed the days like this for 4 or 5 weeks. I did not buy a cell phone. I got rid of the old mattress. Every night at 9:00 I lay down on the smooth hardwood floor with a stretch and a yawn, and I had no trouble sleeping. I had no dreams. I was like a newborn animal. I rose with the sun.[188]

The clutter and fragmentation, to borrow from Oyler's narrator, disappears from her mind; instead, she is able reevaluate who she is. Sleep as performance art brings her closer to understanding what she wishes from her life. Moshfegh's narrator illustrates the limit of ironic performance and constructed distance from others. Thus, I ask: is there any other way? Is there any other way to confront the present moment, beyond hyper-aware, disparaging, meta-irony?

In the next chapter, I submit that a turn to *sincerity* has affordances that can lead to a more expansive affective stance towards life under late capitalism. From this perspective, we can look back and read the constant parodied self as "giving in" to the conditions that make the narrators miserable. The possible alternative I will discuss thus assumes that *enjoying oneself* and continuing to feel a full range of emotions are their own coping mechanisms.[189] Indeed,

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[187] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 32.
[188] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 278.
[189] I am hesitant to label them as modes of resistance, simply because they do not go quite that far. Furthermore, "modes of resistance" have to, perhaps, extend beyond our emotional reactions to and negotiations of capitalism and rather towards actual material disruption of the status quo.

Moshfegh's narrator seems to deduce something similar: "[the] notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn't exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air on my body with stillness, trying to capture something—a thought I guess—as though such a thing were possible."[190] The disaffected narrator in *Fake Accounts* creates no such future, and anticipates nothing that might ever be pleasant.

By contrast, Moshfegh's narrator grasps *towards* a future, as difficult to comprehend as it may be. It involves a turning to inconvenience, which Berlant explains is rooted in attachment that "draws you out into the world; inconvenience is the adjustment from taking things in. […] there is an inconvenience drive—a drive to keep taking things in and living with objects. The inconvenience drive generates a pressure that is hard to manage, let alone bear."[191] All jokes, conceits, and ironic affects must end. To carry on the act for too long is to succumb to a constructed, avoidant affect that does not necessarily offer paths forward—whether to liberation or mere momentary enjoyment of the ordinary. Cvetkovich postulates that if "depression is conceived of as blockage or impasse or being stuck, then its cure might lie in forms of flexibility or creativity more so than in pills or a different genetic structure."[192] In the following pages, I explore how irony's opposite is crucial to imagining better and more interesting worlds. Because the worlds of Oyler and Moshfegh are not very interesting.

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[190] Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 286.
[191] Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Duke University Press, 2022), 6.
[192] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 21.

Chapter 3

"looking at the internet, I don't see many ideas worth dying for"[193]

"Action is pointless; only senseless hope makes sense"[194]

Introduction

It is unsurprising that Sally Rooney takes a markedly different stance than Ottessa Moshfegh or Lauren Oyler. The former is an Irish Marxist who shies away from the trappings of fame. The latter are American women who are equally famous for their fiction as for their critical essays. This chapter interrogates the previous one on the subject of voice, questioning the extent of the affordances that self-deprecating irony offers us. I turn to the authenticity, or sincerity, needed to confront and move beyond coping with living conditions under capitalism. Sincerity, as affective orientation, necessitates seeing the world in a more holistic way, both resisting reduction and resisting atomization. It can perhaps fill part of the space that ironic detachment hollows out. Rooney speaks in a flat affect, portraying the world as it is. Her characters do things and how they feel is with little pretense. This flatness acts as its own quiet confrontation of the world, rather than avoiding it through layers of irony that serve to emotionally separate the character from the world she inhabits. As such, Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* navigates the characters' adjustments to the crisis ordinary through an embrace of creative writing.

I interpret the embrace of production as a confrontation with the ouroboros of cruel optimism, especially at a time when utility of writing has little financial return. That is, Rooney's characters, whom we can read as multiple variations of herself, engage in something otherwise considered fruitless as an act of hope. *Conversations with Friends* grapples with the issue of the

[193] Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 82.
[194] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, 3.

individual against a collective problem, wrestling with the troublesome notion to which irony has conceded the future, but which she and her characters cannot accept: that "moving to an even larger master narrative of depression as socially produced often provides little specific illumination and even less comfort because it's an analysis that frequently admits of no solution."[195] Caring about how to navigate such a world, with an eye to carving out pockets in which life can be not only endured, but enjoyed, is the narrator's, and perhaps Rooney's, central concern.

In keeping with Ann Cvetkovich's emphasis on craft, and its role in shaping the ordinary to hold pockets of meaning, I examine the practices and affective orientations that Rooney's protagonist, Frances, adopts to cope. I look to conceptions of queer and feminist futurity, filtered through Rooney's own Marxist lens, as not only are Frances' and her friend Bobbi's own ontologies decidedly feminist and queer, but also because the affordances of such theories is their gesture towards reframing our affective investments away from the normative. That is, we can conceive of ironic detachment as the contemporary normative stance, and affects of authenticity or sincerity as running counter to this ontology.

This chapter attempts to salvage the wreckage of the previous chapter; that is, if novel-length satires of the Internet merely reenact detached unhappiness without offering the original salve of Twitter voice, how else might one portray such conditions while also critiquing them? Rooney instead writes characters who feel a range of emotions and possess convictions that bypass resignation, even though her characters experience "a general state of obstructed agency."[196] This would seem to be a requirement of the novel; I argue that this return to emotive interiority is in fact significant because the broader cultural moment is decidedly the opposite in

[195] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 15.
[196] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3.

its celebration of nihilism. This chapter grapples with the limits of satire and discusses Rooney's first novel to posit that perhaps sincerity, like that which Lockwood's unnamed character embraces outside the portal, might also be another way to combat the crisis ordinary.

I. Malaise and work

I return to *Fake Accounts* to read an instance where the narrator might have been able to lead a different life. It is a moment in which she makes a deliberate choice to embrace the brick wall of endless irony and self-parody. The narrator's Berlin roommate explains, "'I want to get back to my center, to really understand myself and my priorities.' […] I nodded, conveying, I hope, that I pitied her for having these sorts of futile fantasies."[197] I draw attention to this moment to highlight that the narrator has ample agency—she simply chooses an inner life devoid of investment in *living*. In doing so, she rejects the possibility of a future. The transition from ironic hyper-awareness to performed miserable abnegation forecloses a future in which things might matter at all.

Rooney's characters experience the same kind of diversion from a life they felt they might have been promised. They also confront emotional dead ends, dissatisfaction with labor, and unfulfilling daily lives. Yet the affects of refusal differ. Frances explains: "I wasn't used to being attacked like this and it was frightening. I thought of myself as an independent person, so independent that the opinions of others were irrelevant to me. […] I isolated myself from criticism so I could behave badly without losing my sense of righteousness."[198] Frances does not shy away from analysis of her emotions, whereas Oyler's narrator, by contrast, barely interfaces with her interior life at all. The difference, then, lies in the access to emotion that each woman

[197] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 240.
[198] Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (Hogarth, 2018), 208.

permits herself. It may be uncomfortable to acknowledge the root case of pushing others away, but Frances nevertheless does so and entertains the possibility that she is imperfect. This is an exercise that neither Oyler's nor Moshfegh's narrators can engage in, since their hyper-aware ironic stances reject emotional complexity or sentiment—much to the detriment of their emotional range, and indeed a range of experiences that life might otherwise provide them.

For Frances and Bobbi, two Marxists fashioned in Rooney's image, the necessity of labor and the role of social class are sites of affective interrogation with possible futures. They thus reject the doctrine of work as utopia and attempt to find ways to circumvent the necessities of unfulfilling wage labor. Feeling the depth of one's pain has affordances for confronting physical and emotional discomfort, as well as for teaching them what they *will not* accept. That is, straightforwardly navigating the world by acknowledging the "badness" of various things enables them to not just confront things that are bad, but also envision new futures. By contrast, irony is a passive affect, and has the effect of keeping one locked in place.

Of the four novelists I discuss, Rooney discusses work most explicitly and decidedly: wage-labor is a form of oppression and resource extraction. While Oyler's narrator mentions that her job is dull and boring, and thus contributes to her malaise, she does not extend her criticism to the conditions that created her job in the first place: she dislikes the job because it is uninteresting, not because she conceives of it politically as a "bullshit job." It may leave her unfulfilled, but given that irony and self-performance can fill this gap, any critique ends there. Since Frances, however, filters the conditions of her life and establishes her sense of justice through Marxist principles, rather than submit to the ostensibly apolitical stance of ironic self-detachment, she *must* have an opinion. I submit, then, that the very formation of opinion about material or labor conditions is itself a sincere act, a choice that performative irony

impedes. I quote Frances' thoughts at length to illustrate how, in establishing a political stance that rejects the theoretical neutrality of neoliberalism, she must be sincere in her decision-making and convictions:

> I hadn't been kidding with Philip about not wanting a job. I didn't want one. I had no plans as to my future financial sustainability: I never wanted to earn money for doing anything. I'd had various minimum-wage jobs … and I expected to have more of them after I graduated. Though I knew that I would eventually have to enter full-time employment, I certainly never fantasized about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role. Sometimes this felt like a failure to take an interest in my own life, which depressed me. On the other hand, I felt that my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy. I'd checked what the average yearly income would be if the gross world product were divided evenly among everyone, and according to Wikipedia it would be $16,000. I saw no reason, political or financial, ever to make more money than that.[199]

One might say, first that, Frances' rejection of *any* labor is naive, silly, and a decidedly immature position to assume. Frances is what Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant call "the idle poor," a group of people able to engage in wage-labor but who refuse, "dragging the economic prosperity of the community down with them."[200] It is in identifying the problems with the way society is organized, and negating the fantasies of others through a rejection of "performing an economic role," that she is able to envision an alternate future for herself. It is the mere questioning of the status quo that opens up the other possibilities. I focus less on whether her aspirations for the future are realistic and more on how Frances' engagement with her own desires without deflecting them through emotional repression or self-loathing is predicated on what must be a genuine affective internal world. Irony is disinterest and sincerity is care.

Figuring out how to navigate caring for others through political conviction, while also meeting her own basic needs, is difficult for Frances. This genuinely contradictory political question opens the door to different values, whereas irony is a *reaction* to something and is rooted in place by its inability to imagine: the promise that there is "more" "makes certain

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[199] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 22.
[200] Adler-Bolton and Vierkant, *Health Communism*, 48.

objects proximate, affecting how the world gathers around [her].”[201] Indeed, Frances muses on her belief “in small jobs, like raising children, picking fruit, cleaning,” saying that “[they] were the jobs I considered the most valuable, the jobs that struck me as deserving the most respect of all.”[202] Though the novel was written in 2018, Frances articulates what we all witnessed at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021: with everyone forced to stay home, it was “essential workers” who oiled the machine that propels society through transport, food, health, garbage disposal, etc. Inverting the structure of what kind of labor is considered “important,” and prioritizing care work, agriculture, and *maintenance* work, Frances thus offers a vision of a society that would respect and value such labor. This vision is not possible without sincerity and, by extension, engagement with care for the daily conditions under which labor is performed.

II. Alternatives

I take up a discussion of Cvetkovich's conception of “crafting,” which she describes as “a form of body politics where agency takes a different form than application of the will.”[203] I expand this concept to include creative writing to trace the affects of coping mechanisms that the written word affords the chronically online, the characters who contend with such online life, and women who write to speak back to these conditions. As Clare Hemmings notes, “affect is mobile and ordinary, producing attachments to the normative, or the normative through those attachments, as well as holding out to the possibility of their transformation.”[204] As such, the progression I follow is one that moves from ironic posturing as ostensible protection from the deeply oppressive conditions of life under capitalism, to one that returns to what I call sincerity

[201] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 14.
[202] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 219.
[203] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 168.
[204] Clare Hemmings, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, ed. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (De Gruyter, 2015), 149, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110365481.147.

to see if there might be any alternatives, however small, to throwing up one's hands and saying nothing can be done.

Frances does not reduce her emotions to irony, but rather *feels* the ugliness of the pain of living, especially those caused by class disparities. Though known in her circles for her writing, she thinks "I didn't feel like writing anything. In fact I felt that if I tried to write, what I produced would be ugly and pretentious. I wasn't the kind of person I pretended to be. I thought of myself trying to be witty in front of Nick's friends in the utility room and felt sick. I didn't belong in rich people's houses."[205] Here, Frances confronts her ugly feelings, as well as her "ugly" coping mechanism for her emotions. She wrestles with the "intimacy between desire and anxiety; the orientation toward the good becomes a form of pressure in a world in which the good cannot exhaust the realm of possibility."[206] Rooney thus uses her characters as vehicles of critique; allowing the reader access to their emotions, motivations, and inner lives in turn creates possibilities for us.

Frances is miserable. Battling what will eventually be diagnosed as endometriosis, she describes a particularly bad day: "I sat […] and smoked two cigarettes, one after another. I had a headache, I hadn't eaten. My body felt used up and worthless to me. I didn't want to put food or medicine into it any more."[207] Yet here she interrogates her motivations for living, and the ways she navigates the barest minimum maintenance work of staying alive. Rather than resorting to retreat, she expands outward, outside of herself. Anna Gibb notes that "[writing] […] is an affect-laden process: driven by interest and desire, subject to frustration and misery as well as productive of joy and excitement."[208] It is this "implicitly dialogical […] procedure – a turning

[205] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 58.
[206] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 31.
[207] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 88.
[208] Anna Gibbs, "Writing as Method: Attunement, Resonance, and Rhythm," in *Affective Methodologies: Developing Cultural Research Strategies for the Study of Affect*, ed. Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 223, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137483195_11..

and returning – that characterizes it as an affective methodology."[209] Writing as craft becomes a way to process and engage with her feelings, even if the words she writes deliberately cast herself in a bad light that does not necessarily erase her emotions: "I wrote for an hour and a half, poetry in which I figured my own body as an item of garbage, an empty wrapper or a half-eaten and discarded piece of fruit. Putting my self-loathing to work in this way didn't make me feel better, as such, but it tired me out."[210] Frances navigates the possibilities that writing about her negative feelings affords her; in embodying a feeling of being garbage, or being something unwanted, she arrives at a place of treading water in a way that still feels self-sustaining, participating in "an ordinary form of spiritual practice."[211] Feelings of misery, or malaise, leave Frances' body through her craft, leaving her unable to adopt an emotional position of ironic nihilism.

Frances' writing, then, can be understood as its own coping mechanism. And, in its own way, it can make the inevitable mundanities of life bearable. I cluster the following three quotes together to illustrate this idea:

> Gradually the waiting began to feel less like waiting and more like this was simply what life was: the distracting tasks undertaken while the thing you are waiting for continues not to happen. I applied for jobs and turned up for seminars. Things went on.[212]

> Everyone's always going through something, aren't they? That's life basically. It's just more and more things to go through.[213]

> I realized my life would be full of mundane physical suffering, and that there was nothing special about it. Suffering wouldn't make me special and pretending not to suffer wouldn't make me special. Talking about it, or even writing about it, would not transform the suffering into something useful.[214]

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[209] Gibbs, "Writing as Method: Attunement, Resonance, and Rhythm," 224.
[210] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 90.
[211] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 159.
[212] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 276.
[213] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 245.
[214] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 263.

While this resignation appears, at first, to be similar to the emotional defenses chronicled in the previous chapter, Frances interprets the waiting of life to get better as a period during which she might exercise agency to see if the outcome might be different. As Kathleen Stewart describes it, "the everyday is a process of going on until something happens, and then back to the going on."[215] In filling up the waiting period, Frances does things; the everyday acts of self-maintenance signal participation in her own life and construct a possible future. This "project" of affective participation in the minutiae of daily living demonstrates that "daily life in all its ordinariness can be a basis for the utopian project of building new worlds in response to both spiritual despair and political depression."[216] This outlook is reparative in its focus on an "attempt to make things, to be creative, to do something."[217] Like the trauma that Diane of the Netflix show *BoJack Horseman* attempts to make meaningful,[218] suffering experienced from endometriosis becomes part of Frances' adjustment to the crisis ordinary that characterizes life. It becomes another thing to deal with and write through—not about. If injustice cannot be reduced to pain, or feeling bad,[219] and pathologizing it prevents healing, then is through seeing pain for what it is—a physical symptom, or, alternatively, a symptom of capitalism—that Frances is able to regain or conceive of how agency fits into the patchwork of interpersonal and systemic forces to which she is subject.

Yet Rooney points to a way to navigate life, one that can be managed, as Frances does, through "craft," but also through the rejection of atomization. The crisis ordinary keeps Frances worrying about finances and continuously adjusting to the difficulties limited capital poses to managing a chronic illness—but it is through looking at the crisis ordinary head-on, and

[215] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 10.
[216] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 189.
[217] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 161.
[218] Diane wrestles with the "point" of trauma if it does not come to serve a purpose, such as writing or self-improvement. It is a way of mining the self for "content."
[219] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 193.

choosing to manage what can be managed, that Frances is able to reject irony that otherwise shuts down possibilities of a future that looks different from the inhabited present. That is, Frances is not engaging in radical protest, and it is debatable how radical her coping mechanisms really are, but she, at least, makes a choice. In gravitating towards her writing, she acts as part of a "circuit that's always tuned in to some little thing somewhere."[220] Her energies and pains direct themselves into craft that affectively circumvent pain, distract from it, or soothe it. While "[depression] […] can take antisocial forms such as withdrawal or inertia," as we saw in the previous chapter, "it can also create new forms of sociality, whether in public cultures that give it expression or because, as has been suggested about melancholy, it serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation."[221] Even if the crisis ordinary is bad, rejecting any fulfillment would be a concession to the totalizing affective orientation that ironic detachment ultimately creates.

Frances' turn to writing is, when compared with the self-aware emotional retreat described in the previous two chapters, a hopeful expansion of her future possibility. As Sara Ahmed writes in *The Promise of Happiness,* "ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life are also sites of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than separation of good and bad feelings,"[222] and it is these simultaneous engagements with and holding space for pain and creative drive that Frances manages. It is limited in its optimism, yet fully realistic that pessimism offers momentary and temporary relief, not a future of possibilities. Within the turn to writing, an act of self-confrontation that acts as metaphor for confronting the crisis ordinary created by oppressive capitalist conditions, there exist conditions and occupations that Frances will not accept. Within stretches of depression, flare ups of chronic pain, and constant poverty,

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[220] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 12.
[221] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 6.
[222] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 6.

there can be "the slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation"[223]—that is, not "magic bullet solutions," necessarily, but the beginnings of reimagining what life can look like. Like many of Rooney's characters, Frances rejects work and its accompanying implicit demands. She becomes part of what Mihály Csíkszentmihályi theorizes as "flow," which is "the experience of an individual engaged with the world, or involved with the world,"[224] an experience that gives her the "quality of a *some*thing to inhabit and animate."[225] As such, we can view "leaning into" pathways that arise in crisis as offering long-term affordances for a future not defined by constant adjustment to precarity. The very act of managing her life through creative maintenance thus establishes an affective orientation that opens up possibilities for more than just the work of management.

Frances says that she "missed the periods of intense academic concentration that helped to relax [her]," a time when she "liked to sit in the library to write essays" and "mostly forgot to eat on days like this and emerged in the evening with a fine, shrill headache." The creative process, one necessitating introspection and the pain of production, yields both negative and positive sensorial experiences, as Frances then perceives things with "a feeling of genuine novelty: breeze felt new, and the sound of birds outside the Long Room. Food tasted impossibly good, as did soft drinks."[226] Frances uses literary production to navigate the chronic physical pain of endometriosis, even though her focus on craft ultimately causes additional kinds of pain. Writing thus mediates the connection between mind and body, providing her the tools to regulate them independently and together. While writing depletes her to the point of pain, it also brings her back to herself and enables her to transform daily physical and material discomfort into

[223] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 2.
[224] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 11.
[225] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 15.
[226] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 33.

something that can be endured at a minimum, and elided at best. Essays, poetry, and fiction open new possibilities for her, expanding her initial resignation to poverty to tentative optimism. This habit enables "new affective, material, and political capacities and collectives to occur."[227] Amid the misery of poverty and the fear that accompanies a chronic illness, Frances seeks and finds enjoyment and meaning to counterbalance the otherwise also-chronic affects of uncertainty. In doing so she makes room for both misery and "feeling good," dual halves that require each other and comprise "a life" more than disinterested and unproductive critique inherent to performed irony. Frances, in other words, builds her life from constituent pieces, rather than reacts or retreats to a place of hollow comforts.

Rather, engagement with physical and emotional discomfort enables Frances to not only deal with but also reconfigure her socioeconomic precarity. In contrast to her friend Philip, a man enthused by the working world rather than filled with existential dread, Frances feels she is "more discerning with my enthusiasms."[228] Instead of work, Frances does things like "tinkering with commas in a long poem [she] was working on,"[229] writing for hours until "It was past three o'clock and I hadn't eaten. […] When [she] did get out of bed, a wave of dizziness came over [her], breaking everything into a shower of visual noise."[230] While Frances' every action is refracted through her material poverty, she works *in spite* of those conditions, rather than projecting ironic self-deprecation *out of spite.* The intensity of daily life directs itself into creative production as a way of mitigating the double helix of chronic pain and chronic poverty, carving out affective space instead of eliminating an affective range altogether. Likewise, in *Beautiful World, Where are You*, best-selling novelist Alice (ostensibly a fictionalized form of

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[227] Carolyn Pedwell, *Revolutionary Routines: The Habits of Social Transformation* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), xvii.
[228] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 22-23.
[229] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 177.
[230] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 202.

Sally Rooney herself) muses that "If serious political action is still possible […] I would like to be helpful in some way to the project, whatever it is […] No one wants to live like this. Or at least, I don't want to live like this. I want to live differently, or if necessary to die so that other people can one day live differently."[231] In contrast to the desire to deflect pain through the deployment of ironic hyperawareness, the wish for suffering to end is utopic, forward-thinking—arguably, braver than critical irony could ever hope to be.

Rooney's characters recognize, through engaged pursuit of this *something* that involves creation of some sort, which in turn needs, as the prerequisite, a non-ironic way of looking at things: "The ordinary permeates the political."[232] Even though the novel's prose conveys details sparely—focusing on their materiality as they appear—counter to what James Wood has called "hysterical realism,"[233] Frances rejects disengagement, and rejects dis-*affect*, both of which impede a complex understanding of misery, joy, and the role of "craft" in reclaiming a future that is livable not just for a select few. The following excerpt, which I again quote in full and whose appearance in the novel I preserve, demonstrates the extent to which Frances and Bobbi attempt to work through the affective structures that govern life under late capitalism; though of course Oyler's narrator also ruminates, her thoughts do not move her forward, and are performatively self-conscious. Here, Frances and Bobbi text each other about love:

> Bobbi: if you look at love as something other than an interpersonal phenomenon
> Bobbi: and try to understand it as a social value system
> Bobbi: it's both antithetical to capitalism, in that it challenges the axiom of selfishness
> Bobbi: which dictates the whole logic of inequality
> Bobbi: and yet also it's subservient and facilitatory
> Bobbi: i.e. mothers selflessly raising children without any profit motive
> Bobbi: which seems to contradict the demands of the market at one level

[231] Rooney, *Beautiful world, where are you?*, 82.
[232] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 39.
[233] James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman," *The New Republic*, July 24, 2000, https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman.

> Bobbi: and yet actually just functions to provide workers for free
> me: yes
> me: capitalism harnesses 'love' for profit
> me love is the discursive practice and unpaid labor is the effect
> me: but I mean, I get that, I'm anti love as such
> Bobbi: that's vapid frances
> Bobbi: you have to do more than say you're anti things[234]

As difficult it may be to introduce Marxist principles into the content, voice, or form of the novel, here we see none of the apathy and deliberate disinterest that appears as a corollary of ironic sentiment. Crafting a future requires being *for* things. Left unsaid in this text exchange is the context of Frances and Bobbi's relationship: once just best friends, then girlfriends, and now best friends again, the two women return to each other even after suffering pain at the hands of the other, in a demonstration not only of their commitment to each other, but to what they see as their broader roles in the world. Bobbi, a staunch and aggressive lesbian, takes José Esteban Muñoz' queer utopic position that rejects "a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[235] The reification of their friendship, and thus their attachment, in other words, is the basis for their desired authentic engagement with the systems they live in and wish to change.

It is impossible to want something better for oneself without being attached to that something. To want better is to care for and about the ways in which poverty, creativity, and relationships—to take Rooney's most urgent preoccupations—affect the self and keep one trapped or push one forward. Rooney works through the pain of being attached to others, to depending on them, to needing them in a way that is, at times, unsexy, and perhaps desperate, or undesirable. If solidarity is needed to build the better worlds that all her characters wish for, then

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[234] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 173-174.
[235] José Esteban. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.*, 1 online resource (229 pages) vols., Sexual Cultures Ser. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5748525, 1.

that ideology also comes to bear on interpersonal relationships. Frances is the vehicle through which Rooney tests her ideas, writing to Bobbi via text, "nothing consists of two people, or even three. My relationship with you is also produced by your relationship with Melissa, and with Nick, and with your childhood self, etc., etc. I wanted things for myself because I thought I existed.[236] The self that is "Frances" is conceived not through the work of a single lone individual, but through the meaningful production of the self through conversations, literary production, interpersonal relationships, and daily life. Far from the atomized, stand-alone self of disembodied Twitter voice, or of Moshfegh and Oyler's narratives, the self coheres through its networks. It is through this network that, contrary to its also-networked diffusion on Twitter, that the need for deflective irony dissipates.

Frances realizes the future lies in production, though not just her own: "[each] brick was placed by human hands, each hinge fitted on each door, every road surface outside, every bulb in every streetlight. […] And human beings themselves, made by other humans, struggling […] Do I want to be free of pain and therefore demand that others also live free of pain, the pain that is mine and therefore also theirs, yes yes."[237] Even though writing fiction or poetry is an abstract task, it is the other side of the coin of physical labor—they are acts of making oneselves useful to others. Rooney's materialism, one that values bricklaying or window-fitting above office jobs which are ostensibly more aspirational, has its roots in optimism, a reconfiguration of the cruel optimism that otherwise defines contemporary life. She suggests that the only things worth doing are things rooted in some form of craft, rejecting the seeming necessity of bullshit jobs. Creativity and cultural production, through the affective engagement needed to generate ideas and tinker with them, are conceived as potentially liberatory.

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[236] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 286.
[237] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 281-282.

III. Maintaining, managing, moving

From "doing" arises the conception of possibilities that might be better than a world in which ironic self-detachment arises to dull one's emotional senses—a retreat that, even in its flattening of experience, seems to be, at first, a better choice than genuineness. I have turned to sincerity and authenticity, because of what we might understand as the linear next step from ironic detachment; if irony is a palliative stop on the road towards better lives, an affective turn towards sincerity lies further down that road. Lawrence Grossberg gestures towards the hope contained in Frances' turn to craft; he comments that capitalism cannot "[achieve] the status of totalizing control of our lives and reality,"[238] and rather that it is important "to help create the conditions of possibility for reconstituting hope"[239] for the broader aim of "realizing that 'another world is possible.'"[240] Irony appears to be a momentary antidote to the depression of conditions of life worsening as the days pass, as it numbs the shock of the unprecedented and unthinkable[241] and holds such things at a remove from oneself. It is an affective stance couched in prioritization and preservation of momentary comfort while flattening other urgent emotions. As such, we may be able to construct "a better life by embracing rather than glossing over bad feelings."[242] This vision is explicitly leftist, an embrace of possibilities rather than a foreclosure of multiplicity or aspects of the self in service of bland individualism or the elimination of entire identities.

What I identify in this chapter is not necessarily the nuanced contours of "expressing emotion" or a necessity for "feeling good all the time," but the possibilities that can arise when

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[238] Lawrence Grossberg, Interviewed by Gregory J. Seigworth, and Melissa Gregg, "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 329, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393047-014.
[239] Grossberg, Seigworth, and Gregg, "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual," 332.
[240] Grossberg, Seigworth, and Gregg, "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual," 338.
[241] For example, in mid-March 2023, the state of Arkansas legalized child labor.
[242] Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 3.

art moves from the endlessly (which is what it is) critical ironic voice, the voice that implies disapproval and misery but cloaks it in the bait and switch of humor. By contrast, to "pin hopes on the future is to imagine happiness as what lies ahead of us."[243] The former orientation is appealing: Twitter is fun, jokes about "unaliving" oneself of TikTok is an entire genre,[244] and conversations with friends[245] take on additional discursive layers, allowing us to laugh together about conditions we may not be able to change or lack the will to. Yes, it is a coping mechanism, and yes, it makes us feel better momentarily, but this thesis also asks: what comes after?

Rooney is merely one vehicle and author to consider the "what next." Michael D. Snediker posits that queer optimism conceives of possible future happiness as "interesting"[246] rather than oriented around (hetero)normative conceptions—a vision not far off from Frances' inversion of what kind of work holds more value (manual, useful labor that facilitates societal functioning) over another (office work). The "what next," this chapter tries to illustrate, is the difficult but needed turn to sincerity, of holding the good and the bad affects of online Twitter life, and of daily life, with clear knowledge that the permeation of irony to *everything* flattens the art we consume and the expectations we have of it—as well as our expectations of ourselves. Could we create stronger "social [bonds] if the same objects make us happy?"[247] If, as Frances observes, "[things] and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn't know about and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them,"[248] then the advantage of refusing the appeal of a momentary ironic blanket is to see oneself as inexorably connected to

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[243] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 160.
[244] Paige Skinner, "Gen Z Won't Let TikTok Stop Them From Talking About Suicide," April 12, 2021, https://www.thedailybeast.com/gen-z-wont-let-tiktok-stop-them-from-talking-about-suicide.
[245] Real ones, not the novel in question.
[246] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 161-162.
[247] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 56.
[248] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 307.

others. Frances takes the position of "being for being against,"[249] or being in a state of wanting something else, even if she is unsure of what that something might be, if not the status quo. In it, we are laughing, amused, performing satire for each other: but are we—and our art forms—better for it?

[249] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 162.

Conclusion

"It's possible to feel so grateful that you can't get to sleep at night."[250]

In online spaces, we see the turn away from critique for the sake of critique, a turn away from irony as a method and voice of cultural discourse. This thesis moves from Twitter, to the novel, and now back out again, to take stock of the homogenization of tone that Twitter voice initiates. Twitter voice, filtered into irony, mediates concerns, media, and modes of living and navigating the ordinary. At first, this voice felt personally useful and quite funny, and seemed to meet the moment of general despair and nihilism in the face of political, socioeconomic, and communications systems that have significant structural problems that feel beyond our grasp. As a gimmick, irony's affective orientation and formal structure as Twitter voice "gives us tantalizing glimpses of a world in which social life will no longer be organized by labor, while indexing one that continuously regenerates the conditions keeping labor's social necessity in place."[251] Yet while it is productive within a specific cadre of self-comfort—it makes us feel better, it makes us laugh—it is not the end of the work, or even the beginning. It is not the last word, because it reproduces itself, and produces little else.

There is additional room to do further extended analyses of the kind of Twitter data I collected. In future projects, pending more advanced coding knowledge, I would like to detect not just patterns among specific parts of speech, but rather *sentence* patterns; that is, the affordances of examining tweets at the rhythm of the sentence or phrase can have affordances for our understanding of how Twitter voice has come to dominate not just one-off tweets, but also permeate and make online criticism ironic against all else, and change the voices of literature.

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[250] Rooney, *Conversations with Friends,* 189.
[251] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

Natural language processing would be particularly useful for doing additional morphological and syntactic work in order to further contextualize this dominant form of online speech within not simply a literary studies perspective, but also one of sociolinguistics and sociolects.

The following sections are brief discussions of the ways in which I see Twitter voice, through its movement from social media humor to a critical voice to a literary one, beginning discussions not simply confined to literary studies. I envision this thesis as an initial exploration of the changing landscape of literature *in* culture, as well as one that addresses *how* and *why* people communicate the way they do, and why they care about the things they do. I thus structure this conclusion loosely: each section briefly discusses the ways in which this project touches on different spheres.

On work

I link labor and class to Twitter voice and irony to illustrate how the latter are methods of coming to terms with Fisher's description of capitalism as seemingly never-ending. Madeline Lane-McKinley writes that "[work] exhausts our capacities to imagine a life against it, dominating our dreams, and even our attempts at refusal,"[252] and I put my work in conversation with her analysis of humor through other media to engage with the idea that Twitter voice's pithy irony is an attempt at a refusal. As useful as this twenty-first century "I would prefer not to" register is for thinking about the specific miseries of current labor conditions, sentiment, not irony, will be needed to help people conceive of alternatives to what is now only beginning to be refused. Indeed, Sara Ahmed explains that "[solidarity] involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same

[252] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 3.

bodies, we do live on common ground."[253] Twitter voice provides this common ground, which need not be confused with the ceiling. Twitter voice's role as gesture towards refusal is "a mode of critique, and a place to begin imagining and enacting a life against work,"[254] and it has expanded the limits of what people might accept from their labor conditions.

On politics

While I will not attempt to address the wide-ranging effects of unceasing irony on leftist political discourse, Twitter voice appears to be one of the default registers of liberals, leftists, or progressives. I collapse these camps not because they have the same priorities but because, broadly, the center-left project is defined by its ironic stance to most things, and its conviction that things are bad and *cannot change*. Freddie deBoer identifies its political origins to around 2016, after the loss of Bernie Sanders and the subsequent loss of Hillary Clinton, writing "[the] style that developed then, combining acerbic and intentionally childish insults with righteous political rage, was a response to the feeling that everything was broken and the system was rigged. And it was genuinely therapeutic, back then."[255] He identifies the present register, when discussing politics as "still defined by a droll, withering superiority."[256] Even though "most collective life takes place to one side of or under the radar of politics […] it seems important to understand what is absorbing in the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting by,"[257] political irony goes hand in hand with the ontological irony of Twitter voice which poses issues for the affectively sticky work of political organizing and solidarity. Carolyn Pedwell offers the same line of thinking, namely that "we have come to understand politically-engaged, left-leaning

[253] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 189.
[254] Lane-McKinley, *Comedy Against Work*, 10.
[255] Freddie deBoer, "Why Irony, Bro?," Substack newsletter, *Freddie DeBoer* (blog), March 23, 2023, https://freddiedeboer.substack.com/p/why-irony-bro?publication_id=295937&isFreemail=true.
[256] deBoer, "Why Irony, Bro?"
[257] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 27.

social and cultural analysis as requiring a mode of critique premised on suspicion and paranoia."[258] Twitter irony in the arena of politics works when people want to vent—but for building a movement towards a better socioeconomic future, perhaps not so much.

On online criticism

I have tried to illustrate that Twitter voice, and its corresponding form, permeates other forms of writing, homogenizing it and creating a vacuum of styles and craft. Most cultural criticism now consists of dissecting a spat or a funny meme trend on Twitter. On the role of online criticism, whether as published article or Twitter thread, it is worth quoting writer Rayne Fisher-Quann at length:

> The ubiquity of online criticism has some roots in a cultural frustration with privilege and systemic injustice, which makes it somewhat ironic that it's caused so many people to want to tune out entirely. But the idea that criticism on the internet is inescapable isn't the end of a conversation about ethics, it's the start of a new one. It asks: what's going wrong? And where should we go from here?[259]

She describes online criticism as rooted in apathy, "an anthem for shrugging your shoulders."[260] As useful as Twitter voice is for amusement and signals membership to a club of politically and culturally-affiliated online critics, Fisher-Quann asks how we might make criticism more interesting. Terry Nguyen, editor of online technology vertical *Dirt* describes "the disjointed condition of online life" as necessarily fragmented, "particularly our desire to derive meaning from the haphazard content-fragments of our feeds."[261] Our attention is so scattered among the debris of the Internet, most of it of low quality, that it is difficult to not resort to feeling like none

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[258] Pedwell, *Revolutionary Routines*, 33.
[259] Rayne Fisher-Quann, "Internet Criticism Will Never Be Ethical," accessed March 23, 2023, https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/93aeb5/internet-criticism-trolling-ethics.
[260] Fisher-Quann, "Internet Criticism Will Never Be Ethical."
[261] Terry Nguyen, "Dirt: Tumblr Poet Laureate," The Dirtyverse, March 21, 2023, https://dirt.fyi/article/2023/03/tumblr-poet-laureate.

of it matters very much, and is just filling up our social media feeds and our brains in the absence of ways to make sense of contemporary life.

The apathy that Fisher-Quann identifies, and its subsequent move towards dissociation, feeds on ironic takes; the two have a chicken and egg relationship. As Jenny Odell explains about how our attention works in this landscape: "[it's] not just that living in a constant state of distraction is unpleasant, or that a life without willful thought and action is an impoverished one. […] A social body that can't concentrate or communicate with itself is like a person who can't think and act."[262] Hence my emphasis on the notion of irony as static, as initial resistance, rather than a path towards a better future—and hence an increasingly possible shift in online criticism towards affective sincerity and curiosity.

On the novel as literary form

Concerns about fragmentation, like Twitter voice's conversion of the ironic as contemporary life mediator, have crossed the porous barrier of online essay to full-length novel (even one like Lockwood's). Perhaps most significantly, the novel as it currently exists acts as a comment on the fragmented affective experience of the Internet, Twitter in particular, and to reproduce those affects. Is the contemporary novel an extension of a form we could simply consume by opening our laptops or phones? While of course not all novels are like this, but the proliferation of this category—beginning to get so saturated that it has its own category on Goodreads now[263]—suggests changing expectations in readership and, equally significant, a destabilization of the novel form. The novel, by definition bourgeois and a long, slow form, has

[262] Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, 81.
[263] "Uncanny (Silicon) Valley! New Fiction About Technology, Startups, and Social Media," Goodreads, accessed April 11, 2023, https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/2501-uncanny-silicon-valley-new-fiction-about-technology-startups-and-so.

seen a shift towards a style that Oyler, too, describes as fragmentation, which "is one of the worst aspects of modern life. It's extremely stressful. 'Fragmented' is a euphemism for 'interrupted.'"[264] Her central concern lies in a quote I discuss in chapter two, and its essence is reproduced here: "Why would I want to make my book like Twitter? If I wanted a book that resembled Twitter, I wouldn't write a book; I would just spend even more time on Twitter."[265] What I have tried to show in this project, then, is how irony as default has shaped the art we consume to the extent of becoming a dominant artistic tone. That is, it has done what few, if any, forms have been able to do: transpose themselves directly into another medium and encompass that medium's conventions. Lauren Oyler's literary criticism, for example, is known as bitingly acerbic and sharply funny; her novel is written the same way, to the extent that one might ask why she had not simply written a memoir or an essay instead.

Forms and voices bleed across genres, changing notions of what a novel, or criticism, or a tweet, can and should do. We are now faced with the blurring of the boundary between the literary and the critical, formally and narratively, and as such, we come to have the same expectations of non-fiction writing (of all kinds) on Twitter or the Internet more broadly, as we do of our fiction. Both are supposed to demonstrate an acceptable stance on a particular issue, nihilistically, lament the seeming impossibility of changing the issue, and move on, having received brownie points for merely engaging.

I claim that Twitter voice and its ecosystem have conditioned a change in what we expect from literature, particularly the novel in its structure, concerns, and narrative contents. Reading a novel now, readers and consumers tell us, should feel like being on Twitter, it should produce the same affective response, and it should be written in the same way. The novel is now "predicated

[264] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 191.
[265] Oyler, *Fake Accounts*, 191.

on a fundamental uncertainty regarding its own definition, its ethical substance, and the possibility of its making any meaningful utterance whatsoever."[266] The next step of this discussion: is this what a novel *should* be? What are the implications for literary criticism? Eugenie Brinkema posits that "reading for form does not involve a retreat from other theoretical, political, and ethical commitments."[267] As such, it is conceivable that the porousness of genre categories across *media* does *not* produce richer novels, let alone richer Twitter or Internet discourse. It is this "failure of consciousness" that "blocks other possible worlds, as a blockage that makes possibles impossible, such that possibles are lost before they can be lived, experienced, or imagined."[268] Twitter voice's ability to travel so easily between forms, to the extent of altering them, is an exciting development from a theoretical and political perspective, but still more for literary studies, which now must ask itself how novels are received by contemporary video-accustomed readers and how novels might be vehicles for envisioning more than ironic reaction to Berlant's "crisis ordinary." I argue thus in favor of Twitter voice in the context of its limited scope, but I posit that a novel about the Internet, about the experience of Twitter, cannot tell us anything new—and perhaps eliminates excitement about a novel's imaginative capacities and possibilities. The unprecedented formal movement across digital to print media necessitates that we acknowledge this process' affordances *and* limitations: will the Internet flatten the novel?

[266] Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, 74.
[267] Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 39.
[268] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 165.

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