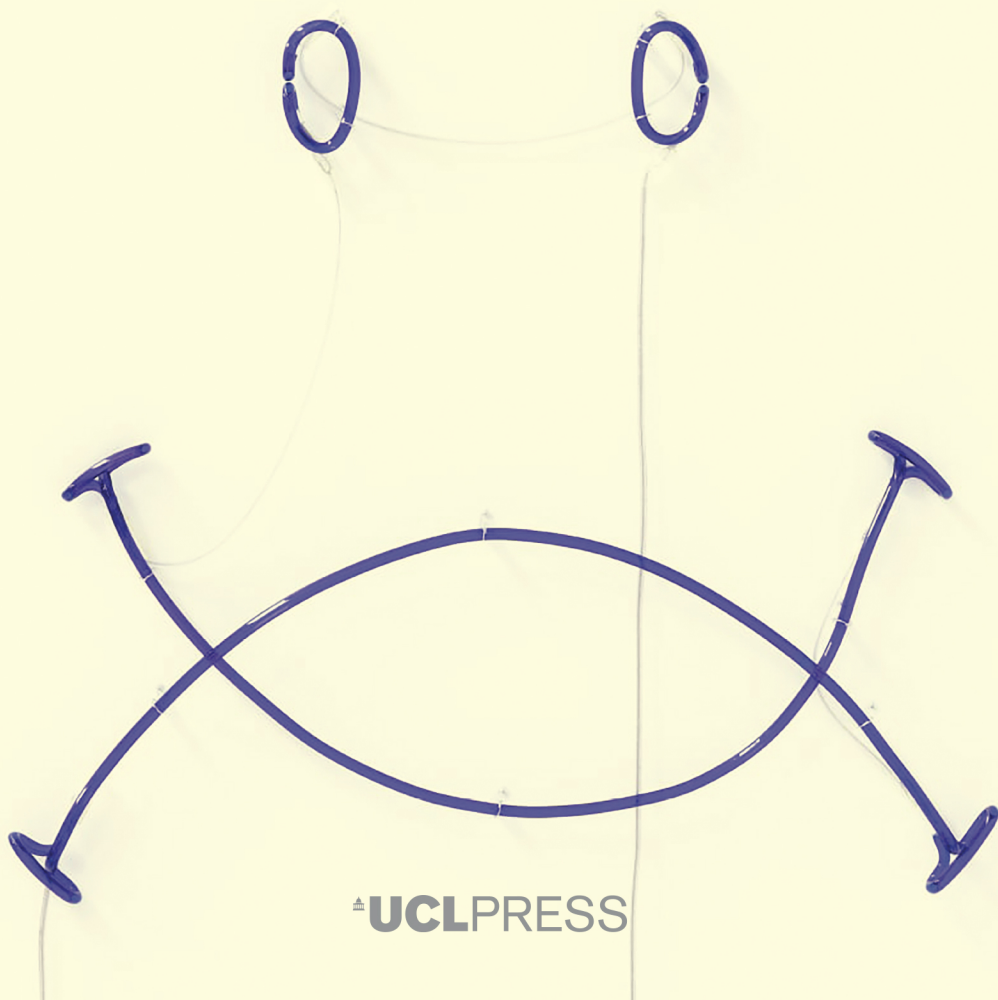


AFFECTIVE CRISIS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ATTACHMENT

A comparative study of contemporary
fiction in neoliberal ruins

Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURE



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Affective Crisis and the Possibility of Attachment

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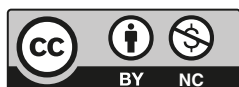
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Acknowledgements

In 2021 we published *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel: De romans van de millennialgeneratie* [Affective Crisis, Literary Repair: The Novels of the Millennial Generation] at Amsterdam University Press: a study of a new generation of writers in Dutch that came to prominence in the 2010s. The book situates that generation in its social context, in the history of literature in Dutch, and within an international literary environment. Although we developed our ideas about the prominence of affective questions in contemporary fiction first in relation to this corpus, we thought it had a wider resonance and wanted to communicate our findings to a wider international scholarly community with an English publication – preferably with an OpenAccess publisher. We told each other that we could make such a book quickly.

Daily academic life having its ever-increasing demands and other research projects taking our time, we only got our minds fully set on this book by the summer of 2024. By that time though it was clear that this new book would not be an abbreviated translation with some new literary analyses and would not be written as quickly as we first thought. If anything, that was a positive development. Writing an article on autofiction and neoliberalism, published in *Textual Practice* (2024), reinvigorated our thinking about contemporary fiction. We held on to the chapter division and to some literary case studies of the Dutch book, but we have further developed, or completely reworked, the theoretical framework in each chapter as well as further unfolded the central concepts in our theorisation of contemporary fiction. And we have chosen for a clearer comparative perspective.

What we first referred to as the ‘English translation’ became, as time passed and more new writing accumulated, ‘the English edition’, and the different titles we gave to the two books are intended to mark that difference. It means that the English reader is presented with ideas and literary analyses that aim to keep up with the latest developments

in contemporary fiction, while it also has a lot of new material to offer to readers of the Dutch book.

A lot of our collaborative thinking for this project happened during walks or in bars in several cities of the Low Countries. That they found their way into this book is thanks to several people and institutions. We would like to thank Rixt Runia and Inge van der Bijl at Amsterdam University Press, who believed in the project from the very beginning, and for allowing us to use material from the Dutch book. We also want to express our gratitude to the editors of *Poetics Today* and *Textual Practice* for letting us reuse our publications in this book. Timothy Mathews and Florian Mussgnug gave us a warm welcome in the series 'Comparative Literature and Culture' at UCL Press, while Elliot Beck and Chris Penfold guided us expertly through the different steps of the publication process. Many thanks also to the anonymous peer reviewer for their positive feedback on the manuscript.

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Introduction: The affective dominant, neoliberalism and friction

Is it too late to write a book about contemporary fiction? It has been more than twenty years since Linda [Hutcheon \(2002, 181\)](#), in the epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, called for colleagues to name the new literary sensibility after postmodernism. Her call has been met with a panoply of names: metamodernism, new sincerity, neo-realism, digimodernism and so on. In contrast to postmodernism though, not one term stuck. The debate to name that new aesthetics now seems to belong to the past, as if the contemporary novel beyond postmodernism has become a historical category. Scholarly attention, it would seem, has shifted from periodisation in poetical, literary-historical terms such as postmodernism and beyond, to periodisation in socio-historical terms, with neoliberalism serving as the primary referent.

This book nevertheless wants to engage in the speculative exercise of naming the present of contemporary literature. Its basic proposition is that contemporary literature is dominated by affective questions that are rooted in, but not fully subsumed by, neoliberalism. In this book we aim to study contemporary fiction both diachronically, in its literary-historical relationship to postmodernism, and synchronically, in its relationship to neoliberalism. These respective relationships differ in kind, the former denoting a shift in aesthetic sensibility, the latter implying an aesthetic mediation of the social. Diachronically we signal a shift from postmodernist fiction's pervasive epistemological and ontological reflections to a focus on questions of an affective nature in contemporary fiction. Synchronically we read contemporary fiction as mediating neoliberalism's double-edged dynamics of commodifying affective experience while privatising collective experience.

We extend the argument, by now familiar in scholarship on literature and neoliberalism, that neoliberalism interpellates the subject on an affective level: the neoliberal subject is prompted to wield their affective experiences and capacities as assets and human capital, as well as to identify as cultural and media consumer with a constant barrage of reified affective impulses in images, clips, feeds, posts, updates and messages. Simultaneously, on an ideological level, epistemological frames for the critique of capital have been consistently delegitimised in the past decades – a tendency that, as Terry Eagleton (2004) commented some twenty years ago, was always what the French philosopher of postmodernism J.-F. Lyotard (1979) meant when he observed a decline in the credibility of grand narratives.

Materialist critics such as Joshua Clover and Annie McClanahan have questioned the concept of neoliberalism as it tends ‘to supplant other, more materialist terms’ denoting the ‘long economic downturn that began in the mid-1970s’ (McClanahan 2019, 106–7).¹ As a set of normative principles developed by economists from the late 1940s onwards, when capitalist accumulation was still growing, neoliberalism served as an ideological response to capitalism’s ‘long down-turn’ in later decades. Rather than as an empirical descriptor of socioeconomic reality, or as a politically applied set of ideas that single-handedly constitutes that reality, neoliberalism should be considered as a normative regime serving an ideological purpose in specific historical circumstances. It bears pointing out, moreover, that neoliberal subjectivity – as constructed in that normative regime as ‘entrepreneur of the self’ – may well refer less to an overall historical change in social conditions or to a fully internalised notion of the self, saturating lived experience, than to ‘the introduction of economic exigencies into the lives of people once shielded from them’ (118).

When we speak of neoliberalism in the book, then, we do so with caution, but also in the conviction that the conditions of capitalist appropriation have seen a turn towards affect in recent decades. The combined force of commodification and privatisation we have sketched above results in an affective crisis that informs the shift in aesthetic sensibility from postmodernism to a contemporary aesthetic sensibility that we examine in the book and that we believe can be read as registering an affective dominant. Contemporary, however, does not imply static synchronicity: moving beyond postmodernism and through the elastic moment we have for some time now been calling the contemporary, fiction develops emergent mediations of neoliberal dynamics and the affective crises the latter yield. We observe in contemporary fiction an

affective crisis of detachment that gives rise to forms of aesthetic and cognitive mediation through which we can also diachronically differentiate between different generations or different forms of literature beyond postmodernism. While earlier moments in literature's movement beyond postmodern still registered a working through of residual postmodernist epistemological reflection, more recent developments show emergent mediations of affective experience through epistemological frames of critique deriving mostly from feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecocritical theory.

These emergent mediations may afford a politicised understanding of affective experience that opens up possibilities for less privatised, more collective engagements with neoliberal reification as well as with the material inequities and hierarchies neoliberalism sustains. In this sense emergent trends in contemporary fiction hark back to a longer history of political critique, within feminist, postcolonial and ecocritical theory, of the logic of appropriation, exploitation and destruction inherent in the dominant patriarchal and imperialist modes of knowledge production in Western modernity. Among other notions, an ecofeminist politics of care and relationality resonates in emergent contemporary fiction, by now firmly beyond the postmodern.

A brief comparison may make the above clearer. A central text in discussions of the aesthetic sensibility beyond postmodernism is 'Octet', a short story from David Foster Wallace's collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). This story invokes postmodern conventions and ideas, but works both within and through them to arrive at a new position. The postmodern convention that the narrator – who is 'unfortunately, a fiction writer' (Wallace 1999, 145) – mainly tackles is the conventionalised practice of metafiction. 'Octet' consists of several pop quizzes, and in 'Pop Quiz 9' the narrator reflects on his work. Well aware that 'break[ing] the fourth wall' (147 fn 2) is 'now lame and old news' (159 fn 17), the writer wants to use metafiction towards a different end. More specifically, he uses the questioning structure of the pop quizzes and the metafiction to ask the reader if they feel the same 'weird ambient urgency' (152) that he does: 'This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?' (154).

The main focus of metafiction in 'Octet' is thus not, as it usually is in postmodern fiction, on the ontological status of fiction nor on epistemological indeterminacy, but on affective issues. The reflections deal with the narrator's inability to *cognitively* describe or explain a certain 'human sameness', which he can only evoke *affectively*: the writer wants the reader to feel the same 'urgency' he senses (1999, 147). The quizzes

and commentaries deal with relationships, interpersonal contact, and the difficulty of ‘truly “to be with” another person instead of just using that person somehow’ (155). The quotation marks indicate that terms like feelings and relationships can only be used ironically: they are ‘near nauseous term(s) in contemporary usage’ (155). Metafiction demonstrates this awareness to convince the reader of the truthfulness and sincerity of his intentions.

This implies that concerns about truth and sincerity are not absent from ‘Octet’. However, as Adam Kelly states, ‘the guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation’ (2010, 143). Wallace’s narrator in ‘Octet’ wagers that these issues may be resolved when an affective contact is established – when the reader is ‘feeling anything like what you feel’ (1999, 154). Cognitive and affective issues are not mutually exclusive – they are interwoven. Yet, in ‘Octet’ the narrator turns to affective means in order to settle the cognitive issues of sincerity and reality/truth.

In ‘Octet’, then, we find a narrator who aims to break out of a postmodern cultural context he experiences as insufficient and suffocating. Struggling with the terms on which such emancipation may be achieved, he turns towards affective experience as an alternative orientation now that postmodernism’s question of language, representation and being no longer suffice to make sense of the world, the self and the other. If we now move on to a different white male poster boy from contemporary fiction, Ben Lerner, we find the affective not to be an outcome for a cognitive problem, but a problem in itself: ‘I always already felt removed from my experience’, the protagonist Adam Gordon notes in *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). As we discuss in [chapter 3](#), the novel explores this detachment from experience through a reflection on presence and absence, the ‘actual’ and the ‘virtual’. If those terms are still reminiscent of the postmodern handbook, this is not the case in most of the novels we discuss in this book that similarly emphasise experience as an issue. In *The Opposite of a Person* (2022) by Dutch author Lieke Marsman, Ida’s detachment disrupts her relationship with Robin and her commitment to the climate cause. Moreover, this affective crisis similarly seems to block, as we discuss in more detail in [chapter 6](#), the processing of the different epistemological frames of feminist and ecological debates she reads to make sense of herself and the world. This is a pattern we often notice in contemporary fiction: a difficulty to translate an affective crisis within an epistemological frame, or vice versa: the affective crisis disturbs access to the epistemological critique. Both affect and epistemology are now conundrums.

If in 'Octet' we see the affective becoming dominant over epistemological and ontological issues, the affective is the dominant focus in the novels by Lerner and Marsman. This becoming dominant is exemplified in authors that have been associated with labels such as new sincerity (Kelly 2024) or post-postmodernism (McLaughlin 2012), yet this book will be more concerned with that stage in twenty-first-century fiction in which the affective is already dominant. While some of the earlier novels in our corpus reflect on this transition and tackle their characters' affective experience in terms reminiscent of postmodernism, in many other cases the affective is already foregrounded as a premise rather than as an emergent trend, let alone projected as an alternative or remedy to post-modernist discontent. The epistemological serves as a means to mediate and make sense of the affective as well as to redress or repair it.

It would prove difficult to find a character in this later group of contemporary fiction that, like Wallace's narrator, finds relationships or feelings 'near nauseous terms'. The issue is no longer an epistemological scepticism but an affective blankness: a lack of feeling where feeling is to be expected, which ultimately leaves one feeling lonely and sealed off from the world. Detached here is not so much postmodern coolness: an (aggressive or defensive) attitude of disinterest or lack of concern. Rather, it is detachment from experiences, love, friendship, political projects, and values one deems important but nevertheless feels removed from. This disconnection then tends to corrode the meaning attached to that love, project, set of values and/or makes the subject doubt their capacities to love, connect and commit: one is no longer sure what to feel and what one is feeling. It is, in short, detachment as an affective short-circuiting in which connection always breaks down, leaving the subject desiring attachment and belonging.

The main cause hereof, as suggested above, is the dominance of experience as instrument to build a life and make sense of it for this generation of writers, having grown up in a world of neoliberal subjectivation voided of grand narratives. Mark Greif suggests that, in the absence of such narratives, a specific 'concept of experience' becomes the 'method of life' to gain a meaningful and happy life (2016, 78). Yet, now that experience is something we actively seek, we run the risk of loss and disappointment: 'The sense that each or any moment might be won for experience, but is lost to time instead, leaves a residue of perpetual loss' (84). At the same time, the saturation of representations relating or performing how we should feel (when we kiss, celebrate, mourn, walk in a protest, have a drink, study, and so on) walls the subject off from their own experience and makes them feel as if they are simply performing

rather than living their experience. At the same time, the contemporary subject turns connections into a network, affective capacities into transferable (life) skills and experience into (standardised) representations (a picture, a 'tweet', a 'story', a reel). In other words, one turns life into commodities to attract followers and clients or secure attention and (work) opportunities. If Bernardo Soares in Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* did not know 'how to have life' (2015, 11), he could nevertheless still note: 'Taking nothing seriously and recognizing our sensations as the only reality we have for certain, we take refuge there' (12). In the contemporary novel, even feelings no longer constitute a 'reality we have for certain'.

This book will argue that the affective dominant is crucial to an understanding of contemporary fiction. In our six chapters we situate this affective crisis in the ideological and socioeconomic context of twenty-first-century society, while our analysis of an international corpus of novels addresses issues of attachment and connection in relation to themes such as identity and ecology, and genres such as autofiction and Bildungsroman. In the remainder of this introduction, we will first give a short survey of dominant interpretations of contemporary fiction beyond postmodernism, which will be followed by our own hypothesis of the affective dominant. Through the concept of friction, we then position ourselves in debates about the relation between literature and neoliberalism from which follows a short exposition of our method. We conclude the introduction with a note on our corpus and a brief overview of the chapters.

Beyond postmodernism

In the first fifteen years of this century, critical and scholarly attention for contemporary fiction mostly had a diachronic focus: it studied the emergent aesthetic sensibility in relation to the postmodern aesthetics that preceded it. This research has generated a heterogeneous collection of heuristic labels that highlight different dimensions of fiction beyond postmodernism.² Despite these differences, all agreed that contemporary novels show a shift in perspective: they do not flatly reject postmodern conceptions of reality and identity; rather they accept them and try to move beyond them. Irmtraud Huber speaks of a 'wilful aesthetics of the "in spite of", or ... an attitude of "true/but still"' (2014, 6).

On an *ethical* level, contemporary novels are said to search for sincerity, intersubjectivity and commitment in response to postmodernism's

alleged solipsism and irony. The ‘post-postmodern’ novel is said to ‘reen-ergize literature’s social mission’ (McLaughlin 2004, 55), and to foreground ‘the problem of solipsism’ (Timmer 2010, 360). Lee Konstantinou identifies a wish to transcend irony because its ‘mode of critique no longer adequately addresses contemporary reality’ (2016, 8), yet this ‘postirony’ is not a return to a naive representation but a quest for a new literary form. On an *aesthetic* level, contemporary novels are said to leave behind postmodernism’s anti-illusionist metafiction, its pastiche of literary styles and its formally innovative experiments. They demonstrate a ‘retreat from ... the emphasis on textuality and difficulty’ (Eagleton 2013, 14) and prefer ‘a more stylistically translucent representation of the world’ (McLaughlin 2012, 216). Contemporary fiction nevertheless remains aware of language and narrative as constitutive of any understanding of reality (cf. Kunkel 2010). To sum up, the aesthetic and ethical changes in contemporary fiction can be considered as a process of reconstruction of the values and ideas of subjectivity and reality deconstructed by postmodernism (Huber 2014, 47–8).

Reflections on the poetics of contemporary fiction, however, tend to rely on a conception of reality or the ‘real’ that remains largely unquestioned: a stress ‘on representing the world we all more or less share’ (McLaughlin 2004, 66–7). Moreover, much criticism naively assumes that a return to less formally challenging narrative strategies will suffice for the revival of a tendency towards the social. We agree with Madhu Dubey that the social novel cannot be revived ‘on purely formalist terms’ (2011, 364) as the wider social conditions that complicate that revival – meaning neoliberal globalisation, and disintegration of the social world – remain in place and have even intensified. More importantly we challenge the assumption that realist form yields *more* reality and truth than postmodern form, as if realism is not in itself a conventionalised mode. In this book and elsewhere (Demeyer and Vitse 2021), we argue that the shift between postmodern and contemporary novels relies less on a return to the real and the other, than on a different way of relating to the real and the other. Our hypothesis of the affective dominant contends that the real is not primarily experienced and valued in cognitive (epistemological, ontological) but predominantly in affective terms. This different engagement with reality, we argue, reflects a historical transformation.

Criticism on contemporary fiction in the diachronic mode provides, however, few convincing historicising accounts of the shift beyond postmodernism. To some the contemporary novel responds to the uncertainty about the value of literature in our current mass-mediated society (Green 2005, 10). Others refer to the weariness with

and institutionalisation of postmodern ideas (Dames 2012). We perceive this weariness as a surface effect of broader social and cultural changes that have made postmodern ideas become inapt as means to analyse and understand the contemporary. Other scholars of contemporary fiction do integrate historical context and contemporary culture, but are less or not interested in the question of postmodernism. Peter Boxall puts twenty-first-century fiction in the context of technological innovations that have altered our experience of time and space (2013), whereas Annie McClanahan and Lauren Berlant situate contemporary fiction in the context of neoliberalism. In *Dead Pledges* (2016), the former reads cultural phenomena in light of the twenty-first-century debt crisis and debt economy and the latter's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) discusses cultural objects in the light of the crisis of the welfare state and its accompanying good life fantasies.

Our book will equally situate contemporary fiction within the ideological and socioeconomic context of neoliberalism. Before we do that, we return in the next section to the work of Russian Formalism and Brian McHale and their notion of a dominant. This concept allows us to bring together both the diachronic and synchronic framing of contemporary fiction.

Affective dominant

On a diachronic level, we put forward the hypothesis that contemporary fiction marks a shift towards an affective dominant. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) Brian McHale defines the dominant as a structure that brings order and hierarchy in a diversity of techniques and motifs in a literary text. In modernism the dominant is epistemological: its central question, 'how can I know reality', is foregrounded in its use of montage and multiple perspectives. The dominant in postmodernism is ontological: literary story worlds that constantly shift between factual, fictional and fantastic worlds lead to central questions such as 'what is reality?' or 'Which world is this?' (McHale 1987, 10).

It is our hypothesis that, for contemporary literature, this dominant is affective. The prevailing questions are 'how can I feel reality (myself, the other, the past, the present, and so on)?'; 'how can I feel to belong to reality?'; 'how can I feel reality to be real?'; 'how can I feel connected to society and the problems it faces'.³ This affective dominant manifests itself in motifs such as desire, attachment, fantasy, embodiment and identification. Formal and narrative devices that in modernist or postmodernist

fiction contributed to an epistemological or ontological dominant, tend to foreground questions of affectivity in contemporary fiction.

The concept of the dominant originated in Russian Formalism and is defined by Roman Jakobson as ‘the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components’ (Jakobson 1971, 82). A literary work or genre is not just a collection of formal devices: one element is more strongly foregrounded than the other and is more important in determining the specificity or distinctive character of a work or genre. A literary-historical development can then be analysed as a shift in the dominant. Brian McHale famously applies this formalist concept in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) to conceptualise the transition from modernism to postmodernism. He defines the dominant as the ‘common denominator’ in a series of textual features or as the overarching question or problem (7–8). Nevertheless, this dominant question is foregrounded by specific formal devices, such as multiperspectivism and shifting narrative worlds in the modern and the postmodern novel respectively.

McHale’s theory has met with significant criticism (see Hutcheon 1988).⁴ Without putting aside this criticism, we will take the hypothesis of a shift in the dominant as the starting point for our analysis. This concept, as revisited by McHale, allows for a view of literary development as a shift in focus rather than as a break. The shift to an ontological dominant, according to McHale, does not imply that postmodern fiction no longer poses epistemological questions, but only that these are no longer foregrounded. The shift in dominant, moreover, is not a purely textual feature but also an effect of reading (McHale 1987, 6).

In our use of the concept, we contend that the dominant manifests itself in themes, motifs, intertextuality, character and plot as much as it does in formal features. More than McHale, we aim for a societal and ideological contextualisation of the dominant. We want to complement the diachronic approach implicit in the concept of the dominant with a synchronic perspective on the novel as it relates to its contemporary (societal, ideological, technological) context – that of neoliberalism. We thus aim to provide a historical understanding of the dominance of affective concerns in contemporary fiction.

Before we move on to the synchronic axis of our dominant, we first want to address some further specifications of our concept. A first concern is our relation to affect theory. In the last two to three decades, the study of affect has become prominent in cultural and also literary studies.⁵ Although our hypothesis is not without a relation to this affective turn, it cannot be reduced to it. It is not our primary concern to theorise affect

as a philosophical concept, nor do we aim to analyse the specificity and formal conditions of affect in the novels under discussion or to present a model for the analysis of affect in literature. Our approach is concerned with recent literary history and with a critical reading of twenty-first-century fiction rather than with the theoretical study of affect as such. We did not come to contemporary literature from the angle of affect, but started from the question how to ideologically understand the emergent 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977, 128–35) in contemporary fiction and arrived at the dominance of affective issues. Our use of the term affective then refers to a wide range of issues and questions that pertain to feelings, desires, attachments and motivations as they are both represented and formally developed in fiction.

This approach distinguishes our take on affect from two influential strands in affect studies that consider affect to elude verbalisation and representation. A formalist approach, such as Isobel Armstrong's (2000), understands affect as being generated by aesthetic form and takes as its starting point 'the disengagement of language and affect' (Armstrong 2000, 115). A Spinozan/Deleuzian approach, such as Brian Massumi's (1995, 2002), sees affect as a non-semantic, bodily intensity and an unformed potential for variation (Massumi 1995, 97). However, we are less concerned with affect as an ontological potentiality that defies representation than with affects in their societal and historical (contemporary) construction.

Our approach is closer to the 'everyday affect school' (Wiegman 2014, 14) that finds its main source of inspiration in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and in queer and feminist critical practice more generally. As for instance exemplified in Ann Cvetkovic's *Depression: A public feeling*, this school has a 'generic' use of affect that includes both 'embodied sensations' and 'psychic or cognitive experiences' (2012, 4). Whereas the ontological approach distinguishes affect from ideology, this strand of affect studies allows for the integration of affect in the critique of ideology. It analyses the 'affective economy' of political society and culture (Ahmed 2014), the historical dynamics of affect as investment in and attachment to images, persons, practices and discourses (Sedgwick and Frank 2003), and the 'impersonal structures' that mediate such investments (Berlant 2011, 121–6). Our ideological reading of contemporary fiction is akin to this sort of inquiry: we study affect as a means to specify and locate dominant issues in twenty-first-century fiction and to interpret these findings in their societal and historical context.

Secondly, our hypothesis of the affective dominant does not necessarily contradict the reading of contemporary fiction in terms of a commitment to realism and social concerns. The affective should not be read

as a (narcissistic) retreat into the private individual that moves away from broader social and political issues. It is rather that the latter manifest themselves primarily at an affective level. The affective is political, in the sense that the political is experienced affectively. Whereas the epistemological and ontological doubt of modernism and postmodernism demonstrates how the political infiltrates at the level of knowledge and imagination, the contemporary affective crisis demonstrates how the political infiltrates at the level of feeling. In many of our analyses, social and political conflict is primarily experienced at the affective level. Political society is seen to penetrate the characters' affective level of experience and to render it factitious and simulated. Their (lack of) involvement with social issues is premised on their affective disposition, while at the same time their social position generates affect and the circulation of affect.

Finally, we want to distinguish our concept from other scholars who have emphasised the importance of feelings and affects in their analysis of contemporary fiction. According to Nicoline Timmer (2010, 43–6) post-postmodern characters feel empty inside while at the same time being overwhelmed with feelings they cannot appropriate; only through sharing feelings is the self able to construct a self-narrative. Whereas Timmer focuses on a 'relational ontology' (46), our hypothesis of the affective dominant shifts the emphasis towards feeling as the crucial means to relate to the other, the self and the real. The importance of the affective for contemporary fiction is also foregrounded in Rachel Greenwald Smith's critique of 'the affective hypothesis': 'the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience' (2015, 1). This 'unsettling consensus' is symptomatic of the commodification of affective experience in neoliberal subject formation, in which 'emotions are increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage, rather than as instances of authentic experience' (6). Yet, whereas Greenwald Smith assumes a smooth integration of subjectivity into the workings of the market in its subjectivity, our book demonstrates the lack of such integration and the affective crisis that follows from that conflict.⁶ In the following section we will further situate our argument through a discussion of the relation between contemporary fiction and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism and the contemporary novel

On a synchronic level, this book aims to make an intervention in discussions about the relation between contemporary fiction and neoliberalism

through the introduction of Anna Tsing's concept of friction (2004). That allows for more flexible interpretations moving beyond the models of resistance versus complicity that prevail in framings of this intersection of literature and society. More specifically, the concept of friction allows us to discuss both the violence of neoliberalism and the possibilities of life and creativity that may be found within neoliberal ruins. We read that violence in terms of the reification of affective and cognitive experience into information. Contemporary fiction, we argue, seeks possibilities of difference and creativity in affective attachments.

In the second decade of this century, the study of periodising the literary present shifted towards a focus on the interplay between the contemporary novel and neoliberalism. Even though the nature of that interplay has been conceptualised in various ways, two paths tend to dominate. On the one hand there is the question how the novel has actively engaged with the issue of neoliberalism. On the other hand, research inquires if and to what extent neoliberalism has determined or otherwise shaped the production of literature's form and representational content.⁷

Although in both tracks neoliberalism is understood to be a multifaceted object, a 'shared historical account' and 'shared logic' can be discerned: from the 1970s onwards, an economic rationale pervades all levels of social experience and remodels them after the firm operating within a deregulated and privatised market (Watson 2019, 430). In several studies, this historical logic begets the quality of a 'telos'⁸ that tends to settle the relation between literature and neoliberalism as one that Fredric Jameson, following Althusser, typified as 'expressive causality': history and literature get rewritten 'in terms of some deeper, underlying, and more "fundamental" narrative' (2002, 12). Thus Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, in the introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017), suggest a chronology of four phases in the development of neoliberalism⁹ – first as a monetary policy in the undoing of Bretton Woods (the economic phase), then as the 'dominant political ideology of the 1980s' (2017, 6) in the Reagan and Thatcher regimes (the political phase). The third and fourth phases are of more interest to the relation with literature. The former, which Huehls and Greenwald Smith call sociocultural, sees neoliberalism subsuming fields such as the arts and education 'to a rigorous economic calculus' (8). In the fourth, ontological phase, neoliberalism has insinuated itself even more granularly into sociocultural life as to have become 'a way of being' (9), rather than a set of ideas or policies (or poetics, for that matter).

In such teleological narrative, the relationship between literature and neoliberalism is often seen in either epistemological or ontological terms. The epistemological model derives from a Marxist conception of culture as superstructural and tends to conceive of literature as ideologically complicit with or actively intervening into the neoliberal infrastructure. Studies of literature and neoliberalism informed by that model often evoke ‘allegories of the subversive versus the hegemonic, resistance versus power’ (Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 110). Mathias Nilges, for instance, initially rejects a discussion of the neoliberal novel in terms of ‘subsumption’ or ‘autonomy’, instead opting for an inquiry into the novel’s involvement in ‘cultural regulation’, into its ‘crucial function in the making of neoliberalism’ (2015, 366). However, he goes on to distinguish between novels that ‘reproduce’ neoliberalism’s temporal logic – collapsing the (imagination of the) future into an eternal present and linear time into temporal immediacy – and those that ‘engage’ with this problem, and hails the latter as ‘important like never before’ (371). Conversely, in his contribution to *Neoliberalism and Literary Culture*, Nilges suggests that postmodern literature’s celebration of difference was instrumental in ‘providing that set of fictions that gave rise to neoliberalism’ (2017, 109).

The ontological model moves beyond such dualist reasoning only by collapsing literature into neoliberal’s ontological state. This is the case in Huehls’ and Greenwald Smith’s fourth phase of neoliberalism, in which ‘[t]he market only requires our presence, our being in and of it’ (2017, 9–10). Both literature and history are then governed by a neoliberal essence of market rationality. The allegory of ‘resistance versus power’ nevertheless persists: in this fourth phase Huehls and Greenwald Smith see new forms of ‘philosophical realism’ attempting to locate ‘potential forms of immanent resistance’ to neoliberalism at this ontological level (10). These two models, then, ultimately intersect: both argue that neoliberalism has reshaped literature while authors should self-consciously recognise and reflect upon such condition if they do not wish to uncritically assimilate to its potentially totalising logic.

In scholarship on contemporary literature’s entanglement with neoliberalism, then, we see a predilection to conceive of that relation in dichotomous terms of subsumption and subversion (or, at least, critical distance). Associated with that dichotomy seems to be a critical preference for impersonality as a narrative or affective mode and, vice versa, a huge scepticism for personality as such mode. In *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024) – a book we will further discuss in chapter 3 – Anna Kornbluh discerns an aesthetic of immediate – unmediated – presence,

charisma and authenticity, which she reads as the cultural reflection of twenty-first-century capitalism's compression of time and futurity into instantaneity and into a lived experience of time collapsed into an eternal present. She finds this exemplified in first-person (autofictional) narrative. To counter capital's appropriation of literary imagination Kornbluh proposes narrative remedies, such as impersonal narration, which would afford an objectifying, critical distance from unmediated lived experience in 'too late capitalism'.

Similarly, as mentioned, Greenwald Smith signals a focus in contemporary literary production and discourse on the emotional affordances of reading and the fictional mediation of individual emotional experiences. Greenwald Smith aims to shift scholarly attention from emotional experiences as embodied and recognised by individuals (say, characters or readers) to 'impersonal feelings' circulating within and generated by the material texture and narrative organisation of the literary work. Greenwald Smith's distinction between personal and impersonal feelings is reminiscent of Brian Massumi's opposition of emotion and affect, in that both impersonal feelings and affect elude being contained by narrative representation or individualised experience. Therefore, Greenwald Smith sees such '[impersonal] feelings as offering greater potential for catalyzing experiences that are challenging to the status quo' (2015, 19). As these 'are not yet "owned and recognized"' and 'def[y] the prevailing notion that feelings only exist insofar as they are the property of the individual' (20), these affects might subvert or escape the neoliberal reification of affective practices.

A final example comes from Daniel Hartley (2019), who identifies contradictory impulses in neoliberalism towards on the one hand 'impersonality and depersonalization' and on the other hand 'personalizing tendencies' of various kinds (135). The former refers to the abstraction inherent in capitalism's impersonal mode of domination. The latter refers to 'structural personifications' imposed by a specific regime of normativity, for instance 'the entrepreneur of the self' Foucault recognised as the normative neoliberal *persona*. His reading of literary case studies, however, is guided by the assumption that emancipatory impulses are primarily to be found on the level of impersonality, for instance in Rachel Kushner's impersonal narrative style 'profound, emancipatory depersonalization' (140) serves as the hallmark of the revolutionary subject moving beyond its particular subject position.¹⁰

For all three authors, a critique of the personal is related to a concept of neoliberal subjectivity as 'human capital' or 'entrepreneur of the self' (Greenwald Smith 2015, 3; Kornbluh 2024, 7, 81): the configuration

of the subject as an enterprise who needs to invest in their affective and cognitive capacities to increase their value (cf. [chapter 1](#)). It is important to repeat here that such conception of the neoliberal subject should be understood as less universal than it is often made out to be. McClanahan has convincingly argued that the contemporary exemplary neoliberal subject should be thought of in terms of un- or underemployed, indebted and working for low wages or in the gig economy: ‘growing portions of the population of the developing and developed world are finding themselves not “entrepreneurs of the self” but no longer worth capital’s investment at all’ (2019, 121). Those populations are wageless or deemed surplus and stand in stark contrast from the relatively smaller group of the population that is incentivised to develop their human capital and belongs to the professional managerial class.

That said, the authors discussed in this book or in the work of the critics above are rather interpellated by a neoliberal ideology of entrepreneurship than that they are being cast out or relegated to the bottom of the economy. Yet, the favouring of the impersonal by a strand in contemporary criticism seems to suggest that these critics perceive this interpellation as total. If the subject is saturated by a neoliberal ideology, only an impersonal mode of affectivity can provide a way out of or distance from neoliberalism.¹¹ We believe such model to be too binary. Rather, we propose a more flexible and generous, yet not necessarily endorsing, model of reading subjectivity in contemporary fiction in which neoliberal ideology is not an encapsulating totality but a complex of abstraction, alienation *and* possibility.

In this book, then, we take Johansen’s and Karl’s uneasiness with ‘oversimplified models of resistance or capitulation’ seriously (2015, 205), and we similarly question the seemingly concomitant dichotomy of the personal and the impersonal. We take as a given that literature as a social phenomenon ‘intervene[s] in contemporary history in the very act of representing it’ (Dollimore 1985, 10). With Anna Tsing, however, we understand the dissemination of neoliberalism in the different fields of social life in terms of friction: ‘the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference’ (2004, 4). In literary studies of neoliberalism, the latter is often conceived in idealist terms: a set of ideas that were adapted as policy and then went on to transform the texture of all dimensions of life (cf. Huehls and Greenwald Smith 2017, 5). Instead of assuming such successful integration, a model of friction pays attention to the unexpected, unstable and uncertain. Friction should, however, not be understood as ‘a synonym of resistance. Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction’ (Tsing 2004, 6). It is what gives a

particular universal its effectiveness as well as that which gets in the way of its smooth functioning as an all-encompassing force. Whereas Huehls and Greenwald Smith see the neoliberal subject 'glid[ing] smoothly through a depoliticized world of networked relations and immaterial labor' (2017, 10), friction allows us to see both violence and possibility.

Similarly, we understand reification of the subject's affective practice not as smooth or absolute. Reification creates a sense of alienation, understood by Anna Tsing as 'that form of disentanglement that allows the making of capitalist assets': to reify one's affective capacities is to disentangle them from their 'life worlds' and modify them to 'one stand-alone asset' (the furthering of one's own capital), 'whereby everything else becomes weeds or waste' (other affective needs and functions are not engaged with or are distorted) (2015, 133, 5–6). In this book we argue that in contemporary fiction these weeds take the shape of an affective crisis: a difficulty in feeling attached to the world, the other, oneself and one's own lived experience. Yet guided by the concept of friction we argue that besides this affective loss and impoverishment contemporary fiction also explores possibilities to find affective attachments in this context of neoliberal reification.

A note on method

Our approach is inspired by Lauren Berlant's reading of affective scenarios in their seminal work *Cruel Optimism* (2011). A sensitivity to characters in their narrative embedding is key to understanding the patterns of expectations, attachments and improvisation allowing people to navigate social contexts that are never individual. It is vital, Berlant explains, 'to see that in the affective *scenarios* of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life' (9). That situation is best qualified as 'crisis ordinariness', a term identifying both daily life as crisis-ridden and crisis as an ongoing condition of daily life, rather than a rarified historical exception or an infrastructural abstraction. This crisis ordinariness 'force[s] people to adapt to an unfolding change' on a quotidian level; the affective experience of living in crisis ordinariness 'unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming' (10).

Thus Berlant reads stories 'with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated' (2011, 10). Such affective experiences are never individual or contained by individual lives or individual expressions of feeling, even though individuals share in them and their narratives may mediate them: 'affective atmospheres are shared,

not solitary ... affective responses may be said significantly to exemplify shared historical time' (15). Even though Berlant is indebted to a tradition of materialist critique, their approach steers clear of dichotomies of oppression and resistance, false and true consciousness, or personal and impersonal affect. In the affective scenario of cruel optimism – a relation in which 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (1) – then, neither the objects of attachment are simply 'bad and oppressive things', nor are the subjects 'emblematic symptoms of economic, political, and cultural inequity' (15).

Similarly, our readings will be sensitive to affective scenarios and patterns registering in characters riding the uneasy waves of crisis ordinariness, occasioned as these may be by the disruption of temporality, by the reification of affective experience or by anthropogenic climate change. We thereby take imaginations of personal affective experiences as seriously as any impersonal lines of flight we might trace on the level of narrative mode or aesthetic composition. Building on the seminal feminist injunction to understand the personal as intrinsically political, we believe that, in the context of neoliberalism's double impulse of depersonalisation (through reification) and personalisation (through neoliberal subjectivity and privatisation of collective experience), the personal in contemporary fiction is more political than it has ever been.

Our political reading is also inspired by Lauren Berlant's rearticulation of the concept of infrastructure in *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022). Theorists in the leftist tradition tend to think of structure as solid and as simply reproducing itself, but for Berlant it is 'really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement' (Berlant 2016, 394). Otherwise put: structure is the result of a wanted reproduction of a thing because particular social powers and interests implement it. Infrastructure conceives of the same object, but from the perspective of those living within such structure: infrastructure is 'the living mediation of what provides the consistency of life in the ordinary; infrastructure is the lifeworld of structure' (Berlant 2022, 20). Infrastructure comprises the patterning of social life – the mediations, values, people, fantasies, movements – that make a world and bind one to that world: it is everything 'that link[s] ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation' (2016, 393). In Berlant's capacious definition, a road as much as the family can be an example of an infrastructure.

Berlant's infrastructuralism allows us to consider the lived experience of material, socioeconomic pressures as other than merely an ideological internalisation or symptom of abstract relations of production and possession. In their reinterpretation of the traditional Marxist concept of

(infra)structure – understood as the economic base of society in its modes and relations of production – Berlant questions the tendency to reify the notion of structure into a ‘calcified’ (Berlant 2022, 96), abstract determining cause, ‘a thing’ (96) existing in itself beyond its concrete embodiment in social relations and practices. This embodiment, for instance in specific living arrangements, Berlant does not understand as a saturation of a lifeworld by an abstract structure – as the work of ideological state apparatuses as Althusser would have it. Rather, infrastructures as Berlant sees them are the concrete ways in which people try to sustain themselves in conditions of crisis ordinariness. Thus, Berlant’s understanding of infrastructures collapses the traditional Marxist distinction between base and superstructure because infrastructure here is ‘at once material and symbolized’ (21).

Infrastructures become particularly visible and pertinent when social institutions promising the conditions of a good life are collapsing. As lived mediations of material pressures these infrastructures involve processes of attachment to compromised conditions of living, but also of adaptation and adjustment, which can be messy and contingent. Social relations of production and possession exist in and through ‘the material of lived relationality’ (2022, 20), which gives them consistency yet at the same time makes them potentially elastic or contingent. While a reified notion of structure ‘negates ordinary continuous adaptation and adjustment by casting them as epiphenomenal’ (96), Berlant’s infrastructuralism ‘focuses on many phases of the activity of poesis, or world-making’ (20). When traditional infrastructures fail, that is no longer sustain the reproduction of life, processes of alternative world-making may emerge and ‘things [may] stop converging in the reliable patterns of social and material reproduction’ (95). These processes of ‘unlearning’, as Berlant calls the loosening of attachments to traditional infrastructures – or ‘another way to lose your object’ (106) – set the scene of social transformation that Marxists tend to look for in ‘the abstraction of what counts as “structure”’ (20).

Our readings will be sensitive to such scenarios of unlearning, of the loosening or rearticulation of attachments – a process that, guided by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), we will also refer to as reparative (see chapter 2 of this book). Different from the rather binary strands of criticism discussed above, we do not perceive of such rearticulations as epiphenomena of the same ideological process of neoliberal subjectification. Against this reduction to sameness, we take these rearticulations seriously as differences through which characters are able to move on from a position of stuckness, to sustain themselves or even to flourish

(even if only momentarily) in an environment of crisis and alienation. This reading method does not mean we endorse all tactics of loosening or rearticulation presented in these novels; we will critique modes of rearticulation that, to our mind, are ideologically and culturally problematic and interpret them as a symptom of crisis. However, we also want to avoid a position of reductive judgement. Therefore, we do not only want to look *at* our objects but also *with* them.

The novels; the chapters

The aim of this book is not to provide an exhaustive survey of contemporary fiction, say, from the 1990s up to the present – roughly the period in literary history since the long downturn of postmodernism. Rather our transnational corpus exists out of eighteen novels by authors who came of age in a late postmodern context and whose writing, we argue, needs a different set of heuristics than the one of post-postmodernism or new sincerity. With this selection, we aim to document geographical diversity and diachronic development (within the limited range of the contemporary).

We have chosen our case studies from various parts of the world to address this affective crisis in contemporary literature at large. Our corpus roughly divides into a third of Anglo-American origin, a third of Dutch-language origin (the Netherlands and Flanders), and a third composed of novels and writers from (other) European countries, such as France and Germany, and from Latin-America (Argentina, Chile) and Africa (Senegal). This transnational corpus allows us to argue in a comparative fashion how a similar affective disposition is present and differently articulated in disparate literary cultures and social contexts. The relative focus on Dutch-language fiction is a distinctive feature of the study and speaks to our academic background in ‘Neerlandophone’ literary studies.¹² Through incorporating this minor or small corpus of literature, we want to redress its absence in most surveys of both contemporary and world literature (D’Haen 2019) as well as to introduce a corpus that in an exemplary fashion presents some of the ideas we have introduced here. More specifically, we believe that the affective crisis of the neoliberal subject is most powerfully at display in the novels of our five Dutch case studies: Maarten van der Graaff, Lieke Marsman, Nina Polak, Joost de Vries, Niña Weijers. This is an effect of three combined factors in Dutch society and culture: a dominant neoliberal realism that is not significantly challenged by epistemological frames for socioeconomic critique, except for

residual religious traditions; a relatively limited social precarisation of the middle classes compared to other countries with long-standing neoliberal policies; and, finally, the undermining of nationalist and patriarchal good life fantasies to which this literature tends to respond in rather convoluted ways.

Diachronically the book comprises novels published for the most part in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the period that saw contemporary fiction, having loosened its ties to postmodernism, coming into its own and moving forward. If Adam Kelly situates new sincerity (in American fiction) between 1989 and 2008, our corpus starts off where he ends it: the oldest novel in our corpus, *Stilte en melk voor iedereen* [Silence and Milk for Everyone] by David Nolens, was published in 2008. While the earliest novels in the corpus document the moment of transition, we do not focus on that generation of writers embodying that by now historical phase of leaving postmodernism behind. As argued earlier, whereas that set of authors made a turn in their work from postmodernism towards realism and intersubjective relations, in our corpus the socially generated affective crisis disturbs any straightforward relation to the world and intersubjectivity. Our hypothesis of the affective dominant contends that the real and the other are still mainly understood and valued in cognitive terms in the first group of authors, who reflect on postmodernism within postmodernism's cognitive mode, whereas in the second group this is predominantly in affective terms. With some exceptions (such as Ben Lerner, Heike Geissler or Zadie Smith) we thus present a group of writers roughly belonging to the millennial generation (1980–95), the youngest of these (Fatima Daas) bordering on Gen Z. This means that we tend to select novels representing these writers in a relatively early phase in their literary developments, usually at a moment in their careers when they start receiving both mainstream and academic critical acclaim.

We develop the central issues of this book in thematic chapters with each chapter discussing three novels. Our first three chapters focus on the subject. In contrast with the rather dismissive discussion of neoliberal subjectivity in contemporary scholarly work, and in line with our contention that the personal becomes ever-more political in neoliberal times, we aim to give a more generous account of the neoliberal subject's experience through a discussion of neoliberal subject formation and autofiction, identity and the intersection of axes of injustice, and coming-of-age in times of disturbed temporality. The last three chapters put the emphasis more on the subject's relation to its surroundings: to a postcolonial history, to the home in a globalised world and to the climate crisis.

In [chapter 1](#), we discuss three contemporary autofictional novels in relation to both the feminist emancipatory novel, proclaiming that ‘the personal is political’, and neoliberal subject formation. These novels revolve around the relation between life and work, and reflect on the issues of subjectivity, reification and affective experience in neoliberal society. Our interpretation of these novels takes up Wendy Brown’s analysis of neoliberal normativity and McKenzie Wark’s materialist critique of neoliberal reification of information. Inspired by Anna Tsing, we are specifically interested in the entanglement of reification and creation of life in neoliberal ruins. *Kamers antikamers* [Rooms Antirooms] (2019) by the Dutch author Niña Weijers reflects on the position of autofiction as an emancipatory genre. In Canadian author Sheila Heti’s novel *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), the epistemological reflection on the relation between living and writing finds a solution in female friendship. Heike Geissler’s *Seasonal Associate* (2018) mediates the narrator’s experience of alienation working in an Amazon distribution centre through the rhetorical device of the apostrophe.¹³

Guided by Nancy Fraser’s analytical work on injustices of distribution and recognition, we examine in [chapter 2](#) how contemporary fiction explores the intersections of various axes of injustice – contra claims that the contemporary novel in its focus on the politics of identity glosses over neoliberalism’s material inequities. In *NW* (2012), Zadie Smith explores how social identities are forged in conditions of socioeconomic and racial inequality, offering limited possibilities for social mobility. Nina Polak’s protagonist Skip, in *Gebrek is een groot woord* [Lack Is a Big Word] (2018), hopes to strike a balance between her desire to escape her identity being fixated by discourses of national identity or postcolonial critique and her desire to belong in a cosmopolitan community of care. Louis, the protagonist in Édouard Louis’ *Who Killed My Father* (2019) finds no space to develop his queer sexuality in the heteronormative working-class community he came of age in, yet he finds opportunities for attachment – if only retrospectively – in fleeting moments of rapprochement with his father.

We continue with a reading of three contemporary novels as rewritings of the Bildungsroman, a genre that traditionally expressed the cultural promise of progress and self-improvement. In [chapter 3](#), we contend that in the context of neoliberalism the optimism inherent in the promise of Bildung has become cruel: neoliberal capitalism’s disruption of temporality contradicts the sequential narrative development inherent in the genre of Bildung. Ben Lerner’s protagonist Adam Gordon, in *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), likes to think of his literary residency in Madrid as

a journey of self-discovery, yet his sense of affective detachment from his own experiences blocks any sustained emotional investment. Maarten van der Graaff's *Wormen en engelen* [Worms and Angels] (2017) reflects on a subgenre of the Bildungsroman, the postwar narrative of secularisation: as a Christian-raised millennial in a secular student milieu, Bram does not share in the genre expectation of liberation. In Fatima Daas' *The Last One* (2022), the protagonist Fatima's Bildung is disrupted by both the heteronormative temporality of married life and the queer normativity of coming-out, yet she develops new bindings with religion, family and lovers to repair her sense of detachment.

In chapter 4 we propose an interpretation of three contemporary novels' negotiations of the relationship between twenty-first-century society and its (post)colonial histories, through the lens of Paul Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia. Although these novels are primarily set in the present, their characters' experiences of their environment are informed by an affective relationship with the past. Postimperial melancholy is most evident in Dutch writer Joost de Vries' *Oude meesters* [Old Masters] (2017), which evokes the Netherlands' uneasy reflection on its colonial history. Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019) is haunted by both the contemporary politics of migration and native American history, and searches for an ethically responsible mode of narration. Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *The Most Secret Memory of Men* (2024) introduces a Senegalese writer who is invited into metropolitan literary culture while being required to internalise white culture normativity. The novel repairs a space of aesthetic possibilities that was opened up as well as obscured by colonisation.

In contrast to the postmodern emphasis on the nomad and mobility, the home, experiences of homelessness and home-longing are central motives in contemporary fiction. Chapter 5 understands these motives as effects of the friction that attends processes of globalisation and the commodification of housing, and analyses the home as a transitional infrastructure that is bound up with and not simply in opposition to global capitalism. In *Stilte en melk voor iedereen* [Silence and Milk for Everyone] (2008) by David Nolens, the home mediates the longing to depart from a postmodern nomadism and to arrive back home in care and attachment, yet such mediation ultimately fails. Through the portrayal of a fictional pandemic, Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) questions (work) routine, nostalgia and consumption as means to inhabit the pressures of a globalised world that leaves its main character feeling homeless. Alejandro Zambra's *Ways of Going Home* (2013) relates how the home became affectively and politically insecure during Pinochet's dictatorship and

speaks of the desire to return (the country, oneself and one's beloveds) back home without, however, falling into the trap of nostalgia.

In [chapter 6](#), the final chapter, we pick up the theme of climate change. We argue that in contemporary fiction the environmental crisis is often experienced as an affective displacement. Such displacement, we argue, results from what Rob Nixon terms the 'slow violence' of ecological degradation (2011). The three novels we discuss seek for ways of repairing this crisis in attachment and care. In Lieke Marsman's *The Opposite of a Person* (2022) the main character's depression obstructs her love relationship and her engagement with the climate struggle. She tests different critical frames to mediate this experience yet these fail to deliver her from her affective loneliness. The main character's detachment in *The End We Start From* (2017) by Megan Hunter mediates the flood she experiences and gets repaired in the care for her first-born. All care, however, breaks down in Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream* (2017) because of environmental degradation, leaving its main character trapped in life-threatening anxiety.

Our conclusion offers an overview of the different affective scenarios and types of aesthetic and critical frames through which these novels mediate the affective crisis that we argue is central to contemporary fiction's aesthetics and politics.

Notes

1. McKenzie Wark similarly questions an idealist view of neoliberalism, but focuses on the reification of information instead of the long downturn (cf. [chapter 1](#)).
2. In *Literature After Postmodernism* (2014), Imtraud Huber discusses many of those labels: "neo-realism" (Rebein and others), "renewalism" (Toth), "aesthetics of authenticity" (Funk), "new sincerity" (Kelly), "performatism" (Eshelman), "digimodernism" (Kirby)' (45).
3. In *Literature After Postmodernism* Huber points in the direction of a pragmatic dominant (2014, 40), whereas Adam Kelly in *New Sincerity* speaks of an 'ethical' dominant (2024, 36–7).
4. The concept of the dominant raises theoretical and methodological questions: is it correct to think of a literary text (or genre or period) as a hierarchically organised system and, if so, how is that hierarchy to be determined? See also, besides Hutcheon, Fokkema (1997, 20–1), Vervaeck (2007, 52), Smyth (1991, 12) and Tew (2004, 22).
5. 'Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect?' reads the rhetorical question with which Brinkema opens her study *The Forms of the Affects* (2014, xi).
6. Compare McClanahan (2016, 207–8 fn 39).
7. Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl speak of the neoliberal novel as a body of writing which may self-consciously reflect 'upon the mechanisms by which neoliberal logics solicit consent', while it 'can and does also formalise the economic present' (2015, 210). They also ask if 'the transformation' of the genre of the novel in a neoliberal regime has 'been more invisible, re-framing existing characteristics in ways that reinforce the assumptions of neoliberal capital' (204).
8. See for instance Johansen and Karl (2015, 203) and Nilges (2015, 362).
9. Bruce Robbins (2019, 842) speaks of this timeline as a 'misplaced theology'.
10. Jeffrey T. Nealon offers another example, yet from a different genre and a different generation of writers, when he reads contemporary conceptual writing (for example by Kenneth

Goldsmith) in the context of neoliberalism, suggesting that the 'affectless banality of language usage' (2017, 76) and the 'draining of affective textual *jouissance*' (80) may be seen as an antidote to affective capitalism. '[A]s innovation, affect, and creativity became integral to capitalist profit making', 'artists felt the need to migrate their practice elsewhere' (74).

11. In a review of Greenwald Smith's study, Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian suggest that the impersonal may resonate with Friedrich Hayek's neoliberal writing and his favouring of networks over subjects and feelings (2017, 609–10). A similar critique may apply to other critics who prefer the impersonal above the personal.
12. To counter the evident but misleading link between Dutch-language literature and the nation state the Netherlands, Elleke Boehmer and Sarah de Mul suggest replacing 'Dutch' with 'the umbrella term *neerlandophone* to refer to the manifold Netherlands languages variations spoken by persons, groups or localities across the globe' (2012, 18).
13. Throughout the book we will use the original title to refer to novels that have not been translated into English. From those novels, all translations are our own.

Autofiction and neoliberal reification

Mary Parsons, a thirty-something New York resident, has difficulties experiencing her life as real and imagining herself a really living person. She woke up, Mary confides, ‘feeling impersonal I almost doubted I was alive’ (Lacey 2018, 78). To pay for an expensive alternative therapy, she takes on a job in famous actor Kurt Sky’s ‘Girlfriend Experiment’. Kurt, hoping to solve the problem of love once and for all, has set up an experiment distributing the various affective affordances of a romantic relationship among female employees, hiring Mary to act the part of ‘Emotional Girlfriend’. It is Mary’s responsibility to provide Kurt with emotional support and ego confirmation. The experiment is conducted by a crack team of neurological researchers who aim to analyse love as a series of distinct, measurable informational patterns. Personal feelings, the team claim, are nothing but impersonal data in human guise: ‘just data, not mysterious, not immeasurable You can’t possibly think that a human feeling is anything more than information’ (203). This information can then be applied in goal-oriented affective practices.

Mary is the protagonist in Catherine Lacey’s novel *The Answers* (2018). Though quite clearly not an autofictional novel, *The Answers* presents a fictionalised perspective on the mechanisms of reification and abstraction intrinsic to neoliberal subject formation. For many scholars the genre of autofiction exemplifies the dynamics of neoliberalism, more specifically the formation of neoliberal subjectivity that aims to govern and increase its own human capital.¹ In this chapter we look at this logic of human capital as a process of friction that simultaneously creates abstraction and alienation: the reification of the subject’s affective and cognitive capacities into information that generates an affective crisis.

We do not, however, understand autofiction simply as a manifestation of a neoliberal rationale; we are interested in those differences and possibilities of life in and against the (affective) ruins that such reification

creates in the subject. We therefore move away from the subject as an 'entrepreneur of the self' and adapt McKenzie Wark's materialist perspective of the subject as a 'gamer' who navigates an indecisive terrain. We find common ground between this approach and the tradition of feminist emancipatory autofiction. This theoretical framework will allow us to offer a reading of autofictional novels by Niña Weijers, Sheila Heti and Heike Geissler to demonstrate how, within the friction generated by a neoliberal rationality, abstraction, alienation and possibility are intimately entangled.

Friction: abstraction, alienation, possibility

In *Undoing the Demos* (2015), a political-philosophical study of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism is not merely an economic model aimed at the liberalisation of markets. She rather conceives of neoliberalism as a new rationality: a new configuration of people, governments and companies that changes the principles of their functioning. This radical reorganisation, Brown claims, is based on the company model and, more specifically, on the model of financial markets. Crucial indicators in this model are stock value, solvency (creditworthiness, rating) and attractivity to investors. This neoliberal rationality also generates a new subject, a new normative frame of the self and of being human. For the classical *homo economicus*, life was all about the accumulation of wealth. The neoliberal *homo economicus*, however, following the principles of financial capitalism, aims at increasing the value of its own human capital. In all aspects of its existence the neoliberal subject functions as an enterprise that tries to increase its stock value and solvency, and that self-invests to attract other investors. In compliance with this model, the neoliberal subject invests in the development of its knowledge and competences (through lifelong education), as well as in its health, creative talents, and social and emotional skills.²

Brown's account ultimately looks at the subject from the perspective of capital: the subject is a capitalist trading and investing in their own capital. We would like to shift the perspective and look at the same processes from the perspective of the labourer,³ and understand its trading of cognitive and affective capacities as a continuation of the capitalist process of reification. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), Georg Lukács develops this concept through continuing Marx's classic analysis of the fetishism of the commodity in *Capital* (volume 1). Reification occurs when a social phenomenon is no longer seen as part of and in

relation to the total social process but instead presents itself as an independent product. The classic example is that of the commodity, which is no longer seen as the material embodiment of the totality of social relations but as a self-contained thing. For Lukács, in a capitalist society, this logic of reification not only applies to the commodity, but also to consciousness, referring to both the intellectual development of society (its scientific and philosophical insights) and the psychological development of the subject.

Lukács analyses the capitalist formation of the subject as a form of expropriation in which capital not only appropriates the physical but also psychic, intellectual and emotional capacities of the subject. His object of critique is Taylorism, the model that aims to standardise industrial labour on scientific grounds and ‘extends right into the worker’s “soul”’: even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it’ (Lukács 1971, 88). The labourer now confronts their skills and capacities as they would confront marketable products – or, in contemporary neoliberal terms, as skills one can market: ‘his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can “own” or “dispose of”’ (100). In Lukács’ terms, we can thus describe the articulation of the neoliberal subject as producing the reification of the social, emotional and creative capacities of the individual.

With McKenzie Wark we understand contemporary reification as one of information. If Brown, according to Wark (2017, 188), is very good at explaining the ‘what of neoliberalism’, her own account wants to address the ‘why’. Wark, however, reads neoliberalism as a reaction to a crisis in capitalism, and offers a materialist account of socioeconomic shifts in the 1970s, when neoliberalism made its ascent. The prime force driving those shifts was the reification of information: ‘Commodification moved on from land to things to information’ (179). Information as a key term affords a synthesis of the shifts in capitalism we have so far indicated. The immaterial, affective and cognitive labour of creativity, marketing, culture industry, as well as the increasing economic impact of financial markets and the rise of platforms such as Amazon and Uber all hinge on the creation, processing and property of information. Reification can then include everything, making ‘all human activity interchangeable and replaceable’ as long as it leads to marketable information, while the nature of reification also changes: ‘Commodification now means not the appearance of a world of things but the appearance of a world of information about things, including information about every possible future state of those things’ (Wark 2019, 96, 15). Labour’s product has now

attained a high level of abstraction, while the labouring body, mind and soul are ever more intensely pulverised.

Our understanding of reification moves beyond other accounts that linked autofiction and the neoliberal subject as *homo economicus*. In his blogpost 'Autofiction and autoreification' Lee Konstantinou (2021, n.p.) limits reification to the careerist practices of the author as someone who needs to sell and publish their work: 'the internalization of marketing into literary form'. Whereas Konstantinou explicitly does not want to denounce autofiction, other scholars have exhibited a strong distrust of narratives in the first person. For Walter Benn Michaels (2009, n.p.) the memoir affirms Thatcher's famous one-liner 'that there are only individuals and (most memoirs add) their families'. Anna Kornbluh (2023, 90, 111) frames such readings in her analysis of immediacy as contemporary capitalism's governing style, which for literature implies that the publishing industry collapses into 'the charismatic author', which leaves out any form of mediation and allows for a 'frictionless [circulation]' in which 'the "auto" of autofiction inscribes the self-manifestive quality common to the governmental ideology of human capital' into fiction.

Whereas these critics see the first-person or autofictional novel as expressive of neoliberal ideology, or as the smooth implementation of a neoliberal universal of human capital, our study of contemporary autofiction discerns the violence and alienation such implementation involves. This turns the labour of writing for the contemporary novelist into a pressing paradox: on the one hand their creative and affective skills give them a core position in the neoliberal production of information as value; on the other hand they are increasingly dispossessed of those skills. This is even more the case with autofictional writing, in which the writer enlists not just their skills but also their lives and themselves as resources for writing. Our discussion, however, does not want to end with demonstrating how contemporary fiction is a symptom of capitalist transformations. Autofiction might also be a way of regaining a degree of autonomy in a context that deprives the subject of the possibilities of freedom and emancipation. With Tsing (2015, viii) we are interested in 'what manages to live despite capitalism'.

To mark our position towards neoliberal reification, we therefore suggest displacing the figure of the writer as 'entrepreneur of the self' by the figure of the gamer. In *Gamer Theory* (2007), Wark sets out from the observation that contemporary life feels like a competition in which we all stand to one another in a relation of battle and ranking. She theorises such experience through taking the digital consoler game as an allegory for a world remade into a 'gamespace'. Whereas in the former the

gamer can intuitively discover the algorithm governing the game's rules, in gamespace the rules cannot be figured out, while the game has real-life consequences. Play becomes work, requiring all the subject's creative and affective capabilities to survive in a game not of their choosing, in which loss is more certain than victory. Everybody finds themselves in this gamespace, but different practices can be developed: play without accepting the rules, or create new values, new rules.⁴

Rather than seeing autofiction as the product of authors playing the game of human capital, we suggest looking at the autofictional author as a gamer who, within precarious circumstances and with all the skills and information they have at their disposal, aims to find possibilities of life – for themselves or their alter egos – within the ruins of the abstraction that neoliberal subjectivity implements. In the cases we discuss below, autofiction affords the nurturing of affective attachments from which difference and creativity can emerge besides and within the interchangeable sameness of reification and the binary logic of winners and losers.⁵ Such difference is not necessarily (although it may well be) one of opposition or defiance, but may simply offer a reprieve and sense of self-preservation, create a fold in the everyday grinding of affective and cognitive skills, or be an (implicit) reflection on the contradictions of both creating and dispossessing one's life in writing.⁶

A focus on difference as a potential for life is present in contemporary discussions of autofiction that situate it in a tradition of second-wave feminist autobiographical writing – such as 'confession' or 'experiential stories' – that politicised and presented those experiences that were routinely sidelined as private, such as sexual and affective relations, as intrinsically societal phenomena.⁷ Moving against a neoliberal post-feminism that commodified feminism and displaced it as a political movement – invoking feminism only to dismiss it as 'a spent force ... as having already passed away' (McRobbie 2004, 255) – these critics aim to emancipate the particular experiences of those whose voices are marginalised, discounted, unheard or always already commodified. In her monograph on what she terms 'contemporary feminist life-writing', Jennifer Cooke (2020, 18) concedes that such writing emerges in 'an environment saturated in broader cultural and social concerns with the management of the self', while taking care to distinguish emancipatory efforts at feminist subject formation from reductive readings of such works as neoliberal appropriation of the self as human capital. In her discussion of autotheory, Lauren Fourier (2022, 1–2) is interested in the 'tensions' between feminisms and 'neoliberal imperatives surrounding the self'. Similarly, Yanbing Er (2018, 1–2) reads novels by Heti and Jenny O'Fallon as a

'counterpoint to a postfeminist subjectivity shaped by a neoliberal logic of self-improvement'. Their autofictional writing, Er argues, attempts to recast personal experiences, like the feminist autobiography before, as the substance of a collective political project.

In what follows, we look at three contemporary autofictional novels that both revolve around the relation between life and work, and that deploy strategies affording a critical reflection on the issues of subject formation, reification and affectivity. Our interest is especially in the entanglement of reification and creation of life in neoliberal ruins. *Kamers antikamers* [Rooms Antirooms] (2019), by the Dutch author Niña Weijers, presents a profound yet undecided reflection on her relation to the feminist tradition and on the position of autofiction as an emancipatory genre. In *How Should a Person Be?* (2012) the Canadian author Sheila Heti moves from reifying others and her alter ego into information for both life and work to an affective relation of female friendship. Heike Geissler's *Seasonal Associate* (2018) mediates the narrator's experience of alienation working in an Amazon distribution centre through the rhetorical device of the apostrophe, which retroactively allows her to find affective attachment within an environment in which all social relations are reified into object relations. All three novels thus explore possibilities for a difference from reification.

The desire for an emancipatory genre: Weijers

At the beginning of *Kamers antikamers*, Niña Weijers' second work of fiction, an 'almost deaf' writer whom the narrator reveres calls her work 'a more or less accidental byproduct of her life' (Weijers 2019, 15). The scene seems to refer to a real-life interview Weijers conducted with Chris Kraus, and may guide the reader's interpretation of what follows. However, *Kamers antikamers* is not a typical autofictional novel. The narrator remains anonymous, even though various references to autobiographical facts the reader might be aware of allude to the genre.

The protagonist cannot be unequivocally identified in the novel's intricate composition, in which longer narrative chapters alternate with conversations between the narrator and like-minded writers. Some chapters are narrated by an anonymous first-person narrator. Others have third-person narration, generically referring to characters as 'the man and the woman' or 'the two women'.⁸ Only in one chapter do the characters have names; otherwise they are referred to by pronouns or professions. A series of short chapters presents an ongoing dialogue

between the narrator and a female character referred to as 'M', who is also a writer. The two friends stroll around the park playfully discussing their respective works.⁹

Clearly, the novel's mode of narration is self-reflexive and self-consciously invites its dismissal as neoliberal self-commodification. Weijers portrays her protagonist as a cultural entrepreneur for whom her work is the driving force in a life of public talks, grants and residencies, which in their turn provide the resources for more writing. Autofiction is presented here in the context of neoliberalism, which reifies life as well as the narratives that give meaning to it. The novel contours the affective hole dug out by this total reification. The novel's form, we argue, allows the protagonist to find affective attachments that spark pulses of creativity within this process of reification. It generates a movement back and forth between affective experiences and the processes of reification in which these are embedded, and thus affords an experience of that process rather than simply its product. The subject's immanence in neoliberal reification does not imply a perfectly smooth incorporation: there is a friction that *Kamers antikamers* explores.

The novel's composition superficially resembles that of a frame narrative, with the short chapters presenting the narrator's conversations with M serving as the frame. The longer chapters in between could then be seen, not quite as stories narrated by characters in the frame story, but rather as variations on a life untold – or, given the almost deaf writer's Deleuzian rhetoric, as multiple actualisations of a virtual plane. As an alternative to chronology, that writer presents a lateral poetics of 'parataxis', hopping 'sideways through space' (Weijers 2019, 25–6). The one thing you need is a thread to hang on to: 'Something, or preferably someone, who keeps things together' (22). To which the narrator replies: 'M' (22).

Through its frame-like structure *Kamers antikamers* consistently alludes to the distinction between life and the stories we tell about life. Numerous cross-references and variations between the chapters link up the episodes and simulate a life preceding the story. Chapters often appear to be coupled, as if one presents a fictional representation of the contents of the conversation in the other. The first of two consecutive chapters in the first half of the novel is set as a dialogue between the narrator and M about the book M is writing: 'In the meantime, M said, I turned myself into a physiotherapist' (Weijers 2019, 81). In the next chapter, the narrator describes the writer's residency she has just moved into, while M 'worked as a physiotherapist' (97). The conjunction of the chapters simulates the distinction between narrative and reality, and

suggests that so-called 'real life' is effaced or wanders virtually through the novel's various episodes.

In a chapter in the realist genre, the narrator hosts a dinner party for friends. Here she is the mother of a four-year-old boy, Arie, whose father, Daniël, she appears to have left. In the preceding chapter (Weijers 2019, 120), M outlines a scene she is trying to write: 'A typical thirty-something dinner party with good wines and recipes from a cookery book. You are living with your husband and two children in a bourgeois house.' This episode unfolds the protagonist's existence as a middle-class good life fantasy of sorts, yet, even if prompted by M, a traditional family with both a mother and a father cannot be imagined. Playful as these interactions between M and the narrator may be, we take them seriously as moments of joint creation, sparked by a genuine affective connection, which open up new narrative actualisations for the protagonist.

To understand the (affective) logic of this structure, the motif of the letter board, introduced in another chapter, is particularly instructive. During a skiing holiday in the French Alps an unnamed 'sound engineer' tells the protagonist about his relationship with a boy who was unable to speak or write because of a brain impairment. Using a letter board, the engineer enables the boy to speak; yet gradually he realises that the boy's words, at least partly, derive from his own mind. The boy's language is a shared creation of which the origin cannot be traced. The engineer concludes 'that you wanted to go somewhere without being aware of this, and apparently this not-knowing had the power to set the body in motion' (Weijers 2019, 75). The narrator envies him this story, 'which genuinely meant something for him' (76) and misses a proverbial letter board to spin a story from her own not-knowing. She does not so much miss a story as the source of a story, 'something I could put into words' (77). At the same time 'the story did not seem to want me' (77). A letter board could help her 'tell what [her] mind kept hidden for itself' (77). What drives her writing eludes her, she implies, as well as it eludes narrative representation.

The letter board is a crucial *mise en abyme*, accounting for the various narrative episodes in the novel as attempts to voice 'what [the narrator's] mind kept hidden for itself' (Weijers 2019, 77). The narrator expresses a poetics of unknowing, yet also speaks ironically about the commodification of romantic notions of creative surrender and mystic revelations. The narrator uses the metaphor of the Ouija board to describe the almost deaf writer's 'words as a prophecy, a glass moving across the Ouija board' (18). Her longing for 'guides' and 'religiosity' is related, she thinks, to a 'deeply felt, wordless grief' (17), which in her position

of ‘middleclass-safeattachment-highlyeducated-safetynetwhenIfall’ (17), cannot be given a voice or a political discourse. As poetical motifs the letter board and the Ouija board are ambiguous: they imply both the singular voicing of ‘wordless’ affect and the appropriation of that desire for voicing what is unspoken – its reification into marketable stories, into information.

In the first half of the novel secondary characters talk extensively about specific problems in their lives. When a character called Mia sketches an incident she is ashamed of, the narrator is not impressed: ‘Shame you can talk about is shame light at best, watered down with vanity’ (Weijers 2019, 145). The unspeakable nature of shame recurs in the chapter in which ‘she’ visits the island in the Dutch Antilles where she spent part of her childhood. ‘I really cannot write this’ (177), she thinks when considering a shameful sexual encounter with a young black taxi driver. More importantly, perhaps, such reflections question the friction between the desire to voice affective experience and the acute awareness of thereby reifying it into information about that experience. A shameful experience makes for a good story; turning it into a story makes one question if one searched for the experience in order to make a story.

Nevertheless, the protagonist cherishes the idea that something might remain unsaid: ‘The real conflict, the real shame, that I cannot write about’ (Weijers 2019, 175). It is striking that this chapter about the island refers less explicitly to debates on colonialism and slavery than Weijers’ earlier essay ‘Nutteloos eiland’ [Useless Island] (Weijers 2017) on which it is based. The protagonist eliminates a frame that might clarify her ‘conflict’ and hesitates to have her story pinned down by postcolonial critique. Such critical discourse on exactly the kind of appropriation the incident with the taxi driver evokes, while allowing the wordless shame to surface, might simultaneously disconnect the narrator from her affective experience.

Conventional narrative genres – and the critical frames they imply – appear to function in a similar way. The narrator likes to imagine her life as ‘a certain type of film’ (Weijers 2019, 132) and has the impression she’s living ‘a genre ... rather than a life’ (105). Such reflections express awareness that narratives easily reify into clichéd tropes. More generally *Kamers antikamers* can be read as a sample sheet of genres the narrator tries to wrap around her affective sensibility. We then conceive of genre, following Berlant (2011, 6), as a narrative form of consciousness, an aesthetic form shaping elusive affective experiences into a narrated feeling.

In *Kamers antikamers*, the feminist Bildung – and often autofictional – novel is a leading genre. Its conventional narrative is that of a

female protagonist who breaks free from the gender norms holding her back (for instance as an artist). In a university course she taught, the narrator discusses ‘a short story ... about a young mother who feels smothered by her family life and runs off’ (Weijers 2019, 52–3). The narrator is haunted by the thought of that kind of life, her mother’s in particular, who ‘when she was my age, had bought a house in a quiet neighbourhood and was expecting me’ (89). She finds that frightful image embodied by the middle-aged women she meets in literary circles, who insist they would have ‘done everything differently’ (51), had they been born in her day, implying they envy her for the freedom she is supposed to have. While she feels unfree and voiceless, she is told – echoing post-feminism – that women’s liberation has already been achieved, and societal conditions are a matter of individual responsibility. A previous generation’s narrative of emancipation still inspires the protagonist to reflect anxiously on her own life; yet at the same time it has been reified into the illusion of an achieved reality obstructing continued emancipation.

The script of the feminist *Bildung* novel, then, spurs the protagonist to debunk her supposedly emancipated existence as a form of oppression. She faces the ‘calm happiness’ (Weijers 2019, 20) with her boyfriend as an abyss and enacts her own contemporary version of the feminist *Bildung* novel where she breaks free from the stereotypical role of the brilliant female student seeking ‘the teachers’ validation’ (33). In another episode, she enjoys the *Bildung* novel her mother missed out on when she leaves ‘the kindest, healthiest and gentlest man she knew’ (194) for a woman. The protagonist likes to consider this relationship from a feminist angle, yet ‘wondered at what point her own liberation (of heterosexuality, of patriarchy as such ...) was no longer a liberation’ (219). This concern echoes political lesbianism in second-wave feminism, which not only questions heteronormativity but heterosexual relations altogether. However, this political metanarrative does not quite seem to convince the protagonist, and the jagged narration of this episode evokes the friction between affective fulfilment and never-receding anxiety. She is susceptible to the objections, raised repeatedly in the novel, against opportunistic lesbianism, and is wary of politicising her experiences. These various feminist narratives of emancipation guide as well as obstruct the protagonist’s life; she faces them as sources of identification as well as objects reifying messy experiences into fixed protocols for life.

In its interweaving of the conversations with M with the longer narrative episodes, *Kamers antikamers* appears to foreground the epistemological binary of life and story. Yet the repeated invitation to epistemological reflection opens up an affective dimension: the desire to give

voice to wordless affective experience rubbing uncomfortably with the sense that voicing slips into reification. Paradoxically the narratives giving voice serve to amplify the voicelessness and the absence of an origin that could be revealed. Similarly, the novel presents critical frames and genres that afford an explanation of this affective experience. The personal is made political, while the adequacy of this politicisation is questioned. These critical frames generate friction: while affording a cognitive understanding of affective experiences, they tend to reify these experiences into information about those experiences – and thus to intensify the sense of crisis. This friction, nevertheless, hinders the smooth incorporation into neoliberal subjectivity.

This friction is integral to the novel's composition, each conversation with M sparking a new episode in which the reification of affective experience into narratives, discourses – information – about that experience is reset and revisited. At the same time, the conversations with M and, more particularly, those with the almost deaf writer provide waves of affective relief. The protagonist's voicelessness in her stories is matched by the sense of presence she experiences talking to the writer. That conversation was all about 'how we sat there', in a situation that demanded – and realised – 'my complete presence in that space' (Weijers 2019, 15). The two encounters with the writer provide the narrator with the affective anchoring she needs in her work as a 'by-product of life' (15) and her life as a by-product of work. They provide moments of presence and connection, they spark creative differences in a world of reified information, they generate a possibility of identification in a precarious existence deprived of subjectivity. The affective core of the novel, we contend, lies in the sense of attachment to these sparks of shared, unknowing creation.

Connection countering reification: Heti

In Sheila Heti's autofictional novel *How Should a Person Be* (2012), the protagonist's name corresponds to the author's and, in Sheila's best friend Margaux, one can recognise painter Margaux Williamson. The blurb claims that Heti relied on 'transcripts, real emails', but also on 'heavy doses of fiction' – the novel's American and Canadian edition were subtitled 'A Novel from Life'. That 'real' material is given aesthetic form. The book is structured as a play in five acts (although with chapters instead of scenes) and an interlude, and conversations are styled as dramatic dialogues. We aim to demonstrate that this mixture of drama, fiction and reality signals not the reification of life into a commodity but

rather a sense of affective connection and attachment that emancipates the protagonist from a reified identity.

The title raises an epistemological question that is grounded in an affective rather than a political or moral problem: Sheila, a writer, doubts whether she even is a person and whether or not she has ownership over her existence. Her typo – ‘sould’ instead of ‘soul’ (Heti 2012, 5) – makes her wonder if she has sold her soul, and even if she ever had one? If she once felt ‘the benevolent operation of destiny in every moment’ (41), that feeling seems to have abandoned her now, stripping her of any sense of certainty. The novel begets its particular intensity by its direct language and conversational tone in which the narrator unremittingly and restlessly reflects on everyday life. In these volatile, fleeting reflections, Sheila seems constantly to try reconciling the incompatible. As a potential answer to the titular question, for instance, she suggests wanting to be famous while also having a simple life: ‘It is the quality of fame one is after here, without any of its qualities’ (3). Friction is inherent to this desire. She wants the affective aura of reified popularity, to feel as a wanted product, but also to have a life that does not adhere to the neoliberal tenet of self-investment.

To help her decide how she should be, Sheila observes others and converts their characteristics into reified information, as if they are pieces of clothing that fit certain people and make Sheila wonder whether they would fit her too. Sheila is well aware of this objectification: ‘I know that personality is just an invention of the news media’ (Heti 2012, 2). She nevertheless would like her lack of sense of self to be remediated by this media invention: ‘They like me for who I am, and I would rather be liked for who I appear to be, and for who I appear to be, to be who I am’ (3). She wants the other’s admiring gaze to reify her appearance, and subsequently wants that reification to replace her absent or ugly identity. Since she believes there is ‘something ugly [inside me] which would contaminate everything I would ever do’ (22), she wants to transform herself, her life and her artistic work into ‘an object of beauty’ (13).

Next to existential, Sheila’s impasse is also artistic. In the first year of her marriage, a feminist theatre company invites Sheila to write a play about women, but not necessarily a feminist one. This confronts Sheila with the epistemological question how to represent (contemporary) women: ‘What women had to say to one another, or how a woman might affect another, I did not know’ (Heti 2012, 41). At the same time, there is the suggestion that the exemplary feminist story has become reified into a cliché that obstructs Sheila’s creativity and investment in the play. Talking Margaux through a version of the play, she denounces the

predictability of her central character's development: Ms Oddi flees her family once she 'realizes ... that she's completely dissatisfied in her life and has never reached her full potential, blah blah blah' (63). Sheila has fled her marriage and feels dissatisfied with her life, but rendering her experience in such form feels as if it undoes the singularity of that experience. It is the friction between that singularity and reification that seems to cause her obstruction.

The 'demand for representativeness', Buurma and Heffernan (2014, 89) argue, requires the women in the play to be exemplary cases. Sheila, therefore, thinks she should lock herself into her room to mould her experiences into a canonical play: 'leave the world for my room and emerge with the moon, something upon which the reflected light of my experience and knowledge could be seen: a true work of art' (Heti 2012, 40). Reifying her experience into a commodity may subsequently give a surplus value to Sheila's life – or it may not: 'if I want my life to be a work of art, then if I make bad work, it tarnishes my life' (73). Sheila's difficulties with the commission make that life and art increasingly oppose one another.

Margaux provides an important link in the development of the commission. At first Sheila sees Margaux as the solution to all her problems (Heti 2012, 94). Margaux is made into an object, an ideal, from which Sheila thinks she can derive all information she needs to write the play as well as improve her life. She starts recording their conversations to derive information that might serve as a way out of her existential and artistic impasse. Transcribing the conversations and writing about their joint activities, Sheila feels 'closer to knowing something about reality, closer to some truth' (158). This, however, leads to a break-up. Sheila thinks she 'had plagiarized [Margaux's] being and mixed it up with the ugliness that was mine' (179), and thereupon leaves for New York. Margaux, for her part, feels abused by Sheila, since she thinks the latter ends their friendship from the moment she knows 'how a person should be' (242), leaving Margaux behind in Toronto. Eventually Margaux recommissions Sheila to write the piece, although this time it does not necessarily need to be shaped as a play. It is suggested that the novel we read has substituted the play.

This shifts the focus from the epistemological to the affective. Rather than an exemplary representation of a woman we get the singular narrative of Sheila and Margaux. According to Buurma and Heffernan, relationality replaces representation because Sheila 'enters more fully into the attachments that individuate her' (2014, 90). Instead of leaving all options open, Sheila now develops an attachment. Margaux calls

Sheila an 'invariable' (Heti 2012, 265) in her life and Sheila acknowledges Margaux's singularity. She is 'not like the stars in the sky', one of many points of orientation – there is 'only one of her' (300). This helps Sheila to acknowledge her own singularity: 'I had never wanted to be one person, or believed that I was one, so I had never considered the true singularity of anyone else' (300). The affective relation displaces the reification of others and oneself as information.

Life and art no longer get in each other's way but now mediate one another. The conversations and trips with Margaux no longer serve as preparations or procrastination for writing the play; they are now an integral part of the novel. The latter is not a reified canonical work or a piece of information that provides an answer to the epistemological question how a person (a woman) should be, but instead depicts the affective relation and attachment between two twenty-first-century female artists. That process replaces the reified product. No longer does a work of art need to be an 'object of beauty' for Sheila; she can now express her ugliness in her work: 'I started throwing the trash and throwing the shit' (Heti 2012, 277). Most important, as Margaux puts it, is 'the people you're doing it with, and the experience you have doing it' (72). The form of the novel puts this affective dimension front and centre: the drama form brings the epistemological commission to mind and thus contrastively stresses Sheila and Margaux's mutual attachment; that attachment in life motivates the aesthetic form of the novel in which life and fiction become entangled. Simultaneously, the form foregrounds friction: the drama form reminds us of Sheila wanting to reify women's lives in general and Margaux's in particular, and the novel can still be perceived as Heti reifying her friendship; yet the description of the shift from reification to singular attachment precludes such easy categorisation – as in Weijers' novel, it obstructs the straightforward incarnation of neoliberal subjectivity.

Ultimately the novel does not answer the question raised by its title, but it does provide a method in its inquisitive disposition and its relationality. This is primarily expressed in the many conversations Sheila has with other characters. Lauren Berlant (2011, 57, 59) describes conversations as 'a key genre of the present' because they allow for an exchange of knowledge in a time of crisis: 'Thinking about life during lived time, everyone is figuring out the terms and genres for valuing living.' That is the drama in this novel that sees the genre of the canonical work being replaced by a more open, relational and social genre, and reified relations replaced by affective relations: information that at first needed to be reified in a work of art transforms into knowledge as part of an affective

connection. 'Life feels like it's with Margaux – talking – which is an equally sincere attempt to get somewhere' (Heti 2012, 82), Sheila says. More generally many of their conversations discuss what it means to be a female artist in a time when the scarcity of female role models is both a bliss and an obstacle (4).

Whereas in the post-feminist neoliberal imaginary a post-feminist woman should already be fully emancipated, Er (2018) argues that Sheila's confessional narrative makes clear this is not the case. We would like to add that the focus on female friendship in Heti's book allows Sheila to shed the men and their narratives, which used to control her life and thinking, and the idea of destiny that comes with them. In a fit of jealousy, for instance, an ex-lover predicted Sheila's fate, a life story that ends with a Nazi farting in her face, and Sheila finds herself haunted by the story ever since. Likewise, the tale of Moses leading the Jews through the desert to the promised land mediates Sheila's identity quest. She appears to free herself from both stories when she lies down between the buttocks of a sexually dominant and demanding man called Israel: 'it felt like the first choice I had ever made not in the hopes of being admired' (Heti 2012, 273). Her own identity no longer coincides with the way others see her: 'The way he saw me was not the same thing as me' (272). It is not a coincidence that this chapter is titled 'Destiny is the Smashing of Idols' (270–3): she does not need to achieve the perfection of the promised land; she can, rather, begin to accept her ugliness and her imperfection, breaking through, as Cooke (2020, 85) points out, the lifelong imposition on women to be likeable and good. Appearance does not need to replace being any more, as it did in the beginning of the novel. Instead, the contingency of relational identity can be fully acknowledged, which includes the friction between reifying and experiencing attachments.

Affective affordances of apostrophe: Geissler

Towards the end of Heike Geissler's workplace novel *Saisonarbeit*, translated by Katy Derbyshire as *Seasonal Associate* (2018), the narrator makes clear she is not quite ready to call it a day: 'We're not leaving this book until you've taken action' (170). The second person she is addressing ('you') is a performance of the self: 'you are me' (11). Thus 'you' is 'female', 'a writer and a translator' with 'two sons and a partner' (11). Even though her boyfriend sometimes calls her 'the only neoliberal left-winger he knows', 'you' is ready to abandon neoliberal 'narratives of success' (15). Still, 'it feels like failure when you can't live off your actual

job' (15). Moreover, 'you' is German, born in East Germany, the German Democratic Republic. In this novel 'you' is also an anonymous 'Ms ...' who has just been hired as a seasonal associate by Amazon's distribution centre in Leipzig for the 'pre-Christmas rush' (14). Although 'you' is individualised, the narrator sets out to 'introduce you to your most generic traits' (13).

This apostrophe, the novel's most distinctive narrative device, affords a playful exploration of the self reified into a humanoid tool 'to move money and material' (Geissler 2018, 95). The narrator signals a 'certain anachronism' as 'you' and her coworkers work in circumstances reminiscent of early twentieth-century industrial production, yet they 'process a colorful rainbow of contemporary commodities' (136). 'You' works in distribution rather than production, but the twenty-first-century distribution worker is articulated as an extension of the distribution process in a similar way as the Fordist industrial worker was an extension of the production process. The distribution worker is there because they cannot yet be profitably replaced by machines (136–7).

Heike Geissler's project in *Seasonal Associate*, we argue, is not to project an alternative world to that epitomised by Amazon, nor is it to sketch an outline for radical subversion of its mechanics. It is, rather, to open spaces for living – beyond mere endurance or survival, as well as beyond the 'doable' (Geissler 2018, 184) of neoliberal self-help guides – within conditions of existence that the narrator assumes to be 'fatal' (138). In that respect, we suggest there is also a more affective dimension to the narrative device of the apostrophe, which, we argue, is similar to the optimistic attachment Lauren Berlant identifies in Barbara Johnson's poststructuralist analysis of apostrophe:

Apostrophe is thus an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible. (Berlant 2006, 22)

By addressing a second person, the speaking subject might feel supported by the experience, even if only imagined, of sharing a space and thus being connected to another person. Even though the narrator likes to pose as the puppeteer holding 'you' by her narratorial strings – for example half-way through the novel she decides 'you' cannot have her partner and children after all (Geissler 2018, 78) – she also appears to engage in an affectionate, albeit imaginative, relationship with her puppet 'you'. At

one point the narrator comes to collect 'you' when the latter arrives at a tram station from work, 'exhausted' (90), trying to cheer her up with talk of Hannah Arendt. When 'you' is bed-ridden with flu, the narrator takes care of her: 'You're trembling so I bring you all the blankets I can find' (110). In these instances, the apostrophe conjures up an imaginative space, 'a fake moment of intersubjectivity' (Berlant 2006, 22), which the narrator can share with her second self. This space opened up by the apostrophe allows for a meeting of minds as well as bodies, and for the comfort of shared views and lived experience, as the following quote illustrates: 'I had the idea that you and I, whenever someone says that's the way it is and that's the way it always will be ... then you and I should both fall over backward together and start laughing' (Geissler 2018, 83).

We read this affective relationship between 'I' and 'you' as political, as it informs both the narrator's and her second self's experience of working at Amazon. The narrator needs the 'you' she is animating to perform her workplace experiences by proxy, and retroactively, but differently. The relationship between 'I' and 'you' also involves a distance: the narrator no longer works at Amazon and has managed to move on, professionally, cognitively, and affectively. Nevertheless, that period still informs her affective experience in the present. In the apostrophe she both enacts and recognises the cognitive and affective processes unfolding during a stint in the distribution centre, hoping, it would seem, to modify its affective impact beyond that period.

Working as a seasonal associate, the narrator observes, rearticulates one's experience of time, reducing one's temporal horizon to an eternal present. This contraction of time is also an appropriation of time: 'all you're lacking is an unblocked view of the days, the rest of the year that seems not to belong to you any more' (117). Workers have to submit to varying shifts, many workers 'spend [at least fourteen hours] away from home every day' (166), and the speed and efficiency with which they perform their tasks is continuously measured and reported back to them (Geissler 2018, 176). This sense of time entails a flattening of lived experience to 'sheer endurance', a never-ending conversion and reification of 'time and energy into money' (101). The worker's temporal horizon and life expectations are formatted by the temporal index points of the job, converting the lived experience of time into information: 'the end of the shift, ... the weekend, annual vacation, retirement' (139). This contraction of time appears to yield a longing for permanence, as 'you' at some point starts to 'wish for a permanent contract at this place' (151).

This rearticulation of time is but one way in which working at Amazon contracts and compresses lived experience. Cognitively it

impairs the scope of critique as it limits the worker's capacity to look beyond the immediate workplace surroundings. When 'you' is angry with a new manager, she gets stuck in 'childlike hatred of the boss' rather than 'moving on to critique the structure that enables a boss like that' (Geissler 2018, 164). Both cognitively and affectively 'you' is stuck in the moment, and thus any workplace frustration which might be politicised is contained. In other respects, the work yields appeasement and acceptance, through sheer fatigue but also through the temporal pattern of short-term contracts, projecting the false prospect of a life beyond this temporary job. The narrator warns 'you' not to fall for the trap of patience as regards her lack of nourishing social and cultural experiences. 'Your patience ... would be obedience ... nothing but an appeasement reflex' (161). 'You' should rather 'notice the deficit' and allow herself to be disturbed by the 'fatigue' and the impoverishment of life (161).

Therefore, the narrator urges 'you' to claim more agency in her position as a seasonal associate than she herself was able to and to prove that she is still alive: 'you ought to have more guts than me and not try to perform your work as well as possible; you should be trying to perform your work badly' (Geissler 2018, 169). Whereas the narrator regrets having been 'intimidated' at Amazon, she believes 'you, you could and so you can disrupt' (169). Disruption, and agency for that matter, should not be conceived in terms of a dialectic of oppression and resistance. It makes more sense to think of disruption in terms of the friction inherent in the subject's neoliberal interpellation: 'you' self-consciously magnifies the friction generated by her workplace integration with sloppiness and unprofessional behaviour, such as miscounting items or allowing faulty packages to be sent off. Disruption is the gamer's way of not respecting the rules of the gamespace they find themselves in, if only because not identifying with the rules makes one feel somewhat more alive.

Proving that you are alive, then, boils down to a less than heroic refusal to die of exhaustion. Towards the end of her stint at Amazon, the 'you' is exhausted, in physical pain and affectively numb: 'nothing here is still worth experiencing' (Geissler 2018, 201). The 'you' decides to play, rather than fight, the game and asks her doctor for a sick note until the end of her fixed-term contract. The narrator heartily approves of this strategy, which happens to have been her own. Still, when she concludes the novel with the question: 'Have you taken action or not?', she seems hesitant: 'We'll see' (211).

By leaving on a sick note the 'you' – or the narrator for that matter – certainly has not done anything to change labour conditions at Amazon.

The narrator appears to concede as much through a brief flashback to a strike at Amazon long after she had left the job. The strikers' demands are hardly revolutionary – they just 'want to be paid in line with the retail wage agreement' (Geissler 2018, 120). Amazon's failure to meet basic labour conditions notwithstanding, one of the strikers talks about his job as an opportunity, wishing the narrator 'a chance to work here again' (120). Even though 'feeling connected to the strikers' (119), the narrator's assessment that 'there's always a little bit of war everywhere you look' (121) signals her difficulty in fully identifying with traditional leftist talk of class struggle.

This flashback might imply that the striker is not entirely off the mark: labour conditions at Amazon might not be worse than those enjoyed by the narrator as a freelance writer and translator. The narrator is careful not to romanticise her own position as an immaterial labourer under neoliberal conditions. She 'can't quite tell any more whether [her] work is labor' (Geissler 2018, 115), but she stresses the precarity of her situation, which, even when she is doing well, is overshadowed by a permanent fear of sliding back into poverty – and, thus, into another stint as a low-cost seasonal associate.

So I work or I don't work, doing both with a sense of urgency, though, in a hurry and for many hours of almost every day, because I'm afraid ... of getting tired again if I sleep too much, falling into hesitation and procrastination or back into that situation where I really had no money and didn't know where to find the entrance to the world. (Geissler 2018, 115)

A brief period at Amazon was enough to demystify any aura of freedom freelance immaterial labour might have held for her. Early in the novel the narrator anticipates that 'you' will be similarly affected: 'Something inside you is essentially unsettled and will never calm down again' (29). The narrator pithily observes her own transition from 'neoliberal left-winger' to 'deeply scared left-winger' (131) and, at the end of the novel, she wryly remarks that 'you' after leaving Amazon feels 'free' and enjoys her 'slowly rising fees and [her] sprawling working hours' (211). 'You' has '[not] yet come to the ... conclusion' that the contemporary subject, '[a]s an entrepreneur of itself ... is both master and slave simultaneously' (211). It would seem, then, that the narrator is well aware of the traps the neoliberal gamespace has laid out for immaterial workers, who might feel successful when their human capital is yielding dividends, yet whose lives are no less precarious than those of low-cost, short-term retail

workers. As a gamer, the narrator permanently feels the threat of going down a level.

In the concluding pages of the novel, the narrator observes: ‘You don’t want reports on exotic antitheses to the world, you want theses with possibilities for living in this world’ (Geissler 2018, 208–9). In so far as *Seasonal Associate* can be read as such a thesis, it would suggest that possibilities for living in this world imply possibilities for affective attachments in a world that reifies affect as well as ideas and goods. Scattered throughout the novel are observations on affective living conditions within the Amazon workspace, for instance on the question whether work floor romances enhance employees’ attachment to the company (148) or to what extent friendship could be ‘expanded into a business relationship’ (208). When ‘you’ at one point believes herself in love with a co-worker, she embraces a scenario – equal shares heteronormative and neoliberal – in which he will lead her to permanent employment. The narrator is keen to demystify this delusion, yet she is also understanding of her second self’s affective need. She points out that everyone at Amazon wants to belong there, ‘because no one has any time left to belong elsewhere’ (63), implying that labour conditions overwrite and rearticulate affective relations of attachment. Thus, ‘you’ gives in to a workplace fling because ‘you have no time for tender looks elsewhere’ (156). The narrator wryly suggests her second self is ready for a course in feminist theory. However, any awareness an Amazon employee might have of feminist theory appears to suffer from the contraction of the subject’s cognitive capacities for critique we discussed above regarding the experience of time. Moreover, in the context of grinding affective reification the subject might feel detached from the epistemological affordances of any frame for cultural critique and be inclined to opt for quick – and reified – emotional support under workplace conditions.

Nevertheless, towards the end of her contract ‘you’ develops an affective attachment to co-worker Melly, which affords them a liveable fold in the workplace (Geissler 2018, 177). On a rhetorical level the apostrophe opens up possibilities of affective attachment for the narrator and her second self ‘you’. This rhetorical device thus allows the narrator to drop a book she loves in a box of books ‘you’ is handling and to ‘let you find’ (198) an excerpt that kindles a hopeful thought of a ‘[d]esire line’: a path that comes about because it is ‘wished-for’ (199).

While still working at Amazon ‘you’ considers scenarios similar to those proposed by Walter Benjamin in his essay ‘The Author as Producer’ (1998), such as ‘setting up a writing group and getting your coworkers to write, collecting stories’ (Geissler 2018, 141). *Seasonal Associate* could

very well be read in that light, as the fruit of a labourer seizing the means of immaterial – artistic as well as affective – production in order to find possibilities of living in a non-liveable space.

Conclusion: reified information; affective dispossession

If life gets reified into information, then autofiction is information about information. Reified into a commodity to be sold and bought, the book's success may in turn further the reification of the author and increase their value. That is the game of a writer's life, yet our analysis of three contemporary autofictional novels has shown that that is not all there is to it.

Working at Amazon, Geissler's seasonal associate suspects that 'the superego is a thing made up of things' (2018, 99). However, the narrator and her second self find a fold within neoliberal temporality through the mediating device of the apostrophe. This narrative mode of address retroactively yields an affective attachment that makes it possible for her to go on living – and writing – in a world permanently destabilised by a full-on confrontation with neoliberal reification at Amazon. In Heti's novel a shift takes place. First, Sheila wants to reach the top level through using Margaux as a source of information; but later their relationship moves to a friendship in which singularity and qualitative differences get acknowledged. The novel tellingly ends with a game of squash, with nobody seeming to know the rules. Weijers' protagonist navigates different levels of self-manifestation in narrative episodes that self-reflexively demonstrate the reification of affective experience. The novel's composition enacts the unfolding of diverse life narratives emerging from the affective connection between the protagonist and like-minded writers. These are sparks of creativity, however, within the worlds of reified information.

In all three novels, then, the worlds of information are subordinate to an affective function: the desire to find possibilities of life in affective attachments, which in their turn open up possibilities of difference. The lived experience of a world of reified information is, after all, one of affective dispossession. If all of one's life serves as information to create value, then that life may seem to belong to something else than oneself – exemplified by Geissler's seasonal associate's stint at Amazon, Sheila's typo 'sould' and the deprivation of Weijers' protagonist from her narrative. Crucial in remediating this affective crisis was the experience of attachment to a friend – Margaux; M; 'you' – that creates the possibility of creativity and of a space to play without rules or according to new ones.

In that sense the novels differ from the second-wave feminism's epistemological focus on consciousness-raising as a tactic to make women aware how private issues were social and systemic. Geissler's narrator is aware that her second self gives in to reified fantasies of workplace romance, including its cluster of heteronormative promises. There is a wry hint of irony in her recommending a course in feminist theory, though, since her narrative implicitly traces the gap detaching the Amazon employee – embodying a high degree of integration in neoliberal gamespace – from epistemological critique. In the autofictional texts of Weijers, Heti and Geissler, consciousness about feminist scripts is information the protagonists do not necessarily experience as helpful. The focus is rather on affective connection, and on the sense of presence and creativity it engenders, and this within the ongoing grinding of life into information within a neoliberal ruin. It is the model of friction that allowed us to see, when researching the relationship between neoliberalism and fiction, all these dimensions simultaneously – abstraction, alienation, possibility – and to discuss them in their undecided and intimate entanglement.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that the term 'autofiction' is not uncontroversial and that alternative terms have been suggested for novels similar to the ones we discuss here. Laura Di Summa-Knoop (2017) prefers the term 'critical autobiography' to refer to works by Heti and Chris Kraus. Hanna Meretoja (2022, 123) distinguishes between metafictional autofiction, which is similar to postmodern autobiography, and metanarrative autofiction, which '[articulates] how the self is constituted in relation to narratives that are only partly our own'. We understand 'autofiction' as a form of life writing that questions the truth of the self and that more or less explicitly and/or self-consciously points attention to the self as a fiction and a construction made by the institutions, ideologies, environments – in short, life world – in which the subject is entangled. We consider the novels we discuss in this chapter as examples of such autofiction, which deploy strategies to reflect on the issues we outlined above. See Cooke (2020, 20); Wark (2023).
2. In the introduction we discuss how this type of neoliberal subjectivity is limited to a particular class position.
3. We take inspiration here from McKenzie Wark's discussion of autofiction (2023).
4. In the latter case, the gamer becomes a hacker, the name Wark reserves for those labourers who create information as difference: hackers create 'new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations ... we are the abstracters of new worlds' (2007, §198). This difference begets sameness as information through intellectual property rights.
5. On 'besides', see Sedgwick (2003, 8–9).
6. Or as Wark (2023) puts it: 'writing through the contradictory experiences of trying to live any kind of creative life in the gamespace of present conditions'. On the fold and heterotopia, see Berlant (2022, 14–7).
7. Felski (1998, 83); Costera Meijer (1996, 212).
8. *Kamers antikamers* refers to contradictory views on the ideological connotations of modes of narration (2019, 20). In feminist literary criticism narrative experimentation has been related to the female writer's (impossible) subject position and the position of the female 'I' in patriarchal language more generally.
9. The anonymous M was promptly identified by Dutch literary critics as Weijers' fellow novelist and close friend Maartje Wortel.

2

Identity and politics: recognition and redistribution; paranoia and repair

In the autotheoretical essay *The Argonauts* (2015) Maggie Nelson recalls an anecdote by Christina Crosby, her former lecturer in feminist theory. Crosby's students decided to organise an educational event outside the university, because, as Nelson (2015, 73) explains, they 'were frustrated by the poststructuralist ethos of her teaching, they were tired of dismantling identities, tired of hearing that the most resistance one could muster ... was to work the trap one is inevitably in'. Upon entering the alternative student event, participants were asked to register 'how they identified' (73). Rather than to deconstruct normative identities, this anecdote suggests, Crosby's students were keen to affirm their own identities.

There is a lot to unpack in this brief excerpt. Nelson's paraphrase of the students' complaints references a quotation from an interview with queer theorist Judith Butler earlier in Nelson's memoir: 'This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in' (Butler 1992 quoted in Nelson 2015, 18). In the interview, Butler explains how the performativity of gender should not to be mistaken for the notion of 'gender as a kind of consumerism'. Gender, rather, implies 'the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms', the repetition opening up the possibility for subversive performances that 'force them [the norms] to resignify' (Butler in Kotz 1992). It would seem that Crosby's students took this deconstructivist view less as a call for resistance than as a cry of despair. For them identity is as much an object of attachment (what you identify with) as it is a forced internalisation of an oppressive structure. It is as much a way of living within the trap as it is a way of fighting it. Their real quarrel seems to be with the waning of the perspective of radical change that made Butler's work so appealing in the first place.

This chapter does not set out to resolve this conflict. Others have tried by implying that ‘identity politics’ should be seen as compatible with, or symptomatic of, the rise of neoliberalism towards the end of the twentieth century. Co-occurrence is then easily interpreted as causation. In an essay on ‘the neoliberal novel’ – or what he alternatively calls ‘the novel of identity’ – Walter Benn Michaels (2011, 1027) claims that ‘the novel of identity made questions of “recognition” more prominent than questions of “redistribution”’. If this is already a provocative claim, it is followed by a more explicit rephrasing: ‘the focus on identity functions not just to distract people from the increase in inequality but to legitimate it’ (1027). The backbone of Benn Michaels’ argument is a graph showing a steady rise in financial inequality in the US since the 1970s. In the same period, American culture, and literature, Benn Michaels contends, has tended to prefer questions of cultural difference to questions of socioeconomic difference, a preference that betrays uneasiness or even unwillingness to confront issues of class (1023).

A similar claim has been made by Joseph North in *Literary Criticism: A concise political history* (2017). According to North (1), the dominant paradigm in literary scholarship since the 1970s has been the ‘historicist/contextualist paradigm’, which reads literary works ‘as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read’. Typical exponents of this paradigm include new historicism or gender and postcolonial critique. North claims that ‘the turn to the current paradigm in the late 1970s and early 1980s was symptomatic of the wider retreat of the left in the neoliberal period’ (3). The left, the argument goes, retreated to the academy, indulging in its hermeneutics of suspicion while neoliberalism ascended. North rhetorically asks to what extent the feminist movement managed ‘to secure basic structural changes’, and to what extent ‘they [were] working to replace a materialist politics with a mere politics of recognition, thereby serving, albeit often inadvertently, as the “handmaidens of neoliberalism?”’ (58).

There is much to take issue with in these essays – most importantly, we do not recognise Benn Michaels’ sketch of the ‘novel of identity’ in the corpus we discuss. Of interest to us here is also the misleading manner in which both Benn Michaels and North support their claims with a reference to Nancy Fraser’s seminal essay ‘From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a “post-socialist” age’ (1995) as if contemporary fiction is solely preoccupied with matters of recognition. To do justice to the contemporary novel’s portrayal of politics and identity we will, in the first paragraph of this chapter, start with a brief discussion of Fraser’s analytical framework for studying the intersection of various axes of

injustice in contemporary society, claiming it affords an integrated perspective on socioeconomic as well as cultural dimensions of societal inequality. We will then complement Fraser's frame with an affective dimension, derived from Sara Ahmed's notion of affective investment in social conditions and Eve Sedgwick's analysis of paranoid and reparative positions towards ambiguous and possibly threatening objects of attachment. This conceptual frame will then guide our readings of three novels: Nina Polak's *Gebrek is een groot woord* [Lack Is a Big Word] (2018), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Édouard Louis' *Qui a tué mon père* [Who Killed My Father] (2018). All three belie Benn Michaels' complaint about the 'novel of identity' by portraying the social as a complex of intersecting 'axes of injustice' (Fraser 2013, 163).

Redistribution, recognition, attachment

Fraser (1995, 70) famously identifies 'redistribution and recognition as two analytically distinct paradigms of justice'. While the former refers to socioeconomic inequalities, such as the exploitation of labour or income inequalities, the latter is 'cultural or symbolic' and is related to 'patterns of representation' and cultural normativity (71). The merit of Fraser's analysis is to integrate questions of gender and race firmly into a left-wing, broadly Marxist paradigm, by convincingly arguing that both gender and race are 'bivalent mode[s] of collectivity' (80). This is to say that gender and race involve redistribution as well as recognition, in other words they are a matter of socioeconomic inequality as well as of cultural and symbolic injustice.

Fraser's initial framing of sexuality as an issue of recognition rather than a bivalent axis of injustice, provoked a critical response by Judith Butler (2008), which led Fraser to further specify the concept of misrecognition. Even though not directly rooted in society's economic structure, Fraser explains, injustices of misrecognition may very well have material grounding in institutionalised forms of inequality that deny certain groups or persons equal opportunities to participate in society (for instance, in certain professions or levels of education). Fraser (2008a, 62) then defines misrecognition as 'the institutionalization of cultural norms of a class of devalued persons who are impeded from participatory parity'. Thus, injustices of misrecognition – which Fraser in follow-up essays (2008b, 2013) also refers to as inequalities in status or prestige – are not superstructural in the traditional Marxist sense. Because in capitalist society there is 'a partial uncoupling of economic

distribution from structures of prestige' (Fraser 2008b, 139), one dimension does not determine the other. Nevertheless, 'the two dimensions are interimbricated' (139) and bivalent injustices need to be tackled on the levels of both distribution and recognition at the same time. While careful to avoid unproductive polemics, she is wary of the risk that bivalent injustices be addressed as 'free-standing cultural harm', thereby 'displacing redistributive claims' (132).

In a later essay Fraser (2013, 163n) concedes that, apart from gender and race, sexuality and class also – which in the original essay were cast as purely a matter of recognition and distribution respectively – and 'virtually all real-world axes of injustice' may be understood as bivalent or two-dimensional. The 'redistribution–recognition dilemma', then, implies that the remedies for both types of injustices tend to work in contradictory directions. Redistribution claims, according to Fraser (1995, 74), typically try to undermine distinctions between groups (say, between classes), whereas recognition claims more often 'promote group differentiation' (say, between men and women).

To tackle the redistribution–recognition dilemma Fraser proposes transformative remedies to both types of injustice, seeking to abolish or deconstruct group differentiation along all axes of inequality simultaneously – casting deconstructivist queer theory as the 'cultural analogue of socialism' (87). In later essays she prefers to understand misrecognition in terms of status (parity of participation) rather than in terms of identity. In her view, the conception of misrecognition as the misrecognition of one's identity would entail remedies 'that valorize group specificity' (Fraser 2008b, 137). In the 'status model' of misrecognition remedies may highlight 'underacknowledged distinctiveness' (similar to group specificity), but they may also debunk normative identities (dominant groups' claims of universality) or 'deconstruct the very terms in which attributed differences are currently elaborated' (2008b, 137).

Most importantly, we believe it a major analytical breakthrough to no longer conceive of patterns of representation and cultural normativity as superstructural reflexes – as Benn Michaels and North still appear to – but rather as a paradigm of injustice in its own right. It bears pointing out that Fraser thus avoids the trap of side-lining one type of injustice for another. Interestingly, however, Fraser (1995, 91) signals as the 'principal drawback' of her call for transformative remedies that people might not be easily 'weaned from their attachment to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities' – implicitly drawing in the classic Marxist concept of ideology through the backdoor. We believe that contemporary affect theory, in particular contributions by Sara Ahmed

and Lauren Berlant, might do some of the work that the critique of ideology did for classic Marxism; that is, in the former's words, 'offering an account of how we become invested in social norms' (Ahmed 2014, 12). To the dimensions of redistribution and recognition we might add an affective dimension, pertaining to the work emotions do in producing the 'surfaces and boundaries' (10) that allow groups to be differentiated and 'I' and 'we' to be 'shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others' (10). Ahmed conceives of her cultural politics of emotion as a critique of a model of social analysis that neglects the affective dimension. 'Attention to emotions', she argues, 'allows us to address the question of how subjects become *invested* in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death' (12).

Affect may then foreclose the possibility of a (transformative) politics of recognition and/or redistribution. Ahmed for instance demonstrates how investment in the nation can be mediated by shame, in particular shame about the nation's colonial history, its involvement in slavery or its oppression of indigenous populations. While one might expect shame to inform a disinvestment in the shameful nation, and a recognition of racialised minorities in relation to that shameful history, Ahmed argues that 'national shame works as a narrative of reproduction. The nation is reproduced through expressions of shame' (2014, 108). Expressing shame at the nation's past failure to live up to its present ideal might reinforce the belief in the moral righteousness of a nation that is capable of owning its past failures and experiencing shame about them in the first place. 'In other words, our shame *means that we mean well*, and can work to reproduce the nation as an ideal' (109). For national shame to work as a narrative of reproduction, however, the nation's past should be conceived as disconnected from its present, and historical injustices as 'cut off from injustice in the present' (118). This condition implies that emotions may guide investment in social structures – a mechanism that Ahmed carefully analyses – but that they do not necessarily, unconditionally, work to smoothly reproduce those structures: affects may create friction.

Our three case studies in this chapter are novels that explore this friction involved in attachment to normative social and cultural structures or, as Ahmed alternatively calls them, 'the scripts of normative existence' (107). These novels trace the imbrications of distribution and recognition in matters of class, gender, race, ability and sexuality, and the affective attachments these afford. In doing so they oscillate between positions queer and affect theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously called 'paranoid' and 'reparative'. In 'Paranoid reading and reparative

reading' (2003) Sedgwick analyses the paradigm of demystifying ideology critique, the so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Ricoeur) or, as she calls it, paranoid reading. Even though she stresses the need to continue to critique persistent systems of exclusion and domination, she questions the epistemological power of debunking. Which knowledge does this strategy yield when insight into injustices is widespread; and, more importantly perhaps, to what extent does this knowledge lead to real political activism?

Referring to Sylvan Tomkins' work on affect, Sedgwick calls paranoid reading a strong and negative affect theory. Paranoia is a strong theory because its reach is wide: setting out to discover instances of violence and oppression one will find them in a wide variety of situations. The paranoid critic will often find the injustices they anticipated. Paranoia is a negative affect theory because it anticipates negative, painful experiences. As a consequence the paranoid critic runs the risk of precluding the possibility of positive experiences or positions of hope: the 'self-confirming strength of a monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect can have ... the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect' (Sedgwick 2003, 136).

As an alternative to this negative affect theory, Sedgwick presents the reparative position. As opposed to the paranoid reader, the reparative reader has no urge to demystify the text as an ideological delusion or deceit. The reparative reader accepts the text as imperfect and tries to find hope, sustenance and care in the reading experience. 'What we can best learn from such [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture' (2003, 150–1). The concept of reparation Sedgwick derives from Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory, where it is closely related to depression and mourning. According to Klein (1940) the subject develops an inner world, consisting of unconscious images, mediated by desire and fantasy, of people, objects and situations in the outside world. From early childhood onwards, this inner world is split: from the 'good' objects the subject derives support, trust and care, whereas it feels threatened and persecuted by the 'bad' objects. Since this split affects the objects themselves, the subject experiences good and bad part-objects. For the infant, for instance, the mother's breast is split between a good and a bad breast.

The paranoid defence mechanism is geared towards controlling and ultimately destroying the bad object the subject feels threatened by. The fear of losing the good, loved objects, according to Klein, leads to depression, a situation comparable to mourning, in which the subject

loses a loved object (person) who passes. However, it is also the position of depression that allows for the unification of good and bad part-objects, repairing the object and helping the subject in its development. Sedgwick claims that the ‘reparative impulse ... wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self’ (149). The paranoid position, on the other hand, fixates on the disciplining of the bad part-object and its anticipated negative effects. Paranoia thus yields essential critical insight while it hinders a positive affective relationship with the object, for instance with a text from which a reader hopes to gather sustenance for survival.

Sedgwick’s essay – and the ‘reparative turn’ (Stuelke 2021b) it afforded – has been academically debated in relation to neoliberalism. While Joseph North welcomes Sedgwick’s contribution as an alternative to the historicist/contextualist paradigm supposedly complicit with neoliberalism, Patricia Stuelke (2021b, 9) historicises ‘the rise of reparative approaches’ in conjunction with ‘the concomitant rise of neoliberal racial capitalism’.¹ Stuelke’s analysis of the solidarity movement, with Central American populations struggling against US imperialism, identifies a reparative relationship between the US activist subject and the self-evidently positive object of solidarity. In that movement ‘the reparative emerged as a consoling mode for responding to state and racial capitalist violence, for accepting such violence as known or intransigent to the power of critique’ (2021b, 16). At its worst, repair would imply the activist subject finding personal consolation and cleansing in the pleasure of its dedication to the good cause (113).²

While we accept that the rhetoric of reparation *may*, in some instances, be compatible with the neoliberal status quo, we believe this is not necessarily the case. In Stuelke’s critique, the reparative attachment to an object of solidarity implies a disavowal of state violence. As we read Sedgwick, however, repair refers to a relationship between the subject and the threatening (part-)object itself, or with a product of an environment with which the subject has a conflictual relationship. In its original context of queer emancipation, Sedgwick saw the reparative position as a way of surviving harmful and oppressive conditions of living, in full awareness of the violence intrinsic to these conditions. The reparative position, more generally, affords sustenance in the attachment to an ambiguous object. Moreover, it allows for a loosening of the attachment and opens possibilities for a reorientation of – potentially more sustaining – affective ties.

In the following sections we discuss the imbrication of distribution, recognition and attachment along various axes of differentiation in

novels by Nina Polak, Zadie Smith and Édouard Louis. All three writers tackle these issues from a spatially and culturally specific vantage point. *Gebrek is een groot woord* addresses class and race divisions as these are embedded in the ongoing debate in Dutch society about national identity and colonial history, and in (related) tensions between the country's central region (with Amsterdam at its heart) and the so-called periphery. *NW* is equally specific in zooming in on one city – London – and even one area within the city (giving the novel its title). That spatial focus allows Smith to analyse class and race stratification on the microlevel of both space and lived experience, and to trace the workings of emotions mediating those divisions. *Qui a tué mon père*, in its autofictional nature, pertains to the region in France where Louis was born and raised, and situates the interlocking of class, gender and sexuality in that community within the context of the ascent of neoliberal policies on a national level.

Embracing and casting off attachments: Polak

After a few years at sea Nynke Nauta – Skip to her friends – returns to Amsterdam, where she spent her youth alternately with her depressed mother in a deprived neighbourhood and with the well-to-do Zeno family in the city centre. Rather than a panorama of society's class structure, however, Skip's narrative presents a network of personal contacts and affective relations, tracing a rare connection between various social groups. By the end of the novel, Skip has not found a clear way forward: having spent some time with the Zeno family she finally chooses to resume her life wandering at sea. Before she leaves, she terminates a pregnancy and rejects the prospect of a family life with the biological father, her ex-boyfriend Borg.

Gebrek is een groot woord carefully explores how national shame intersects with class and gender divisions in contemporary Dutch society. The latter division remains, for the most part, implicit: shame about the nation's colonial history means that nationalist sea narratives, which traditionally afforded their (male) readers a horizon of opportunities, no longer hold any imaginary perspectives for this young woman in the early twenty-first century (cf. [Pieterse 2019](#)). Class is foregrounded, then, if only through the somewhat conspicuous narrative device of Skip's 'double' class affiliation. While the stereotypically bourgeois Zeno family experiences no shame at all, Skip is torn between her own national shame, the shaming of her naive attachments by Borg's academic critique

of ideology, and her desire for the self-satisfaction afforded by middle-class white innocence.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of progression in Skip's story: an affective development. During her stay in Amsterdam she comes to terms with certain social relations she once tried to escape by going sailing, and on her new trip she is able to both hold on to them and let go of them. The final sentence of the novel implies that distance allows for integration (cf. [Op de Beek and Van Dijk 2019](#)): 'I take their hands, pull them on deck, embrace them, cast off the lines, hoist the sails and carry them with me, to an empty sky' ([Polak 2018](#), 238). Skip's affective development traces a lateral and relational, rather than linear, movement throughout the range of her social contacts. Moreover, it incorporates delicate social issues, such as the colonial past and white middle-class privilege.

From the opening pages it transpires that the nexus of this constellation is home – and how feeling at home is related to location, to nation and to class. A single glimpse of the Zeno family in Cannes suffices to awaken Skip's latent feeling of home. 'The Zeno house' ([2018](#), 8), looking out on Amsterdam's Vondelpark, first presents itself in Skip's memory as a reservoir of smells, primarily Mascha's, the lady of the house. In second place 'that other decor' (8) springs to mind, the high-rise in Osdorp, a less affluent part of town. Osdorp is where Skip grew up with her mother, a place and time that Skip, even in her imagination and her memory, longs to escape as quickly as possible.

Skip's life at sea is guided by her denial of the desire to go home, her disavowal of the 'question: where is home?' People like Skip 'do not long for home because that gives us nothing but tears. We wander on' ([2018](#), 28). At the same time she senses that the cult of homelessness sits uneasily with the involuntary diaspora of 'the Jews' and 'half the population of the Middle-East' (28–9). It is precisely that inclination to celebrate homelessness under the guise of cosmopolitanism that links Skip to her second family's class, the educated middle class that has found a comfortable anchoring in the well-off centre of town. 'Why would you, why would *anyone* leave such a centre of possibilities' (34), Skip wonders. Only from a position of absolute certainty can one indulge in fantasies of an uprooted existence. The urban middle class is keen to steer clear of nationalist waters. The Zeno family prides itself on its 'half-Italian' roots, placing them with one leg outside Dutch culture. Copious dinners serve to underscore they are not as frugal as the Dutch (40). Even their villa's nineteenth-century architect designed his baroque bourgeois palaces as a negation of the local identity: 'Calvinism, my ass!' (35).

Skip's position towards and within this privileged middle-class disaffection is ambiguous. In the story she grew up in Osdorp, even though her sensibilities and her experience of the city show traces of a youth spent in the city centre. She went to school in the inner city, where her teacher introduced her to 'the glorious architectural history of our town, our Amsterdam' (2018, 35). When she attends a wedding not far from where she lived as a child, the neighbourhood appears to her as 'an alien part of town' (128). The description of a square with 'Arab looking children' blends seamlessly into a melancholic reflection on the suffocating atmosphere within the inner city canals.

Skip avoids the question of home by going sailing. At the same time sailing and travelling are interwoven with national identity and with images of Dutch history. Upon her arrival in Amsterdam, Skip associates Dutch culture with navigation and cartography: 'the best designers of road signs are from the Netherlands, as are the best cartographers, and have been for ages' (2018, 33). For her part, Skip can only find her way on the water; back in Amsterdam she repeatedly loses all sense of direction. When at the end of the novel Skip again leaves Amsterdam to go sailing, she connects her longing to travel to her nostalgic attachment to romanticised colonial sea travelogues. Spending the night on a ship moored in Enkhuizen, she is struck by nostalgia and the feeling of home: 'for an inexplicable moment' she feels 'at home' (204). She makes a point of resisting a nativist conception of home: a tourist is gazing upon the horizon 'with a similarly nostalgic look' and there is no reason why 'this land would belong to [Skip] more than to him' (204).

The ship in Enkhuizen brings to mind the port of Hoorn and the monument of Bontekoe's cabin boys on the city walls. Skip formed an attachment to these nationalist travel narratives when no other forms of attachment were available: 'all this faded Dutch glory which I have internalized because I had to internalize something' (204). When the statue was defaced by decolonial activists, she experienced this action as an 'obituary', a moment of mourning for a lost fantasy, even though she did not question the action's political legitimacy:

I don't know whether it was the shame the activists intended, or irritation because the symbols I loved were besmirched with a tiresome question of conscience. It was probably a combination of both – the same sad resistance, the humiliation, experienced by a child hearing that Santa-Claus is a lie. An absurd obituary which in the end can only be accepted and acknowledged. (2018, 201–2)

Skip's position might be called reparative, as she rearticulates her attachment to her beloved symbols and narratives while accepting the loss of their innocence. Shame in Skip's case does not reinforce national pride, as Ahmed theorises, nor does reparation entail a disavowal of colonial state violence, as in Stuelke's analysis. Yet Skip's reparative position remains ambiguous. Moreover, the connection evoked in this scene between nostalgia and childhood brings to mind Gloria Wekker's analysis of the Dutch postcolonial syndrome in *White Innocence* (2016). Wekker qualifies the dominant Dutch attitude towards its colonial past and postcolonial multicultural society as 'white innocence'. The innocence of a clean soul, of a moral vanguard, of merely ironic racism, and of a small country that sees itself as a vulnerable victim rather than an aggressor. *Gebrek is een groot woord* reflects on this diagnosis and on the 'paranoid' position this entails. This consciousness is reflected in an embedded story written by Borg, a stereotypical academic, and is tellingly entitled 'The innocent'.

The story's male protagonist, history student Paul, is involved with a young woman, Cleo, who, just like Skip, was born in Osdorp. Skip immediately recognises Cleo as Borg's attempt to portray her. The narrative depicts Paul and Cleo's relationship as one between teacher and pupil, between historical critique and childish naivety. Paul assumes a post-colonial, paranoid position and argues 'that the VOC [Dutch East India Company] had designed the original model for the present-day multinational' (Polak 2018, 157). He is annoyed at 'the naïve, uneducated way in which she read the stories' (158). According to Paul, Cleo fails to see the connection 'between her romanticizing, her exoticism and the brute fact of colonialism She remained ignorant towards history, innocent' (158). The attribution of the position of innocence here is charged as well as ambiguous. The narrative is embedded in the novel in such a way as to invite a critical reflection, from Skip's point of view, on Paul's perspective on Cleo. Reading Borg's story against the grain, as its position in the novel appears to welcome, would characterise the academic framing of Cleo's reading of travel stories as '(white) innocence' as the ultimate position of innocence. As an enlightened critic of ideology, Paul avoids the trap of innocence, thus affirming his self-image as innocent.

Apart from white innocence, the embedded narrative reflects on the conflict zone between gender critique and postcolonial critique. Celebrating all things oriental, Paul claims, Cleo glosses over gender relations in Islamic culture. In her contacts with a Moroccan shopkeeper, she takes an uncritical position 'towards the fact that this man evidently considered his wife as his property' (2018, 160). Earlier in the novel Skip talked about her pleasant relationship with a Turkish family who had

invited her to a wedding. In that environment she experiences a sense of community she lacks in her life: 'a moment of divine collectivity' (133). She is aware that this experience might be her own projection. However, she is less self-conscious about the stereotyping exotism betrayed by her observations on the communal atmosphere – which she experiences as a kind of 'violence' – and the 'small ladies with backs like puddings' (126).

If there is a hint of orientalism in her glorifying gaze, Borg's uncompromising feminism reeks of paternalism: 'He flirts with political incorrectness about Muslims so he can imagine himself as the avant-garde' (2018, 134). Jan Willem Duyvendak defines sexual nationalism as 'the embrace of progressive values in the field of gender and sexuality' in the service of xenophobic or nativist politics (2017, 108, our translation). Borg may not be a sexual nationalist, but his feminist position seems opportunistic. Skip refuses to identify with his position and (paranoidly) demystifies his (equally paranoid) view as false consciousness.

In the motif of sailing, the contestation of Dutch national identity merges with Skip's troubled attachments. In the ship in Enkhuizen she feels safe: 'so protected that as I lay down ... I almost immediately fall asleep' (Polak 2018, 195). Her mother Nellie was not able to give her that sense of protection. She tried to find that sense of safety in Amsterdam with Mascha, who is repeatedly characterised in affective terms of care and warmth.

The feeling of safety beneath Mascha's wings bears a complicated relationship with her work as an actress. Mascha performs in a repertoire piece by Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*. Playing the part of actress Arkadina, Mascha more or less plays herself, and Skip seems to identify more with the older actress on the stage than with her younger antagonist Nina. '[C]ompared to the trembling little rabbit playing the part of Nina [Mascha] looks relaxed, experienced, grateful for her own body' (2018, 99). She embodies the art of innocently enjoying who she is. While her younger colleagues are filled with 'self-hatred' (99) and 'self-flagellation' (101) Mascha is satiated with herself, 'sensuous, voluptuous, proud to be a woman' (99). Mascha provides the safety of a self-satisfied ego, unencumbered by and even flowering under the gaze of the other, and watching oneself with an admiring rather than an undermining and paranoid look.

In watching Mascha, Skip not only desires to feel at home in a family, she also longs to feel at home in a body, a gender, a generation – in the world. She experiences being in a theatre – 'my theatre feeling' – as a feeling of intense longing for what is beyond reach: 'as if there ... I was offered the whole existence, the whole globe in compressed form, as a

freshly baked, warm biscuit, just out of reach' (2018, 96). Skip yearns to find her home in this globe, in this world. The 'theatre feeling' connects this multilevel home feeling with self-reflection, as if the 'biscuit, just out of reach' is the pure, unmediated, undisturbed gaze at your own home: the feeling of home as the salutary narcissism of complete identification. The theatre feeling, then, is the unfulfilled desire for this narcissism. Moreover, the description of the scene – 'an unobstructed view of the lake and the horizon' (204) – implies a link between the theatre and the nostalgic gaze at the horizon in Enkhuizen, where Skip is 'startled by a gull as big as a battleship' (205). The salutary narcissism of Dutch identity, which was brutally shaken when anti-racist activism demystified the Dutch tradition of 'Black Pete' – an iteration of blackface – as a residue of the Dutch involvement in colonial slavery.

Skip's reparative impulse is complex and ambiguous. She tries to repair the connection with the Zeno family, while their privilege and idle cosmopolitanism repel her. At the same time she hopes to find support in childhood stories that turn out to be colonial and that she therefore rejects on ideological grounds. Both objects of attachment, moreover, seem mutually exclusive, a contradiction that Skip only manages to resolve by escaping from it at sea.

Affective encounters in a stratified society: Smith

Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) explores affective responses to social conditions of class, gender and racial inequality. The novel's two main characters, Nathalie Blake (born as Keisha in the Caldwell estate in a family of colour) and her childhood friend Leah Hanwell (white, of Irish descent) embody its central theme of social mobility, more specifically the conflict between claims for equal opportunities and a more neoliberal conception of meritocracy. They were both raised in London's NW district yet manage to obtain a university degree and a middle-class life.

NW traces the movements of a number of NW-born Londoners in their thirties whose lives intersect in the stabbing of one of them. The first part of the novel, 'Visitation', introduces Leah Hanwell, who is still living in NW. 'Guest', the second part, details one day in the life of Felix Cooper – the last day, as it happens, as he is the one being stabbed, presumably by Caldwell-bred Nathan Bogle. The third part, 'Host', chronicles Natalie's life from childhood until the present, in a series of numbered vignettes, after which the brief fourth and fifth part pick up the story after Felix's stabbing, leading up to Leah and Natalie incriminating Nathan with the police.

We argue that *NW* reveals the affective costs, in the lives of Natalie and Leah, of the continued struggle for upward social mobility in precarious conditions of living. This cost is higher for Natalie than it is for Leah; for the former a sustained paranoid defence against the violence of social inequality leads to a state of near-complete affective detachment. Natalie's affective crisis, then, is not the crisis affecting the socially privileged who used to be shielded from precarisation. The social conditions of her crisis were already in place before neoliberalism's affective reification targeted previously protected privileged strata of society.

If *NW* registers an affective dominant, it is in the sense that the novel foregrounds the affective dimension of socioeconomic and cultural injustice that predates the era of neoliberal affective reification. The novel's self-conscious use of both modernist and postmodern narrative techniques might suggest an epistemological questioning of this social issue – concerned with the availability of a critical perspective, or with the narrative mediation of the social. Although these concerns are not alien to the novel, we contend that *NW* approaches the issue from a primarily affective perspective, focusing on the circulation of affect through social relationships, generated and mediated by social conditions of class, gender and racial inequality and the limited possibilities for upward mobility.

A focus on affect also guides our reading of the novel's intertextuality and metafiction. A salient feature of Smith's writing in *NW* is its wide variety of intertextual references and period styles (Knepper 2013, Guignery 2014). The various narrative modes in *NW* underscore the sense of affective detachment that pervades the life of the novel's female protagonists. Moreover, the novel explores Natalie's relationship to canonical and popular culture in terms of affective investment and (failed) identification.

Leah's anxieties about her '[t]hree years of useless study [of philosophy]' (Smith 2012, 28), her professional prospects and social pressure to raise a family are refracted through both impersonal narrative style and a modernist stream of consciousness in 'Visitation'. In chapter 5 Leah's sexual relationship with Michel is observed from a seemingly distant and objectifying perspective. The opening line, 'Leah believes in objectivity in the bedroom', is followed by depersonalised observations on their bedroom conversation. 'The woman tries to talk to the man who is her husband about the desperate girl who came to the door' (20). The objectifying perspective on the conversation mediates the high emotional charge the event discussed holds for Leah. It is implied that the encounter with 'the desperate girl' – Shar – affects Leah because Shar immediately

spots Leah's pregnancy, of which Michel is oblivious, and because for Leah she embodies the permanent threat of precarisation.

Chapter 8 is set in Leah's London office, which buzzes with the discourse of 'public-sector accounting' (Small 2013, 540) – 'relatability', 'empathy' and 'personal connection' (Smith 2012, 28). Leah 'doodles passionately' around the words 'I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY' (29), yet experiences the office ambience from a detached position. Anxiety about pregnancy sets her apart from her female coworkers. Free indirect discourse thus questions the character's affective involvement in the situation rather than modernist epistemological uncertainty.

Similarly, the frequent author intrusions in 'Host', while on the one hand echoing postmodern metafiction, can on the other hand be interpreted as markers of affective detachment. Natalie's tale of self-realisation in 'Host', a story she clings to at the expense of her affective wellbeing, mimics a postmodern rewriting of the Bildungsroman. Paragraph 172 provides a fine example, with the narrator mimicking the language of a tourist brochure. This narrative device highlights Natalie's unfulfilled longing for emotional connection and intimacy. 'Natalie Blake wanted to know people. To be intimately involved with them' (2012, 245).

Natalie Blake, as the narrator explains, 'was crazy busy with self-invention' (2012, 183), determined to carve out a new identity for the underprivileged girl Keisha Blake she used to be. Her remarkable success at class mobility, obtaining a law degree and considerable wealth, comes at the cost, however, of intensifying her loss of a sense of self. With typical narratorial distance the narrator comments on 'Ms Blake having no self to be' (183). From childhood onwards Keisha observes life, including her own lineage and personality, from a distance. Throughout these childhood vignettes, the narrative voice strikes a delicate balance between distance and empathy, blending Keisha's childhood experience with the analytical detachment of an adult cultural critic, thereby mimicking Keisha's objectifying distance from herself. A striking image in section 14 reveals that detachment as a combined product of economic disadvantage and commodification of desire: looking through a window glass at Nike Air trainers Keisha is '[s]eparated from happiness' (158). The sports brand's commodification of 'the infinitely available thing' (158) – air – is doubled by its commodification of affect, putting Keisha at arm's length from her own happiness.

This structure of commodification is reflected in Keisha's affective disposition: she confronts her own emotions as if they were objects to be attained, or instruments to be wielded. From observing Leah, she concludes that generosity is a quantifiable good and 'had to be employed

strategically' (2012, 157). Her underprivileged social position does not allow her to experience emotions in the present, forcing her to postpone them as future goals. Thus, she is denied the simple 'ecstasy' (159) of enjoying popular music and the 'celebrated will and focus' that guides her social mobility does not even 'leave her much room for angst' (162).

Keisha's sense of detachment is continued into adulthood and into her new persona as Natalie. When Natalie Blake gives birth to her first child, the narrator conspicuously points out the change this supposedly life-changing event *fails* to bring: 'the brutal awareness of the real that she had so hoped for and desired ... failed to arrive' (2012, 237). Pregnancy had merely continued, even expanded the 'image system at work in the world' (237) and online pregnancy advice only added to her disaffection. 'She grew anxious that she was not anxious about the things you were meant to be anxious about' (237). Not even in the experience of giving birth does Natalie feel to be inescapably, viscerally involved: 'she was able to say to herself quite calmly: "Oh, look, I'm giving birth"' (237).³

Natalie moves back and forth between this foreclosure of connection and a longing for intimacy and belonging. In 'Host', this desire is often mediated by references to the literary canon, an institution that has historically tended to exclude people like Keisha/Natalie Blake. The interplay between the section titles and the narrative content is striking in this regard. A section entitled 'Jane Eyre' reveals Keisha's eagerness to identify with and take comfort from 'the relevant literature' and 'the pertinent movies', 'even if the people in the literature and the movies looked nothing like you ... and – had they ever met you – would very likely have enslaved you' (2012, 160). A section on Keisha's university application is significantly entitled 'Brideshead unvisited', given the financial obstacle that even buying a train ticket to Manchester or Edinburgh presents.

When at one point, during a dinner party at university, this intimacy suddenly seems to present itself, the experience is so powerful that awareness of its artificial and temporary nature almost eludes her. Natalie 'had to remind herself that this intimacy ... was being manufactured at this present moment, along with its history' (190). Significantly Natalie's powerful sense of belonging is elicited by a judge's speech referencing Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*'s first performance and an Anglo-Saxon chronicle on the Peasants' Revolt from 1381 – that is to say British cultural history predating Afro-Caribbean presence in the UK, a history that she has had to work extremely hard to make her own. Yet Natalie is thrilled by the experience of belonging to that heritage, promoted from being 'an accidental guest at the table' to 'a host, with other hosts,

continuing a tradition' (2012, 190). This scene suggests an illuminating reading of the chapter titles: whereas Felix remains 'Guest' – stuck in his class position – Natalie achieves the position of 'Host'.

NW has been read as an inclusive panorama of London's multicultural and class-divided society.⁴ We argue that NW reveals socioeconomic stratification as an affective structure. The various chapters track emotionally arresting encounters that exemplify the conflicts underlying a socioeconomically stratified and ethnically diverse community with limited possibilities for social mobility, and the affective charge generated by those conditions of living.

As a promising student of law, having recently met her wealthy future husband Frank de Angelis, Natalie 'took out a large student loan and made a point of spending it only on frivolous things' (Smith 2012, 185). Raised in a family of colour in an underprivileged estate, for Natalie spending money, let alone owing money, has always been accompanied by the 'bottomless anxiety' (185) of debt. The prospect of social mobility, however, sparks an affective shift, more specifically in the affective dimension of time. 'Now that she glimpsed the possibility of a future, an overdraft did not hold the same power of terror over her' (185). Frank, having the benefit of wealth and unearned male confidence, seems unaffected by such terror, or even unaware of its existence.

As this example indicates, affect is embedded in socioeconomic hierarchy. Natalie's affective detachment, then, is distinguished from a more typically middle-class sense of malaise. In a telling scene in 'Host', Natalie's affective condition is contrasted with Leah's white art student boyfriend's talk about 'his short films' (2012, 176). 'They're all about boredom essentially. It's the only subject left' (176) Natalie's is a socially conditioned detachment that cannot be assimilated to a middle-class millennial sense of dread.⁵

A specific feature of her alienation is its being accompanied by shame. While Skip's shame, discussed in the previous section, mediates her affective attachment to nationalist and colonial narratives, Natalie's shame registers internalised racism: she feels both shame for her own social background and self-contempt about this shame. A double reference to Genesis signals this entanglement of emotions. First Natalie visits her family's flat and experiences 'a new feeling of lack. A new awareness. And lo they saw their nakedness and were ashamed' (2012, 218). In contrast to Natalie, who feels ashamed of her underprivileged family, the middle-class friends she meets in a second scene seem to know no shame for their own privilege. 'And lo they saw their nakedness and were not ashamed' (221).

The novel is most strongly organised around the social and affective relationship between Natalie and Leah. Even though the novel acutely analyses this relationship in terms of its socioeconomic conditions, it also traces the affective responses sparked by those conditions. Their friendship – deeply affectionate and firmly rooted in childhood experiences – is frequently characterised by ‘ugly feelings’, which Sianne Ngai (2005) has defined as feelings that do not allow for a cathartic resolution. When Leah and Michel visit Natalie and Frank, the narrator points out the unease between the two friends: ‘They have been annoying each other all afternoon’ (Smith 2012, 52).

Chapter 177 in ‘Host’ seems to identify their affective relationship as envy, a feeling, which, according to Ngai, ‘lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities’ (Ngai 2005, 128). By not explicitly ascribing envy to either of the characters, Smith avoids the trap of treating envy as a subjective state of mind and instead shows envy as a non-verbalised affective response to social conditions. Leah asks Natalie to ‘speak at a charity auction for a young black women’s collective Leah had helped fund’ (Smith 2012, 252). While delivering her speech, Natalie ‘found her mind travelling to obscene tableaux. She wondered what Leah and Michel, who always seemed to have their hands on each other, did in the privacy of their bedroom’ (253).

It remains unclear who is feeling envious, at whom, and why – is Leah envious at Natalie’s social mobility, or Natalie at Leah’s supposedly more satisfying sexual relationship? The point is, rather, that their friendship is premised on conditions of socioeconomic inequality – with which both have struggled as allies as well as competitors, Leah’s Irish descent a slight advantage over Natalie’s – to which envy is both a personal and a political response.⁶

A telling example of affect as a structure of racial discrimination is found in a scene in ‘Guest’, in which Felix is caught up between ‘a white woman, hugely pregnant’ (2012, 145) and ‘two men’ (146) sitting opposite him in a subway carriage, one of whom has ‘put his feet up on the seat’ (143) next to Felix. It is implied that the men are of colour, as the white woman addresses Felix as their friend. When he does not succeed in convincing the man to move his feet, Felix cedes his own seat to the woman. The novel analyses the affects involved in great detail: ‘Felix felt a great wave of approval, smothering and unwanted, directed towards him, and just as surely, contempt and disgust enveloping the two men and separating them, from Felix, from the rest of the carriage, from humanity’ (146). In this complex affective constellation, the configuration of these bodies in space is organised by hate, on the one hand. This hate

derives both from what Sara Ahmed calls ‘histories of association ... such that some bodies are already encountered as more hateful than others’ (2014, 54) and from observably aggressive behaviour by the men. The scene in that sense illustrates Ahmed’s thesis that hate structures social space as it ‘creates the surface of bodies through the way in which bodies are aligned with and against other bodies’ (54). On the other hand, however, Felix feels oppressed by the woman’s approval of his behaviour, as this approval appears to keep Felix ‘sealed in [his] skin’ (57) almost as much as hate would have, according to Ahmed’s phenomenology of racial hatred.

Not only does hate set the men apart from the community, it also sets Felix apart from the community as well as from the excluded men. Felix is caught up in a double bind: either he accepts the subject position imposed upon him by the woman, thereby accepting the racial hierarchy and the contempt implicit in it and reproducing it as a hierarchy between men of colour; or he refuses to break social and racial solidarity with the men, thereby condoning their aggressive behaviour.

When Leah is on the subway with her mother Pauline, the latter comments on the plight of the London underclass as being ‘so sad’ (Smith 2012, 39). That this comment is sparked by an encounter with ‘[a] dirty Gypsy girl and a tall fella’ (39) who turns out to be Nathan Bogle, suggests a sense of racial distinction implicit in Pauline’s attitude. Pauline’s ‘realm of the so sad’ might be read as an expression of her racial privilege, her existence as white, working-class woman being ‘only disappointing’ (41). This gelling of Pauline’s affective experience into a fixed, racially infused emotion then sparks an affective response in Leah, who finds it ‘obscene’ (41).

As this example shows, *NW* traces affectivity as circulating within social relationship rather than as being inherent in individual subjects. The final chapter opens up a reparative perspective in the emotional connection between Leah and Natalie, as the former comforts her long-time friend struck by a nearly catatonic affective detachment. Yet their mutual decision to incriminate a fellow NW resident suggests the persistence of paranoid defence against the threat of precarity – even for those who have achieved upward social mobility.

The personal is political violence: Louis

Violence is the central theme of the autofictional work of French author Édouard Louis: how social violence generates intimate violence, and how

intimate violence reproduces and continues social violence. In addressing this violence, a paranoid impulse is unmistakably present. In his seven novels to date, his depiction of events and life narratives from his own and his family's history are always embedded within a critical, often sociological, gaze that understands how personal lives are embedded in social structures. Individual choices are 'the result of social, collective determination', Louis explains in an interview that serves as a preface to a French reprint of his mentor Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* [Returning to Reims] (2018, iv).⁷ The personal is political, even the most intimate feelings (vi). If Louis' autofictional work stays very close to his autobiography, his sociological perspective allows for critical distance: often painful and violent experiences are interpreted epistemologically, as personal experiences are embedded in their societal context.

Born as Eddy Bellegueule (literally: 'beautiful trap') in a working-class family in the Picardian village Hallencourt, Louis was destined to become a factory worker at a young age like his other male family members, yet against all odds became internationally the most prominent French author of his generation. In his first novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014), translated by Michael Lucey as *The End of Eddy* (2017), Louis puts an end to his violent history in the village. He recalls the harassment and the humiliation he suffered in his youth for his homosexuality. 'From my childhood I have no happy memories', reads the first line of the novel. By being attentive to social structures of violence, the novel does not, however, present us with the myth of the private individual as gifted child who attempts and succeeds in escaping a hostile environment. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator explains:

I've wanted to show here that my flight was not the result of a project that I had had in mind for a long time, as if I were some kind of a creature struggling for freedom, as if I had always wanted to escape, but rather that escape was the only option left to me after a series of defeated attempts to change who I was. Flight was at first something I experienced as a kind of failure, something to which I resigned myself. Back then, to succeed would have meant being like everyone else. (2017, 'First Attempt')

Eddy does not consider escaping because he does not know there is a place to escape to. The village is depicted as a closed community where history is endlessly repeated: 'All these experiences that the people living in the village reproduced exactly from generation to generation, and their resistance to any kind of change' ('A Man's Role'). Such behaviour

should not be understood as narrow-mindedness, but as the result of mechanisms of social reproduction keeping people in their place.

A dominant value in this microcosm is masculinity, embodied exemplarily in the village by the tough guys: 'The village tough guys, who embodied all the much-touted masculine values' ('My Father'). One of these values is to refuse bowing to school discipline, which is why many men go to work in a factory even before they are eighteen, and why masculinity and social class sustain and perpetuate one another. The father's role is to pass on (t)his masculinity to his sons. Eddy's father had to 'make me into a tough guy, his pride as a man was at stake' ('My Father'). However, Eddy's body and speech show 'feminine' traits. Although his family believe this is his choice, Eddy rather feels oppressed by a voice, a walk and a body of which he does not know the origin: 'I didn't know where whatever it was that made me different had come from, and not knowing hurt' (2017, 'Bedroom'). Because he wants his parents to no longer be ashamed of him, he starts identifying with normative masculinity. For a couple of years, the phrase '*Today I'm gonna be a tough guy*' is at the centre of his existence ('Becoming'). He starts monitoring his gestures, longs to work in the factory, plays football more often, and has relationships with girls. Driving this identification is a desire for attachment and recognition; but as the physical and mental violence continues, he remains excluded and perceives 'the trap I was in, the impossibility of really changing while I was still inside the world of my parents, of school' ('Rebellion').

The novel's portrayal of Eddy's flight is not one of destiny but rather a result of the different way in which Eddy was shaped by his environment. Because his sexuality does not conform to working-class masculinity he can never belong to his village and his family: 'Being attracted to boys transformed my whole relationship to the world, encouraging me to identify with values that were different from my family's' (2017, 'Sabrina'). Eventually a drama teacher at school refers him to a theatre programme in Amiens. He auditions, is accepted to the boarding school, and meets boys from a different social class, bringing alternative masculinities and social views. This is not a destination Eddy set out for himself; it is, rather, an unexpected and contingent outcome of a collision between working class, male gender and queer sexuality.

For the paranoid critic, the life narrative of Eddy/Édouard may come as a surprise. Paranoid criticism, Sedgwick suggests, is strongly related to 'a notion of the inevitable' (2003, 147) – to finding what you anticipate. This incurs a temporality 'in which yesterday can't be allowed to have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so' (147).

In this 'Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness' (147) fathers and sons go through the same motion. For Sedgwick, there is, however, a 'queer possibility' (147) that can disrupt this repetition and makes different identities possible: fathers and sons, the past and the future can differ from one another. If *The End of Eddy* shows such queer possibility for its protagonist, Louis' third novel *Qui a tué mon père* (2018), translated as *Who Killed My Father* by [Lorin Stein](#) (2019), aims to envision such possibility for society at large by politicising his father's body and by offering a reparative approach towards him.

The novel sees Louis returning to the subject of his father who, at age fifty, is already a physical wreck: he can barely walk, needs a breathing machine to sleep, and even talking is 'too intense, too great an effort' (2019, 5). The silences and difficulties in the communication between father and son are a motif in the book. Louis addresses his father with 'you', but a dialogue does not unfold. This is not only due to the father's physical pain but also to the cultural distance that has come to stand in between them. In a paranoid fashion, Louis critiques this silence with reflections about the different ways in which social and political violence constitute or erase a life. Besides this paranoid lens, the novel also includes a reparative impulse: it paints a more compassionate and complex image of the father than in his debut novel. Louis loosens the paranoid hold on his father, which allows that other than violent traits and instances appear at the margins of his recollection of him. The father here is still a homophobe, instilling shame in his son when he claims in the pub he would like to have a different son; but he is also a father who stands up for his son, he is a man who dances and even a man who is crossdressing in a picture. The first novel's somewhat detached tone makes way here for a more intense one blending political anger and touching intimacy.

In *Who Killed My Father*, political pamphlet meets (auto)biography since political decisions have consequences for private bodies. Following Ruth Gilmore, Louis defines sociopolitical forms of domination as the exposure of particular social groups to an early death. More generally he defines politics as 'what separates some populations, whose lives are supported, nurtured, protected, from other populations, who are exposed to death, to persecution, to murder' (2019, 54). His father, Louis asserts, belongs to the latter group. Louis' project is to denaturalise political oppression internalised in the body. His father cannot recognise the violence in his environment because that environment is violence: 'nothing was violent because violence wasn't what you called it, you called it life' (59). The violence is Louis' father having been denied life. Referring to Eribon's concept of social verdicts, Louis speaks of a negative ontology

that defines particular social groups negatively (2018, vii). The toxic combination of masculinity and poverty has deprived his father of a different existence: 'I feel as though your existence was ... a negative existence' (2019, 26). Working-class conceptions of masculinity led his father to the factory at age fourteen, depriving him of his youth – whereas for middle-class kids enjoying youth is a matter of course.

His father was denied the opportunity to know, understand and relate his life. When young Louis after school asks questions about the Berlin Wall his father snaps at him out of shame for his ignorance. Louis realises that history classes are not about people like his father: 'The history they taught at school was not your own. We were learning world history, and you were left out' (2019, 30). After Louis' escape from his working-class background this painful silence within their relationship continues. The novel's opening scene stages their meeting as a theatre play in which only the son is talking, wondering whether his father can hear him: *'The son speaks, and only the son, and this does violence to them both: the father is never allowed to tell his own story, while the son longs for a response that he will never receive'* (1).

The social violence between the father and the world bears an influence on the intimate violence between father and son. As the father is voiceless and invisible in the world, the son often goes unseen and unheard by his father. When Louis as a child performs a song by nineties band Aqua for his father and his friends, the father refuses to watch, probably because he is ashamed his son is performing the part of the female singer. Shame here demonstrates the investment of the father in masculinity even if it forecloses the possibility of showing public affection for this son and generates an '[e]mbarrassment' in the son that spreads through the room: it perpetuates a painful situation in which nobody seems to (be able to) interfere. There are, however, instances in which Louis is seen. He is surprised when he hears his father say to the police he is proud of his intelligent boy: 'I had no idea that you thought all those things (that you loved me?). Why had you never told me?' (2019, 61). Their relation softens in moments of physical pleasure, as when they sing along to Céline Dion. Louis realises this is a sentimental image, yet, for him, these are the moments when his father manages to communicate something. When he is drunk his father says he loves his son: 'You would cry, admitting that you couldn't make sense of the forces that came over you, that made you say things you'd instantly regret. You were as much a victim of the violence you inflicted as of the violence you endured' (62). Both the joy and tears are reparative here because they enable father and son to align themselves differently.

The intimate rapprochement in such scenes appears to contrast with the harsh indictment of French politics in the third part of the novel. However, it is probably more accurate to say that Louis tries to establish a different intimacy here, by demonstrating that, for his father, political decisions are as intimate as sharing tears with his son. While for the ruling classes politics is in the first place ‘a *question of aesthetics*: a way of seeing themselves, of seeing the world, of constructing a personality’, for the lower classes it is often a matter of ‘life or death’ (2019, 73). Louis enumerates policy measures taken by the successive presidents Chirac, Sarkozy, Hollande and Macron that are all neoliberal in nature: it concerns policies that refer to people receiving unemployment benefits as people who need to be *activated*, policies of austerity in healthcare, policies in which work does not serve social integration but is a goal in itself. This politics slowly kills his father’s body; it bends his back and gives him breathing and digestion problems: ‘The history of your body stands as an *accusation* against political history’ (79).

The final pages, nevertheless, open a perspective for the future. Father and son try to listen to one another, and his father, who used to be racist and homophobic, asks about his son’s loved one and criticises racism in France. As if attempting to give his father a voice after all, Louis leaves the final words of the novel to his father: ‘*You’re right – what we need is a revolution*’ (2019, 81).⁸ The recognition of a shared exposure to death might form the basis for solidarity between various groups suffering neoliberal oppression and be the start of a disruption in the repetition of violence.

Conclusion: sustenance in compromised conditions of living

All three novels we discussed in this chapter explore the intersections of various axes of injustice. Nina Polak’s *Gebrek is een groot woord* focuses on class and race, the latter referring to present-day multicultural society as well as debates on Dutch colonial history. Social stratification within Amsterdam allows the novel to outline class and race as (partly overlapping) inequalities in distribution, with the working class of both white and migrant communities sharing the city’s less affluent neighbourhoods. However, the novel more subtly addresses the imbrications of class and race on the level of recognition, demonstrating how patronising middle-class conceptions of supposedly uncritical or nationalist working-class views on the colonial past help sustain class divisions as a status

injustice. Skip's affective crisis is mediated by shame, about that past as well as about her attachment to the colonial narratives it engendered and about her growing up in precarious conditions, but also by her desire for comfort and belonging. The novel traces an attenuation of Skip's attachment to the position of self-indulgent middle-class identification and thus, if only on an individual level, a loosening of the class divide in the dimension of recognition.

If Skip's affective experience may be read as middle-class disaffection posing as working-class sensibility, Natalie Blake's affective detachment is properly underprivileged. *NW* shows how, for some of its characters, race functions as a class differentiation – entailing socio-economic disadvantage, lower-class living conditions and limited educational opportunities. At the same time the novel underscores the relative uncoupling of distribution and recognition, as upward social mobility does not free middle-class black people from the harms of racist prejudice and persistent internalised racist misrecognition. The characters' social interactions exemplify how emotions work to mediate divisions of class and race, as demonstrated in the relationship of envy between Natalie and Leah, and in Natalie's shame for her family and the living conditions in which she grew up.

The intersections of class, gender and sexuality are central to Édouard Louis' autofictional writing. In the working-class community in which Louis' protagonist came of age the dominant conception of masculinity was decidedly heteronormative, leaving no space for young Louis' queer sexuality. Moreover, this heteronormative gender differentiation sustains distributive class inequality as it keeps working-class men locked in precarious labour conditions. Escaping heteronormativity for Louis, then, goes hand in hand with escaping working-class conditions of living. Louis' father's shame for his son's sexuality – and more generally the community's shaming of homosexuality – precludes the latter being weaned from his attachment to these harmful normative structures.

To varying degrees all three novels present a 'paranoid' critique of their society's injustices and the workings of emotions in sustaining attachments to these social structures and the identifications that go with them. Nevertheless, there are also reparative impulses in their characters' negotiations of their attachments. If repair implies finding sustenance in compromised conditions of living, in attachment to ambiguous objects, then *NW* most clearly shows the social cost of repair, as Leah and Natalie find affective relief in their friendship while incriminating another person. Repair for Polak's Skip implies rearranging her attachments to compromised objects such as the Zeno family or Borg, and to

negotiate her attachment to the sea and to sea travel in the light of the demystification of Dutch colonial history. It also, however, implies leaving people behind. Repair appears to be most successful in the case of Louis. Even though a symmetrical affective relationship with his father remains impossible, Louis' protagonist nevertheless succeeds in finding opportunities for attachment – if only retrospectively – in the recollections of fleeting moments of rapprochement between father and son.

Notes

1. There is a certain irony here, but Stuelke makes a more convincing case than North. The presumed transparency of state violence, for instance, may well be seen as an effect of the unrelenting efforts of 'paranoid' researchers rather than as an argument for the obsolescence of such paranoid efforts.
2. More often, it was suggested that 'this investment in love as an instrument of change ... might repair the ... damage of US empire' (Stuelke 2021b, 118). The twin strategies combine in 'the belief that the gaze of solidarity could effectively rehumanize suffering Central American subjects and redeem US citizens complicit in ... US imperialism' (111). This analysis is akin to Ahmed's critique of national shame and reparation for (settler) colonial violence as a strategy to boost national pride. Repair as Sedgwick saw it, is rather found, we believe, in texts and pictures documenting 'Salvadorans engaged in ... continued practices of celebratory pleasure amid the already erupting violence' (119).
3. Natalie has a similar experience when meeting up for coffee with her cousin Tonya, believing she lacks her cousin's 'gift of living' (2012, 214). She refuses 'to make a deeper "connection"' and hopes 'to avoid precisely this intimacy' by keeping her cousin 'at bay' (214). This emotional distance extends to Tonya's children, who '[n]ever seemed real to her no matter how many times Natalie felt their weight in her arms' (214).
4. Cf. Zapata (2014).
5. Interestingly Natalie's sense of detachment is not shown to derive from the alienating effects of digital media use, although these effects are discussed and exposed in the novel. Natalie anxiously considers the impact on identity formation and self-awareness electronic devices might have on her young children (2012, 241). When at the end of 'Host' she joins two adolescent males in a sexual encounter, she ridicules them for not being able to perform without being hooked up to a laptop streaming webcam images (257), whereas Natalie's obsessive internet consumption seems to result from a pre-existing crisis in subjectivity.
6. As Ngai argues, envy is 'an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of in-equality' (2005, 129).
7. 'le résultat d'un déterminisme social, collectif' (2018, iv).
8. This statement is not without irony. Two years before the French publication of *Who Killed My Father*, Macron published a book called *Révolution*. It is precisely this Macron who gets criticised the most in the novel.

3

Disrupted development: Bildung, temporality and mediation

In *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Fredric Jameson understands the protagonist of the traditional Bildungsroman as ‘an instrument for the exploration of the new possibilities of bourgeois society, a kind of registering device, the establishment of a laboratory situation in which those possibilities can be acted out before our eyes’ (2013, 146). Jameson’s formulation speaks to the optimism that is often invoked as a defining trait of the genre. When it emerged in the eighteenth century, the Bildungsroman expressed the cultural promise of progress and self-improvement. In its development, the typical ‘Bildungsheld’ undergoes a series of initiation and transitional rites, both on a personal and societal level, through which it achieves ‘a way of relating himself not just to someone but to everyone in the society at large’ (Jeffers 2005, 53).

The possibilities that Jameson speaks of are those of a new bourgeois public sphere and of modernity in general. For Franco Moretti, the Bildungsroman is the symbolic processing of the contradictory impulses of modernity. Modern society must reconcile perpetual change with the need for stability, the desire for liberation with the pursuit of security. These conflicting impulses coexist in modernity, and the Bildungsroman, Moretti argues in *The Way of the World*, functions as ‘a cultural mechanism capable of representing, exploring, and testing that coexistence’ (1987, 9). The defining characteristic of the genre is therefore the compromise: the hero does not resolve the contradiction but learns to live with it (10).

In twenty-first-century literature the belief in the possibility of successful personal and social development is far from evident. The Bildungsroman may well be seen as one of those ‘particular older realist genres’ of which Berlant argues that they are ‘waning’ (Berlant 2011, 6).

The affective expectations presented by the Bildungsroman – of constructing and achieving the good life – no longer seem applicable today: its optimism has become cruel. Growing economic inequality, ongoing (poly)crisis, a warming planet, an epidemic of burnouts and depression – these are several of the keywords that, since the 2008 financial crisis, if not earlier, illustrate a shift from ‘more’ to ‘less’ in our narratives and imagination of the future. Narratives that speak of faith in the attainment of individual, social and economic growth have been replaced by narratives that relate of the impasse or that articulate visions of apocalyptic doom. Society’s contradictions can no longer be contained in a compromise; at best they maintain a precarious balance that is nevertheless constantly beset by uncertainty, instability and insecurity.

For many of the authors we discuss in this book, this change in outlook took place around their own passage from youth to adulthood or from early adulthood to establishing a professional and family life. Despite – or perhaps, because of – this widespread sense of disrupted development, a recurrent theme in contemporary fiction is the experience of coming-of-age in a neoliberal society in crisis. Many such novels are typically set *after* some of the more paradigmatic initiation rites – such as (higher) education, leaving the family, first romantic and sexual relationships – have already taken place.¹ Characters nevertheless fail to imagine their lives as a linear narrative extending sustainably into the future, and they long for an interpretative frame that legitimises their existence and for a narrative that gives meaning and form to the consecutive phases of their lives. It is from this perspective that we consider many contemporary novels as rewritings of the Bildungsroman. Different from its classic form, their protagonists do not enact new possibilities but rather register the *impossibilities* of a neoliberal society, which includes the impossibility of the Bildungsroman itself as a form to mediate a life: characters do not arrive at ‘reconcil[ing] individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity’ (Graham 2019, 1), but feel relationally and affectively removed from society.

In the first section of this chapter we will focus on the crisis of temporality that disturbs the temporal backbone of the Bildungsroman’s narrative development. The normative temporal organisation of time that sets the different stages of a life is opposed by a tendency within capitalism to reduce temporality to the present, which abolishes both historical consciousness and future perspective. This creates a problem for the genre of the Bildungsroman: how to remediate such immediacy with the necessary genre characteristic of a narrative development?

Contra the argument that contemporary fiction embraces such immediacy through evoking and amplifying presence, urgency and instantaneity, our chapter will argue that the genre displays friction in stuckness. The characters' halted development and sense of unbelonging generates, on the one hand, an epistemological questioning of the social conditions that mediate their subjectivity (in a neoliberal society). Those reflections, however, seem unable to direct life towards an upward or sustainable development. On the other hand, there is a search for affective attachments that make folds within both the normative organisation of time and its reduction to the present, and folds within the demands of a neoliberal society more generally; folds that they can inhabit and that may offer a sense of continued development.

In Maarten van der Graaff's *Wormen en engelen* [Worms and Angels] (2017), the main character Bram is forced to reconsider his social coordinates when his emancipation from a religious community into urban society and culture does not meet the affective expectations of that genre. Unable to move forward in a neoliberal society nor go back to his religious background, Bram aims to establish several lateral relations that will carry him through. Adam Gordon in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) is a poet on a year abroad in Madrid, but rather than attaining experience he is constantly reflecting upon the mediation of experience through drugs, language, art, media and politics. The relationality that such mediations establish either strengthens Adam's always already felt detachment or renders him a sense of presence. In *La petite dernière* (2020), translated as *The Last One* (2022), by Fatima Daas, protagonist Fatima navigates the interpellations that several identity categories make upon her subjectivity: Muslim, lesbian, French, Algerian, Parisian or suburban. Although available Bildungsnarratives want her to abandon parts of her identity, Fatima engages in reparative projects that aim to hold them together.

Disrupted temporality

One way to understand the current disturbance of Bildung is as the clash of two temporal organisations that leave the subject affectively unmoored. The normative narrative of the subject's development through life conflicts with an eternal instantaneity that turns living into a series of singular moments that do not add up to (meaningful stages in) a life. To take part in regimes of time, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) argues, may result in an affective sense of belonging – especially for those lives

that the temporal regimes enable – but in this section we want to suggest that this binding dimension of time is unravelling.

In *Time Binds* (2010), a study on time and history in the works of queer authors and artists, Elizabeth Freeman refers to the normative and socially binding dimensions of time. She argues that a shared temporality creates coherence and connection within social groups, giving meaning to the existence of the individual who embodies this temporality through their actions: ‘naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation’ (2010, 3). This temporality is neither neutral nor arbitrary, as every society has a normative temporality aimed at regulating human activity (such as labour and sexuality). To capture that normative dimension, Freeman introduces the term chrononormativity: ‘the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity’ (3). Freeman’s term refers to the temporal organisation of labour, but also to knowing the rhythms of social engagement. Through chrononormativity, institutional power relations beget a natural, somatic and affective character: its temporal regimes structure social life as a kind of existential binding that ‘engenders a sense of being and belonging’ (18). Lives that are not favoured through such temporal regimes, however, are made to be felt out of sync.

By adopting Dana Luciano’s term chronobiopolitics, Freeman extends this normativity to the social regulation of an entire life – from birth to death – at the population level:

In a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals. (Freeman 2010, 4)

From this quotation it becomes clear that Freeman connects chronobiopolitics to narrativity and representation: the regulation of time operates through the mediation of imaginations and narratives about a chrononormative life course. In the chronobiopolitical society, an individual that is integrated into normative temporality is able to envision their life as a story, as a goal-oriented progression marked by decisive events and turning points: ‘having a life entails the ability to narrate it ... in a novelistic framework: as event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations’ (2010, 5). In this conception of life

as a story, the sequential nature of time takes centre stage – time is understood as a series of events connected by cause and effect.

From that perspective, the Bildungsroman can be understood as both a genre through which one mediates one's life story as a sequence of events and a genre that may further naturalise the chronobiopolitical structuring of the social world and its values. A sequential logic of 'gradual growth, a few steps at a time', Moretti writes, is a 'pedagogical ideal' that the Bildungsroman expresses (1987, 46), while it can also be seen as the temporal background against which the Bildungsheld interprets their life and the episodes that take place in it. The protagonist recalibrates the development of their life and personality by interpreting the present (episodes) through 'the constant work of reorganization of what has taken place, as well as a projection of what is to come' (44). In the contemporary Bildungsroman such recalibration still takes place but is equally disarranged because the chrononormative imagination of a life in its continuity and development from birth to death is disturbed, while in some cases it also keeps on functioning as a cruel optimistic promise.

We understand such disruption as an effect of a different organisation of temporality that reduces the experience of time to that of the present while that very reduction simultaneously causes the present to dissolve. Several critics attribute this temporal shift to a change in the capitalist system in the postmodern period. David Harvey famously speaks of 'time-space compression' as a transformation of time and space to maintain capital growth. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), Harvey describes economic measures, taken from the seventies onwards, such as shorter cycles of investment, flexibilisation of labour and new technologies that all serve to 'accelerat[e] turnover time' (284). Such a model, Harvey argues, welcomes velocity at both the material and immaterial levels of society: 'volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products, production techniques, labour processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices' (285). Cultural and economic acceleration also impacts the experience of time as a felt loss of continuity: rather than as an unbroken line from past to future, time is experienced as an eternal present without future perspectives.

In his essay 'The end of temporality', Jameson makes a similar claim when he discerns in late capitalism a tendency that 'seeks ... to reduce the historical dimension of existential experience as such' (2003, 713) – a tendency that he further describes as a reduction of temporality to the present and to the body. Jameson situates this shift in the transition from modernity to postmodernity. The former implied temporal heterogeneity because 'incomplete modernisation' gave people a 'comparatist

perception of the two socioeconomic temporalities' of the new industrial time and the pre-industrial one (699). In postmodernity, as the economic temporality of capital has pervaded the whole of society, time and historicity are less consciously experienced. This temporal homogeneity furthermore speeds up through finance capital. When financial speculation in stocks, bonds or future contracts becomes the primary source of value creation, economic transactions accelerate, and the economic time horizon shortens. The ever smaller and more pressing 'microtemporality' (704) of finance capital informs social precarisation, the narratives our culture (both aesthetically and quotidian) tells itself and our awareness of time and historicity:

This situation [of 'the "end of temporality"'] has been characterized as a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place. (Jameson 2003, 708)

Historical consciousness dissipates while the capacity for utopian thought and long-term forward thinking disappears. Not informed by a sense of the past or the future, the present too cannot be named, interpreted or made sense of.

The end of temporality then contradicts the chrononormative organisation of life and relegates the Bildungsroman – and more generally the imagination of life as sequential development – to a residual form. The political implications hereof are ambiguous. If the end of temporality undoes the regulating and exclusionary organisation of temporality, it simultaneously troubles the conditions in which a different, emancipatory temporality can be envisioned. Temporality's reduction to the present may deliver the subject from chrononormativity but may leave it hanging without any other temporality to hold onto. At the same time, the present has become a flimsy basis on which to recalibrate the (political) meaning of one's life because there is no historical or personal past nor future projection that can sustainably organise the sense of the present – chrononormative, or otherwise.

Within such context, the end of temporality, along with the enduring cruel optimism of the good life fantasy, could actually reinforce the nostalgic desire for chrononormativity. Such desire would be one (imaginary) resolution to the aesthetic tension between the Bildungsroman's focus on personal development and a temporal situation that foregrounds the short term over the long term, the moment over narrative, and speed

over durability. Yet, which genre improvisations are possible besides such conservative turn? If the Bildungsroman for Moretti mediated the contradictory situation of modern change and pre-modern tradition, then how does the current Bildungsroman mediate the contradiction between the temporal homogeneity of successive presents and the formal requirement for a narrative to imagine a life?

Whereas Harvey and Jameson discussed the acceleration of time in relation to postmodern culture, Anna Kornbluh examines it with regard to contemporary aesthetics in her book *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024). Although not directly concerned with the genre of the Bildungsroman, her argument needs addressing here as it foregrounds the question of the mediation between aesthetics and a capitalist system of increased acceleration. Kornbluh's book presents a totalising picture: she identifies 'immediacy' as a dominant cultural style as an effect of the undoing of temporality. She discerns a 'confluence' between the aesthetic features in the superstructure and the characteristics of the economic base: both display 'flexibility and fluidity, emanation and connectivity, directness and instantaneity' (2024, 5). Similar to Harvey and Jameson, Kornbluh understands the temporality of this new dominant style as a 'present without future' (6, fn 9), and she too focuses on the speeding up of the economy – a 'magnification of the circulation process' (43). Kornbluh claims circulation of information and goods has further intensified and sped up through, for instance, digital media. It is this 'political economy of instantaneity and flow' that forms the condition for immediacy as a dominant cultural aesthetic (39).

Kornbluh argues that this aesthetic exhibits a desire to negate mediation and to arrive at presence, the real, the truth. In contemporary literature she discerns 'a repudiation of fictionality and genre, purifying charismatic presence, affective extremity, and unfiltered authenticity' (115). She criticises this aesthetic for leaning into the economic conditions and the crisis it generates: 'immediatism is a reaction to crisis that fails the bar of strategy, a reflex that is ultimately crisis-continuous' (17). Contemporary literature, Kornbluh contends, only rearticulates economic values in its own discourse and 'aestheticizes this capitalist base' (82). Thus it further immerses us in the crisis and does not afford the necessary space for distance, reflection and slowness from which a critique can unfold that fosters a new collectivity (217). As a remedy, she suggests taking up the 'remnants of prior cultural constructions' (22) to revive mediation, such as third-person narration to create 'disembodied, impersonal, impossible perspectives that radically depart from our phenomenal, embodied, banal experience' (197). The ubiquitous first-person

narration would simply perform unmediated voices and personas that are unable to move beyond their own perspective.

Kornbluh's analysis is, if anything, one-sided. Although an aesthetics of immediacy and a desire for presence is recognisable in contemporary literature, its grip is not as totalising as Kornbluh claims. Part of the issue lies with Kornbluh's concept of mediation. On the one hand, she describes immediacy as a *form of mediation* that obfuscates its own mediations: 'The paradox of immediacy is a cultural style that imagines itself unstyled' (2024, 11).² On the other hand, she introduces a *norm of mediation*: that which inserts the impersonal, objective and speculative into self-evident subjective experience (21). Forms of mediations that do not meet this norm are then disqualified as the style of immediacy. The question whether contemporary fiction's mediation of an economic situation does something other than replicating that situation can therefore not be posed.

Whereas for Kornbluh, there is the actuality of immediacy, for Jameson the tendency towards the end of temporality can never be arrived at: 'seeking immediacy ... we only find a host of mediations' (2003, 716). To offer a less reductive perspective on contemporary fiction's mediation of an eternal present, we argue that this 'host of mediations' creates what we called 'friction' in the introduction: that which muddles or blurs an all-pervasive power or tendency.³ Looking at the contemporary Bildungsroman from a perspective of friction allows us to see obstruction and alienation as well as possibility.

For the contemporary Bildungsroman, we suggest that the 'end of temporality' creates a problem for the genre's form without, however, reducing itself to a presence on offer in all its plenitude. This struggle is visible in the novel's imagination of temporality. None of our case studies in this chapter – or other novels in our book that could be read along such lines – present a character's growth over different stages of life. Rather, they focus on one particular transitional period that exemplifies the character's stuckness and forms the background for what we call a lateral exploration of its environment. The *temporal* obstruction leads to a *spatial* probing into what both constitutes and destitutes a life; the temporal reduction to immediacy that impedes the possibility of cognitively and affectively mapping oneself in the world nevertheless leads to attempts at exactly such mapping.

The temporal impediment undoes the epistemological and affective binding that Freeman perceives in a normative temporality. This could have an emancipatory quality for lives that were not meant to thrive under a chrononormative regime anyway; yet it may also leave lives

alienated: no longer held by the normative expectations of a life unfolding, there is a lack of belonging and sense of isolation. Moreover, the end of temporality can hinder the imagination of any (emancipatory) temporality beyond that of the present. Our case studies, then, show different ambiguous responses to this temporal condition that depend on their subject position. In *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Adam Gordon, as an American male, middle-class and slightly successful writer can still imagine leading a chrononormative life, even though he has a hard time experiencing it as real. Bram Korteweg in *Wormen en engelen* (2017) leaves behind his atypical religious upbringing in a secular nation, but experiences it as an impasse rather than as his emancipation. *The Last One's* Fatima is the least normative subject: as a queer, Muslim, French-Algerian woman from the Parisian suburbs, she is alienated from both a chrononormative and a secular queer narrative of Bildung; but this distance nevertheless creates the possibility for a different relation to society.

Different from Kornbluh, we discern in these first-person narratives not a subject that is present and immersed in its surroundings but a subject that feels othered and alienated from its environment. The 'I' is not a solid presence; rather the contemporary Bildungsroman examines how this 'I' is socially mediated and how the surrounding sociality forms bodies and subjectivities. Whereas the traditional Bildungsroman focused on the merging of a normative, mostly male, white subject with society's expectations, the current Bildungsroman reimagines the relation between the individual and society: obstacles of class, gender, sexuality, ability and race (Graham 2019) are now supplemented by an affective obstacle that hinders alignment to society at a fundamental level. Furthermore, the lateral exploration that we discern in the contemporary Bildungsroman involves the creating of folds within the landscape of immediacy through affective attachments: small forms of connection and collectivity from which a possibility arises for a life besides a constricted social chrononormativity and an alienating immediacy.

Privatisation of the Bildungsnarrative of religious emancipation: Van der Graaff

The protagonist in Maarten van der Graaff's debut novel *Wormen en engelen* (2017) is a young man called Bram, who was raised in an orthodox protestant environment on the island of Goeree-Overflakkee. As a teenager he lost his faith and subsequently moved to Utrecht to study art

history. In that sense his life resembles a subgenre of the Bildungsroman and a classic genre in postwar Dutch fiction: the novel of emancipation, more specifically the novel of depillarisation – of leaving behind one of the religious and/or ideological pillars Dutch society was composed of. *Wormen en engelen* explicitly questions this genre. The novel stages the tension between the protagonist's affective crisis and the prospects of emancipation the genre implies.

Bram mentions a few renowned examples of this narrative of depillarisation, such as *Een vlucht regenwulpen* [A Flight of Curlews] (1978) by Maarten 't Hart and *Terug naar Oegstgeest* [Return to Oegstgeest] (1965) by van Jan Wolkers. He considered these books as 'liberation narratives' speaking of 'how it would soon be ... the great free life thereafter' (13). The genre then provides an affective expectation of a grand life of freedom and creativity:

Childhood in the country, in the orthodox protestant church, followed by the drift to the city. Secularization explained to seculars. It is a famous Dutch recipe: displacement from family and friends Then a new family of interesting friends and loved ones presents itself, sexual emancipation and upwards mobility ensue, symbolized by music, parties, novels, expositions, films. The development towards a greater individualism is accomplished. (2017, 91)

Even though Bram indeed quickly feels adopted by a group of poets, has a poetess for a lover and starts to write his first stories, he will not fail to observe that genres do not fulfil expectations. The utopian promise does not come true, and Bram cannot align himself with the normativity the well-known Dutch recipe implies: from believer to emancipated and expanded individual. Bram does not seem to understand very well what he left behind nor what he has found. Contact with his friends gets harder, his girlfriend Lena leaves him and later she writes to him about how he became taciturn and quiet (2017, 86, 225).

Both with Bram and in the tone of the novel a sense of detachment and melancholy can be observed, caused by the unsettling experience of never really belonging, of not feeling at home anywhere, despite the promises of the genre. One reason Bram cannot participate in the genre is his age. He arrived too late at the liberation party:

When I decided to become a heathen I did not even know how. In Utrecht that soon enough became clear. I was incredibly Christian and incredibly lonely. An experience so self-evident I always

overlooked it, but isn't this the experience of a totally different generation? I am not a babyboomer goddamnit? (2017, 128)

In the sixties the doubt and loneliness were a collective, shared affect, but now with Bram they have become private. Such internalisation brings melancholy because it encloses the individual in itself: Bram is a marginal character who belongs neither to the orthodox protestant nor to the secular community.

But society has changed as well. The welfare state is being dismantled, social mobility has become a fiction, and freedom and creativity have been integrated into the so-called post-Fordist economy – the dominant labour model in neoliberalism. Thus, the classical Dutch recipe ends: 'The development towards a greater individualism is accomplished. You are ready for the market, to be creative. Take your laptop to your flex desk' (2017, 91). In post-Fordism, the focus shifts from material to immaterial labour and affective and intellectual skills become the most important productive forces: creativity, knowledge, communication. Digital communication is part and parcel of that: Bram is well aware that he 'will have to sell his communication skills anyhow, my mood, the e-mail sending unit I call my body' (101). Emancipation in other words leads to a new containment, while the promise of growth makes way for decline and stagnation:

This is a time of mourning. A time without success, when nothing will be conquered, nothing pulled off, no progress from renting to buying, from job to house, from less to more, it is a time without a higher idea, gain or salvation. A time which unravels on all sides, which makes you fall to the side, back, forward, still. A time of the impossible. (2017, 259)

When you cannot move forward you move sideways, laterally, or you move back. In a sense this is what happens in the novel too. It starts off as a recognisable *Bildungsnarrative*, but then the singular focus on a young man finding his way in life shifts to a more lateral aesthetic in which various textual forms are arranged side by side and multiple voices are heard. The future-oriented genre of the novel of emancipation makes way for other, more improvised genres that are not so much future-oriented as geared towards exploring and connecting with the present. The young man turns his focus from the road to the wider landscape in which he moves: 'I want to understand the fabric we are part of. I want to understand something bigger by trying to imagine it' (2017, 91).

This lateral aesthetic reclaims affective and intellectual abilities from capital. Communication and the body take centre stage, both analogue and digital. Bram starts a 'project', the buzzword of post-Fordist labour, which in effect consists of conversations with friends. These do not pursue profit or growth (not on the part of capital nor on that of the labourer), but focus on bodily sensibility, care and community: 'A friend watches over the soul of a friend The aim is not only taking pleasure in each other's company, rather the other's wellbeing and the wellbeing of the whole, the community is stressed' (2017, 156–7). It is about being 'laterally related' (157).

This bodily sensitivity reoccurs when Bram joins Uterque, a theological work group. For Bram, the religious encounter is affective rather than cognitive: the physical proximity of others or the singing together are more important than discourses or institutions. Bram also experiences that sensibility through digital mediation in an online community that 'has found a new way to talk about their physical being in the world' (2017, 113). This is a group of YouTubers who bond over ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response), a pleasurable physical, tingling sensation generated by usually soft audiovisual stimuli. This gives him the feeling of belonging: 'I write to you, communicate, while I am included in a virtual and bodily network of pleasure and communication' (116). At the same time, it bothers Bram that some ASMR-vloggers pay so much attention to the digital mediation that enables this experience.

The lateral genres of conversation and bodily sensation, then, do not afford synthesis or catharsis: they do not provide a durable community in which he feels at home nor revive his future prospects. The protagonist remains lonely. The various e-mails included in the book illustrate this dynamic of a connection that does not last. By writing long e-mails to his friends, Bram reclaims the e-mail from the commercial and cursory function the medium has in work life. In the space marked out by the e-mail 'everything [must] flow, everything [must] thaw' (2017, 119). His (ex-)girlfriend Lena stresses how letters or e-mails create attachments: they are directed at a 'physical receiver' by whom 'one wants to be understood' (187). Even though the novel's long, empathetic e-mails point at a less shallow or efficient communication, these do not necessarily bring about a sustained conversation. One answer to an e-mail, for instance, is 'already a couple of weeks old' (156) and the novel contains various e-mails without replies or e-mails replying to a message which is not included. This gives the impression of unilateral communication that does not generate a two-way conversation similar to the conversations Bram records for his project.

The genre of the novel of emancipation breaking down half-way and the lateral genres only proving partly successful, it is ultimately unclear to which genre this novel belongs. On the one hand the conversations present a logic of extension and enumeration. Lena talks about a poem in terms of 'extensiveness': 'Everything at the same time, without a full stop' (2017, 94–5). Similarly, the novel's structure presents the different story lines not in their chronological order but in parallel, while jumping through time between the chapters. On the other hand, the novel points at the time-honoured desire for negativity: the desire for the marginalised artist who says 'no' and, in doing so, wants to change the world. The novel refers, among others, to Simone Weil and Pier Paolo Pasolini, but there is also Bram's friend Wilfried: a religious babyboomer, a homosexual Franciscan. These characters uncover the limits of the genre of secularisation because they remain outside the dominant story. At the same time the novel asks the question whether the position of the outside is still possible: the stratified public spaces have been replaced by networks. Simultaneously, the novel evokes the progressive narrowing of the imagination of a life to a chrononormative narrative. In one of his e-mails to Bram, Wilfried writes how forms of living together other than with a partner – like living a life in a commune, or with a relative or a friend – have become residual: they 'no longer seem to exist or to be understood The nuclear family has won. In the name of freedom all freedom gets limited' (158). Similarly, he criticises the dominant 'liberal, secular history of gay pride' in which there is no space for 'negativity, combat' (252).

These lateral genres then do not present, in Fredric Jameson's famous phrase, an 'imaginary resolution of a real contradiction' (Jameson 2002, 62). The contradictions, rather, are out in the open: outsider versus network, individual versus community, loneliness versus friendship, critique as inclusion versus critique as negativity, secularism versus belief. To that list we could add *Bildung* versus extensiveness: the way the novel, despite its focus on the social fabric, keeps Bram centre stage. The novel testifies to the difficulty of imagining a life when desires cannot develop along the lines of the genres with which a millennial character such as Bram is familiar. His emancipation from religion was, if anything, an experience of the narrowness of secular life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Bram could not yet find the means to emancipate himself from such chrononormative narrative because time has lost its futurity and sociality got individualised. Or, as the novel phrases this struggle: 'Our problem is organisation, giving shape to vague desires' (2017, 260).

Bildung entangled in cognitive scepticism and affective detachment: Lerner

After three collections of poetry, the American author Ben Lerner published his successful debut novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). Its protagonist, Adam Gordon, is a young American poet who resides in Madrid for a year thanks to a prestigious fellowship. The novel can be read as a *Künstlerroman*, that type of *Bildung* narrative that focuses on the development of an artist, and its associated genre of 'the expatriate travel narrative of self-discovery (or self-obfuscation) by virtue of encounters with the foreign' (Katz 2016, 5). The affective expectation of the genre, in which the artist's sensibility develops through the encounter with a new environment, is, however, not met: Adam is mostly sceptical that his experiences abroad will initiate any affective or cognitive development. The novel 'refuse[s] forward momentum' (Dames 2012): Adam does not seem to work at the research poetry project that got him the fellowship, and spends most of his time smoking, drinking coffee, going for walks, showering, meeting up with his love interests, reading. At the end of his stay, he echoes his prediction at the beginning of it (Lerner 2011, 15): 'Over the course of my research, I'd lost considerable weight. Other than that, I didn't think I'd undergone much change' (179).

Throughout the novel, Adam nevertheless wonders if he should return to the US. This doubt hinges upon the question whether either his life in Madrid or the one at home is the most real. On the one hand, he considers the year abroad as a postponement of his coming-of-age, whereas back home he shall make his way through the motions of chrononormativity: 'I was convinced I should go home, ... be present for my family, and begin an earnest search for a mate, career, etc.' in order to 'renew contact with the reality of my life' (2011, 163). The real here is that which grounds him in a normative *Bildung* and recognisable life. On the other hand, he perceives his experiences in Spain as more real because they do not yet meet the familiar forms of representation: '*this* is experience, not because things in Iberia were inherently more immediate, but because the landscape and my relation to it had not been entirely standardized' (163). In this case, the real revolves around that which lacks a certain formalisation or recognisability. Adam's doubt, then, confronts him with the contradictions of experience and representation. Representation can make (the) experience (of a life) feel more real while simultaneously create distance from life's experiences.

In this autofictional novel, there is not so much immediacy but too much mediation. Or rather: the immediate life is always already mediated, and it is Adam's self-conscious awareness of the mediation of experience through representation that makes him feel detached from whatever life he eventually obtains. Presence, as we will see, can only be obtained through an intensification of mediation. We will argue how Adam's *Bildung* gets disrupted by his exploration of the contradictions between affective experience, representation and the real when detachment has become the dominant (historical) affective condition.

In the opening scene of the novel Adam visits the Prado Museum as part of his daily routine in the first weeks of his stay. He especially comes to view *The Descent of the Cross* (c.1435) by the Flemish master Rogier van der Weijden, but finds his daily pattern disturbed when that morning another man is beholding the painting from Adam's beloved spot. Slightly irritated and inclined to leave, Adam is stopped in his tracks when the man 'suddenly [breaks] into tears, convulsively catching his breath' (2011, 8). Adam wonders if this man is having 'a *profound experience of art*' (8), something Adam is so deeply suspicious of that he thinks the man might be an artist who is performing his emotions (10).

Adam is wary of the man's melodramatic, immediate and intense experience, as he is himself incapable of having such an experience. His is that of affective detachment: 'I always already felt removed from my experience' (2011, 67). This sense of detachment persists in Adam's experiences of art, life, politics and romantic relationships. Adam, the novel suggests, is trapped in a circular logic of cognitive scepticism and affective detachment. His detachment makes him sceptical about the possibility of a truthful representation and an authentic experience of life. Simultaneously, the impossibility of such representation has the existential effect that it makes lived experience inauthentic.

This becomes clear in Adam's ruminations about two experiences of life and time that are unrepresentable. On the one hand, there is 'life's white machine': the rhythm of everyday life not punctuated by events but rather the 'pure transition' of time passing (2011, 64). That life is 'falsified' by narrative (64). The impossibility to narrate 'entered the experience' and makes it incommunicable, which strengthens his 'loneliness' (64). On the other hand, there is the succession of intense and eventful moments. Those are equally impossible to represent and experience: 'The ease with which they could be represented entered and cancelled the experience' (64). These reflections, Adam adds, are 'what I felt, if it wasn't what I thought' (64). This suggests that the crisis of

representation is not only cognitive, but that it has also penetrated the realm of the affective. Adam finds himself trapped in a double bind: his scepticism about the possibility of authentic experience precludes his affective investment in lived experience, whereas at the same time his affective detachment generates and reinforces this scepticism.

Rather than wishing to cancel this distance from experience, Adam aims to strengthen the feeling of removal to acquire a sense of presence. Smoking hash, for example, 'intensif[ies]' his detachment, and so he 'experienced it as an intensification of presence, but only at my customary distance from myself' (2011, 67). The hash does not undo the distance but allows Adam to have a profound experience of that distance from his own experience. Adam thus turns his problem into a solution and this practice of removal to acquire a sensation of presence informs both his poetics and ethics.

Adam presents a poetics of the actual and the virtual, which he describes most consistently in relation to poetry. For him, the actually realised poem can only be a failure with regard to the indefinite virtual possibilities and abstract potentiality of poetry itself.⁴ This aesthetic poetics interlocks with his affective detachment. His interest in the arts lies not in their profound effects, but in 'the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf' (2011, 9). Only in the experience of disconnection or removal can presence be felt: a 'profound experience of the absence of profundity' (9); an experience of the absence of (expected) experience. He furthermore wishes his own poems to actively sidestep the actual, as they are 'less poems than a pile of materials out of which poems could be built; they were pure potentiality, awaiting articulation' (39). His is a poetics of displacement: the failure of the actual holds a 'negative power' that points to a utopian (virtual) possibility (39).

This negative power is foremost an affective one. Different from a (post)modern poetics of subversion and formal complexity that offers a political critique through the negation of normative concepts of the world and subjectivity, Adam cannot 'even imagine imagining' any politically effective intervention from poetry (2011, 44). Nevertheless, its negative power is needed because in a world in which art is lost and 'the total triumph of the actual' is realised, Adam 'would swallow a bottle of white pills' (45). The negative power of the arts serves affective rather than ideological aims. It allows for the *feeling* of possible alternatives – an emancipation from the 'damaged life' (20) of detachment into a stronger sense of absorption or 'perfect social integration' (67).

Poetry can, however, also create presence through its practice of mediation. In his most engaged aesthetic encounter, Adam reflects on the work of John Ashbery:

The best Ashbery poems ... describe what it's like to read an Ashbery poem; his poems refer to how their reference evanesces. And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced immediately. It is as though the actual Ashbery poem were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, and you saw only the reflection of your reading. But by reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. But it is a presence that keeps the virtual possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed, on the far side of the mirror. (2011, 91)

An Ashbery poem allows Adam to attend to his own consciousness and the temporal quality of his own reading. If our relation to the world is always already mediated, then it is the experience of such mediacy that allows for the experience of feeling present in time as it passes: 'one could experience the texture of time as it passed, a shadow train, life's white machine' (2011, 90).⁵ Because he experiences presence through the process of mediation, this presence does not collapse into the actual because the ongoing mediation keeps the avenues of poetry's potentiality open.

Adam can experience presence and the promise of belonging through his romantically inspired poetics of the actual and the virtual that displaces his customary detachment into a more self-conscious experience. Adam, however, also adopts this poetics as an ethics as he extends it to his relation towards himself and others. Otherwise put, the genre by which Adam mediates his life is a poem: 'That the tissue of contradictions that was my personality was itself, at best, a poem, where "poem" is understood as referring to a failure of language to be equal to the possibilities it figures' (2011, 164). Similar to poetry, the actual Adam is far less interesting than the virtual possibilities that others can project upon him. He uses several tactics of displacement – telling lies, performing emotions, talking enigmatically – to create distance to others. This causes an endless regression of projections and simulations of how one is perceived or thinks to be perceived – 'it was like seeing myself looking down at myself looking up' (41). The dominant function of these performances is affective: to serve Adam's affective needs, and in particular his desire

to be liked and admired.⁶ At the same time, they disrupt Adam's *Bildung* because they sever his engagement with others and his environment.

Trying to create an 'aura of profundity' (2011, 53) about himself, Adam invites others to read him as a poem. This affective aura depends on gaps and absences – the meanings that get lost in translation and lead to a silence that creates depth by 'the swelling of potential meanings' (51). He believes that his only chance to be liked resides in acting as a screen onto which others can project favourable self-images: 'Her experience of my body, I thought, was more her experience of her experience of my body' (47). In a comparable way, Adam uses the others as a screen that allows him to attend to his own consciousness. Not understanding Spanish fluently offers a poetic experience: 'It was less like I failed to understand than that I understood in chords, understood in a plurality of worlds' (14). When his love interest Isabel tells an emotional story, he similarly leaves all possible interpretations open. This, however, implies that he does not know why she is crying: his wandering in virtual possibilities cuts him off from a connection with the other – 'You miss it, it misses you. / You miss each other' (91).

Adam also fails in engaging with events. Adam feels some jealousy towards his friend Cyrus who went to Mexico with little money 'to acquire experience, not just the experience of experience sponsored by my fellowship' (2011, 68). Cyrus and his girlfriend Jane do seem to have a 'real experience'. Through a conversation via instant messaging, Cyrus relates they went swimming in a river with a very strong current in which eventually a young woman drowned. Later that day, Cyrus and Jane had a fight because he suspected her to be secretly 'excited' because of this experience:

I had this sense – this sense that the whole point of the trip for her – to Mexico – was for something like this, something this 'real' to happen. I don't really believe that, but I felt it, and I said something about how she had got some good material for her novel. (2011, 77)

What this discussion foregrounds is that this real experience is also already mediated: through the desire for it, through the idea of what could be material for a novel, through the idea of what experience such trip should deliver. Compared to other conversations in this novel, Adam is strongly engaged: he is not ironic or sceptical at any point. In the medium of instant messenger, presence is, however, never certain: 'still there?' (2011, 68); 'You there?' (72). Apart from that, the conversation's irony is that Adam's engaged attitude is bound up with the most

standardised expressions, making his engagement sound impersonal: ‘I’ (71), ‘jesus’ (72), ‘fuck, man’ (74), ‘this would shake anybody up’ (78).

The novel further demonstrates the standardisation of affect when Adam does witness a historical event: the terrorist attack in the Atocha Station on 11 March 2004. His reaction can be read as an exploration of contemporary political alienation in a mediatised world. Adam walks to Atocha, wanders around, and walks back to his apartment. There he opens several news websites, and he ‘could feel the newspaper accounts modifying or replacing my memory of what I’d seen; was there a word for that feeling?’ (2011, 119). The ease with which a spectacular event can be represented in standardised cultural images and phrases detaches him from his own experiences, rendering them inauthentic. Rather than delivering him from his complacency, the shocking and violent event reinforces the disconnection between himself and the political through the machinery of representation. It turns the political from an ‘immediate’ event in which to engage into a spectacle to behold: ‘These attacks were “made for TV”’ (140).

Whereas in poetry the virtual might hold a utopian possibility, in life Adam’s dwelling in the virtual closes off any attachment and constantly returns him to his anxiety and incapability in fulfilling affective needs. Whenever he allows himself to think he is leading himself astray, or whenever he fears the other might be aware of their own projections, his sense of loneliness, fraudulence, and lack of essence (his contingency) are reinforced. Behind the several mediated reflections, the virtual causes, the actual Adam’s presence can only become an absence: ‘I have never been here, I said to myself. You have never seen me’ (2011, 178).⁷ The virtual as a means to extract oneself from society and to feel oneself affectively absorbed in a better social relation does not seem to create any *Bildung*. Rather the opposite: Adam’s individual aspirations, to move through life as if he was a poem, do not meet society’s expectations. He is unable to relate to others, to himself, to a place or to the (political) events of his time.

Queer-Muslim Bildung besides chrononormativity and coming-out: Daas

In the autofictional debut *La petite dernière* (2020), translated into English by Lara Vergnaud as *The Last One* (2022), by French-Algerian writer Fatima Daas (a pseudonym), time does not bind. Its main character and first-person narrator, Fatima Daas, is twenty-eight – which makes

her older than was Daas, born in 1995, at the time of writing – and feels detached from life: ‘I seek stability. / Because it’s hard to always be on the outside looking in, looking at people, never with them, your life passing you by, everything passing you by’ (2022, 151). Fatima recounts a sense of falling outside of a recognisable life in which people, events, personal aspirations, and social expectations bind together with the passing of time. Rather, Fatima finds herself ‘incredibly maladjusted’ (120) and unable to identify with a subject position in society. If identity categories could offer a sense of recognition, for Fatima there is never any common ground to tread because each identity she holds seems to be contradicted by another. As Fatima thinks about the book she is writing and we are reading: ‘It’s the story of a girl who isn’t really a girl, who isn’t Algerian or French, who isn’t from Clichy or Paris, a Muslim I think, but not a good Muslim, a lesbian whose homophobia is built in. What else?’ (192). Finding herself in between different identities, she feels displaced from her family, her religion, her sexuality, and her sense of national and spatial belonging.

The temporal organisation of the novel does not take the shape of a sequential narrative in which Fatima overcomes several obstacles to finally find herself solidly positioned in society. Fatima’s narrative is fragmented, consisting of short chapters (sometimes of less than a page) that are not chronologically ordered. Analepses and ellipses are common, making it often difficult to situate a chapter on the timeline of Fatima’s life. Following Freeman, we read such ‘gaps’ and ‘hiccup[s] in sequential time’ (2010, 11, 3) in terms of a queer temporality that offers the opportunity for attachment beyond the chrononormative goal of marriage and heterosexual coupling as well as the queer normative development of coming-out. Both these regulating temporalities are imposed on Fatima and would require her to rescind parts of her subjectivity. Whereas those temporalities demand a forward movement, Fatima moves sideways to develop new bindings with religion, family and lovers to repair her sense of detachment.

Despite the novel’s fragmented arrangement, one can discern the contours of regulating temporal arrangements that each imply their own form of *Bildung*. A first is the heterosexually and patriarchally coded chrononormativity. This troubles Fatima’s teenage and adolescent years as she finds herself attracted to girls. She displays and dresses up like a boy while not particularly identifying with either femininity or masculinity. Institutions like the family, religion and school that mediate the *Bildungsheld*’s socialisation in this novel all emphasise the importance of the heterosexual dyad to Fatima. ‘God created man and woman. God

doesn't like it when a girl wants to look like a boy', her mother says (Daas 2022, 80); the imam stresses the importance of 'marriage' as it composes '[h]alf of religion' (131); at school the principal Mrs Salvatore equates Fatima's gender confusion with a negative *Bildung*: 'She says that I take myself for a boy, that I'm heading down the wrong path' (155).

To some extent, Fatima responds with unsuccessful attempts to fit in. She entertains her mother's normative ideas about femininity and tries 'to figure out what my problem is' (2022, 122) but remains feeling alienated from such femininity; she visits imams to discuss her fabricated Muslim friend's lesbian desires, after which she performs rituals of praying and cleansing; but these cannot prevent an internal 'voice ... encouraging me to "evil"' (176) – this qualification suggesting that Fatima has internalised the homophobic discourse. At school, she lies to her group of male friends that she has 'a crush on Ibrahim', to which one of the group responds: 'Shut up! You're a dude, you can't dig another dude. That's weird, Fatima' (53). The heteronormative script keeps on excluding her, even when queer elements seem impossible to ignore.

Although the novel relates several instances in which Fatima rebels against her secondary school teachers and even verbally abuses one, she follows a normative *Bildung* path within French society by continuing her studies in Paris and taking the 'hypokhâgne' in literature, a two-year intensive course that prepares students for the entry exams to the prestigious *Écoles normales supérieures*. After her professor falsely accuses her of cheating on her homework, Fatima drops out of the course that was full of 'texts written exclusively by white hetero cis men' (2022, 72) and goes on to study philosophy elsewhere in Paris. As she lives in Clichy-sous-Bois, a Parisian suburb with a large migrant constituency, she has a three- to four-hour commute to Paris each day. Although excited at first, Fatima starts to experience 'commuter fatigue' that inspires ideas of 'moving closer' (47). This is not an option, though, because it would signify disloyalty to her family: 'Moving closer means leaving. / Leave; betray, renounce and abandon' (47). Although from a French perspective succeeding and living in Paris would demonstrate Fatima's successful 'integration' into French society, Fatima positions herself in between Paris and Clichy-sous-Bois.

Paris would, however, also be a marker of success from the perspective of a second model of temporal regulation – what we could call queer *Bildung*. Cassandra, one of Fatima's partners, left Toulouse and embraced 'the lesbian world' of Paris (2022, 82), whereas in Clichy-sous-Bois all queer women are 'hiding' (71). Cassandra typifies the Western narrative of queer *Bildung* that pivots around a coming-out that puts

the protagonist on a journey away from a life experienced as shameful and restrained in the heterosexual mould towards a more stable position in which that character accepts and lives their queer desire freely (Pecic 2013, 142–3; Miller 2019). Fatima's lovers advance such a path for her: Ingrid calls her 'completely repressed' (Daas 2022, 128) and in need of sexual-emotional liberation; Gabriella fears that Fatima will 'decide to end everything because of [her] religion' (106). Implicit in Gabriella's reasoning is the view that Fatima's sexuality and religion are incompatible, and that emancipation resides in leaving her religion behind. Whereas for Cassandra, Fatima remarks, 'leaving doesn't necessarily equate to rupture and abandonment' (83), that would be the case for her while it would also tear her away from the Koran's 'sooth[ing]' qualities (61).

Fatima's *Bildung* is then disrupted twice: her life cannot be recounted as a sequential narrative in which she arrives at a stable subject position that is recognised by society nor at a position of queer emancipation. Whatever shape these trajectories take, they would involve her discarding aspects of her identity. Instead, the novel performs a reparative project in which Fatima dis- and reassembles the different part-objects of her identity into 'something like a whole – though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*' (Sedgwick 2003, 128). This process of reassembling the part-objects manifests itself in the novel's structure in which Fatima shifts from one moment in time and one subject position to another without creating a chronological sequence or hierarchy between them: part-objects that in the *Bildung*-trajectories would get opposed (French versus Algerian; queer versus Muslim), can now sit next to one another.

The name for the whole that Fatima composes is 'Fatima Daas' in the sense that Fatima is the nodal point in which the many social mediations and perceptions that are hurtful, either in themselves or in their combination, coexist with those dimensions that cannot be subsumed under any of those social categories. This composing becomes clear when we look at the most striking feature of the novel: the repetition of 'My name is Fatima Daas' at the beginning of almost each chapter.⁸ This anaphor is followed by further specifications of Fatima's life: 'I'm asthmatic' (Daas 2022, 135), 'I feel like I'm living a double life' (69), 'I need to sustain multiple relationships. / I tend to be polyamorous' (104), 'I have a weakness for fragility. / A weakness for heightened sensibilities' (144). This figure seems to fit Kornbluh's assessment of autofictional work as eviscerating fictionality and asserting a 'voice' as 'auratic solidity' that would be 'simply manifesting viscerally affecting stuff' in short

chapters and paragraphs (2024, 101, 7).⁹ Such typification would forego, on the one hand, how the character's speech is partly engendered by her upbringing in a family that preferred gestures and silence over talking,¹⁰ and on the other hand Fatima's inquiry into the social mediation of the self. The anaphor is not an announcement by which Fatima asserts her presence or declares her voice, but a means of working through the social representations and interpellations that inform and mediate her subjectivity. Several examples may illustrate this:

My name is Fatima.

The name of a symbolic figure in Islam.

A name that must be honoured.

A name that mustn't be 'soiled', as we say in my house. (2022, 1)

My name is Fatima Daas, but I was born in Yvelines. (22)

My name is Fatima.

Fatima is a girl's name, a Muslim name.

I start to dress 'like a boy' at the age of twelve.

I don't know this right away. Someone points it out to me. (45)

My name is Fatima Daas

The name of a girl from Clichy who has to make at least three transfers to get to her university. (175)

In the first example, the name comes with an obligation to which Fatima needs to hold her life accountable. It is a name that induces a sense of shame in her, which in this case implies both a strong attachment to the ideal the name symbolises and a felt distance from it. In the second, Fatima plays with the common French-Western perception that an exotic name positions one outside of France. The third example points to gender interpellations, whereas the final one can be read as a critique of the unequal distribution of means (of transportation, knowledge, wealth) corresponding to a racialised urban planning.

It is, however, easy to miss such critique. *The Last One* does not stage a confrontational or heroic, often male inflected form of conflict.¹¹ Rather, Nadra Hebouche has described Daas' way of constructing subjectivity in terms of 'départenance' (2024): a strategy by which the 'I' takes their distance from dominant discourses and/or collective identities. In *The Last One*, Hebouche shows, such distancing happens explicitly or through more subtle means like irony, sarcasm and the not-said – the absence of a coming-out would be an example of the latter. Such sideways distancing

creates the space from which a different attachment can develop. This idea, too, is enclosed in Fatima's name:

Fatima means 'little weaned she-camel'.

To wean, in Arabic: *fatm*.

Stop the nursing of a child or a young animal to transition it to a new mode of feeding; feel a lack; separate someone from something or something from someone or someone from someone. (Daas 2022, 9)

Different from the models of coming-out, moving to the city, or secularising, this mode of separation and transition does not imply a break but rather a new relationality. Thus, Fatima removes herself from the patriarchal institutionalisation of Islam in her family and with the imams she visits, while reapproaching her religion 'out of desire and love and not obligation' (2022, 109): 'I think I'm still converting to Islam. / I try ... to bring myself closer, to make it a way of life' (19). This life does not exclude her sexuality: Fatima learns that 'female homosexuality isn't addressed in the Koran' nor are 'consensual homosexual relations' (132). This life is also not prevented from a relation with her family: without ever having discussed Fatima's homosexuality openly, her mother gives her 'a notebook' (193): a gift that can be read as a tacit endorsement of her daughter's writing, which is also the writing of her sexuality (Egan 2023, 172; Hebouche 2024, 77).¹²

'Among Klein's names for the reparative process is love', Sedgwick writes (2003, 128). It is indeed love that informs Fatima's reparative project. Following her sister's lead, Fatima wants to use 'interpersonal relationships as an example of how to practice Islam. Hanane ... would say that if you love someone, you invest yourself, you give them your time, your kindness and your attention. You nourish the relationship' (Daas 2022, 109). Fatima's affective crisis troubles any easy execution of such loving practice: 'I regret that no one taught me how to love' (148). Her family did not discuss love and sexuality as they considered them objects of shame (102) and, even though she is 'la petite dernière', a term that in French connotes a certain 'endearment' which 'the last one' does not entirely capture (Bickerton 2021), her mother bluntly states she did not want another child, making Fatima feel as if she is 'a mistake, an accident' (Daas 2022, 119). Fatima's reparative project is then not only an act of love but also the act of learning how to love.

Fatima's 'affections are fickle. / Unstable' (2022, 97), but encountering Nina Gonzalez seems to change that. She calls Nina the 'heroine

of my story' (48). That status relates less to her presence in the narrative, which is almost always in passing, than to her affective impact: 'When Nina showed up in my life, I no longer had any idea what I needed and what I was missing' (85). Fatima feels less restrained with Nina, finds it easy with her to overcome her difficulties to communicate and seems to develop a less capricious attachment (152, 156). Despite Fatima's desire, she and Nina do not develop a romantic relationship. Theirs is an encounter of a certain affective intensity that does not, however, conform to that stage of the Bildungsplot in which the hero finds their mate. Given that Nina's presence drives Fatima's writing – 'Since meeting Nina, I've written every day' (100) – one could read the relation to Nina as metonymic for the novel: it exemplifies the potential of a relation – with love, religion, sexuality, family, space, nationality – without moulding it into the preordained forms that meet society's expectations, while also speaking to the reparative potential of an attachment to create a Bildung without the need for the type of rupture that dominant models of Bildung seem to require.

Conclusion: a lack of compromise

Whereas Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy* suggests that contemporary first-person narration 'reconfirm[s] the realities of voice, body, and self' (2024, 73), we discern in the portrayal of the three protagonists' voices, bodies and selves that lack feeling alive to their reality: an experience of detachment, disaffection, disidentification prevails. It is Adam's sense of fraudulence; Bram's loss of genre and resultant reticence; or Fatima's sense of being an outsider to a life that passes her by. These novels do not so much reconfirm reality but rather aim to attain a sense of feeling attached to one's reality: the intensification of mediation in Lerner, the reparative process in Daas, the projects of correspondence and lateral exploration in Van der Graaff.

The impossibility of achieving such attachment also relates to the reduction of temporality to the present or the body – an impossibility that can only, Jameson asserts, lead to a series of mediations. This shows itself in the novels' difficulty of imagining temporality. *Leaving the Atocha Station* is the only novel with a clear chronological structure in its representation of Adam's year abroad, yet it is a year that for Adam falls *outside* his own Bildung and that he finds difficult to connect with the future. In *Wormen en engelen* and *The Last One*, different phases of life are not told in sequence but are put alongside one another, which means that

chapters jump through time. This disturbed temporality creates an affective displacement in the main characters – a removal from the unfolding of their own life narratives.

Not being able to develop their life according to normative regulations of temporality, the characters explore the representations and mediations that inform their subjectivity – the social fabric they are part of. A common thread is that the characters become aware of how their subjectivity is mediated by abstractions that separate and alienate them from their own reality. Adam reflects ‘Who wasn’t squatting in one of the handful of prefabricated subject positions proffered by capital or whatever you wanted to call it ... who wasn’t a bit player in a looped infomercial for the damaged life’ (Lerner 2011, 101). In her use of the anaphor ‘My name is Fatima Daas’, Fatima demonstrates the several ways in which her name conjures an abstraction that situates her in – and/or separates her from – certain narratives and positions in society that alienates her identity from herself. Following the motions from the genre of religious emancipation, Bram learns how his creative and affective abilities will not be of use for his own self-fulfillment but are coopted for post-Fordist production at the workplace.

Despite the characters’ reflections upon society’s norms and expectations, they do not arrive at the typical genre characteristic of the traditional Bildungsroman: the compromise (Moretti 1987, 9). Instead of an agreement between society and individual, change and stability, freedom and security, we are left with characters who find themselves at an affective remove from society and from its normative organisation of time. Yet, the disruption of temporality is of such extent that the novels are unable to imagine a more emancipatory temporality. Their narratives do not take the shape of being, in Freeman’s words, ‘goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations’ (2010, 5) – not normative or otherwise.

We can nevertheless discern minor changes or folds in their experience of disrupted Bildung. For Adam they mostly revolve around the aesthetic experience in which he can sense a certain presence or the promise of a virtual belonging – although the very end of the novel suggests the possibility of such belonging in the actuality of his life: ‘Then I planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends’, reads the last line of the novel (Lerner 2011, 181). Bram’s project, his conversations and the experience of bodily experience through his engagement with Uterque and ASMR offer folds into the extraction and alienation of his cognitive and affective skills as well as into the temporal stasis of a life without genre. Not fitting within two types of Bildungsnarratives, Fatima

engages in a reparative project in which she tries to bring together the different part-objects of her subjectivity for a society that does not generally allow for their coexistence. The balance this creates between the characters and society remains, however, at best precarious.

Notes

1. See also Kelly (2013, 55).
2. Although Kornbluh lists the techniques or ‘vanishing mediators’ (2024, 40) that create such effect, she often speaks as if immediacy *actually* does away with mediation to arrive at presence: ‘contemporary literature *repudiates* representation itself, *dismantling* narration, character, plot, and the smoke of myth in favor of simply manifesting viscerally affecting stuff’ (7; our emphasis).
3. We are furthermore reminded of Alexander Galloway’s discussion of the digital interface as a window, meaning as a somehow transparent medium (2008). He goes on to emphasise the *practice* of mediation: the activities and relationships that produce the effect of such transparent window. Similarly, one should look at the activities and relationships that produce the effect of immediacy.
4. In his monograph *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner (2016, 8–9) speaks of the virtual as the ‘abstract potential of the medium’, which is opposed to ‘the “actual poem”, which necessarily betrays that impulse when it joins the world of representation’. For an exploration of Lerner’s poetics in both fiction and poetry, see Katz (2016).
5. In his ‘The future continuous: Ashbery’s lyric mediacy’, an essay from which the novel heavily copies, Lerner (2010, 209) talks about ‘lyric mediacy’.
6. Adam is mostly honest about his dishonesty and in a way suffers from his own projections and stimulations: ‘Why was I born between mirrors?’ (Lerner 2011, 181).
7. These phrases are lifted from a poem that within the fictional world is written by Adam Gordon (128) but had actually appeared earlier in Lerner’s first book of poetry, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004, 15); cf. Rogers (2013, 230).
8. This repetition also brings to mind what Fatima dubs ‘the Alcoholics Anonymous intro’ at the asthma school sessions she attends: ‘You have to identify yourself. Provide the strict minimum: in this case, nothing more than your first name, last name and age, three things you don’t choose’ (36). Contra Kornbluh, the repetition of her name does not assert presence, but actually foregrounds a mediation or imposition.
9. ‘Archipelagic prose’ is the name Kornbluh reserves for this type of writing in brief paragraphs that foregoes plot and narrative. Other elements of Daas’ novel that would fit her characterisation of immediacy as a dominant style are the use of autofictional first-person narrative and the blurring of the distinctions between prose and poetry (Kornbluh 2024, 102–8).
10. ‘I think that I communicate better than before But I still feel like I’m saying too much. Sometimes, I express my emotions with distance and reserve. Sometimes, nothing comes out. Sometimes, I get stuck. I go quiet. Sometimes, I talk too much’ (Daas 2022, 139).
11. This is different in her teenager years. She abhors ‘anyone representing authority’ at school (51) and after calling her father ‘a monster’, she decides to no longer speak to him (56). Yet, even such conflicts are narrated succinctly.
12. Frances Egan speaks of a ‘coming “in”’ as opposed to a narrative of coming-out; ‘being queer within Islam and the family home’ (2024, 182).

History: melancholic mediations of the past

‘I wanted to forget the island’, Dutch writer Niña Weijers (2017, 5) concedes in an essay entitled ‘Nutteloos eiland’ [Useless island]. The island in question is probably the Caribbean island of Curaçao, which was occupied by the Dutch West-Indian Company in the seventeenth century, and nowadays has an autonomous status within the Dutch state. In the essay, Weijers reflects on the island’s colonial history and on its function in the Dutch slave trade. Even though she spent part of her childhood on Curaçao as her father was employed there, the quote suggests she is reluctant to integrate the island’s history into her own life-story. When the protagonist in Weijers’ autofictional novel *Kamers antikamers* (see chapter 1) visits the same island, she thinks disparagingly of the essay she will have to write in exchange for the grant she received for the journey. The essay will be ‘too politically correct’ (Weijers 2019, 175). The novel shies away from further explicit reflection on colonial history and its continued effects on contemporary Dutch society and culture.

This awkward, self-conscious sidestepping of colonial history in Weijers’ autofictional novel – a failure to connect with a history both collective and individual – is one manifestation of an affective relationship to the past that Paul Gilroy has called postcolonial melancholia. As an affective structure, postcolonial or postimperial, melancholia mediates between contemporary culture and its imperial history and guides its experience of present-day society. It is a fruitful lens through which to understand contemporary fiction’s negotiation of the relationship between twenty-first-century society and its histories and memorial practices. In this chapter we examine this relationship in three novels that are not historical novels per se – their story worlds are primarily set in the present – but that question the manner in which their characters’ experiences of their present environment is informed by an affective relationship

with the past. In various ways their protagonists are affected by post-colonial melancholic moods in the communities they inhabit, which they either uncomfortably embody or try to divest from through exploring alternative affective genres.

Postcolonial melancholia

In the introduction to *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2004) Paul Gilroy identifies ‘an anxious, melancholic mood’ (introduction) in – then – contemporary British politics and culture. This melancholic mood is manifest in xenophobic responses to immigrant and refugee populations, a rhetoric of war and invasion in public discourse, and widespread concerns about (the loss of) British national and cultural identity in multicultural society. Moreover, this ‘morbid fixation with the fluctuating substance of national culture and identity’ is accompanied by ‘a refusal to think about racism as something that structures the life of the postimperial polity’ (introduction). Implicit in this refusal is an unwillingness to acknowledge that, even though most former European colonies officially gained independence over half a century ago, ‘[t]he imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries’ (introduction). When activists point out these continued effects of colonial attitudes and discourses, their claims are ‘dismissed as an endorsement of victimology’, or they are answered by a discourse of innocence guided by an appeal to ‘universal and liberal standards of justice’ (introduction).

This melancholic mood Gilroy calls postcolonial or postimperial melancholia. Similar to Freud’s concept of melancholia, postcolonial melancholia is related to mourning and, more specifically, to a loss – of empire or more generally the sense of metropolitan power and prestige – which has not been worked through. Although the periodisation of this affective structure is somewhat vague, postcolonial melancholia becomes acute as the nation’s colonial history is more widely contested in the public sphere and wider segments of political and civil society have to face up to the nation’s past crimes in the former colonies.

Gilroy distinguishes this ‘postimperial melancholia’ from an earlier, and in his view ‘more dignified sadness’ (2004, chapter 3) which arose from the realisation that the nineteenth-century imperial mission would meet with fierce resistance and significant human and financial cost. That imperial melancholy was redeemed by the nation’s dedication to what it considered to be its noble civilising mission. It begins to transform

into postcolonial melancholia as empire declines and as residents from previous colonies arrive in the country and start to 'make demands for recognition' (chapter 3).

Postcolonial melancholia is sparked by the loss of that sense of moral legitimacy which guided empire: it is 'the guilt-ridden loathing and depression' that results from the refusal and inability to come to terms with the '[r]epressed and buried knowledge of the cruelty and injustice that recur in diverse accounts of imperial administration' (2004, chapter 3). Though postcolonial melancholia may pose as innocence or not-knowing, it arises from the disavowal of knowledge and the repression of ensuing feelings of guilt and responsibility. This postimperial melancholia is deemed pathological because it blocks the working through of imperial history and its continued impact on contemporary society. In contemporary Britain Gilroy sees postcolonial melancholia hardening into an affective structure that serves to sustain an increasingly precarious national identity rather than to afford a transition towards the construction of more inclusive identities (chapter 3). Thus it is bolstered by triumphant claims of recovered whiteness as well as by a retelling of imperial history with the British in the role of victims rather than perpetrators.

Similar accounts have been proposed for other former colonial powers, such as Gloria Wekker's analysis of the Dutch postcolonial experience as 'white innocence' – 'a strand within the postcolonial melancholia syndrome' (Wekker 2016, 17). The Dutch claim to innocence, Wekker argues, is rooted in its self-image as a small, tolerant and (geopolitically) minor country that may serve as a moral guide to more powerful nations. This identity construction relies on a disavowal of Dutch involvement in colonisation and the Atlantic slave trade, and of the 'imperial continuities' (20) between 'the memories, the knowledge, and affect with regard to race' (19) that solidified in the metropolis during the colonial era and contemporary attitudes and institutional hierarchies informed by race. Dutch postcolonial melancholia thus registers in a denial of racism and an aggressively claimed ignorance of the colonial past. This melancholic pose of 'innocence, not knowing' is 'one of the few viable stances that presents itself when the loss of empire is not worked through, but simply forgotten' (17). On top of the loss of empire, it is the '[l]oss of innocence, that is, knowing and acknowledging the work of race' (18), that provokes strong denials of white privilege and violent responses to anti-racist activism.

The specificity of postcolonial melancholia as an affective structure may be outlined further by comparing it to the related notions of colonial

and imperial nostalgia. Patricia M.E. Lorcin defines ‘nostalgia in relation to empire’ as ‘a longing for a period of former imperial and colonial glory’ (2013, 97). She goes on to distinguish imperial from colonial nostalgia, the former referring to the nation’s loss of geopolitical power and prestige, the latter to the loss of settlers’ colonial lifestyles.¹ Postcolonial melancholia is closer to imperial nostalgia, as it is not concerned with the lived experiences and memories of those who actually settled in the former colonies. While the difference between remembering and forgetting is one of degree – forgetting being part of the spectrum of memorial practices – postcolonial melancholia results rather from forgetting, from the blocking of remembrance, than from remembering, which is central to (imperial or colonial) nostalgia. More generally, the mechanism of disavowal may set apart melancholia from nostalgia; whereas the latter is primarily concerned with the mourning of a lost object and may imply a working through of colonial history, the former results from the disavowal of both the experience of loss and the remembrance of the object lost.

We propose to extend Gilroy’s notion of postcolonial melancholia to include an awareness of ‘the intimate association of modernity and slavery’ (53), which Gilroy unpacks in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness* (2022 [1993]). While primarily engaged with the ambiguous position and ‘double consciousness’ of radical black intellectuals within and vis-à-vis Western modernity, this study simultaneously argues that colonisation, slavery and its attendant racial terror are integral to and constitutive of modernity. Against accounts that would sideline slavery as a remnant of a pre-modern past, Gilroy argues that ‘capitalist, racial slavery’ should be understood as ‘internal to modernity and intrinsically modern’ (220). Rather than as its irrational opposite, ‘racial terror is not merely compatible with occidental rationality but cheerfully complicit with it’ (56).

This is a complex argument, which Gilroy illuminates through the image or ‘chronotope’ of the ship, more specifically the transatlantic slaver, which for Gilroy represents a microcosmos of the cultural and political interactions that gave rise to modernity. The chronotope of the ship provides ‘a means to reconceptualize the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory’ and ‘a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders’ (2022, 17). This constitutive interaction with outsiders is disavowed when a nation presents its history and culture as self-enclosed, denying this imaginary identity construction ‘any external referents whatsoever’ (14).

Part of Gilroy's project is to disentangle how racial thinking, images of blackness and debates on slavery have informed aesthetic, epistemological and ethical discourses – notions of beauty, knowledge and humanity – which have been identified with modernity. He draws attention, for instance, to how 'the figure of the black ... support[s] the production of aesthetic judgments of a supposedly universal character' (2022, 8).² This 'complex interpenetration' (48) of cultural forms from which modernity was born is disavowed by those who believe that modernity can be 'completed from within its own philosophical and political norms' (56). Conversely, an account of radical black thought and politics in the modern age should acknowledge that these achievements 'exist[s] partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of Enlightenment' (48).³

The decentring of modernity is also foregrounded by Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017). At the core of his critique is the idea that the Western experience of race and blackness was constitutive of modernity, which is therefore radically decentred: 'Blackness and race have constituted the (unacknowledged and often denied) foundation ... from which the modern project of knowledge – and of governance – has been deployed' (2). Confronted with blackness, 'a sign in excess of all signs' (11) that Western reason was unable to incorporate into its systems of meaning except as a gap in meaning, Western modernity set forth to construct a conception of the world with itself at the centre, which 'maintained a relationship to other worlds that was fundamentally imaginary' (12). Mbembe goes on to imply that, in its urge to govern blackness, Western systems of meaning-making broke down, a collapse he describes in words reminiscent of modernism's epistemological anxiety: 'reason found itself ruined and emptied, turning constantly in on itself, shipwrecked in a seeming inaccessible place where language was destroyed' (13). As a result, Western language got increasingly unmoored from its anchoring in reality.

We suggest that the postcolonial melancholic mood is also concerned with a more abstract experience of loss that results from a deep epistemic decentring of Western modernity. To be sure, awareness and theorising of this decentring goes back to poststructuralism, which in Sam Durrant's words 'arose historically out of the postwar crisis in the French empire' (2004, 2) and, more specifically, the devastating experience of the Algerian war of independence. Nevertheless, public awareness and contestation of colonial discourse and its continuities in contemporary society have significantly increased in recent years and have effected a denaturalisation of public and cultural discourse. This widening awareness is accompanied by a sense of melancholia ranging from a violent

disavowal of colonial discourse and of the need for its denaturalisation, to a self-conscious welcoming of the urge to work through this epistemic shift.

Postimperial melancholy is most evident in the first novel we discuss, Dutch writer Joost de Vries' *Oude meesters* [Old Masters] (2017). Written in the context of the Netherlands' uneasy, heavily debated working through of its involvement in the colonial slave trade, the novel explicitly references leading postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gloria Wekker, while its protagonists somewhat ironically indulge in imperial and patriarchal fantasies.

While steering clear of such indulgences Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019) shares with *Oude meesters* a melancholic sense of the ethical challenges to conventional narrative modes and genres posed by the brutal awareness of past and present white-supremacist violence. Set up as a road novel of sorts in a region haunted by Native American memories, *Lost Children Archive* uncomfortably engages with frontier myths and searches for an ethically responsible narrative mode to express the courage and suffering of refugee children. A weakened, welcoming sense of melancholia registers in Luiselli's awareness of the need to provide a historical backdrop when tackling current issues of migration, and the concomitant need to acknowledge the persistent influence of the frontier myth on the understanding of these issues.

A yet more complex relationship to postimperial melancholia can be traced in Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021), translated by Lara Vergnaud in 2024 as *The Most Secret Memory of Men* (2024). The novel works through the conflicting affects an aspiring African writer might experience when being invited into metropolitan literary culture – on the condition, it would seem, of simultaneously internalising white cultural normativity and continuing to embody black otherness. In its mystification of a mid-twentieth-century Senegalese cult novelist the novel explores this affective conflict in both imperial and postimperial Francophone literary culture. Implicitly, French postimperial melancholia is shown in its ongoing tokenisation of Franco-African writers to support contemporary metropolitan literary culture's claim to inclusive identity politics.

Masculinity and postimperial melancholia: De Vries

The vicissitudes of Edmund and Sieger van Zeeland, the male protagonists in *Oude meesters* (2017), Joost de Vries' third novel, foreground the

imbrication of postimperial melancholia with anxieties about gender – more specifically the waning of dominant masculinity as it was shaped in the context of Western colonial modernity. In their own ways this Dutch pair of brothers both lead a nomadic life. The former travels the world searching for affective fulfilment; the latter seeks fame and adventure through investigative journalism. Both struggle to sustain long-term social contacts and relationships. A nostalgic longing for the belief in progress embodied by colonial narratives of discovery and expansion leads them to identify with the *great expectations* that seem inherent to their privileged position as white, well-to-do Dutch men. These narrative genres, however, no longer afford a way forward. Edmund and Sieger, therefore, revert to an imaginary experience of the past.

In *Oude meesters* Joost de Vries demonstrates a keen awareness of societal sensitivities, and he does not eschew provocative statements. His protagonists experience twenty-first-century identity politics as a culture of victimhood and new taboos, a culture that does not allow them uninhibited expression of their desires and ambitions any more. From the opening scene onwards, Edmund self-consciously confronts post-colonial critique: ‘He was sincerely nostalgic for naïve nineteenth-century orientalism ... Edward Said and Gloria Wekker would hate him’ (De Vries 2017, 18). Moreover, the brothers are uncomfortable with resurgent feminist activism. As a political editor at a national newspaper, Sieger heckles young job applicants’ alleged political correctness – their “‘deep interest” in “hidden minorities”” – and wonders why ‘nobody wants to write about *majorities*’ (100). He dismisses a women’s rights demonstration as angry women attacking men and masculinity altogether, and he adopts a position of male innocence: ‘They were angry at white, heterosexual men – men like him, men oppressing women, celebrating white privilege, upholding the status quo ... deep down all potentially rapist *men*’ (69).⁴

Oude meesters stages male characters who feel threatened by contemporary political activism. It is also a novel about fantasy and the desire to escape from fantasy. The overarching fantasy is the narrative of the battle of brothers: history told as an epic conflict between men, forging their solidarity through the social relation they know best – struggle. Edmund’s course of life is a contemporary enactment of the fantasy of wealth: with the help of a barely motivated trick, he comes into possession of a large share in a successful app and his fortune affords him fame, privilege and liberties. He buys a part in a television series – which employs his sister-in-law Sarie – by contributing financially to the production. This fantasy is shown to collapse when the recording fails because of Edmund’s meddling.

His brother Sieger's fantasy is the myth of the chosen son. As a political journalist he feels entitled to follow in the footsteps of renowned journalist W.H. Verdelius, who has just passed away, and to conduct an exclusive interview with yet another 'Great Man', Russian billionaire and self-declared dissident Anton Borisov. This fantasy is also demystified when Verdelius is knocked off his pedestal because of his dubious relations with the Russian regime. And, even though Sieger still finds fame with his story on Borisov, he owes his success more to luck than to skill.

Edmund's imaginary world is set in the past. It is encapsulated in the Rijksmuseum, the national museum of the Netherlands in Amsterdam, where the grandeur of colonial history is displayed as a myth. For Edmund, seventeenth-century admiral Michiel de Ruyter is not just an emblem for the celebration of the Dutch East India Company; he presents a model of heroism that is no longer available today: 'one could not think of any living Dutchman who in four hundred years might merit such a hall. That kind of grandeur simply did not exist anymore' (2017, 80). Edmund likes to think of himself as a man born in the wrong time; as a historian he does not aim to study the past, rather he wants to 'live in it' (32). By the past he means a fantasy of aristocratic and imperial grandeur: 'who will maintain the estates when there is freedom, who will polish the marble when democracy has arrived?' (32).

It feels obvious to qualify Edmund's world view as an explicit case of postimperial melancholy and imperial nostalgia. This interpretation is anticipated and rejected in the novel, more specifically by Anton Borisov's wife: 'My husband liked old-fashioned standards ... He liked discipline, big books, hard work. ... But he did not glorify the past' (2017, 200). Borisov, interviewed by Sieger, presents himself as 'the bad conscience of a culture which has substituted the easy pleasure of moving images for intellectual labour' (84). However, Borisov takes it one step further. The critique of colonial history, he claims, conceals that we hold the past in higher esteem than the present:

We always feel guilty towards the past. That is why we are so angry at it. We cry out that now we should be ashamed about the way we dealt with slavery, with human rights, women's rights, with colonization and exploitation – yet ultimately we know that the past is morally superior to us. (2017, 84)

The attribution of emotions in the argument is conspicuous: as the exemplary embodiment of white and male privilege, he attributes the position of anger to postcolonial and feminist critiques of history.

Postcolonial melancholia in *Oude meesters* is primarily mediated by questions concerning white masculinity – normative masculinity shaped by Western colonial modernity. Edmund indulges in colonial fantasies about the expanding world of Columbus, since ‘it was still possible then to sally forth as a man and tame a river’ (2017, 151). Sieger too identifies with privileged men from the past; with a man like W.H. Verdelius – ‘relic from a better age’ (47) – who frequented the highest of circles and is remembered in the history books ‘as a monument’ (44). Or with the boy ‘from a world of old-fashioned privilege’ in a Rembrandt painting. The appeal such privilege holds for him ‘has something to do with sovereignty’ (90). Sovereignty, or legitimacy, is a motif in the novel: in another scene Sieger ‘was looking for legitimacy, he wanted to be able to justify his presence’ (36). Edmund too repeatedly wonders what his part, his ‘raison d’être’ is (175). Apparently, these men feel their existence is no longer a priori justified.

The fact that Edmund and Sieger project their fantasies of masculinity into the past implies that their belief in the future of patriarchy is ruffled. While they can no longer justify that power structure, they had secretly hoped to bear its fruits. In *Oude meesters* De Vries conveys a postimperial voice that has lost its absolute freedom of speech, acknowledges that loss but cannot yet accept it. This melancholia is registered in frequent references to the debate on privilege, for instance on the set of Edmund’s television series, which includes scenes reminiscent of colonial conquest: ‘And you think you are the right person to tell the story of an indigenous group which was the victim of genocide by Europeans?’ (2017, 170).

De Vries presents the crisis of white masculinity in the wider context of the Dutch postcolonial melancholia syndrome. Edmund’s melancholia, moreover, is intertwined with affective problems such as loneliness or the longing for connection. There is a reparative impulse in this affective approach: Edmund tries to assuage his experience of loss by seeking connection, particularly with Sarie, and thus to mitigate his paranoid position towards the present in which he feels displaced. As Sarie points out to Edmund: ‘When you show your world view, your emotional scope, the form of your fantasies, you expose yourself’ (2017, 120). With this remark Sarie responds to Edmund’s story about a Roman arch in southern France. Edmund feels as detached from his societal context as that antique landmark in the twenty-first century. Sarie voices his nostalgia’s affective grounding: ‘You identify with the arch. You feel left alone ... You do not want to acknowledge the possibility of loneliness’ (120).

His political incorrectness is thus reframed as a sign of affective crisis. Edmund considers his escape from the present as a sign of vulnerability: the past makes ‘everything relative’ whereas the present forces you to ‘commit yourself to other people’ (2017, 257). He does not succeed in making that commitment: in his spacious home in Amsterdam he tellingly leaves a complete floor empty. ‘Hundred and fifty square meters between him and the world, pure emptiness, insulation ... nobody could reach him’ (104). His wealth provides him with the means to cultivate this isolation, while at the same time it allows him to keep Sarie close.

Edmund’s desires disclose an affective dimension that invites empathy. Nevertheless, the protagonists’ reactionary statements may temper that sense of compassion. Towards the end of the novel the fantasy, which was demystified earlier, seems to be resurrected. The brothers regain their homosocial solidarity and eventually they split the trophies of their masculinity: a brief spell as editor-in-chief for Sieger, the proverbial ‘girl’ for Edmund. Sarie debunks the infantile brotherly struggle between Edmund and Sieger, yet reinforces their imaginary identity as sovereign loners (2017, 265). *Oude meesters* self-consciously stages masculine disaffection in contemporary Dutch literature. Even though the novel runs the risk of lingering in imperial nostalgia, it also demonstrates that reactionary fantasies are well past their expiration date. The motifs of sovereignty and legitimacy imply an inchoate critique of affective crisis and the loss of autonomy in a neoliberal world. Traditional fantasies, however, persist to hamper this critique coming to fruition.

Weakened postcolonial melancholia: Luiselli

While De Vries’ protagonist Edmund self-consciously embodies Dutch postcolonial melancholia, such identification with the nation’s pervasive melancholic mood is absent from Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* (2019). To be sure, Gilroy’s analysis of postcolonial melancholia does not entirely hold for the US, the country in which Luiselli’s novel is set, for that country did not see a decline in its imperial power similar to that experienced by Britain, the Netherlands or France in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the US can be said to have experienced ‘the painful obligations to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality’ (Gilroy 2004, chapter 3). The country’s postcolonial melancholia is shown through its present border policy, which in Gilroy’s words could be

interpreted as an attempt at '[r]epairing that aching loss ... by the recovery or preservation of endangered whiteness' (chapter 3). *Lost Children Archive* addresses US colonial history in its two-fold focus on the colonial settlers' eradication of Native American societies and cultures, and on the current US policy to police the country's ethnic composition by closing its southern borders to migrants and refugees. While consistently alluding to the analogies between past and present in the settler's fantasy (and anxiety) of white supremacy, the novel conveniently divides the twin issues among its two protagonists, the husband focusing on the colonial past, the wife – and narrator – on the postcolonial present.

Even though neither protagonist identifies with US postcolonial disavowal of past atrocities and sense of decline in white dominance, melancholia resonates through the female narrator's meditations as they travel across the country. This specific offshoot of postcolonial melancholia pervades the narrator's main question: how to tell the story of the refugee children in an ethically responsible way? In our reading we interpret this question about the appropriate representational mode as a weakened sense of postcolonial melancholia: a feeling of guilt and loss through which the subject acknowledges the past and its own implication in its continued effect on present-day society.

In the first of *Lost Children Archive*'s four parts, 'Family Soundscape', the anonymous female narrator chronicles the road trip she and her husband are taking from New York City to the Mexican–American border. The opening paragraphs set the scene for major parts of her story: she is in 'the copilot seat', her husband is '[b]ehind the wheel', and on the backseat are her five-year-old daughter – his stepdaughter – and his ten-year-old son – her stepson – consistently referred to as 'the girl' and 'the boy', and eventually as 'Memphis' and 'Swift Feather'. The narrator makes it clear from the first page that her story is for the children on the backseat: 'I don't know what my husband and I will say to each of our children one day ... We'll need to give them an answer, tell them a proper story' (Luiselli 2019, 5).

Four years after they fell in love, their marriage is breaking up, and soon not only husband and wife but also stepbrother and stepsister will go their separate ways. The family embark on what will most likely be their last trip as a family. The trip is set up as a reconciliation of sorts: while he wants to document the echoes of Apache history in the south, her goal is to document the fate of refugee children who get lost in their attempt to cross the border. Given the many analogies between the respective histories they are documenting – conceived as phases in the ongoing history of white-American imperialism – in the trip the husband and wife's new projects tentatively converge. Except, of course, they do not.

The novel's second part, 'Reenactment', marks an abrupt shift in narrative voice, as the boy steps in as narrator, picking up the story where the mother-narrator left off. In his opening paragraph the boy signals his narrative's addressee: 'I'm gonna tell it to you, Memphis' (2019, 191). Narrating retrospectively – as opposed to the mother's present-tense narration – the boy records the journey he took his sister on to find the lost refugee children – effectively running away from their parents and getting lost on the way. In the third part, 'Apacheria', the narrative voice again shifts between each of its three chapters. First it reverts to the mother-narrator, the second chapter consists entirely of episodes from the fictional novel the mother is reading, called *Elegies for Lost Children*, and in the third the boy's voice blends with that of the fictional novel's narrator. In the fourth and final part of *Lost Children Archive*, the boy concludes his story for Memphis, revealing that he recorded his story on tape for his sister to remember their lives together (347).

We interpret the novel's narrative structure as an attempt to find an imaginary resolution to the contradictions the narrator in the first part faces. These are contradictions of an epistemological as well as an ontological and an affective nature, which the shift to the boy's narrative voice aims to resolve through a blending of the dichotomies the mother-narrator confronts. Our reading foregrounds the affective conflict haunting the female protagonist, between parenthood – or motherhood as this appears to be a gendered conflict – and political activism. This affective conflict reveals a heteronormative opposition between the image of the heroic, solitary activist and the nuclear family that the novel ultimately sidelines in its call for sympathy with the children. Resonating through these conflicts is the overdetermining postcolonial melancholia we identified earlier as the narrator's sense that this refugee children's story is not hers to tell, and yet she has to confront it.

Even though the mother-narrator met her husband while they were working on the same soundscape project, the couple could never quite come to terms with the different approaches to documenting sound they brought to the project. He came from a background in acoustic ecology, sampling the sounds of the natural environment, whereas she worked in 'a tradition much more-journalism-based and narrative-driven' (2019, 99). As a running gag of sorts, the couple joke about her being a documentarist and him being a documentarian.⁵ However, the narrator suggests that, at least from the husband's perspective, this difference implies an epistemological hierarchy, in which her 'pragmatic storytelling, commitment to truth, and a direct attack on issues' is construed as 'a mere adherence to a conventional form of radio-journalism', or even worse,

‘a blind obedience to funders and funding’ (99). His acoustic documents would then be more akin to the aesthetic autonomy claimed by a modernist work of art (Stuelke 2021a, 55).

Their epistemologies as well as aesthetics – ‘the ways in which we each listened to and understood the sounds of the world’ – the narrator understands to be ‘probably irreconcilable’ (Luiselli 2019, 100). Her dedication to storytelling opens up a whole range of social, ethical and political concerns that her husband – as we see him through her eyes – does not even begin to address. As a journalist who is used to working in precarious political circumstances, her getting the story right is about not ‘getting killed’ and not ‘getting the sources killed’ (99). In the case of the lost refugee children she tries to devise a way to tell this story that does not imply her appropriating others’ painful experiences for her own aesthetic or professional profit. For her, narrative is nothing short of an ethical and aesthetic conundrum, which we interpret as indicating a weakened sense of postcolonial melancholia.

By contrast the husband seems happy to spin an endless stream of stories on Apache history as the family travels across the US. The boy-narrator, in the second part of the novel, suggests as much when he concedes that he ‘[sometimes] couldn’t tell if Pa was telling stories or if he was telling histories’ (2019, 216). His project, he explains to his son, ‘is simply to work on the inventory of echoes’ (95), capturing ‘environments and voices’ in an audio-montage without ‘forcing it all together into a clean narrative sequence’ (95–6). He is not all that concerned about storytelling because he does not conceive of his project as intrinsically narrative.

This is not to say that the husband’s approach does not meet any epistemological obstacles. His project is about documenting the absence of what has been erased, registering traces of the Apache lives and the Apache struggle for survival against white-American colonisation of their lands. He aims to do so by recording the current acoustic environment on the locations of historical Apache presence (2019, 141). He does not seem to have any further qualms about the legitimacy of his project. As the boy explains, his father teaches them about the political implications of the language used in American cultural memory, such as the word ‘Apache’, which ‘meant “enemy,” and that’s what the Apache’s enemies called them’ (215). Nevertheless, his critique of others’ use of language does not lead him to hesitations about his own. ‘Papa said: genocide, exodus, diaspora, ethnic cleansing, that’s what happened’ (215). Neither full-blown postcolonial melancholia – which would imply ‘a chain of defensive argumentation’ (Gilroy 2004, chapter 3) – nor that weakened

melancholia, which we argue registers in doubts about legitimacy or appropriation, seems to get their grip on the husband.

For the mother-narrator the epistemological problems are more fundamental. Her project is rife with gaps, conflicts and interruptions. Apart from the pragmatic-political concerns discussed earlier, she raises epistemological issues: '[w]hat you have, in the end, are all the moments that didn't form part of the actual experience. A sequence of interruptions, holes, missing parts' (Luiselli 2019, 102). The next question is whether a document registering the voices and testimonies of the lost children would be ethically acceptable: 'it doesn't seem right to turn those children, their lives, into material for media consumption' (96). Listeners feeling 'pity' or 'rage' would not entail any concrete action to improve the situation (99). She might not even arrive in a position where she could speak to relevant witnesses in the first place, since the refugee children are being carefully policed and kept out of the public eye.

With this last issue the epistemological concern appears to merge with interruptions of a more ontological nature: the mother-narrator grapples with gaps between various 'worlds', more specifically the fictional world of the novel *Elegies for Lost Children* she is reading, the real world of her immediate surroundings including her children, a more remote real world – of the lost refugee children – that she chases but feels is hidden from her view, and finally the real but erased world of Apache history. As she reads the fictional novel, first by herself, then out loud to the boy – and even recording those readings – she attempts to straddle the gaps between those worlds and 'to understand the best way to tell the story of the other lost children' (2019, 144). Somehow, she hopes, reading the fictional story out loud to the boy, would join the dots not only between the fictional world and her immediate surroundings, but also between her intimate world and the world beyond her reach.

The narrative shift in the second part of the novel can be interpreted, we suggest, as the enactment of the mother-narrator's desire to find an imaginary resolution for the problems she faces. From the boy's perspective, first of all, the conflict between her and her husband's approach to documenting sound would appear as a slightly ridiculous grown-up problem of semantics. 'Officially, Pa was a documentarist and Ma was a documentarian, and very few people know the difference' (2019, 192). Even though the boy may minimise the issues involved, his child's perspective cannot conjure away the affective conflict underlying the divide. He is acutely aware – at least this awareness is ascribed to him by the instance concocting his narrative voice – of the fact that his family is falling apart (210). He therefore mumbles a made-up blend of

the two words – documentarianist – when asked about his aspirations for the future, as if merging the two words might bridge the gap between his parents (234).

On the ontological level, in the chapter ‘Echo Canyon’ in the third part of the novel, the boy’s narrative voice affords a blending of the fictional world of the *Elegies* with the real worlds of the lost children, and the erased world of Apache history the children have been reenacting throughout the road trip. At first the *Elegies*’ lost children appear in the stories the boy tells his sister, ‘so that you could hear them the way I did in my mind’ (2019, 321). In a few pages in the chapter, composed as a modernist single-sentence twenty-page monologue, the narrative voice betrays intrusions of another voice, picturing a hypothetical ‘old lady’ who keeps track of the number of deceased refugees found in the desert while listening to a ‘moralistic lesbian novel written by author Lynne Cheney’ (322–3) – a portrait not likely to spring from the boy’s pen.

Moreover the boy’s past-tense narrative shifts abruptly to the present-tense narration of the *Elegies*’ narrator, for instance in this excerpt, where the boy and the girl see storm clouds and eagles: ‘and then we saw another strike of lightning, even brighter this time than the first, the lost children see it, too, as they continue marching in the desert’ (2019, 325). Eventually the blending of the narrative voices induces a further blend of two ontologically distinct worlds as the boy and the girl meet the fictional lost children in the desert. Their respective narrative voices, however, do not merge completely:

[N]one of them seemed real until you opened your mouth, Memphis, you said Geronimoooo from just a step behind me, and then we heard the four faces say Geronimoooo back to us, Geronimoooo, the two children say to the four of them from the other side of the abandoned gondola, a boy and a girl, and it takes them all some seconds to realize that they are all real, them and us, us and them. (2019, 331)

This ontological blending has been interpreted by critics in various ways. Stuelke (2021a, 62) reads ‘the whimsical mysticism of this encounter between children lost among the echoes of the dead’ as a self-conscious exploration of the children’s imaginative appropriation of the histories of both Apache warriors and refugee children. In its blurring of ‘the figures of child and the Indian’, Stuelke claims, ‘this vision of childhood play ... is not divorced from settler fantasy’ (61). According to Pieter

Vermeulen (2022, 84) '[t]he overtly phantasmagoric nature of the blending of the boy's and the lost children's perspective' serves to stress 'the imaginative disconnect that marks the first half of the novel'. While the mother-narrator refuses facile identification with the refugee children's experiences, the blending of worlds shows '[e]mpathetic connection' as 'a fantasy' that the reader should not fall for (84).

Vermeulen makes a convincing case for reading *Lost Children Archive* as a symptom of a mode of symbolic production that has recently been gaining currency in the US book market. Rather than as a field of restricted production, as Bourdieu analysed the segment of literary production wielding high symbolic capital, Vermeulen identifies 'the segment of literary upmarket literature' (80) as 'a field of restricted emotion' (81). In this field to 'block affective release qualifies as an index of literary value', as opposed to a segment of literary production that allows its readers to indulge in 'unreflexive empathy' (80) and ethically questionable acts of emotional investment in often painful experiences of others.

Vermeulen traces various strategies in the novel that would assure 'that the experience of the undocumented children remains unavailable for unearned empathetic identification' (2022, 88), such as the inclusion in the novel of 'so much half-filtered archive material' (87). We contend that Vermeulen's concept of 'restricted emotion' can be productively aligned with that of postcolonial melancholia, more specifically that weakened sense of melancholia that registers in a hesitation to uncritically identify with or appropriate others' experiences, particularly when these bear a relationship with colonial history.

Vermeulen locates the novel's affective intervention in a specific, highly foregrounded dimension: the relationship of empathy and identification between the novel's implied readership and the children crossing the border.⁶ However, Luiselli also outlines a more centripetal affective conflict at the heart of the mother-narrator's private sphere: the conflict between parenthood, more specifically motherhood, and political activism – an affective conflict that compounds and further complicates the overall sense of melancholia.

Towards the end of the first part of the novel the mother-narrator explicitly points out the analogy between the story she reads 'about the lost children on their crusade', 'the story of the real children' and 'of course, finally ... my own children, one of whom I might soon lose, and both of whom are now always pretending to be lost children' (2019, 172). The narrator then falls asleep asking herself

the question: 'What happens if children are left alone?' (172). The sense of loss and aloneness she does *not* explicitly address is hinted at in the following paragraph, when a urine stain in the children's bed sends the narrator reminiscing about her own childhood:

I wet my bed until I was twelve. And I wet it, especially, between the ages of ten and twelve. When I turned ten years old, exactly the boy's age, my mother left us – my father, my sister, and me – to join a guerilla movement in southern Mexico ... For many years after that day, I hated politics, and anything to do with politics, because politics had taken my mother away. For years, I was angry with her, incapable of understanding why politics and other people and their movements were more important to her than us, her family. (2019, 172–3)

In a novel self-consciously deploying echoes as a compositional device, this echo of the mother-narrator's childhood seems conspicuously unstressed. The word 'echo' returns in the closing sentences of the paragraph as the narrator reflects on her 'deeper understanding' (2019, 174) over the years of her mother's choices. 'Perhaps the right word', she muses, 'is recognition, in the sense of re-cognizing, knowing again, for a second or third time, like an echo of a knowledge, which brings acknowledgment, and possibly forgiveness' (174). Entailing the possibility of forgiveness, this re-cognition seems to be of an affective as well as cognitive nature. The narrator goes on to compare her mother's choices to her own: 'I hope my children, too, will forgive me, forgive us, one day, for the choices we make' (174–5).

As the family witness a group of children being deported by aeroplane – in what is probably the emotionally climactic scene of the novel – she realises her prime obligation is to care for the children, more specifically 'to make sure' that the sounds the boy hears in that instant are 'sounds that will assure him he was not alone that day' (2019, 184). The narrator repeatedly reflects on the affective function stories have in creating a shared space of belonging for the family: 'conversations in a family ... build the world' and gradually develop into an 'intimate archive' (28–9). Overdetermining that care for the family bond are the narrator's anxieties about the urge she feels to intervene more directly in US border policies – lacking a cultural model in neoliberal and neoconservative society for the coexistence of political activism and family care.

When in the second part of the novel the boy takes over as narrator, he gives voice to his mother's concerns, in an echo that amplifies through resonance what remains implicit in the mother-narrator's account. The boy complains that their mother is no longer emotionally available to them when she hears about the lost children: 'I wanted to remind her that even though those children were lost, we were not lost, we were there, right there next to her' (2019, 208). He comes up with a plan, then, to regain their mother's emotional investment: 'what if we got lost, would she then finally pay attention to us?' (208). Paradoxically the children running away strikes a parallel between the fictional lost children and the real lost children on the one hand, and the boy and the girl on the other – a parallel that obscures the sense that the boy and the girl are not so much lost themselves, but rather *have lost* their mother, emotionally, or their parents more generally, to the real lost children.

A similar ambiguity underlies the shift in narrative voice itself. On the one hand, the mother-narrator appears to anticipate this shift when she realises 'that my children's backseat games and reenactments were maybe the only way to really tell the story of the lost children' (2019, 180). She blames herself for not having 'listened to them enough' or 'recorded them enough' (180) – earlier in the novel she rejects these reenactments as morally unacceptable. The narrative shift might be interpreted as the mother-narrator giving way to the children's voice. On the other hand, the mother highlights the parents' responsibility to provide their children with appropriate stories: 'Children force parents to go out looking for ... the right way of telling the story, knowing that stories don't fix anything or save anyone but maybe make the world both more complex and more tolerable' (185–6). This begs the question: is the mother-narrator conceding narrative voice to the children, or rather providing them with a story she deems appropriate?

It would seem, then, that the story of the boy and the girl getting lost together not only affords an imaginary enactment of the family being reunited, and the ensuing affective relief, but also – and perhaps more importantly – the boy's imaginary forgiveness for the parents' separation. 'After we got lost, and then were found', the boy meditates, 'I think Ma and Pa did think about staying together, not separating. I think they tried, maybe even tried hard' (2019, 348). The narrative shift to the boy's perspective thus provides the mother-narrator with relief for her affective conflict, deflecting attention from her conflicted position as activist mother through inviting identification with the children, while more generally providing affective relief for that weakened sense of postcolonial melancholia pervading the novel.

Modernist aesthetics repaired: Sarr

On 15 July 2018 the French national football team won the World Cup with a 4–2 win over Croatia at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow. Even though he watched the game with his DR Congolose friend Musimbwa, the win only leaves a passing impression on Diégane’s mind. Aspiring Paris-based Senegalese writer Diégane Latyr Faye, the protagonist and main narrator in Mohammed Mbougar Sarr’s novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021), translated as *The Most Secret Memory of Men* (2024), is about to share with his friend a rare copy of the book he has been searching for for some years and has, only a few days ago, finally been able to get hold of: *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, the sole novel by Senegalese writer T.C. Elimane, published in French by a small Parisian publishing house in 1938. A couple of hours later Diégane finds his friend ‘elated, as though he’d just had an epiphany’ (2024, 46), an experience similar to Diégane’s after reading the novel on the night of 10 July only ‘to awaken in a world ... where everything ... would be forever changed’ (34).

France winning ‘its second star’ (2024, 41) would seem like a trivial detail in an encyclopedic novel spanning a good century of Senegalese, French and world history. Yet, as Paul Gilroy’s glosses on England’s painful longing for that second win make clear, football is never quite that trivial. Where England’s remembrance of its World Cup in 1966 is tied up to its inability to come to terms with the loss of its empire, France not only did win two, but both were won by a squad reflecting the country’s multicultural postcolonial character.

This is not to imply, however, that France has worked through its imperial decline and the devastating remembrance of its colonial history. Diégane’s comment that ‘Musimbwe is the former occupant of the “promising African writer” seat’ (2024, 41) pithily sums up the ongoing conflict between the French metropole and the former colonies at the heart of the Francophone world of letters. The continued compartmentalisation of that world can in itself be read as a sign of postcolonial melancholia. *The Most Secret Memory of Men* addresses that melancholia sideways, foregrounding the way it affects the novel’s current ‘promising African writer’ – its narrator Diégane. His elated affective responses to T.C. Elimane, overdetermined by his overall melancholic response to his position within the Francophone world of letters, organises this wildly complex novel.

The Labyrinth of Inhumanity and its enigmatic writer, rather than Diégane, are the true protagonists of Sarr’s novel. Both the book and

its writer are barely present, although their traces are felt throughout Diégane's world and his narrative. After the book's publication, T.C. Elimane was accused of plagiarism – a story self-consciously echoing the fate of Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem, who was awarded the Prix Renaudot in 1968 for his debut novel *Le devoir de violence*, but was accused of plagiarism soon after (Dutton 2024). In Sarr's novel the scandal leads Elimane to withdraw from the world of letters and his publisher to destroy all unsold copies and to file for bankruptcy. Elimane's book, though physically present and read in the world of Diégane's story, is virtually absent save its opening lines, being 'a cannibalistic tale' as 'impossible to tell' as it is impossible 'to forget, to silence' (Sarr 2024, 43).

Its writer, for most of the novel, is only presented at a two-level distance from Diégane. In Paris, on the night of 10 July, Diégane meets Senegalese writer Siga D., by then in her sixties, who entrusts him with her copy of *The Labyrinth* and invites him over to her home in Amsterdam. On 25 August Diégane leaves for Amsterdam, where Siga D. shares her conversations over the years with people who actually knew Elimane – a somewhat mythical web of haphazard meetings and coincidences. First among those connections to Elimane is Siga's father Ousseynou, who begat her as an elderly man and happens to be Elimane's uncle or even his biological father. Then, by a chance encounter, Siga became acquainted with an anonymous Haitian poetess and diplomat who was close to Elimane when the latter was living in Buenos Aires in the 1950s. Third, Siga shares her conversation with French literary critic Brigitte Bollème, who interviewed one of Elimane's publishers in the late 1940s.

The Most Secret Memory of Men presents this web of conversations in three 'books'. The first book introduces Diégane in July 2018, when he meets Siga in Paris. The second book picks up the story in late August 2018, and comprises Siga's recounting of her conversations with Ousseynou and with Brigitte. The third book, then, finds Diégane in Senegal in early September 2018, and includes his remembering of Siga's narrative about the Haitian poetess. In our reading we interpret the novel's conversational narrative structure as a rearticulation, in a lateral rather than hierarchical composition, of the modernist aesthetic that Elimane's writing evokes and that Diégane's narration at times pastiches. Through this rearticulation, we suggest, the novel aims to repair a space of creation in between visionary modernism and imperialist destruction, an aesthetic double consciousness that was singularly embodied by Elimane, only to be erased from the world of letters it came to disrupt.

Siga goes some way to explain Elimane's melancholia after finding himself celebrated, at first, as a 'Negro Rimbaud', and then all but

erased from the metropolitan world of letters. Siga portrays Elimane as '[a] writer who believes himself misunderstood, poorly read, humiliated, critiqued through a lens other than literature, reduced to his skin' (2024, 315). The novel, however, does not explain why Elimane's copious sampling from Western literature caused quite such a scandal. After all, as Diégane reminds us, the aesthetics of intertextuality was widely practised and accepted in European modernism.

Excerpts from contemporary reviews preceding the plagiarism scandal indicate on what grounds Elimane's novel could be praised by progressive critics in the first place. Brigitte Bollème's review suggests Elimane could be accepted as the embodiment of the success of colonisation, of the 'miracles' it performed 'in education in the African colonies' (2024, 80). Auguste-Raymond Lamiel, on the other hand, welcomes Elimane's work as 'African down to its marrow' and Elimane himself as 'a kind of Negro Rimbaud' (82). As both a colonial product and quintessentially African, Elimane initially satisfies the need for mimicry as well as otherness. Somehow the plagiarism disrupted that delicate balance. It is suggested in the novel that critics felt humiliated, as if deceived by a hoax they failed to spot. Perhaps in the eyes of French critics Elimane overplayed his hand by assuming that he could appropriate metropolitan culture for his own ends. By recounting 'the story of a bloodthirsty king, a black Nero of sorts' (81), Elimane's novel confirms the colonial view of Africa as dark and savage – thereby implicitly justifying its colonisation. Recounting this story by means of Western literary sources, however, would implicate metropolitan culture into that savagery to an extent that would make many a European feel uncomfortable. Likewise, it might implicate colonial experience into the project of metropolitan modernism.

An interpretation that is not explicitly put forward in the novel could thus be that Elimane's scandal was to have disturbed the narcissistic fantasy of an original, innocent and ethnically homogeneous European culture whose relationship to its colonial outside is strictly one-way: from the metropolis to the colony. The story of Elimane's subsequent relocation to Buenos Aires, where he was celebrated by the likes of Gombrowicz and Sabáto, intimates that his book and his sheer presence had an impact on the postwar development of literary modernism. The scandal of Elimane's existence, it would appear, is to make visible and embody Western modernism's constitutive outside. Elimane, then, might provide, in the words of Paul Gilroy, a 'sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders' (Gilroy 2022, 17).

Elimane, nevertheless, also provoked melancholic rejections by his Senegalese contemporaries – Ousseynou in particular, who felt Elimane

betrayed his culture and his family by aspiring to metropolitan cultural recognition. In an e-mail to his friend Diégane, the Franco-Congolese writer Musimbwa echoes both Ousseynou's concerns and Bollème's review. He addresses the question head on: 'Who was Elimane, really?' (Sarr 2024, 437), answering it in the vein of postcolonial ideology critique: Elimane was '[t]he most accomplished and most tragic product of colonization' (437). The price Elimane paid for literary recognition in Paris was to become a token for colonisation while forever representing the colonised subject and being 'reminded that not only he was not [white], but that he never would be despite his talent' (437). Elimane thus embodies colonisation's 'diabolical triumph – the desire to become one's destroyer' and 'all the sadness of alienation' (438).

Convincing as Musimbwa's analysis may be, it does not entirely explain the fascination the figure of Elimane has held for generations of African diasporic writers and continues to hold for Diégane even after reading this e-mail. An early remark by the narrator suggests that Elimane's significance is affective rather than cognitive: 'after reading the final page, violent, pure life would come coursing back through your veins' (2024, 8). Elimane offers young African diasporic writers 'the chance to tear each other limb from limb in pious and bloody literary jousts' (7). Readers will typically reread it so often they know it by heart – which might paradoxically explain its actual text being barely represented in Sarr's novel.

The novel does, however, spark a cascade of narrative voices testifying to their affective encounters with Elimane. This narrative composition blends distinct levels of narration and blurs the hierarchy of narrative voices. For instance, the first chapter of the first part of book two would appear to be narrated by Siga as a first-person narrator addressing Diégane as narratee. Siga recalls how she went into her father's bedroom as he lay dying, without quotation marks: 'It was 1980, I was twenty years old, he was ninety-two', the chapter opens (2024, 123). A few pages into her story, Diégane takes over as an extradiegetic narrator subsuming Siga's narration to an intradiegetic level:

I distinctly recall thinking that, Diégane, and I still think it.
Siga D. stopped talking. It was approaching two o'clock in the morning. (2024, 127)

From that point onwards Siga's intradiegetic narration is consistently signalled by quotation marks and phrases such as 'Siga D. continued' (129). However, Siga's voice then starts to blend with her father's, as

Siga's room in Amsterdam blends with the father's bedroom in Siga's story: "'You're wrong,' I thought I heard the father moan from the couch, though Siga D. was still talking' (131). At the end of the chapter Diégane quotes Siga quoting her father: "'He told me: I saw what you would become ... Everything begins with Mossane.'" (132–3). The following five chapters are then narrated by Ousseynou. Nevertheless, there are no explicit indications that this narrator is Ousseynou as quoted by Siga, as quoted by Diégane – in other words, that we are hearing the voice of an intra-intradiegetic narrator.

Only six chapters into Ousseynou's narrative, Diégane interrupts, while reaffirming the continuous movement back and forth between their respective story worlds: 'Then the voice went quiet for a while. I kept my eyes shut. I was back in Amsterdam ... The voice resumed. I followed it into the past' (2024, 183). In the final lines Diégane resumes the narration, bringing us back to the extradiegetic level. It would seem that the box-in-a-box narrative structure is simultaneously laid out and deterritorialised by the ingenious play with quotation marks and their absence, indicating the crossing of boundaries between various levels of narration.

This blending of voices is elaborated on in a metafictional comment in which Diégane concedes he cannot tell Siga's voice from her father's:

Though why did we necessarily have to be in a specific place, where an identified voice was talking to us, at a clearly defined moment? We always find ourselves ... between voices and places, between the present, past, and future. Our greatest truth is ... what runs ceaselessly and tirelessly between them, in a dual movement back-and-forth (2024, 132)

This narratorial reflection chimes with Elimane's enigmatic poetics as quoted from his diary at the end of book one. '[T]he path to the essential book', Elimane writes, excludes 'the temptation to remain silent' as well as 'energetic jabbering': 'both believe they are making the essentialness of their book dependent on a posture taken in regard to words or the world, when it stems from submission to an interstitial language' (2024, 116). In an interstitial language, then, the focus would not be on the words or on the worlds these evoked, but rather on 'what runs ceaselessly and tirelessly between them' (116). This poetics of an interstitial language evokes Bhabha's notion of a third space, the 'ambivalent space of enunciation' in which unstable meanings and differences are negotiated (Bhabha 2004 [1994], 55). For Bhabha the notion of third space (similar

to Gilroy's concept of double consciousness) implies that 'the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity' (55) and that cultural meaning emerges from 'the *inbetween* space' (56). The (post)colonial subject, then, self-consciously inhabits that third space as its identification with so-called original culture is violently dislocated.

We argue that the narrative composition of the novel's conversational episodes manifests Elimane's poetics of an interstitial language and the novel's reparative projection of an '*inbetween* space'. It does so by subtly countering the modernist aesthetic that is consistently evoked in the context of Elimane's writing and his literary circle. This modernist poetics is signalled, most importantly, by a rhetoric of depth implying that to read Elimane's novel is to descend into some hidden core of truth. When Siga hands Diégane the novel, for instance, she says she both envies him, which Diégane interprets as follows: 'I envy you means you will descend a staircase whose steps sink into the deepest region of your humanity' (Sarr 2024, 38). That Diégane is particularly receptive to the poetics of depth is immediately spotted and ridiculed by Siga, who recognises the young writer as the kind who 'look[s] at things like they all contain some profound secret' (24).

Interestingly, the rhetoric of depth is shared by the character Josef Engelmann, a German officer who is instrumental in the arrest of Elimane's publisher. Engelmann, as it happens, is a great champion of modernist literature, including Elimane's novel, and he tracks down the elusive writer in occupied Paris. To his surprise Elimane 'was in fact a Negro, but he was also Igitur, who descended the staircase of the human mind, who went to the very depth of things' (2024, 262). Engelmann extends this modernist aesthetics to the apocalyptic desire for 'the Book, the one with which the world must end' (262). As a matter of fact, this apocalyptic poetics is attributed to Elimane himself who, in his diary, voices his ambition to write the book that will, '[i]n one act, abolish and unify the library' (116). That an African writer would so perfectly embody Engelmann's 'quest for moral and aesthetic elevation through purifying fire' (261) should no doubt come as a shock to this Nazi officer.

As the seminal example of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) demonstrates, this modernist aesthetics of depth is particularly well suited to colonial discourse, where the unspeakable depth of Africa mirrors the depth of the Western subject peering inwards – the ultimate scene of modernist literature. Elimane's scandal may well have been his turning the mirror in upon itself, revealing modernist culture's colonial bias and its uneasy common ground with Nazi culture. It would seem that Sarr's project in *The Most Secret Memory of Men* is to tweak that modernist

poetics of depth into something quite different, while holding on to the desire for truth as the driving force of literature. A subtle reorientation can be gleaned from Diégane's first encounter with Siga. When she starts talking about her life with Elimane, the scene is set for Diégane to project his modernist 'theater of the mind': '*I was watching an introspection. Another soul was inviting mine inside her, directing her gaze at her innermost depth, and preparing to judge herself without mercy*' (2024, 30).

The inward movement is not expressed through an interior monologue penetrating the depth of the human mind, but rather through a conversational mode in which the speaker shares their story with the listener. In the narrative structure analysed above, rather than an inward movement towards the deepest level of narration, we see a propulsive movement outward, with the speaker sharing remembered voices that have deeply affected them with the listener, affording a blending of their respective worlds.

Siga's message to Diégane, which he does not quite understand at first, is to demystify Elimane by transforming a poetics of depth into a lateral, relational poetics. While they are both fascinated by Elimane's silence after *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, for Diégane this was the silence of the impossible, essential book that was to follow Elimane's debut novel, whereas Siga is 'talking about his silence toward his mother, his family. ... The reason behind his chosen, radical exile' (2024, 220–1). Siga's affective question unsettles Diégane's epistemological question.

At the end of the novel Diégane returns to Senegal, which he had left as a student, and visits the village both Elimane and Siga left. There he meets Ousseynou's last surviving wife, Maam Dib, who tells him Elimane spent the final years of his life in Ousseynou's home, praying for Mossane's forgiveness. From Maam Dib, Diégane learns that Elimane 'wasn't a god. He was a man. He was living with painful memories and questions without answers. You could have felt pity for him' (2024, 462–3). Maam Dib's words lead Diégane to a final reassessment of Elimane and the poetics of depth: 'Since the beginning, because I read Elimane, I've thought that his secret has something to do with literature ... Maybe there's nothing to be found within literature' (463).

While Diégane's quest for Elimane has so far primarily been guided by his elation on first reading *The Labyrinth*, on his return to Senegal this euphoric affect is balanced by a sense of melancholia. This return lays bare the undercurrent of melancholia in Diégane's verbose polemic with 'African writers ... in the French literary milieu', for having 'fallen into the slave hold of complacent exoticism' and having 'forgot[ten] to be writers' (2024, 48). As opposed to (post)colonial tokenisation Elimane

would seem to embody a radical modernist claim to autonomy. However, this adherence to a quintessentially European claim to autonomy begins to wane.

Having postponed visiting his family for some time, the timing of his return is as fortuitous as it is significant for the novel's poetics: 'I landed in Senegal late on September 6, the night before Fatima Diop's suicide' (2024, 344). Even though Diégane concedes to have 'lost all interest in what was happening in Senegal' (347), the events unfolding in Dakar in the days following his return land him in the eye of the storm of contemporary Senegalese politics. Young antigovernment activist Fatima Diop's suicide by immolation sparks an upsurge in the citizens' protest movement against Senegal's ruling political class – both in government and opposition – and momentarily lifts it up to a potentially revolutionary force.

Still in Dakar Diégane seeks out his friend and former fellow student Chérif, a leading intellectual for the BMS citizens' movement and a staunch critic of Diégane's debut novel, which Chérif criticised for 'abandoning social issues in favor of egocentric preoccupations' (2024, 375). Chérif urges his friend to write '[a] great political book', which implies a concern for others' misery and a desire 'to shake people down to their core' (375). Next a radical activist calls Diégane out on Facebook for having betrayed his own country by catering to the taste of metropolitan French literature (381).

The confrontation with his home country, then, challenges Diégane to weigh his priorities as a writer: 'What did the question of writing matter versus that of a society suffering? The quest for the essential book versus aspirations for basic dignity? Literature versus politics? Elimane versus Fatima?' (2024, 364). This series of oppositions succinctly shows that for Diégane the search for Elimane, the true reason for his return to Senegal, equals both 'the question of writing' and 'the quest for the essential book'. Moreover, the further equation of these quests to 'literature' as opposed to 'politics' begs the question to what extent that quest is actually in itself political. Despite the apparent simplicity of the literature versus politics binary the novel would seem to imply that this quest, which is embodied by Elimane, is the political question par excellence facing the contemporary Franco-African writer.

Of particular interest to us is this harsh point Musimbwa makes in his e-mail to Diégane: 'I want the truth of the long fall, the truth of the infinite fall. I don't repair. None of what was truly destroyed strikes me as repairable. I don't console, others or myself' (2024, 436). Musimbwa does not want to repair, his chilling account of postcolonial bloodshed

in the Democratic Republic of Congo emphatically refuses to repair. Musimbwa, rather, chooses to live in the wound, thereby painfully mimicking the European view of Africa as a dark and savage place, and ironically stepping in Elimane's footsteps, who, as the Haitian poetess puts it, was 'an open wound, from which blood was somehow flowing toward the inside' (387). Nevertheless, upon his return to Senegal Elimane did seem to have found a degree of reparation, and in learning that so does Diégane.

Musimbwa also recalls that Diégane 'always believed that our cultural ambiguity was our true space, our home, and that we should inhabit it the best we can, as ... bastards born from the rape of our history by another murderous history' (2024, 439). This quote again evokes the notion of a third space in which cultural differences are creatively negotiated. Musibwa, however, is not impressed: 'what you call ambiguity is just a ruse for our ongoing destruction' (439). Rather than celebrating ambiguity, however, *The Most Secret Memory of Men* appears to repair the allure and potential once held by the damaged object of modernist aesthetics, which was severely compromised by its implication in Western imperialism.

In his adherence to Elimane, Diégane both euphorically celebrates the creative and intellectual power that was obscured as European modernism's constitutive outside, and mourns the loss of Elimane's visionary modernist aesthetics of autonomy, which the latter could only claim under the conditions of the metropolitan world of letters, and at the cost of disappearing into that creative space of double consciousness from which his writing emerged. In that sense, *The Most Secret Memory of Men* could be read as a work of mourning, working through the irreparable loss of an unrepresented space of creation, shattered beyond remembrance by colonial history.

Conclusion: reparative energies

In *The Ruse of Repair* (2021b) Patricia Stuelke identifies a 'representational dilemma' (118) in reflections and artistic practices by North American activist artists working in solidarity with communities, mostly in Central America, suffering from US imperialist politics. Increasingly dissatisfied with an artistic practice purely aimed at demystifying violence – or rather disillusioned of the belief that exposing would lead to change – yet unwilling to give in to liberal identification with suffering, activist artists seek alternative strategies. The most productive, Stuelke

intimates, would be those capable of capturing some of the resistance movement's 'reparative energies' and 'finding affinity with Central American strategies for coping with the violent history and presence of U.S. imperialism' (119).

From various perspectives the novels we discussed in this chapter seem to grapple with similar representational dilemmas with respect to the particular colonial histories and postcolonial realities they are addressing. The positions they negotiate vis-à-vis the continued effects of imperialist histories, we have argued, are informed by postcolonial melancholia. These positions diverge, from De Vries' disaffected refusal to identify with activist calls for social justice to Sarr's reparative claiming of the space of artistic creation. All three novels we discussed seek reparative strategies in a period that has seen postcolonial demystification give way to postcolonial melancholia.

Neither of the novels embodies postcolonial melancholia in its unadulterated expression of nationalist xenophobia. In *Oude meesters* it is mediated through ironic self-reflection, the novel enacting, as it were, a self-demystification of a postcolonial melancholic consciousness. One may find this self-demystification ultimately complacent in its ironic twists and turns. Nevertheless, the protagonists' desire for attachment, identification and legitimacy in an environment they experience as damaged and unwelcoming allows for a reparative reading, in which their reactionary fantasies are balanced by their expressions of disaffection.

Lost Children Archive is the novel closest in spirit to Stuelke's reflections and the most explicit attempt at finding an aesthetic solution to the dilemma. Luiselli avoids the trap of liberal identification with and appropriation of the object of solidarity, a strategy we have interpreted as a weakened sense of postcolonial melancholia. Implicitly, her representational strategy also challenges the assumption, underlying claims for reparative reading, that violence and oppression are openly visible – the US border policy's execution being hardly transparent. Rather than to lift that veil or to provoke sympathy for the refugee children directly, the novel's narrative structure works towards an imaginary resolution for the mother-narrator's affective conflict, as she feels the activist urge in the face of her family's breakdown. The narrator, then, has to rearticulate her attachments to both the image of the heroic, solitary activist and that of the nuclear family – two objects compromised by heteronormativity. Thereby the novel subtly displaces attention from the refugee children to the narrator's children, whose reenactments of native American stories capture reparative energies while eliciting the reader's emotional identification.

If *The Most Secret Memory of Men* conveys postcolonial melancholia, it does so from the perspective of a writer from a former French colony, Senegal, who faces both the persistent compartmentalisation of Francophone literature and the conflicting demands of the metropolitan world of letters and the home country. In a dazzling narrative composition Sarr combines modernist aesthetics with a lateral, conversational poetics giving voice to an ‘interstitial’ language, a language of the spaces and the movement in between. The narrator seeks to repair his relationship to a modernist poetics of depth and revelation, which was irredeemably compromised by its imbrication with Western colonial violence. At the same time the novel aims to repair as an object of attachment an aesthetic space of creation opened up by double consciousness yet reterritorialised by metropolitan culture. It achieves both through the enactment of an African literary genius reclaiming modernism as an expression of interstitial culture – an achievement eclipsed by European modernity.

Notes

1. Imperial nostalgia should be distinguished from Rosaldo's (1989, 107) notion of ‘imperialist nostalgia’; a type of nostalgia found among ‘colonial agents’ for ‘the colonized culture as it was “traditionally”’, which colonialism destroyed. De Mul (2010, 424–5) analyses a specifically Dutch type of colonial nostalgia: ‘tempo doeloe, a type of nostalgia for colonial Indonesia that is prevalent in Dutch culture and literature today’.
2. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* Gilroy remarks that ‘[a]rguments over racial division ... have impinged upon the formation of epistemological and ethical as well as historical and political categories’ (2004, introduction).
3. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* Gilroy points out that ‘[t]he intellectual architects and theorists of the anticolonial movement ... translated the terms of their national liberation back into the very same moral economy’ which had propped up European state-formation and its colonial enterprise (2004, introduction).
4. This scene is mirrored by a demonstration in Donetsk that Sieger also happens to witness. ‘I am a man, I am relatively rich and fairly white, I am straight, I am educated’ (251), so Sieger has it, yet an Eastern-Ukrainian demonstrator still beat him up. What privilege, then, does this scene seem to imply?
5. For a discussion of the juridical implications of the notions of ‘document’ and ‘record’, see Korsten (2022), who interprets the intersections of law and literature in *Lost Children Archive* and Luiselli’s essay *Tell Me How It Ends*.
6. For a more detailed analysis of Luiselli’s ‘activist’ use of sentimental tropes and techniques, see James (2021).

5

The home as transitional infrastructure

In *La poétique de l'espace* (1957), translated as *The Poetics of Space* (2017), French philosopher Gaston Bachelard calls the home ‘notre coin du monde [our corner of the world]’ (2017, 24). It is our first world, one of protection and happiness, prior to being thrown into the world and being exposed to its dangers. It is also a poetic space that both generates and integrates dreams, memories and the imagination. In the decades after Bachelard wrote these words, such optimistic depiction of the home as a sanctuary or a cradle got replaced in critical discourse by the home as a normative imposition. The home is predicated on unpaid affective labour, mostly performed by women or low-waged workers and on a heteronormative imagination of domesticity, whereas the politics of housing tends to side-line and marginalise minority communities.¹ More generally, poststructuralist thought deconstructed the *oikos*, foregrounded the figure of the nomad and emphasised movement and deterritorialisation, whereas postmodern literature similarly focused on ways of leaving home: estrangement, travel, movement, cosmopolitanism and globalisation.²

Despite this critical activity and the emancipatory possibilities embedded within it, the home may have retained its social and cultural status as a place of intimacy, self-realisation and safety, while also remaining a normative object of desire and a structuring fantasy of the good life. ‘What better represents Berlant’s archaic “good life” fantasy than homeownership’, asks Gabriel Winant (2015). Yet, if Winant’s rhetorical question holds, as we believe it does, then in times of crisis ordinariness the home has also become the prime object of cruel optimism: an object of attachment that in its unattainability depletes the subject. In contemporary fiction too, the home emerges as an object of affective concern. We discern a diachronic shift from the postmodern nomad to a contemporary

focus on the home – not as an object of cognitive critique but as an object of desire (cruel or otherwise). Characters experience a sense of affective homelessness and a lack of spatial and existential belonging, while they long for a space where they can experience attachment, identity and intimacy.

In this chapter we look at longing for a home as a contemporary literary motif. In the first section we understand this longing as an effect of the friction that accompanies processes of globalisation and commodification. To move against any simple binary, we similarly understand the home as an infrastructure – in Berlant’s understanding as the patterning of one’s world-making – that is bound up with and not simply in opposition to global capitalism. Our discussion of three novels by David Nolens, Ling Ma and Alejandro Zambra will present different (combinations of) inflections of home-longing: abstract, nostalgic, political.

Home as friction; home as infrastructure

We propose to understand home-longing as an effect of the friction that is caused by globalisation. Against both a triumphant narrative in which globalisation creates worldwide integration and a pessimistic discourse in which globalisation enforces a worldwide homogenisation of culture and society, Tsing’s *Friction* (2004) argues that global capitalist processes, like financial streams, logistical chains and commodification, create abstraction as well as friction: ‘the unexpected and unstable aspects of global interaction’ (2004, 3). As mentioned in the [introduction](#) to this book, such friction can both make and unmake the implementation of those global ‘universals’: they could make global power function effectively as well as get in its way. The same goes for home-longing. We understand it as a response to the feelings of homelessness and alienation that the abstractions of globalisation create. Yet the critical import of such home-longing may be difficult to discern, and this is bound up with the home’s infrastructural status.

We distinguish three forms of homelessness that result from the abstraction that globalisation creates. A first is material. David Harvey discusses globalisation as a form of time–space compression: the process, discussed earlier in [chapter 3](#), in which the frontiers of time and space get reshaped to facilitate and intensify capital accumulation. This reinvents space as an abstract playing field of economic calculations and financial flows; a process driven by the search for cheap labour and profitable investments. Simultaneously, the ever-faster circulation of commodities,

money and images over ever larger distances creates the impression of a smaller world.³ In everyday life the experience of economic globalisation is felt in the possibility of increased mobility or migration, but also in displacement and in the power that multinational firms exert on local governments, economies and cultures. Harvey argues that this creates feelings of homelessness and being uprooted.

Within such a context, the home can become a socially and affective anchor that acts as a source of autonomy and care. Yet, the home's promise of emotional and social comfort gets disrupted by the same abstractions of globalised capitalist commodification. In their *In Defense of Housing* (2016), David Madden and Peter Marcuse argue that commodification has currently won the political struggle about who can live where and how: the economic exchange value of a house is more important than its affective and ethical use value (26). This is an effect of processes of deregulation, financialisation and globalisation (28–35). Although each house is situated in a nation or neighbourhood, housing turns from a local into a global affair when mortgages also function as speculative financial instruments in a global economic market. This strengthens the uncoupling between housing as an economic asset or investment and housing as a space to live. Investors in Chicago or Tokyo can decide about property in London or Utrecht without taking into account local factors.

This commodification generates what Madden and Marcuse term 'residential alienation': many people do not feel at home because they 'experience their housing as just another precarious place in an insecure world' (54). If owning a home supposedly gives people roots and a feeling of belonging in a place and neighbourhood, the home has now become an 'unsettled place' (62). Annie McClanahan speaks to that experience in her book *Dead Pledges* (2016) when she relates private ownership debt to the uncanny. Following Freud and Marx, she states that private property has alienating effects: as if it does not belong to us. That also applies to housing, and especially when the buyer or proprietor becomes aware of his debts:

when one realizes that neither the pleasures of ownership nor the protections of domestic privacy are given (as it might appear with a commodity one purchases outright) but that they depend instead on the ability to continue to pay over and over and over again. (2017, 126)

The house with a mortgage is characterised by a 'strange ontology': the recollection of one's debt 'defamiliarizes domestic space, which instead

of being a place of comfort and security becomes a space of unease and alienation' (2017, 127). Such alienation increases when financial issues make the repayment of debt more difficult. Yet, the focus on mortgages should not eclipse the always already precarious situation of renters, McClanahan writes in a later article where she addresses this blind spot: 'In the five years during which I wrote about mortgages and homeowner evictions ... hundreds of thousands of renter evictions took place all over my city while barely making it into my book' (2019, 120). Both rent and mortgages mean that, even at home, one may not feel to be at home.

A second type of abstraction and alienation occurs at the cognitive level: an ever-increasing disorientation that troubles any cognitive mapping (Jameson 1984, 84): both the inability to situate oneself cognitively in the world and the conceptual difficulty of mapping the globalised and decentred world of multinationals, web platforms and networks of communication. Due to the increased and ephemeral circulation of ideologies, lifestyles, ideas and practices over a global scale, local traditions and established practices may get uprooted without the subject being able to emancipate itself into different patterns of identification, patterns of space and patterns of community that may ground the subject: disruption is constant (Stiegler 2016).

A related and final type of abstraction pertains to the subject. In 'The aesthetics of singularity' (2015), Jameson distinguishes globalisation as a third stage of capitalism from its earlier two stages in terms of their relation to the other. If the national and imperial stages create the other in different national enemies and in the racialised colonised subjects respectively, then the third stage leads to anonymity: with the earlier divisions of national and imperial demarcations gone, there emerges 'the vulnerable subject into a world of billions of anonymous equals'; a subject that is no longer protected 'by family or region, nor even by the nation itself and its national identity' (130). Surrounded by this vast, anonymous mass, the subject experiences its 'destitution' (130).

Several critics gave the name 'multitude' to this new mass that is no longer bound by any of the older categories of group identity.⁴ In *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004), Paolo Virno distinguishes the multitude from the people: the latter are made one by the state; whereas the multitude 'is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many' (21). One other defining characteristic of the multitude in Virno's rendition is that they 'share the feeling of "not feeling at home"' (35). This feeling follows from a modification in the dialectic of dread/refuge. Virno distinguishes between the relative dread of fear that can

identify a particular threat and from which one can seek shelter in the community, and the absolute dread of anguish in which one is exposed to the ‘danger connected to our very being in the world’ and for which no true refuge exists (32). The distinction between both types of dread has eroded because people live in ‘a reality which is repeatedly innovated’ (33), making it hard to draw distinctions between an inside and outside (33). The multitude then is ‘united by the risk that derives from “not feeling at home,” from being exposed omnilaterally to the world’ (34). The subject is no longer protected by Bachelard’s home as a cradle; it is now constantly thrown into the world.

The common denominator in these three forms of abstraction is a state of insecurity and disorientation: an exposure to the precarity of life from which many people try to seek refuge. This seeking speaks to the friction inherent in the processes of globalisation; evidence that they do not get implemented successfully or homogeneously. Similarly, how one is exposed to the dangers of a globalised world depends on the subject’s positionality. Different from Virno’s rather universalising precarity, McClanahan foregrounds how ‘more and more people are finding themselves permanently and newly in the class of people for whom everything on which life depends is profoundly economic, precisely insofar as it is uncertain, precarious, and without guarantee’ (2019, 121). Emily Johansen nevertheless stresses that no position is free from risk – that no one can be absolutely safe – because everyone is ‘enmeshed in a global matrix of precarity’ and violence, although this matrix and one’s involvement within it may not always be visible for those in more privileged positions (2022, 2).

Among other forms, the seeking refuge from precarity takes shape as home-longing. Often perceived as nostalgic and conservative, this longing has been given a bad press by many critics. They note how many people, in response to their feelings of vulnerability, return to older identities and pseudo-collectives that must create a sense of protection; a conservative reflex that pursues security in older institutions and values from the past, like the family, religion or the nation (Harvey 1990, 292; Duyvendak 2011; Jameson 2015, 130). Or, as Berlant puts it succinctly: ‘the reproduction of normativity occurs when rest is imagined nostalgically – that is, in the places where rest is supposed to have happened’ (2011, 180). In that sense, the searching for rest or refuge in older identities, values, communities may be the type of friction that does not get in the way of the status quo.

Understanding the home and home-longing in terms of infrastructure may further elucidate the ambiguous position of the home in

a globalised world. Within the subject's infrastructure of coordinating a globalised world, the home – as actual space or as object of longing – could become a heterotopic space or fantasy besides the ongoing pressures of precarisation and could offer a sense of refuge and regeneration. Such mediation of the home would, however, not be necessarily outside or in opposition to neoliberalism. The discussion of homelessness above has indicated how the home may equally be a place of pressure and precarisation. But even if the home would be such sanctuary, it is very likely that some of its comforts – the (consumer) products one consumes and uses to furnish and design a home; easy access to utilities – depend on the exploitation of the resources and labourers from the globalised world that the subject at home wants to leave at the doorstep. Critics have argued that privileged subjects are the beneficiaries of global supply chains and global division of labour (Robbins 2012, 93–113; Johansen 2022); a privilege that also resides at home. The home is thus inevitably enmeshed within neoliberal infrastructures.

In times of crisis ordinary, the home similarly is an object of crisis: it has slid from the semblance of 'structure' – a seemingly calcified hub in the world one could easily return to – into an infrastructure, which implies it is unclear how to make fantasies, norms, habits, values converge in it. To double down on the existing fantasy of the home could turn it into an object of cruel optimism. Such reinvestment may also imply a tacit acceptance that neoliberalism's violently unequal distribution of comfort should be allowed to continue unabated – a stance aligned with conservative ideology. The home could, however, also become an infrastructure of transition: a reevaluation of contradictions of the home in a globalised world that serves to loosen the fantasies invested in the home and that leads to a new mediation of the home as a social practice and place that can give consistency to life.

The home-longing in our case studies is not exhausted by a conservative nor a cruel optimistic mode, and manifests in ways that allow for attachment and difference. In the following analyses, we see three forms of home-longing. In *Stilte en melk voor iedereen* [Silence and Milk for Everyone] (2008) by the Flemish author David Nolens, the home gets a positive connotation when contrasted with the wandering and uprooted movements that precede the homecoming. The home as object of desire appears here in a metaphorical sense as social anchor, moral benchmark and affective basis for attachment and the forming of identification. Yet, the particular manifestations of this home-longing are rather pathological and conservative.

In both *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma and *Ways of Going Home* by Alejandro Zambra (2013), the home-longing begets a political character. *Severance* focuses on Candace, a first-generation Chinese-American who lacks a sense of home in a neoliberal society of globalisation that gets hit by a pandemic in which people ultimately lose their consciousness and keep repeating habitual tasks. Depicting an uninhabitable world, the novel shows how Candace's and others' infrastructural patterning to make themselves a home does not offer a severance from neoliberal society but keeps them tied to it. *Ways of Going Home* belongs to the so-called 'literature of the children' – texts by authors who were children during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. In this literature, the home is marked by insecurity, while the characters find themselves in an impasse. In the case of *Ways of Going Home*, this creates the desire to return back home and revisit the past to allow for a transition in the present.

Home-longing in a deranged world: Nolens

Stilte en melk voor iedereen (2008) is the third novel by Flemish author David Nolens, who has built a body of work that is fairly coherent in its formal characteristics and thematic preoccupations. Similar to his other work, this novel distances itself from anything resembling a plot or 'realistic' characters and is rather composed of psychological and philosophical reflections – about language, identity and (non-)existence; often related through banal images – while it also includes an endearing and somewhat bizarre sexuality. The novel's formal complexity further resides in its narrative structure: an emphatic blending of reality and fiction that resembles a postmodern novel.

At first sight the story is told by Sarah, the first-person narrator in the first and longest part of the novel. In a narrative that lacks clear chronology, she talks about her depressed partner Martin, about her delusions and about her conversations with the psychiatrist who is treating her. The second part of the novel starts with Martin confessing that he has, in fact, spoken in Sarah's name and is therefore responsible for the first part: 'I have told the story from a masculine perspective, even though I let her speak' (2008, 155). Sarah's fantasy about breastfeeding a series of men who come and visit her would then, in fact, be Martin's fantasy. In the third and final part their psychiatrist claims that he has made the whole thing up (188). All made-up characters and stories from the first part, nevertheless, appear to exist in the psychiatrist's 'real' world, and all

three narrators in some way claim authority over the other parts of the novel. Who invents what, what is real and what is fictional, is impossible to make out. What at first seems like an embedded structure might as well be a circular model in which the different parts endlessly refer to one another.

This structure, however, does not express the modernist desire to know and understand the world or the self. Sarah does not believe in a 'return to authenticity' (2008, 14). Her conception of the subject bears the influence of postmodernism. She considers her own identity as well as that of others to be unknowable: 'Nobody ever gets to see themselves' (12). She often makes statements implying that people live in a world made out of language and narratives that they cannot exit. This postmodern deconstruction of reality, identity and authenticity fills Sarah with despair, since language no longer seems to provide support, certainty or a sense of identity. She does not see any 'logic' in language any more and fears 'falling outside of language and thus becoming insane' (13). Sarah wants to escape 'all stories' (22). Yet, she cannot find any paths leading outside of narrative, whereas inside the world of language and narrative 'only pain from time to time reminds us ... that we are alive' (15).

The complex texture of narrative levels, of fiction and reality, then, does not so much convey postmodernism's epistemological and ontological questions – the absence of an ontological ground or a foundational metanarrative – as it expresses the existential impasse these questions present for the twenty-first-century subject: 'There are no grids we can put on our thoughts anymore' (2008, 31). At the same time this blend of fiction and reality provides the characters with an affective remedy for their problems. Sarah states 'that fiction is needed to stop the pain' (15).

The novel expresses this problem of the existential impasse, that is mediated by a blend of fiction and reality, through the image of a doughnut: 'The western world is a doughnut. There is a hole in the middle. We no longer manage to fill it. The western human is also a doughnut. There is a hole in the middle. We no longer manage to fill it' (2008, 39). The hole and the circular shape of the doughnut complement one another. It is suggested in the novel that the absence of an ontological ground or a collective narrative has led to all kinds of circular reasoning in the justification of our identities. Individual emancipation has bred an atomised society in which one can only find legitimacy in oneself: 'Yes, that is good. The way you act, is good, since that is who you are. A circle has been completed' (144). That circle is simultaneously a hole – 'We fall through ourselves' (170) – because we lack an external standard to measure the 'veracity' (162) of our thoughts and actions.

At the individual level the doughnut in the novel serves as a metaphor for contemporary narcissism, in which one no longer falls in love with one's image but one is obsessed with the inquiry into the self. At the same time, this narcissism suggests that people are not self-sufficient but long to be recognised by others. 'You must and you will become who you are. The highest is everyone's attention. The applause' (2008, 44). The individual needs to make themselves present in public. Yet, rather than a *presence*, they usually perform an '*acte d'absence*' (86): they make themselves *absent* in the patterns they enact. That is the doughnut at the level of the community or society. People circle around in a moral and spiritual void when they mirror themselves to others and to media images: 'It is good that the media constantly repeats everything we already know for us not to fall through ourselves' (41). The doughnut here signals the standardising of thoughts and feelings and the decline in people leading their lives according to their 'own injunction' (95).

The consequences are 'despair' (2008, 45) and fatigue: emotional and existential exhaustion and disaffection because one can no longer connect with oneself and with others. It is within this despair that the longing for a home appears and is presented as at odds with postmodern nomadism:

Nowadays the tendency is to seek an ideology again in a strained manner, to find a grip in the storm of doubt. Everybody wants to go home. We cannot survive as nomads. Home can be anywhere and exists in the mind mostly. There is a lot of insecurity these days. (2008, 54)

There are multiple problems with this home-longing. In Sarah's husband it manifests as neurosis: 'your propensity for compulsory thoughts is the failed, even very painful attempt to become a circle, to come home to yourself' (2008, 12). Many others strain themselves to live in 'their house', which they 'no longer recognize as their home' (55). They try to remedy this by conceiving of their houses as vehicles of consumerism, the interior design projecting the identity the residents aspire to. This remains, however, solely a projection. The interior merely frames life; it is not life itself: 'Occupying yourself with interior design is anticipating a dream ... It is remarkable how many people spend their whole life working on a life they would like to live' (25). The rise of nationalism and racism is a final, disastrous development, which some of Sarah's imaginary sucklings or 'breast-goers' (94) embody. In a demystified consumerist society 'one envies the fundamentalist and the fascist, for whom every

day still projects a horizon' (26). The novel implies, however, that their dream is a projection without substance. When asked about the Flemish identity, the Flemish nationalist responds with a cliché: 'It is hard ... but together we are strong' (49).

A more acceptable cure for this affective illness is itself of an affective nature: 'The only thing we can do is comfort one another in these confusing times' (2008, 55), Sarah says. Her fantasy enacts a (masculine) desire for love, comfort, innocence and 'child-like attachment' (18). Fantasy affords an affective experience of this longing for a home, for 'a community, a union' (196). Sarah suggests that imagination and fantasy are required to repair affective attachment. It is only through fantasy that Martin can recover Sarah as a 'mystery' and a 'homecoming' (79). On the one hand this fantasy responds to the characters' desire for contact and attachment. Affective care is at the core of Sarah's fantasy about breastfeeding all kinds of important people, like the king or a popular musician: she aims to relieve the others of their despair and to help them reconnect with their ideals and dreams. On the other hand, fantasy is often narcissistically invested. 'How can you put yourself centre-stage like that' (35), the psychiatrist reprimands Sarah. The blending of reality and fiction thus signals an affective short circuit in which the characters can only imagine connecting with the other through a pathological fantasy that ultimately merely refers to themselves. The doughnut's circle is not broken, nor does anyone arrive at home.

How to make neoliberalism inhabitable: Ma

In *Severance* (2018), the debut novel by Chinese-American author Ling Ma, home-longing appears as a response to loss as well as to the experience of the material pressures of globalisation. Through its depiction of the fictive pandemic Shen Fever, the novel, however, construes the home not as a place of severance from, but rather as a component of the neoliberal society the book presents. Set in 2011, *Severance* tells the story of its narrator and protagonist Candace, a millennial second-generation Chinese-American. In the chapters set in the present, Candace has joined a small group of survivors under the self-appointed and religiously inspired leadership of Bob after most, if not all, of the global population has succumbed to the lethal Shen Fever in only a couple of months. The group makes a road trip to 'the Facility' someplace outside Chicago with the plan to settle there. The plotline of the retrospective chapters has the contours of a coming-of-age narrative: it relates Candace's immigration

at a young age from China to America, but mostly focuses on her navigating adult life in New York before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. The two plotlines are narrated alternately, which emphasises the analogies and continuities in the behaviour of Candace and other characters.

Throughout the two plotlines, Candace lacks a sense of home while her narrative tone is one of affective detachment and ‘dispassionate description’ (Zhang 2020, n.p.).⁵ As a teenager, she ‘want[ed] to move to New York. Then I’d really be somewhere, I had thought, inhabiting myself’ (Ma 2018, 195). Candace’s wistful self-reflection at a later age indicates that the city has not delivered upon its promise: she remains severed from her life and feels rootless. Prior to her move to New York, her mother passes away, making her an orphan after her father’s earlier death in a hit-and-run accident. In the light of this, her arrival in New York after finishing a Visual Arts degree feels rather uneventful in her coming-of-age: while her college friends are taking the steps towards adult labour life, Candace wanders around in the city and starts a photography blog. Its name, ‘NY Ghost’, indicates that she does not feel herself to be attached to the city or her life: ‘The ghost was me. Walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do, I was just a specter haunting the scene’ (41).

This lack of belonging is not remedied by her actual housing, given that, within a few years, she may always get outpriced at the place she rents. Belonging is also not attained by taking up a job at the publishing company Spectra, overseeing the logistics of the production of Bibles, nor by having an on–off relationship with her boyfriend Jonathan, a writer and freelancer. When he leaves New York for a cheaper place to live around the time the pandemic picks up in magnitude and starts causing casualties among her colleagues, Candace feels the city’s outside noise ‘converging together to say one thing: You are alone. You are alone. You are alone. You are truly and really alone’ (2018, 129). The novel relates none of these problems as dramatic events; rather they seem part of the ordinary texture of Candace’s life, as if all of this is simply what she can expect from (her) life.

This detached acceptance of the world as it is could be read as a manifestation of what Mark Fisher called ‘capitalist realism’ (2009): the sense that reality can only appear as a confirmation of the inevitable truth of capitalism being the only feasible socioeconomic system, while it affectively comprises an attitude of acquiescence and capitulation in which resistance and alternatives are always already a lost cause. Candace sometimes shares anti-capitalist reflections, but they quickly dissipate. She resigns herself to this world: ‘No matter where you go, you

can't escape the realities of this world' (Ma 2018, 276). The novel suggests that Candace's affective disposition can also be understood through her Chinese-American background. Critics have understood Candace's detachment in terms of displacement and dysphoria (Merican 2023) or have linked it to racial dissociation (Zhang 2020). Others put forward the historical relation between Asian racialisation and (American) capitalism to contextualise (the perception of) Candace's adaptability to work (Saraf 2019; Wong 2020; Ying 2020; Merican 2023). Yet, the lack on Candace's part of explicitly comprehending herself in such racialised terms, and the novel's conspicuously few mentions of racism or racialisation, makes it difficult to claim that this background overdetermines her position.⁶ Nor does capitalist realism or any other overarching frame for that matter. Candace's alienation pervades the novel, with few to no attempts on her part to make it comprehensible to herself: no epistemological frames are tested, adapted or even sought.

Candace's strategies to live in a world she does not inhabit are solely affective: on the one hand she finds comfort in habits; on the other she lets herself indulge in affects of wistfulness. Both are exemplified in her relation to the city:

To live in a city is to live the life that it was built for, to adapt to its schedule and rhythms ... To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out? (Ma 2018, 290)

It is seemingly of little concern to Candace that the city's 'impossible structures' implement a certain coercion on its inhabitants. She puts the emphasis instead on the pleasure and relief she finds in an attachment to the city's rhythms, even if they disturb or possibly undo the attached life. The affective investment in habits is at the same time mediated by images of New York that are saturated with longing and nostalgia. Watching Woody Allen's *Manhattan* makes her 'wistful for the illusion of New York' (2018, 9) and she admits 'always [having] lived in the myth of New York more than in its reality. It is what enabled me to live there for so long' (257). The consumption of these images and affects of possibility help her to engage with New York's 'actuality' (9).

What is true for Candace's relation to the city also applies to her relation to a neoliberal world in general: Candace creates an infrastructure of habit to attach and feel sustained within that world's 'impossible

structures'. Dora Zhang rightly comments that '*Severance* takes a non-endorsing yet non-contemptuous attitude toward how we accommodate ourselves to an unjust world in order to live in it' (2020, n.p.). We will suggest, though, that through the depiction of the pandemic, the novel nevertheless indicates that this affective patterning of habit and consumed affect is wanting. Even if such infrastructural patterning within the pressures of neoliberal life creates a fold that makes one feel at home, it does not offer severance from but keeps one bound to neoliberal life. After all, Candace (and others) keep repeating their habits despite the glitches, interruptions and failures that *Shen Fever* causes in the reproduction of neoliberalism. The affective infrastructures reproduce a certain life across time even if the attached 'impossible structures' have collapsed. The novel, then, speaks to the difficulty of severing one's affective patterning of attachment.

In discussing habit as a possible affective strategy of living in the 'shared atmosphere of dehabitation' that is crisis, Berlant writes: 'Habit produces a freedom for thought beyond immediacy' (2011, 57, 63). This is not the case in *Severance*. For Candace, the attraction of routine resides in the trance-like state it puts her in: 'the nothing feeling subsumed me, snuffing out any worries and anxieties. It is the feeling I like best about working' (Ma 2018, 65).⁷ Work is the prime organiser of Candace's routines. It is here that she can easily los[e her]self' in a frictionless flow while doing the work of measuring, calculating, ordering, inspecting and answering e-mails (23), while at a larger scale work routine turns Candace's daily life into a lifeworld: 'I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine' (150). This routine allows her to repress anxiety when the ordinary is in crisis. Both at the personal level, when she finds out she is pregnant (159), and at the social level, when *Shen Fever* is creating more and more victims and the city gets increasingly abandoned, she doubles down on her routine of going to work, home and sleep. Routine avoids questions of agency and choice in a world that Candace deems unchangeable anyway.

Ma satirises the potential 'mindlessness' of this form of inhabiting current labour and living conditions through the effects *Shen Fever* has on the infected or so-called 'fevered'. One contracts the disease through 'breathing in microscopic fungal spores' (2018, 148) that travel through the air and that – not unlike Covid-19 – get disseminated over the world through logistical networks from its origin in the Chinese city of Shenzhen. The fungal spores affect the brain and ultimately lead to 'a fatal loss of consciousness' (149). In practice this leads the 'fevered', not unlike Candace, to get stuck on their routines. They keep on repeating

particular tasks in a disintegration loop until their bodies die. Candace sees how one fevered person keeps on setting the table for her family, and how another, who is '[missing h]alf her jaw', keeps on arranging the T-shirts in a clothing shop (258). Watching these movements gives Candace 'a sense of calm and ease' (258), despite the horror of the circumstances: the '*fever of repetition, of routine*' continues to produce its calming and numbing affect even if understood as illness (62, our emphasis).

As suggested above, Candace's attachment to work and routine is also informed by her family background. Her mother told her that, through work, one can be at home in America. When Candace as a child is 'playing Homeless instead of House' (2018, 185), her mother reprimands her: 'We didn't come to America so you could be homeless. We came for better opportunities' (186). Later, on her deathbed, the mother instils in Candace the message that she should 'be of use' (190) through adopting her father's 'work ethic', which is 'like that of many other immigrants, eager to prove their usefulness to the country that had deigned to adopt them' (188). Immigrants' striving for belonging thus makes them liable to adapt to unjust working and living patterns. The novel furthermore suggests that Candace's longing for routine resides in an earlier trauma. As a young child in China, the contentment she found in her mother's daily routines got disrupted when her parents left for America and she had to stay with her grandparents for a couple of years before she could leave too. This left Candace with a strong sense of lack: 'the way she managed our days, so steady and constant and regulated. I have looked for that constancy everywhere' (183). Although Candace is not nostalgic for China in the novel, she is longing for an affect she experienced there and could not recover when she was reunited with her mother in America. Candace's investment in routine then also serves to affectively bridge China and America and to undo her sense of displacement.

Candace's adaptation to life's unjust and impossible structures is not without friction, yet they do not interrupt the reproduction of her lifeworld. Ethical concerns about her involvement in an industry and business model that exploits cheap labour in South East Asia get dispelled by referring to her function: 'I was just doing my job' (2018, 85). The longing for a different life beyond routine is another type of friction, yet both its future and nostalgic-oriented versions keep her bound to her affective patterning. A hurricane threatening to hit New York conjures this sense of future possibility: 'maybe it was enough just to feel the possibility that we could [live differently] if we wanted to' (199). With the future, however, only ever going to be the repetition of more and more of the same (13), the novel suggests there is a tendency to find alternatives

in the past to assuage the friction of living in 'impossible structures'. It does so through the motives of home-longing and nostalgia.

The novel plays on the original meaning of nostalgia – longing to return home. The home-longing the novel depicts is not that of nationalist and xenophobic myths but is rather local and personal. It is the type of nostalgia the group of survivors has when they warm to the 'homey feeling' before they stalk – meaning to take useful supplies from – houses and 'imagin[e] the Saturday breakfast, the TV evenings' (2018, 58). The novel suggests that such nostalgia is common and widespread since it may play a role in getting fevered.⁸ On their stalks, the survivors find the fevered to be 'nostalgic' in rearranging their belongings or listening to music that holds sentimental value (28). When one of the survivors, Ashley, goes to her former home, she becomes fevered when putting on dresses in her childhood bedroom. It leads Candace to suggest that nostalgia may 'trigger' the fever (144): 'Don't you think it's strange Ashley became fevered in her childhood house? It's like nostalgia has something to do with it' (143). This suspicion is confirmed when their leader, Bob, also gets fevered in the Facility, which held 'a great deal of sentimental value' for him: it was his refuge when his parents were fighting and thus feels more like home than this actual childhood home (246).

Candace's intuition is further verified by her being seemingly immune from the illness: her rootlessness seems to protect her. In America, Candace only feels nostalgia for the aforementioned myth of New York and not for her former home place in Salt Lake, because it is 'too depressing, too soul-crushingly sad, to reminisce' (2018, 120). In and for China, Candace experiences nostalgia twice, but as Claire Gullander-Drolet points out, 'these iterations of nostalgia emphasize the idea of displacement itself' (2021, 101). The nostalgia for her hometown Fuzhou, as well as the nostalgic bout she has at a Hong Kong night market, both conjure up the world of the global exchange of consumer goods. The Western consumer brands are as much a part of her nostalgic feeling as the Chinese and Asian context in which they are purchased and experienced. It turns home into a place that cannot be disentangled from the global circulation of goods and therefore cannot be returned to: within globalised structures, the home is always already displaced.

Candace shares her fascination for consumer goods with her mother. Her husband tried to remediate her homesickness by letting her consume the goods as well as the affect of American abundance: 'Her homesickness eased in department stores, supermarkets, wholesale clubs, superstores, places of unparalleled abundance' (Ma 2018, 177). To feel at home in America is to participate in its consumer culture,

which is yet another node in the network of logistical chains (Schinkel 2020, 195). Yet, this sense of home and the abundance upon which it rests are dependent upon the exploitation of land and labour overseas. Within the private sphere of (consumption at) home, one can be inattentive to those unjust conditions. Yet, *Shen Fever* brings this violence back home: the disease spreads through the same logistical chains that brought American abundance.

The end of the novel drives home this message of the enmeshment of the home, consumption and neoliberalism. The Facility turns out to be a shopping mall, and Bob wants to turn it into 'a sustainable home' (Ma 2018, 227). Each survivor can pick one shop as their bedroom. Yet, echoing the often gendered logic of the home mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Bob locks Candace up in hers because she is pregnant and this supposed miracle needs to be protected.⁹ Although Candace calls supermarkets her 'favorite American thing' (15), she is now locked up in one, which suggests that this place of pleasure was never one of freedom to begin with: its fantasy of abundance was always conditional on the exploitation of invisible others.

While being imprisoned, Candace gets visitations from her mother. She who always felt trapped in her American home encourages her daughter to flee before the baby is born.¹⁰ While Candace has up till then accommodated herself to Bob (2018, 280), just like she did before to other power structures, she now breaks free both figuratively and literally from his (or power's) hold: she manages to snatch the keys from a fevered Bob, take a car and drive towards Chicago. When her car runs out of fuel, she starts walking towards an uncertain future wherein severance and a different life may become a possibility. Candace wants an end to her 'walking and driving and searching for something that will never settle me. I want something different for Luna ... I want us to stay in one place' (287). The book leaves open the question whether Candace and her child will be able to find and make themselves a home.

The home in a neoliberal dictatorship: Zambra

The economic developments we have discussed in the beginning of this chapter only appear in the background of Alejandro Zambra's *Formas de volver a casa* (2011), translated by Megan McDowell as *Ways of Going Home* (2013). The narrator mentions the changing landscape of Maipú, the neighbourhood he grew up in: its 'world of identical houses' has given way to inequality now that there are both luxury and abandoned houses,

while the shops he used to visit as a child in the eighties are ‘now bank branches or fast-food chains’ (Zambra 2013, 49, 60). This change cannot be separated from the neoliberal policies that were inaugurated during the dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973–90).¹¹

This regime was the first to implement and test the American economist Milton Friedman’s ideas of a neoliberal free-market economy. The so-called ‘Chicago Boys’, a group of Chilean economists who had studied with Friedman at the University of Chicago and were prominent figures in Pinochet’s military dictatorship, took advantage of the unrest and fear in the country to introduce radical economic reforms: privatisation, deregulation and cuts in public spending. Those reforms took place in a climate of terror: 40,000 political opponents were imprisoned in the national soccer stadium, a *Caravana de la Muerte* (death caravan) swept through the country, and thousands of people ‘disappeared’ or were murdered.

In *The Shock Doctrine* (2008), Naomi Klein speaks of a shock therapy to name this socioeconomic change in which a social shock (from a political upheaval, war or natural disaster) is the trigger for an equally shocking economic therapy through the introduction of free-market policies. Klein considers Chile to be the first example of this. The result is not a healthy economy, as Friedman’s recipes promise, but the creation of greater economic inequality. In reference to Chile, Klein writes: ‘perhaps shock treatment was never really about jolting the economy into health. Perhaps it was meant to do exactly what it did – hoover wealth up to the top and shock much of the middle class out of existence’ (86). What contemporary Chilean literature shows is that not only the existence of that middle class but also that of their children was disrupted, to such an extent that one can speak of a generational trauma.

The notion ‘literature of the children’ in Chile refers to the literature of those authors who were children during Pinochet’s dictatorship. In an essay of the same name, Alejandro Zambra – probably the best-known voice of that generation – writes: ‘those of us who were born at the start of the dictatorship grew up searching for and telling the stories of our parents, and it took us too long to understand that we also had our own stories’ (2018, 204). Among this generation lives the idea that they play a secondary role. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that it was not they but their parents who were exposed to the violence of the dictatorship; on the other hand, that after the dictatorship there was not so much a political upheaval as a ‘conspiracy of silence’ (Friedman 2014, 613): there was a depoliticisation of social life as the neoliberal regime only fully unfolded in these quieter conditions, through growing

consumerism and through enforced consensus policies (Friedman 2014, 613; Willem 2015b).

This generation of writers contributed to this silence by writing little or nothing about political issues, but mainly about the intimate and personal sphere in a disillusioned tone. They wrote about the inability to attach oneself in all kinds of intimate relationships, and especially to loved ones and family members (Willem 2020, 404–5). Increasingly, however, this affective problem was linked to the dictatorial past: these authors ‘anatomize how growing up under dictatorship has impaired their generation’s ... capacity to love’ (Friedman 2014, 614). In the terms of this book, we could say that the affective crisis of this generation found an epistemological frame, which helped to increase the politicisation of that crisis.

In the literature of the children, intimacy, politics and space combine in narratives often set in domestic and family settings that can be read as allegories for post-dictatorial Chile. If some of these narratives relate about characters wanting to flee their homes and histories,¹² the nameless narrator and protagonist in *Ways of Going Home* wants to return home. He searches for attachments with his lover, his family and his country Chile. The country’s dictatorial history has, however, caused any intimate relation to be pervaded by a ‘long distance’ – as the title of one of Zambra’s short stories suggests (2015, 55–70). *Ways of Going Home* tentatively constructs a narrative that comes to terms with the legacy of that regime in contemporary Chile now that the country, according to the narrator, has forgotten its past. The pending victory of Sebastián Piñera at the presidential elections makes it ‘obvious we’ve lost our memories’ (2013, 130) since he is the younger brother of José Piñera, one of the Chicago Boys who served as Minister of Labour in Pinochet’s government. In contrast, the novel reflects on ways of bringing the country home, that is, creating a narrative that gives all actors in the country’s history a sense of belonging. More specifically, the narrator focuses on his parents’ class: the silent middle class that neither supported nor opposed the dictatorship; his parents who will celebrate Piñera’s election.

The narrator does not attempt an epistemological or ontological inquiry into the status of political conflict and identity: what is a community, what is a victim or a perpetrator, what is complicity or neutrality, what is guilt or innocence? The protagonist does not want ‘to talk about innocence or guilt’, but wants ‘nothing more than to illuminate some corners, the corners where we were’ (48). Rather, the novel describes relations to the past and to the other in degrees of emotional intimacy or distance, protective care and concealment, surrender and control,

attachment and detachment. In Sedgwick's terms, the narrator's method is more 'reparative' than 'paranoid'. Yet, the subject matter of the novel makes paranoia unavoidable. The dictatorial regime created a political atmosphere in which one needed to hide one's true political identity and could not easily or naively trust the other. In his retelling of history, the narrator hopes to arrive at a sense of belonging from a situation of secrecy and conflict. The novel's relation to the past is thus characterised by a double affective movement of approach and retreat, of reparative and paranoid impulses. Retrospection is not conceived in epistemological or ideological terms – in terms of knowing or criticising the past – but in affective terms of caring, sharing and being-with.

The novel's title evokes the affect of nostalgia: the longing for a home, yet a longing that is multiple – ways of going home. Svetlana Boym talks of 'reflective nostalgia' which 'thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately' (2001, xviii). Rather than truly returning and reconstructing a lost past, the narrator-writer wishes to live in his longing: 'cohabit with those years, chase the distant images at length and then carefully go over them again' (Zambra 2013, 39). The writer carefully attends to the images of the past, as if to protect them from being forgotten and from being tainted by the present. He is aware, however, of the risks an affective relationship with the past might entail, as nostalgia might tempt one to romanticise or gloss over past conflict. The children were protected by their parents from the country's political events and from the responsibility they now have towards the course of the country's history, and it is for that time of innocence and freedom the narrator and his generation longs. Therefore, the narrator needs to avoid the trap of nostalgic misrepresentation, while both protecting those who are affected by his act of retelling and considering his own involvement in this history. It is the particular structure of the novel that points at the difficulty of this balancing exercise.

The novel consists of four chapters: the first and third are presented as fiction, written by the protagonist and narrator of the second and fourth chapter. The latter, metafictional chapters are diary entries, set in the present, that reflect upon the writing of the novel – the novel we are reading – and tell of his memories, his encounters with his parents and his ex-wife Eme. The protagonist in the other chapters is an alter ego of the writer. In the first chapter he is a young boy who, on the evening of the earthquake of 1985, meets Claudia, a girl three years his senior. Shortly after she asks him to spy on his neighbour, who she claims is her uncle Raúl. In the third chapter the protagonist is in his thirties and encounters Claudia again who has come from the US to Santiago

because of her father's death. They have a short-lasting relationship and visit their family homes.

The structure foregrounds the act of storytelling and fictionalisation and its difficulties at a literary, political and affective level. It raises questions that are affective: in his retelling of history, the narrator needs to reconcile conflicting interests with the desire for a shared attachment. These are interwoven with cognitive uncertainties. The narrator doubts the legitimacy of his voice and feels incapable to write the novel because of his status as a 'less relevant' or 'secondary' character (Zambra 2013, 42). That status is generational and historical. He and his peers are secondary characters in Chilean history because they were just children during the dictatorship, oblivious to what was going on. Therefore 'the novel' belongs to the parents: 'That's what we grew up believing, that the novel belonged to our parents ... While the novel was happening, we played hide-and-seek, we played at disappearing' (41).

The epistemological and affective difficulties are numerous: how can one write the 'literature of the children' (2013, 69) if they have been kept hidden from (literary) history? How does one recast oneself as a protagonist without relegating the other to a secondary position? The narrator wishes to inscribe himself into political history via intimate encounters: with Claudia in the fictional, Eme in the metafictional narrative and the parents in both. The narratives aim at attachment and intimacy but end with distance and separation. In these encounters we can see the split affective economy of paranoid and reparative impulses, of suspicion and care.

'Secondary Characters' is the title of the first chapter, which focuses on Claudia and the anonymous protagonist when they were children. Her request to spy on her so-called uncle is put in terms of both care and suspicion: 'I need you to take care of him', Claudia first says (2013, 20). Yet, what she really needs him to do is 'to watch over Raúl: not take care of him but rather keep an eye on his activities' (20–1). In the third chapter we learn that Raúl, whose real name is Roberto, is Claudia's father, a leftist who needed to hide from the regime and therefore lived separated from his family. Claudia's request for the boy to spy on her father is her way of caring and preserving some sort of contact. The metafictional level adds a political meaning to this affective encounter. We learn that the trip where the boy follows Claudia's older sister, Ximena, is based upon 'a real trip I took more or less at that age' (58). The stories differ, as Mary Friedman points out, in their level of politicisation: 'Whereas the original event has been apolitical, its reelaboration as part of the Claudia narrative incorporates politics' (Friedman 2014, 620). The retelling gives

the narrator's life at least the semblance of an oppositional act that was missing from his ignorant childhood.

This example may indicate the perverted status of the home during the dictatorship. Claudia was separated from her father and was not allowed to know the cause because she was too young: a silence that harbours pain and sadness (Zambra 2013, 93). Later, it is Ximena who takes care of their ill father, whereas he had encouraged Claudia to leave for America. As if the 'father had to choose which of his daughters' lives to fuck over. And he chose her. And I was saved', Claudia says (91). After his death, the two sisters have a conflict because Ximena does not want to sell the house and wants to continue residing there. This strikes Claudia as a bad idea: 'that being so close to the past isn't good for anyone. That the past never stops hurting, but we can help it by finding a different place' (92). Claudia will eventually decide to return to America.

The protagonist also leaves his parental home in Maipú at an early age. Maipú is one of the fifty-two municipalities of Santiago and is both geographically and historically peripheral.¹³ Moreover, the parental house is located in Aladdin Street, one of the streets 'where the new families would later live – the families without history, who were willing or perhaps resigned to live in that fantasy world' (2013, 17). This location underscores the parents' status as secondary characters: they belong to the silent middle class, putting themselves at a distance from historical events. In this distance they implicitly supported the regime, whereas these houses also served an ideological function because the Pinochet regime emphasised the importance of family and homeownership (Willem 2015a, 189–90). Nevertheless, the home functioned as a shield from the outer world: 'Each house was a kind of miniature fortress, an impregnable bastion' (Zambra 2013, 18). The narrator was not allowed to invite friends because the house was supposedly dirty: everyone was potentially suspect. For the same reason, all interiors are also rather alike. When the protagonist visits Claudia's house as a child he notices how hers 'seemed fairly similar to my own' (18).

It is to his family home that the narrator returns. He aims yet fails to undo its political concealment. He feels uneasy about the accusations he directs at his parents and realises that he will not be able to change anything by confronting them with the past (2013, 107–8). He realises that his position will always be peripheral, and he renounces 'conviction, dogma, rules' (134). He does not write from a position of knowledge, but from one that acknowledges its own complicity and instability. Rather than rewriting the history of the country, he will be able to add his story to those of others, just like his novels are now standing next to

the photo albums in his childhood bedroom, now repurposed as store-room: 'It strikes me as beautiful that they're here, next to the family mementos' (62).

A similar understanding arises in other intimate relations. The protagonist's relationship with Claudia will, in the end, not hold because the narratives they wish to tell are different. His longing for a shared narrative conflicts with their divergent positions and interests in the story. In the metafictional chapters, the writer aims to rekindle the relation with his ex-wife Eme. He uses literature to give them a shared history. It is her personal history that gave him the idea for the novel (2013, 40). When Eme reads the manuscript, she feels as if their former trust has been breached. "You told my story," she said, "and I ought to thank you, but no, I think I'd prefer it if no one told that story" (133). Similar to Claudia, she has been turned into a secondary character that is part of – and thus controlled by – the writer's narrative.

The writer is aware of these effects because, for him, writing is both about exposition and protection. It is necessary to use other characters in the construction of a narrative for the country to go home, but inevitably the other becomes incorporated within one's own story. The structure of the novel exposes that effect and, in that sense, protects the singularity of the others' past. The narrator does not, as a paranoid reader, simply expose the country's pain and the silence of the middle class but aims to show the different ways in which one has coped with the dictatorial regime. The clash between the fictional and metafictional level has revealed the lack of any foundation within the country's recent history to write a narrative that gives a shared history to an intimate couple or to parents and their children. In the end the novel demonstrates how the affective crisis and the political crisis are inextricably interwoven. The difficulty of attaching to a person is as difficult as attaching to a convincing story of the country.

An earthquake at both the beginning and the ending of the novel acts as a reminder that everything is fragile. The earthquake does not, as the narrator fears, destroy 'the house in Maipú, my childhood home' (2013, 137). Destruction gives way to an understanding of 'failure' (134) – a political and affective failing – out of which reconciliation can be generated: the day after the earthquake, the narrator will visit his parents' home in Maipú. *Ways of Going Home* points out that the home cannot be stripped of its ideological and political history; but the novel does create the possibility for each to find their way of going back home on their own terms.

Conclusion: home as impasse

In this chapter we have discussed how the home no longer constitutes a seemingly solid structure from which to explore the world but rather has become a transitional infrastructure. Neoliberal globalisation and displacement have turned the home from ‘our corner in the world’ – in Bachelard’s phrase – into a borderland: an area in which the subject needs to rearrange values, norms, habits and patterns to make the home inhabitable. In contemporary politics, this rearrangement begets a particular conservative and often racist bend. Be it at the scale of the private home, the neighbourhood or the nation, the home serves as mediator to turn anxiety into a longing for a return to a previous time and place that would restore order and values, welfare and prosperity, safety and stability. Although the novels in this chapter may refer to such type of home-longing, their presentation of the home as transitional infrastructure is more capacious.

In Nolens’ *Stilte en melk voor iedereen* (2008), the home serves as a mediator for change from a postmodern nomadism the characters deem existentially threatening. Yet, the home does not succeed in sustaining such transition. Similar to the novel’s imagination of the human and the world, the home is as a doughnut: a place one can keep on decorating but that never gets ‘stuffed’ with an identity or a caring community. The characters therefore succumb to pathological fantasies that do not find their way into a relationality with the world and the other. The metafictional structure of the novel underlines this circular movement around an existential void.

Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) speaks to the difficulty of loosening one’s object and unlearning attachment: Candace’s infrastructure endures even when the world in which she originally developed it breaks down as a consequence of the Shen Fever pandemic. Simultaneously, the consistency of this infrastructure also seems to suggest that it meets Candace’s needs both before and during the pandemic: it allows her to inhabit the uninhabitable environment that neoliberalism creates either in the state of insecurity it instils in ordinary housing and working conditions in the West or in the pandemic it generates through the exploitation of land and labour for commodities it transports through global logistical chains. In Ma’s rendering, then, the home as infrastructure is too bound up with neoliberalism’s rhythms and values. Only an absolute severance from that socioeconomic practice may offer the possibility of change.

Zambrá's *Ways of Going Home* (2013) testifies to the impact of Pinochet's dictatorship on intimate relations, identity and the political relation to the home country Chile. The home represents these disrupted relations. Under the dictatorship, the home got perverted: the political seeps through the private and plants in every intimate relation a seed of paranoia and detachment. Where some characters only see a possibility of life in fleeing (Claudia), others remain close to the traumatic space (Ximena). Zambrá's narrator attempts to shape the home into a transitional infrastructure in which different stories and positions can sit next to each other in a caring relation. The metafictional structure aims to secure that space and demonstrates how each narrative that wants to bring the country back home will fail if it does not take into account those many positions.

Ultimately, these novels present the home as an impasse. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant names the impasse a 'temporary housing' (2011, 5). The impasse of a disrupted development creates a 'holding pattern' (5), a term we would like to interpret here figuratively as both a waiting mode and as a pattern that holds. The term thus evokes both care and being stuck. In these novels, the stuckness prevails over care: there is rather little here in terms of characters creating a fold or a heterotopic space through relationality from which something besides neoliberal alienation and abstraction can emerge. In Nolens, there is the longing for care but this gets short-circuited in the roundabouts of their fantasies and reflections; in Ma, care only appears as a possible future in the image of a pregnant Candace trailing into the unknown; in Zambrá the narrator's attempt at finding a way back home fails, but in the process a reparative relation towards his parents and his country has been established, which allows a movement away from a defensive, paranoid position. What the earthquake in that last novel symbolises also applies to the other imaginations of the home in this chapter: the home is a precarious place.

Notes

1. See for instance Madden and Marcuse (2016) and GLQ Forum on queering the domestic (Guterman et al. 2024).
2. See for instance Deleuze and Guattari (1980), Currie (1998), Derrida (1999) and Braidotti (2011).
3. Tsing questions Harvey's account of compression (2004, 75–6).
4. The best-known definition comes from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their series of books that started with *Empire* (2000). Whereas theirs is rather optimistic in their imagination of the multitude as a constituent power, Virno acknowledges the multitude's ambivalence: 'it contains within itself both loss and salvation, acquiescence and conflict, servility and freedom' (2004, 26).

5. Julia Desiree Merican (2023) discusses this affective detachment in terms of 'diasporic dysphoria'.
6. Racism is only implicitly present in the novel. When Candace visits one of the Rust Belt towns for a photography project, a white, old man tells her: 'Go back to where you came from ... You don't belong here' (135). When Chinese labourers succumb to lung diseases because of bad ventilation in factories, one company's production editor foregrounds the importance of getting the bibles produced on time, implying that their lives are less grievable.
7. In her excellent piece on the novel and the issue of inhabiting the world's intolerable structures, Dora Zhang describes Candace's comfort in losing herself as a 'kind of affective anaesthesia' (2020, n.p.). Our analysis's use of the phrases habituation and inhabitability are indebted to Zhang's essay and Berlant's discussion of habit in the second chapter of *Cruel Optimism* (2011).
8. See Saraf (2019, 20–1) for a similar argument.
9. See Emily Waples (2021) for a discussion of the novel in terms of patriarchal structures and vulnerability through a focus on the novel's pregnancy plot.
10. The novel suggests a shared affect of being confined in the similar structure of these lines: 'So passed my first night in the Facility' (168); 'Thus passed their [Candace's parents'] first night in America' (172).
11. In her discussion of the novel in the context of the country's recent past, Bieke Willem argues that neighbourhoods like Maipú 'most clearly demonstrat[e] the effects of speculation, privatization and social and territorial fragmentation' (2015a, 190).
12. See for instance *Seeing Red* (2017) by Lina Meruane and *The Remainder* (2018) by Alia Trabucco Zerán.
13. For a more extensive discussion of Maipú (and its representation in *Ways of Going Home*) within Chilean history, see Willem (2015a) and Willem (2016).

6

Affective displacement: environmental crisis, slow violence and attachment

In the essay *The Second Body* (2017), British writer Daisy Hildyard confronts her bodily dissociation from the environmental crisis. She is aware that her body influences and is impacted by the global environment, but this knowledge does not ‘always feel real’ (11): her body goes about its everyday activities without it feeling related to such crisis. To resolve this detachment, Hildyard introduces the concept of the second body. Whereas the first body consists of flesh and bones and performs all sorts of daily activities, the second body refers to ‘the global presence of the individual body’ (107): the global impact of the first body and how it is enmeshed in the rest of nature. Each body performs on the scales of ordinary life and global connection simultaneously: driving your car while eating a McDonald’s drive-through order affects the amount of carbon dioxide in the air, which may impact the weather in a distant country. The quest of the essay is to find the second body’s ‘real life’ (26): the experience of inhabiting both bodies simultaneously.

That proves to be difficult. In Hildyard’s various encounters with scientists, literary texts, animals and others, the prospect of the second body permeating or eclipsing the first leads to experiences of horror, the uncanny, or the fear of feeling overwhelmed. Alienation too remains persistent: even when ‘[m]y second body came to find my first body’ in the form of a flood that enters Hildyard’s house till five feet high, the second body ‘didn’t feel really real. If anything, it seemed more unlikely than ever’ (2017, 91). In the aftermath of the flood, Hildyard comes to reflect on Shylock’s speech in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and a song by Nina Simone that both ask what remains of a person if everything has been taken away from them. Their answer is the body, which they do

not present as individual or distinct but as shared: through naming their body parts, they aim to show their humanity; how what is individual to them, is also common to all. This changes Hildyard's perception of her house: 'as overpopulated – full of everybody else's body' (107). That which is individual is now flooded by everybody. It is, however, the experience of the flood that drove this iteration of the second body home. She concludes that the 'second body comes to the first with experience' (107).

What distinguishes Shylock and Simone's texts from other mediations of the second body is that they give it a certain 'human dignity' (2017, 106). This allows for the positive integration of the first and second body as presence: the realness that Hildyard was pursuing in this essay. We would, however, argue that the second body always already makes its presence felt in the first body through those negative affects of alienation, anxiety and detachment – that its reality is exactly this affective displacement. The dissociation Hildyard felt at the beginning of the essay is the second body making itself present through its felt absence.

We see a similar pattern return in the novels we discuss in this chapter: an experience of the environmental crisis as affective displacement – as depression in Lieke Marsman's *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (2017), translated as *The Opposite of a Person* (2022); as alienation in Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017); as anxiety in Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (2014), translated as *Fever Dream* (2017) – which the novels aim to remediate through a search for care, embodiment and attachment. We argue that such displacement is a manifestation of the 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011) of ecological degradation, while our readings of the novels aim to show how the affective crisis mediates the relation to and representation of the environmental crisis.

Slow violence and affective displacement

Hildyard's second body is an image for the way human life has been reimagined in the wake of the environmental crisis and of the coinage of the Anthropocene – a new, albeit contested, geological age in which the ecological makeup of the earth is fundamentally reshaped through human forces.¹ It points to how human life can no longer be perceived as individuated, autonomous and demarcated in time and space, but should be considered as both intensively entangled with nature and non-human life and as taking place on different spatial and temporal scales. This has informed epistemological and ontological inquiries in the humanities and

literary studies, for instance on the collapse of the distinction between human and nature: what and who constitutes being and the world and through what (literary) means can they be represented and known? ‘Scale’, Henry Ivry writes in *Transscalar Critique*, ‘does not merely refer to the ontological layerings of the world but is also an epistemic description of our critical modes for encountering that world’ (2023, 33). If the Anthropocene counts as a ‘struggle for a cognitive grasp’ (Clover and Spahr 2017, 160) on what human life now portends to be, it has more recently also triggered questions of an affective nature. There has been an upsurge of interest in the emotional effects of the environmental crisis through the naming of new emotions such as eco-anxiety, ecological grief and solastalgia, while also rethinking the environmental effects of ordinary emotions and considering the ways in which the climate and the environment affect people’s everyday emotions (Bladow and Ladino 2018; Verlie 2019; Craps 2020).

Whereas current research on the affective toll of environmental degradation has focused on particular emotions, we suggest that it also disrupts the subject’s affective economy at the more fundamental level of desire and attachment: similar to Hildyard not experiencing the second body, we see characters in contemporary novels not experiencing the environmental crisis as real. Understanding the environmental decline not as an accumulation of singular events but as defining our current condition and ordinary life (LeMenager 2017, 221), we argue that the affective crisis is an effect of the slow violence pervading that condition.

Different from standard conceptions of violence as an immediate and visible event bound in time and space, Rob Nixon (2011) defines slow violence as a gradual disintegration that takes place out of sight and across various temporal and spatial scales. It happens in the aftermath of nuclear waste or wars, but also in the environmental erosion of local and global habitats long after the instalment of (often (neo)colonial) infrastructures and transnational logistical circuits to extract and transport natural resources; the effects of which most often directly impact the poor populations in the Global South. Nixon’s concept illustrates that human and nature are not simply opposed to one another but that their relation is mediated through discourse, technology, ideology, labour and affect.² Slow violence is put out of sight through the mediation of global infrastructure, political discourses of greenwashing investments, the spatial distribution of labour, global hierarchies in space, but also knowledge systems and forms of (media) representation that respectively foreground Western epistemologies of nature and spectacular forms of violence.

Given that such violence cannot be immediately perceived, Daisy Hildyard suggests in an interview (2022) that it cannot be directly felt either. It nevertheless does have an affective impact. One of the effects of slow violence is what Nixon terms ‘displacement without moving’: that type of forced removal in which people do not have to leave their ‘places of belonging’ but in which those places have been so badly environmentally affected that their inhabitants experience ‘the loss of the land and resources beneath them’ (19). Although with differing degrees of impact, we suggest that slow violence in a similar way causes an affective displacement: a loss of one’s affective grounding in belonging and attachment. It is the ‘estrangement from place’ (Trexler 2015, 24); the distorted development of one’s coming-of-age story when the future can no longer be imagined as a hospitable place; the alienation of ordinary acts and consumption goods that now reveal themselves as detrimental to the environment; the loss of particular good life fantasies that no longer seem sustainable; the realisation that habitual acts of care can no longer protect one’s kin. The erosive and gradual violence of the environmental crisis does not only play itself out on temporal and spatial scales, but also on an affective one.

The loss of affective grounding raises questions of genre which we, as indicated in chapter 1, understand as a form of affective expectation about how a (life) narrative can develop. As the environmental crisis rearticulates the social, narrative and affective coordinates of what a life can be, there is a ‘struggle for genre’, as Stephanie LeMenager (2017) puts it: the testing out of new patterns of living in a world marked by the conditions of the Anthropocene. Interestingly, she adds that the spectre presiding over this quest for genre is the question of love, which involves questions of attachment, practices of caring and the political differentiation between objects worth attaching to and caring for – or not (234–6). The struggle for genre may also include Nixon’s call for new narrative forms and genres to meet the representational challenges that the durational length and spatially dispersed nature of slow violence poses. The question then becomes what forms of life and different attachments can be imagined within conditions of environmentally attritional violence that inform an affective crisis of displacement?

The novels we will discuss in this chapter do not offer any straightforward answers, nor do all attend equally to all issues raised here. A constant is, however, that the affective crisis mediates the environmental crisis: it is at the affective level that its violence becomes present as displacement, while the novels seek for ways of moving through this crisis in attachment, embodiment and care. All three novels experiment with

genre to capture this need for attachment amidst environmental and affective slow violence. Marsman's *The Opposite of a Person* is a coming-of-age novel in which the insertion of other genres demonstrates the main character's distorted development, whereas her depression obstructs her love relationship and her engagement with the climate struggle. In the post-apocalyptic novel *The End We Start From*, Hunter's narrator is not shaken out of her detachment through a flood, but through taking care of her first-born. Slow violence gets represented at the affective level in Schweblin's genre-bending novel *Fever Dream* when ordinary modes of care break down due to environmental degradation.

Affective crisis obstructs ecological engagement: Marsman

After publishing two successful poetry collections, Lieke Marsman made her fiction debut with the novel *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (2017), translated by Sophie Collins as *The Opposite of a Person* (2022). Its title derives from a scene from narrator and protagonist Ida's childhood. While she is helping her mother in the kitchen, the latter responds to news reports on the ongoing war in Yugoslavia by saying that people are thoroughly bad. This affects Ida strongly: 'if people were evil, and I wished to be good, then I had to make sure that I was the opposite of a person' (2022, 32). In the present of the novel, Ida, twenty-nine by then, is still consumed by this ethical question – how to be a good person – and more specifically as it concerns love and the climate crisis. Her central problem is of an affective nature: she wants to connect to the other and engage herself for the planet, yet she finds herself trapped in solitary and self-centred reflections.

The first chapter introduces this issue. As a child, Ida imagines herself to be a cucumber, which is one of 'the most extreme tests of our empathetic abilities' (2022, 7) because empathising with 'something that has no feelings means that you must genuinely feel *nothing* ... in the sense that to feel something – anything at all – has become an *impossibility*' (7). Identifying with the other comes with the risk of self-loss. Realising she cannot be anyone else, Ida is determined to ascertain that she 'surely understand[s herself] as fully as possible' (8). Self-reflection and narcissism, however, tend to blend into one another, which makes it hard for Ida to connect with the other.

Ida's thoughts and actions oscillate between introspection and commitment: 'I oscillate between, on the one hand, wanting to participate

more actively in society and, on the other, wanting to shut that society out completely' (2022, 23). The titles of the novel's two parts express this tension. In the first part, 'Staying In', Ida has just graduated as a climate scientist, and she is struggling to find a direction in life. In the second part, 'The Great Outdoors', she travels to the Italian Alps for an internship in a project that considers how climate change alters the region and in particular how a reservoir dam lowers the water quality. The novel, however, does not trace a development from passive reflection to active commitment. Similar to the novels we discuss in the chapter on *Bildung*, it portrays an impasse rather than a sustained development: Ida's conflict remains unresolved.

That issue is reflected in the novel's structure and mixture of genres. Numbered prose chapters recount Ida's story but they are interrupted by poems and essays. This alternation of genres illustrates the difficulties Ida has in integrating inner and outer world and thus hampers the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. The poems and essays show that Ida sees reality primarily as an object of contemplation. Even though in the second part she goes out into the world, this leads to the production of even more texts rather than to action. The texts touch upon this lack of integration. Several poems consist of unresolved paradoxes, while others share with the essays the theme of the unbridgeable dichotomy between lovers, between language and reality, and between humankind and the earth. The first poem ends: 'but this infinite relapse: / mirror and mirror / person and person' (1).

The world, however, is far from absent in these musings. 'Identity works in part via the principles of collectivity' (2022, 62), Ida writes in an essay on sexuality, and that collectivity is shaped by capitalist mechanisms of exploitation and image-building. Moreover, she does not conceive of her feelings of apathy and depression (solely) as a failing on her part but as a 'lack of desire due to a lack of lack, i.e. due to abundance' (89). The world generates an excess of stimuli the mind and body can never fully reciprocate. This disconnection between the subject and the world generates apathy and listlessness: 'Days that flow into one another bearing an apathetic form of grief' (90). This experience disrupts Ida's sense of temporality as past, present and future fade into each other. Since the notions of 'change' and 'future' can no longer be experienced, only 'not-experience' is left: 'a long, sickly sludge of monotony' (138).

Ida specifies her disturbed relation to the world when discussing the difficulties she has in committing herself to the issue of climate change. Firstly, she points at the ecological and economic catastrophe her generation inherits from the previous generation. To millennials being called 'apathetic and cynical' she asks the critical question whether 'apathy might

in fact be a symptom of strongly held values? I know that my apathy is the result of the state my parents' generation have left the world in, my cynicism an expression of dismay' (2022, 69). Detachment and depression are here presented as an effect of the (slow) violence of the environmental crisis. Secondly, on the topic of the previous generation's ideological and ethical heritage, Ida argues that she grew up in a world devoid of ideas or moral guidelines, and therefore also devoid of utopian perspectives:

Seeing as I grew up clueless, without even a religion (though of course with a lot of rules, or at least strict parents, but no overarching principle to bind said rules together), ... I have no mother tongue as such when it comes to beliefs, no golden thread to lead me through the world. (2022, 23)

The conditions for commitment are not met, because the connection between the subject and social reality is broken on the fundamental, ideological level of meaning. The narrator longs to intervene in reality yet finds herself stuck in passive contemplation, which she can only escape by social isolation. The latter then is labelled as narcissistic by that generation that has destroyed the conditions for commitment, traumatised as it was by (de)pillarisation.

The previous generation grew up in a so-called pillarised society: on the basis of religion, ideology and/or socioeconomic position, society was divided into separate groups that had their own education system, newspaper, union and political party. These pillars all held strong dogmas and ideas that this generation had to challenge to find freedom. The current generation, however, seems to face a world emptied of ideology and grand narratives. The French essayist, and current politician, Raphaël Glucksmann refers to this generation as 'les enfants du vide' – the children of emptiness. It is a generation that faces a world emptied of ideology. Liberation then implies confronting that void and 'reweaving' [retisser] connections rather than breaking chains (2018, 92). In the absence of a new collective narrative the burden of societal problems falls on the individual.

Ida's relation to the climate crisis exemplifies this. In the absence of a collective perspective, she experiences this issue primarily as a personal failing for which she feels guilt:

I feel guilty, don't know where to begin, think about how I should have begun a long time ago, and these feelings paralyse me. I feel like someone who has stopped opening her bills – day after day the

climate leaves an unopened letter on my doormat: *You're too late!*
(Marsman 2022, 167–8)³

Her lack of a mother tongue for meaning is apparent in her engagement with diverse discourses on the climate crisis, which are not always compatible and which she does not attempt to integrate or connect. Her 'hero' (2022, 9) is Canadian publicist Naomi Klein, who analyses the climate crisis from a leftist-activist perspective in *This Changes Everything* (2014). Ida quotes several excerpts from that book, which suggest that neoliberal policies and economic dogmas of unlimited growth cause the depletion of the natural environment, which can no longer regenerate (Marsman 2022, 70, 72, 74).⁴ At the same time Ida is intrigued by a lecture on 'Object Oriented Ontology' (166), which inspires her to reference Quentin Meillassoux and Timothy Morton in an essay. Their method is philosophical and ontological rather than political and historical, questioning the hierarchy between human beings on the one hand and objects and nature on the other.

Such cognitive approaches to causes and remedies are nevertheless overdetermined by an affective engagement with the climate crisis. In Ida's view the hierarchy of humankind and the object or natural world is rooted in the loneliness humans felt when they could no longer consider themselves as the centre of the universe. Egocentrism was to avenge the loss of geocentrism:

What it comes down to is that humankind, as a whole, is lonely. We cannot stand that no one says anything back, that those damn objects do not respond Even heaven is empty. And so we put ourselves out by annihilating all of that wordless nature around us, like a desperate lover who receives no message back and so drinks themselves silly in the local bar. (2022, 186)

The fear of loneliness is not just individual but universal. Ida appears to project her own existential feeling on humankind as a whole. She perceives the relationship between humankind and the universe, between the human and the non-human, through an ontological perspective. She projects an essentialist image of humankind that is, however, mediated by her own affective problems, thereby depoliticising the climate crisis that, in other parts of the novel, for instance via Naomi Klein, she does tackle in political terms.

The novel's affective approach of the climate crisis gets emphasised by the way Ida's engagement with love runs parallel to her understanding

of that crisis. To mitigate her fear of being unloved, Ida fantasises about playing an important role in Robin's life (2022, 37–9, 113–4), yet it causes Robin to call her a narcissist. Ida realises that in her romantic musings on Robin she tends to forget that the other also exists without and outside of her: 'Because it turns out that without me, there is a you' (114). She reaches a similar conclusion regarding humankind's relationship to the earth in an essay on the hierarchical relation between subject and object: 'Humankind cannot survive without the Earth, but the Earth itself has absolutely no need of us' (185). Or put differently: without humankind, there is an earth.

In this anthropomorphic, affective engagement with nature, humankind retains its central position. The conclusion of Ida's narrative makes that clear when the motifs of love and climate get intertwined. On a canoeing trip in the north of Italy, just when Robin announces she wants to end the relationship, Ida and Robin are surprised by a flood. At that moment Ida is decentred in her relationship with love and the earth: '*Then an airborne branch strikes Ida's head and at last she loses, you could say, her consciousness*' (2022, 207). In other words, the novel ends on the wrong side of desire. The urge to connect and to identify ends in self-loss, in the individual being cast back by the other and by nature. Ida also finds herself on the wrong side as regards the ethical question of how to be a good person. Earlier in the novel she refers to 'the story of Noah and the Genesis flood narrative' in which 'God punishes people because they are evil' (33): the flood annuls her as a good person. Besides its historical and local meaning as the consequence of an old dam breaking, the flood then is also given a more universal meaning. From this perspective, the flood underlines Ida's alienation, loneliness and guilt – her affective displacement.

And yet there is an alternative way to read the ending. So far, we have mainly analysed the development of the novel in terms of Ida becoming the opposite of a person, as in meaning to become good. That led to the oscillation between introspection and participation that ultimately, when the branch hit her, made Ida end up in her own disaffection. The opposite of a person may, however, also refer to an object or something non-human: the desire to be so empathetic as to move beyond human consciousness. In that case, when the branch hits Ida and she finally '*loses ... her consciousness*' (207), she does fulfil her desire to become the opposite of a person. After all, 'the great outdoors', the title of the novel's second part, also refers to Meillassoux's concept of 'a world in which human consciousness no longer plays a role, or, at least, not a key role' (183). Entering that world, however, comes with

the erasure of identity and even life: ‘But everything about me will be new, I think / I will slip right into time, as though it were a second skin / And right into death, too, as though it were a second home’ (207). We read the desire to become part of the world of objects but also to feel no difference between oneself and the other or the world as a symptom of Ida’s affective crisis in which she does not feel as if she inhabits the world, as if she belongs. Different from many other novels in our corpus, *The Opposite of a Person*, in both readings of the end, does not find possibilities of life in affective attachments.⁵

Reparative care: Hunter

In *The Opposite of a Person* (2022), Ida touches upon one of the more controversial aspects of the climate debate: the idea that the earth suffers from overpopulation and that therefore fewer children should be born. Ida seems to agree, but would nevertheless happily have a child if Robin wanted to: ‘Just the thought of it makes me happy. But you can throw away with that idea any notion of contribution to a better environment’ (138). Public interest conflicts with intimate desire but also with conventional genres of life: if these characters cannot imagine a future for themselves, then why bring a child into a world that will irrevocably change?⁶ In the novels by Hunter and Schweblin, the care for new life is juxtaposed with the prospect of the end of all life. Affective care is a necessity but offers no certainty: care redeems attachment to a broken world in Hunter, whereas environmental damage fundamentally disrupts care’s ordinary practice in Schweblin.

The End We Start From (2017), the debut novel by British author Megan Hunter, connects beginning and ending in its paradoxical title and plot structure. The birth of the first child of the unnamed narrator coincides with the flooding of her hometown London. Instead of starting family life, the young family embarks on ‘the never-ending journey that has become our life’ (42). This journey first takes them to her partner’s parental home in the (equally affected) countryside. Later, the family ends up in a refugee camp where the partner cannot cope and ultimately leaves without ever coming back. Mother and child move to other refugee camps, eventually returning to London where the narrator finds her traumatised partner in a clinic. The novel ends with the three characters coming home for the first time as a family in their now dry but ruined flat. The final sentence suggests a hopeful beginning: the son ‘lifts a leg and – impossible, impossible – he takes a step’ (127).

Different from Marsman's local flood, Hunter's flood has unclear demarcations: the reader does not know when the novel takes place and is equally left in the dark about the scale of the flood. Literary scholars have argued that this post-apocalyptic genre misrepresents the slow violence of the Anthropocene through its focus on a singular event (LeMenager 2017, 225; Vermeulen 2020, 151–6). Pieter Vermeulen goes on to suggest that the genre, even though it is premised on the destruction of the modern world, displays a conservative impulse: its destruction of modernity is often imagined as a *reduction* of its complexity, while ideologically holding on to 'a more rarified version of the status quo' (2020, 155): it is the world as we know it but now at a far smaller scale. A similar critique could be made of Hunter's novel. Unlike other novels in the post-apocalyptic genre, it rarely addresses political and social issues. Yet, in its emphasis on the affective relationships between the main character and the world, it holds on to an attachment to a chrononormative life that is predicated on (heterosexual) procreation.

Despite the emotional events of birth and exodus, the tone is neither dramatic nor animated. It is as if the narrator still keeps the minutes as she used to do in her job (Hunter 2017, 86): the twelve chapters consist of short blocks of about three lines each, separated by blank lines. Characters are named only by initials: the child is named Z (evoking the end); the partner R. This concise style serves several functions. Firstly, it is mimetic: the young mother has little time to report, either due to their journey or to the attention she must give to the child. Astrid Bracke links this fragmented style secondly to an epistemological confusion inherent to the Anthropocene (2019, 284). This epistemological aspect is reinforced by the many inserted passages referring to mythological and religious creation myths. These indicate that we understand the world through stories, but they simultaneously strengthen the fragmentation of the text. This complicates the reader's understanding of the disaster and creates an effect of estrangement 'that captures the experience of understanding and living with climate crisis' (284). To this mimetic and epistemological function of the style, we would like to add an affective one.

The novel shows an interaction between the affective and the epistemological. On the one hand, as Bracke indicates, affective alienation follows from an epistemological problem. On the other hand, from this affective detachment follows a certain epistemology. This detachment is not unfamiliar to the main character. The narrator relates that she lost her 'usual cynicism' (Hunter 2017, 3) back when she anticipated a painful birth and a loss of control, but the climate disaster does not have the

same effect. Similar to Hildyard in *The Second Body* (2017), the flood does not feel real for the narrator of *The End We Start From*: 'The news rushes past downstairs like a flow of traffic. Even our flat back there underwater doesn't make it real' (12). The narrator already suffers from alienation before the flood, and neither the knowledge nor the reality of it seems to alleviate that estrangement. She does not recount the events and the violence in the wake of the flood in apocalyptic scenes, but in a detached and often mediated manner. She makes no attempt at her own account of the events but refers to other people's discourse: 'Words float up the stairs Endgame, civilization, catastrophe, humanitarian' (12). The words fail both epistemologically *and* affectively: they fall short of capturing the disaster *and* making the narrator experience the disaster as a real event. The epistemological problem is that the flood becomes obscure through its apparent self-evidence: 'How easily we have got used to it all, as though we knew what was coming all along' (63). The many inserted quotations from creation myths do then not merely serve the epistemological functions indicated above, but also the affective function of identification: an identification that, however, comes to stand between personal experience and personal understanding.

Epistemological and affective alienation thus reinforce one another: the affective detachment distorts comprehension of the disaster, while the hackneyed reporting of the flood strengthens that detachment. Her body, for example, has no sense of time and place any more: 'My body registers nothing at this. *Where* doesn't seem to be the question any more' (2017, 79). The same goes for her sense of connection: 'We are the only people here. The truth: we've always felt like this' (35). The flood causes disidentification and isolation.

The affective counterbalance for this unreality is the care for the child: 'I might float away. There is only Z holding me to the earth' (2017, 18). Although she is the one breastfeeding him, it also feels as if he is feeding her, 'filling me with a steady, orange light' that calms her (25). A relationship of mutual dependence is established, and the narrator now also finds a certain attachment to other mothers and children. It is not the climate crisis that shocks the narrator out of her detachment, but early motherhood that repairs the narrator's relationship to the world: 'It seems that Z has done something to my heart. Loosened it. Opened up a gap' (76). The narrator does develop a language here for the growth of her child. Something similar happens at the family level. Because of the disaster, home no longer had any epistemological and affective meaning: 'Home is another word that has lost itself' (98). Nevertheless, the family returns to their home and their initial alienation is overcome by,

again, the intimate contact between the three family members: 'We have this touch, our fingers in the ruined room ... our child squirming in my arms' (126). As mentioned, the book ends with the child's first steps. The intimate relationships of care, in other words, allow the family to regain their footing.

It is at this intimate level that the novel establishes a relationship with the environmental crisis. Similar to Marsman's novel, *The End We Start From* mainly imagines the dislocation of the climate crisis through a personal affective dislocation. Climate crisis and child, destruction and birth are not only affectively opposed but also in line with one another. The novel compares the unsettling experience of having a first baby with a society unsettled through climate crisis. Conversely, the novel can only imagine the ecological disaster through the affective analogy with the birth of a child. That a first baby limits the parents' social environment gets magnified at the social level: 'Now, without Internet, without phone reception, there is this: the filling, the emptying. The lumpiness of an engorged breast. The tingling of its release. There is this' (2017, 31). Statements that primarily concern the baby gain a second layer of meaning: 'When you have a child, the fear is transferred In a way, it is multiplied' (69). The flood intensifies that multiplication.

At the same time, the care for and attachment to the baby repairs the derealisation that the protagonist experiences. Hope for a life after the flood is drawn from this intimate relation. The universal story of a child's development (first step, first teeth) points to a human capacity for regeneration. The novel reinforces this tendency towards universalisation through the inserted mythical quotations that reference a cyclical history of endings and beginnings. The interlacing of the intimate and the universal returns in the style: the abbreviations of names to a letter give the narrative the personal character of a diary, although it could also be anyone's diary and about anyone. What is absent, however, is the historical and sociopolitical dimension. The novel does not address at any point the social infrastructure of care: who takes care of the refugee camps, the food distribution, the hospitals, the reconstruction of homes and the possibilities to return home?

Different from Marsman's novel, Hunter's *The End We Start From* offers a synthesis of crises, albeit through a mediation in which the intimate and the mythological are universalised. This novel finds its genre in the myth of the flood that eventually leads to a regeneration of the home. The familial and the intimate come to the fore at the expense of any sociopolitical mediation, whereas the coming to terms with the lack of such mediation in Marsman disrupts Ida's sense of belonging at all three

levels of the intimate, the social and the universal. In the novel we turn to now, the absence of that mediation creates the possibility for the intimate to turn into horror.

Crisis of care: Schweblin

Whereas care is regenerative in Hunter's novel, this is no longer the case in the short novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014) – translated as *Fever Dream* (2017) by Megan McDowell – by the Argentine but Berlin-based Samanta Schweblin. The narrator Amanda suffers from a fever dream on her deathbed. 'I think I have a fever. Is that why everything is so confused? I think that's why, and also because your attitude is not helpful' (2017, 90). Amanda is speaking to the young boy David who is sitting next to her, although the reader cannot be sure of that: it is suggested that Amanda might be hallucinating (132).

Fever Dream is structured as a dialogue between Amanda and David in which the latter is guiding the former in identifying the cause of her illness or the affliction that affects the local community. The conversation reconstructs what happened since Amanda and her young daughter Nina arrived at the countryside in northern Argentina for a holiday and met David's mother, Carla. In this process, David is constantly urging her to pay attention to details, while also dismissing elements of her story as unimportant and stressing that there is no time to dwell on them. What they try to pinpoint is the 'exact moment' (2017, 48) when the so-called 'worms' entered Amanda's and Nina's bodies. This quest has collective implications: 'Because it's important, it's very important for us all' (2). David, too, has been poisoned; something he would have barely survived if it was not for 'the woman in the green house' (17), an alternative healer, who 'transmigrates' David's soul to another body. His own body, however, remains affected.

Although the novel takes place in the countryside, it does not present itself at first sight as a typical regional novel: if anything, it disturbs the fantasies of affective rejuvenation that Amanda brings to the countryside in her retreat from Buenos Aires.⁷ The novel takes the shape of a horror story and a whodunnit bathing in an atmosphere of mortal fear – it is eerie. In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher defines the eerie as a 'failure of absence' or a 'failure of presence' (2016, 61). In Schweblin's novel, there is an absence of presence: there is seemingly nothing whereas there should be *something* causing the monstrous diseases afflicting the

characters. This raises questions about agency as well as the world in which we find ourselves and who or what determines its course. ‘What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all’, Fisher asks (11). In this case, the ghostly atmosphere of the novel raises ontological and epistemological questions: ‘in what world are we?’; ‘can this world be known?’ These create an anxiety that impresses upon the affective level when the mothers realise that the care for their children is insufficient. ‘He doesn’t belong to me anymore’, Carla says about David (2017, 7). It is through this affective dimension of care, we argue, that the novel makes the slow violence of environmental degradation visible.

Amanda’s care takes on a paranoid form. From her mother, she inherited the concept of the ‘rescue distance’:

I always imagine the worst-case scenario. Right now, for instance, I’m calculating how long it would take me to jump out of the car and reach Nina if she suddenly ran and leapt into the pool. I call it the ‘rescue distance’ ... and I spend half the day calculating it, though I always risk more than I should. (2017, 15–6)

Amanda and her daughter Nina are connected by an ‘invisible thread’ (2017, 36) that, depending on Amanda’s risk assessment, either tightens or loosens. ‘It’s just that sometimes the eyes you have aren’t enough’, Carla ominously tells her (15). But can you be blind to what is invisible? Amanda and Nina visit Carla at Sotomayor, the company for which she works and that owns most of the soy fields in the area. As Amanda and David reconstruct this episode, he asks her about the rescue distance. ‘I’m sitting ten inches away from my daughter, David. There is no rescue distance’, Amanda replies (70). And yet it happens at this seemingly innocent place where no danger is visible: ‘It’s from the grass, right?’ (109).

The passage speaks to the interconnection of environmental and affective displacement. On the one hand, one’s perception of nature can no longer be trusted. Against ‘the noise, the grime, the congestion of everything’ (76) in the capital, the surroundings simply looked idyllic to Amanda:

[W]e stay there under the sun with the grass up to our knees. It’s an almost perfect moment A group of trees gives us some shade, and we sit near the trunks, close to the well. The soy fields stretch out to either side of us. It’s all very green, a perfumed green, and Nina asks me if we can’t stay a little longer. (2017, 75–6)

And yet it is at this very place that the characters get poisoned: the environment may look idyllic, but the slow violence of invisible pollution disturbs the associated (romantic, nostalgic) fantasies of regeneration that nature would bring in contrast to urban life. On the other hand, Amanda's affective relationship to nature as well as to her child and her own body are disrupted through that same violence. She fails to protect her child and herself because her feelings of danger fail her. At this point of the dialogue, David repeatedly asks her what she feels, but nothing stands out for Amanda. If the violence cannot be perceived, it cannot be felt either.

The pollution the novel focuses on is local: the pesticides used on the soy fields cause children to be born deformed and others to get cancer or other diseases. Carla clarifies: 'We're in the country, there are sown fields all around us. People come down with things all the time, and even if they survive they end up strange. You see them on the street' (2017, 78). The novel can nevertheless be read as a broader allegory for the invisible danger of the slow violence of the environmental crisis. This is suggested at the end when the fathers come into view. They excel in ignorance, powerlessness and lethargy. Frustrated at not finding any answers about his family's fate, Amanda's husband returns to the city but, blinded by habits, does not see the violence surrounding him:

He doesn't see the soy fields, the streams that crisscross the dry plots of land, the miles of open fields empty of livestock He doesn't notice that the return trip has grown slower and slower. That there are too many cars, cars and more cars covering every asphalt nerve. (2017, 150–1)

The slow violence of environmental degradation alienates people from their surroundings as well as from their practices to take care of their children and each other. The disabled children nonetheless make this alienation visible and draw attention to how such environmental crisis impacts the birth or even non-birth of children: how the disruption of the regeneration of nature impacts the regeneration of human life. It is through the affective dimensions of care that these problems unfold and can be imagined. It is similarly through that affective mediation that the slow violence, created at the social level of poisonous industries, can become visible.

Conclusion: intimate alienation

If the Anthropocene leads to a stronger awareness of one's second body – one's interconnection with nature, and this on a variety of

scales – then in the novels discussed in this chapter it results in an experience of intimate alienation. Whenever the novels' main characters aim to situate themselves in relation to their environment, they find themselves affectively displaced. The coming-of-age of Marsman's Ida gets disrupted because her 'excessive desire for life' (2022, 97) cannot find an articulation into any sustained engagement, which leaves her feeling depressed and guilty for her lack of (environmental) action. The flood in *The End We Start From* (Hunter 2017) literally displaces the narrator, aggravating the intimate unsettlement of her detachment and her experience of becoming a mother. In Schweblin's novel *Fever Dream* (2017), idyllic fantasies of the countryside give way to an eerie nature that disrupts agency and presence and that can no longer be deemed affectively comforting or secure: Amanda and the whole community are affectively unmoored from their environment and their practices of care.

In the introduction to this chapter we argued that the slow violence of ecological degradation manifests itself in such affective displacement – Ida's depression and inability to act in *The Opposite of a Person*; the narrator's confusion and disorientation in *The End We Start From*; Amanda's anxiety motivating her quest to know what violated her in *Fever Dream*. This detachment generates a longing for presence, which is accompanied by a question of genre: a readjustment of affective attunement to different and yet unknown patterns of living. Both imply questions of desire: what objects are worth attaching to? In *The Opposite of a Person*, Ida's desired objects are her girlfriend Robin, a meaningful epistemological frame, and an involvement into climate mitigating action, but she ultimately finds herself unable to break out of a personal sense of loneliness – something which she also perceives to be humanity's global condition. This gets reflected in the novel's improvisation of genre: self-reflective essays and poems overgrow the developmental storyline of the coming-of-age narrative and emphasise Ida's stuckness. Hunter's novel presents a post-apocalyptic narrative in which the object of attachment becomes the narrator's first-born and ultimately the family. The novel then presents an attachment to a fantasy of regeneration along the lines of the status quo; an attachment that helps the protagonist navigate the environmental displacement. Such fantasy of regenerative power gets disrupted in *Fever Dream* by the invisibility of slow violence that breaks Amanda's attachment to her daughter: children are born dead or deformed; adults die an unnatural death. The novel's improvisation with genre – horror, whodunit, regional literature – creates an eerie text in which the question of acting upon, caring for and attaching to the world remains unresolved. Apart from Hunter's novel then, our case studies

here find no attachments that are able to create a fold within the violence of climate change.

In the final chapter of *Literature and the Anthropocene*, Pieter Vermeulen discusses several fictional and theoretical works that present an affective stance of detachment towards the prospect of human extinction (2020, 156–62). He evaluates this positively as a belief in the potential of meaning beyond contemporary forms of living. Whereas the detachment in the texts Vermeulen describes is a chosen attitude, the detachment in the novels by Marsman and Schweblin is not willed. If they point to a world of meaning beyond the contemporary one, they only do so negatively: their detachment is the effect of a violence they no longer want to inhabit. This detachment is, however, not only the effect of the slow violence of climate change, but also follows from the lack of epistemological frames. The frames the characters use to mediate their relation to nature put them at a distance from it: the history of ideas in Marsman, the mythological narratives in Hunter and ideas of the countryside in Schweblin.

This, we suggest, can be reformulated as a question of scale. In the Anthropocene, the scale of the individual faces the global scale on which the ecological erosion unfolds, with – as is often pointed out and most famously by Amitav Ghosh (2016) – little to no narrative realist forms mediating the relation between both. Yet, the sustained focus of this book on affective and epistemological questions adds a historical-ideological dimension: that these two scales are divided by an unbridgeable chasm is not merely an effect of inadequate narrative tools but also of the dissolution of epistemologies and institutions mediating between the individual and the planet in the wake of neoliberalism. This destruction was reflected in Ida's lamentation over the ideological emptiness in which she grew up, and the lack of a caring society in Hunter and Schweblin. What remains is the intimate alienation of affective displacement.

Notes

1. Both the sciences and the humanities contest the term. Dipesh Chakrabarty points to the disputes in geological periodisation (2009, 209–10), and in March 2024 the International Union of Geological Sciences announced the rejection of the term (Carrington 2024). In the humanities, the Anthropocene has given rise to a series of alternative terms – of which the Capitocene (Moore 2015), Chthulucene (Haraway 2016) and a Billion Black Anthropocenes (Yusoff 2018) are arguably the best-known. We agree with other literary scholars that the value of the term Anthropocene resides in the ongoing contestation it evokes (Menely and Taylor 2017, 4; Vermeulen 2020, 7).
2. For a discussion of such mediating apparatus, see Wark (2015, 164–5).

3. The passage plays on the double meaning of the Dutch word 'schuld', which means both 'guilt' and 'debt'.
4. One quotation (2017, 134) is not included in the English translation.
5. The essay 'Two Gaps' may counter that to some extent. It is unclear though who the narrator is as the essay is placed after Ida's loss of consciousness. The essay was also published independently from the novel under Marsman's name in the literary magazine *De Gids* (2016). Although this essay speaks about longing in more positive terms than the rest of the novel, the essay does not speak to any particular attachment besides a reconciliation with the self: 'There is nothing lacking within me' (2022, 220).
6. See Sanjena Sathian's essay on 'the choice plot' that discusses contemporary novels that revolve around the choice (not) to have children – a question that is partially motivated by the environmental crisis (2023, 133).
7. In Latin-American literature, the '*novel de la tierra*' is a genre that after the so-called '*Boom Latinoamericano*' – a literary movement from the sixties and seventies most typically associated with authors such as Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez – was considered to be traditional and outmoded (Alonso 1990).

Conclusion: Affective crisis? It could be political

In 2024 US-based musical artist Claire Rousay released an album with the telling title *Sentiment*. Its opening track ‘4pm’ features spoken word lyrics by a voice the listener can identify as male.¹ To the background of a quiet sound design, dominated towards the end of the track by an eerie violin, the voice serenely shares that they have not been able to stop crying and ‘to eat or sleep or leave the bed for days’. As explicit and immediate as this voice may seem, the speaker appears to intone the narrative voice of a written text, twice referencing the moment and medium of writing – ‘Now that I type it out’, ‘I am writing this on my iPhone’. The narrator concedes that ‘on paper’ their life ‘is becoming the very life I have dreamed about ever since I was a kid’, and they wished they were able to ‘engage, appreciate and truly live this life’. They report feeling ‘a seeming infinite void inside’ and never having felt as lonely, not even when they experienced the loss of loved ones and of their faith. The origin of this feeling is not specified in the text.

These lyrics are a mere snippet of the textual production in contemporary culture. Even though the notion of literature can and has been expanded to include pop lyrics, this snippet would not qualify as the kind of aesthetic artefact we have been studying in this book – it is obviously not a novel. The lyrics are exemplary, however, of the focus on affective questions and on the affective experience of detachment we have identified in this study of contemporary fiction as an affective dominant. Narrators and characters in contemporary fiction share experiences of disaffection, of not feeling connected to themselves, their lives, or the people, institutions or narratives surrounding them.

The speaking voice in ‘4pm’ has not yet reached the stage of complete affective apathy or numbness; they are even ‘grateful’ they ‘can still

cry'. They are also still capable of mediating their affective experience, if only through a text on a phone. In contemporary fiction we have traced a variety of aesthetic and epistemological mediations of affective experience. The novels we have discussed to varying degrees are able or willing to venture objectifying analyses of the social, economic, ideological or technological contexts in which the affective crises they register play out. These mediations typically do not afford a resolution of the affective crisis, and are often shown to fail in that respect, even when they promise such resolution, as in the case of narrative mediation through the genre of the Bildungsroman. Their mediations do, however, allow for a degree of formal, aesthetic or epistemological consistency, which opens up possibilities for reflecting on the experience of detachment, on attachments failing to make good on their promises, and sometimes on reparative rearticulations of affective attachment.

It is tempting, as we have argued in the [introduction](#) to this book, to consider twenty-first-century literature's entanglement with affect and neoliberalism in comfortably dichotomous terms of subsumption and subversion. The argument, then, might go like this: while generally contemporary fiction is seen to be incorporated by the economic and cultural logic of neoliberalism – broadly conceived as the current normative regime subsuming all spheres of human activity and experience, including affective experiences and practices, to the parameters of financial governance – the literary critic highlights instances or strategies of emergent subversion, of resistance to or critical distance from this total appropriation of cultural imagination and production by capital.

We have identified this temptation in various analyses of contemporary literature and neoliberalism. As the studies of Kornbluh and Greenwald Smith show, in the dichotomy of subsumption and subversion the position of mediation as an aesthetic and political category varies. While Kornbluh calls for particular kinds of mediation such as impersonal narration to counter capitalism's logic of immediacy, Greenwald Smith eschews mediation of affect through narrative representation of individualised feelings. We hope the preceding chapters have corroborated our understanding of mediation in contemporary fiction as neither lacking, nor as affording objectifying distance or, by contrast, as subjecting affective experience to neoliberal appropriation.

Our approach has been guided, rather, by Lauren Berlant's reading of affective scenarios in *Cruel Optimism*. Confirming Berlant's conviction that affective scenarios and response 'exemplify shared historical time' (2011, 15), we have argued that personal lived experience in contemporary neoliberal society and culture is more political than ever. The

novels we have discussed in this book reveal diverse positions within, and responses to, what Berlant calls crisis ordinariness; indeed, they reveal that such crisis may take drastically divergent shapes depending on one's position – in terms of geopolitical location, class, gender or belief, among others – within the contemporary context of postimperial, neoliberal capitalism.

Our case studies also display diverse aesthetic mediations of the affective scenarios unfolding in their stories, while none entertain the myth of an immediate 'presence preceding representation' (Kornbluh 2024, 68). They trace multiple trajectories of characters trying to sustain themselves in relations of affective attachment within conditions of living that may be more or less materially precarious, but that invariably fail to provide the comfort, support or hope one needs to project one's future as liveable. As various folds within conditions of decreasing inhabitability, and decreasing return on investment in good life fantasies, these affective attachments may provide relief or open up possibilities for creative practice or for the rearticulation of one's identifications. In other words, our case studies project diverse infrastructures sustained by their characters as living arrangements that allow them to go on living and perhaps finding a certain degree of comfort, joy or attachment in disaffecting circumstances. In some cases this infrastructure is rather accommodating to the daily routine of neoliberal capital, as in Ling Ma's *Severance*; in other cases, like Heike Geissler's *Seasonal Associate*, the narrative is set up as a self-conscious attempt at unlearning the patterns of a numbing infrastructure. The lived mediation of material pressures, in any case, is never entirely smooth, as the protagonists are never fully saturated by the coercive internalisation of neoliberal subjectivity.

Thus, besides building on Berlant's work we have found it useful to introduce Anna Tsing's concept of friction to understand contemporary literature's engagement with neoliberalism: as the affective experiences they imaginatively present, the novels we examine are neither fully subsumed by the cultural dynamics of neoliberalism, nor can they claim a position of antagonistic, resistant distance. The relationship between fiction and neoliberalism, as well as the relationship between affective experience and their aesthetic and epistemological mediations, are characterised by friction. As a relation, friction enables a conjunction – of literature and neoliberalism, of affective experience and its mediation – while blocking a smooth integration or complete subsumption of one into the other.

In these concluding pages, rather than distinguishing between novels based on their level of subsumption or their degree of subversion, we

propose a perspective on our case studies with an eye on, to paraphrase Berlant, how their lived affective experiences are given form, how they are mediated through aesthetic and narrative form as well as through frames of philosophical or political critique.

On the one hand, we see novels deploying various formal strategies to mediate affective experience, which thus unfolds in stories with varying degrees of narrative complexity and experimentation. In some cases the formal devices derive from previous periods in literary history and can therefore be considered aesthetically residual, even though the function and significance of these devices change – in line with our hypothesis of the affective dominant. David Nolens' *Stilte en melk voor iedereen*, for instance, wields paradoxical structures of narrative embedding familiar from postmodern fiction to mediate a contemporary affective sensibility. Similarly in Zadie Smith's *NW* the characters' sense of affective detachment is given shape through narrative techniques deriving from both modernist and postmodernist fiction.

A significant subset of this category of residual aesthetic mediations is the mediation of affective experience through narrative genre, more specifically the genre of the Bildungsroman. In multiple cases we have observed an aesthetic processing and formalising of an experience of detachment through the genre of the Bildungsroman, a mediation that helps to reveal the experience while not affording the character a resolution or a newly articulated sense of attachment. Apart from the novels discussed in [chapter 3](#) we may point to cases from other chapters, such as Lieke Marsman's *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens*, Zadie Smith's *NW* and Nina Polak's *Gebreik is een groot woord*.

In a second category of aesthetic mediation, formal devices appear to emerge from the characters' affective trajectory within their current condition – even though all aesthetic techniques have histories, for instance in feminist writings and poetics. Both Niña Weijers' *Kamers anti-kamers* and Heike Geissler's *Seasonal Associate* are cases in point: their respective experimentations with multi-person and second-person narrative have feminist precursors. Yet their aesthetic devices support their characters' search for folds of affective attachment rather than primarily giving shape and consistency to characters' experiences of detachment and disaffection, as in Nolens and Smith. The formally most challenging and ambitious novel in our corpus, Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, may also be considered the most aesthetically emergent: even though it incorporates a dizzying constellation of inter-textual references, its narrative mediation of the protagonist's trajectory is as innovative and intractable as its affective sensibility.

On the other hand the novels we have discussed display various types of mediations of an epistemological, rather than aesthetic, nature: mediations through frames or discourses deriving from philosophy, political theory or cultural critique. We consider such mediations residual when epistemological reflection along (post)modernist lines anticipates or transitions into questions of a predominantly affective character. We consider them emergent when epistemological reflection is premised on a predominantly affective disposition and is called upon by characters and writers alike to navigate or possibly elucidate their affective experience. In many cases, however, the interaction between affective experience and epistemological mediation seems more ambiguous and messier.

What we call residual mediation of affective experience through epistemological frames effectively indicates the transition from postmodernism's epistemological and ontological questions to the affective questions we consider dominant in contemporary fiction. This transition is most clearly visible in David Nolens' *Stilte en melk voor iedereen*, incidentally also the oldest novel in our corpus (published in 2008). Postmodern conceptions of the self, of language and of nomadic sociality – in themselves a mixed bag of epistemological reflections tipping over into ontological questions – are still the main intellectual tools for making sense of existence – except they no longer make any sense at all. Such philosophical mediations (and their aesthetic counterparts) leave the subject feeling unmoored, isolated and disaffected, with no other possibilities for attachment than identification with the symptoms of detachment – ranging from pathological fantasy to racist or nationalist imaginaries.

The protagonist in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* tries to reason his way out of his experience of detachment through philosophical reflections on presence and representation, on the actual and the virtual. These postmodern conceptions may afford him a tentative rational grasp of his affective disposition; however, they also send him further down the rabbit hole of speculative reflection on reflections. Rather than a fold for attachment in affective relationships, both Nolens' and Lerner's protagonists find speculative spirals of introspection. Residual mediations of a different kind may be found in Zadie Smith's *NW*, the composition of which is laid out as a panorama of class, race and gender stratifications in contemporary English society. Starting out from an epistemologically mediated critique of social hierarchies the novel traces the affective impact of unequal opportunities on the people whose lived experience is contained and crosscut by systemic conflict.

Epistemological mediations of a more emergent kind can be found in novels by Fatima Daas, Édouard Louis and Mohammed Mbougar Sarr, where frames deriving from cultural and political critique make a fold in which identifications may be rearticulated. Both queer critiques of heteronormativity and postcolonial critiques of normative queer emancipation contribute to Daas' eponymous narrator's negotiation of her identification as a queer Muslim woman in France's increasingly xenophobic society. Epistemological mediation thus contributes to the protagonist's reparative search for affectively nourishing attachments to people who accept and help sustain her identity. Louis' (also eponymous) narrator mediates his affective crisis through the intersecting frames of 'Bourdiesian', gender and queer critique: an intersectional reflection on working-class, heteronormative masculinity guides his tentative reparative conversations – even if only in his mind – with his father. In Sarr's novel a dense layering of epistemological mediations – from modernist poetics to (debates within) postcolonial critique – yields a plane for rearticulating both poetical and political affiliations within the world of postimperial Francophone literature. The protagonist's trajectory through these mediations is, again, tentatively reparative, as it may open up possibilities for renewed creative identifications with an African-European literary tradition that was born from as well as obscured – if not erased – by the history of colonisation.

Joost de Vries' *Oude meesters* clearly illustrates the messiness of ambiguous mediations, which can be situated in between residual and emergent mediations. The novel's male protagonists cite postcolonial and feminist critique as relevant contexts to understand their disaffection in contemporary Dutch society; yet they do not use these critiques as intellectual tools to further examine their cultural situatedness. Their position towards these epistemological frames is defensive and nostalgic, implying that the traction they have gained in recent years rather contributes to their affective crisis. We find similarly ambiguous, yet less defensive, epistemological mediations in the novels by two other Dutch writers, Nina Polak and Niña Weijers. The former's female protagonist, in *Gebrek is een groot woord*, acknowledges postcolonial critique's legitimacy as an epistemological frame, while registering its impact primarily as shame and melancholia. Moreover, the novel's intricate composition implies an uneasy connection between postcolonial critique and hierarchies of class and level of education in (white) Dutch society.

In Weijers' *Kamers antikamers* epistemological mediation of the protagonist's affective crisis through feminist critique is ambivalent; the novel's composition sets up a probing dialogue with the tradition of

feminist emancipatory writing, yet it remains unclear to what extent this frame is accepted as a mediation affording a deeper understanding of this crisis – let alone pointing towards a remedy. Postcolonial critique, for that matter, is grudgingly rejected as a relevant epistemological mediation. The female protagonist's project, in Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, to document the stories of lost refugee children, is both spurred on by postcolonial critique of US politics and history, and haunted by postcolonial melancholia as the protagonist questions the ethical legitimacy of her own position as narrator of stories. The novel's complex narrative structure displaces yet in no way resolves the protagonist's affective crisis.

Although emergent epistemological mediations of affective crisis tend to yield more optimism about the possibilities for sustainable attachments – and thus tend to be more inclined towards reparation – this is not a clear-cut distinction. On the one hand, reparation through epistemological mediations always involves a moment of paranoid critique of precarious conditions of living or exclusionary identity formations. On the other hand, all the novels we discuss in this book have reparative impulses, even if these are (as with De Vries) obscured by irony or nostalgic fantasies. In Marsman's *The Opposite of a Person* intense epistemological mediation through both gender critique and ecocriticism does not open up reparative possibilities for the protagonist (who dies, for that matter). By comparison, the protagonist's affective experience in Heti's *How Should a Person Be* is only parenthetically mediated through epistemological frames of gender or materialist critique; yet she finds a fold in neoliberal reification through her affective attachment to an intimate friend.

As an additional perspective on the body of works discussed in this book, we propose to outline two affective scenarios we have seen recurring in varying modalities throughout this study. A first affective pattern we identify as melancholia; this affective scenario is guided by an experience of loss, usually the loss of an object of attachment holding a promise for the subject. This object of attachment may be embodied by a narrative genre, such as the Bildungsroman projecting a promise of emancipation and freedom for Bram in Van der Graaff's *Wormen en engelen*, or the genre of the (colonial) travel story promising adventure and grandeur in the novels by Polak and De Vries. The lost object of attachment may also be of a more abstract, theoretical nature – for example the postmodern notion of nomadism in Nolens' novel – or even of an ontological nature, as the loss of the world itself in Marsman's novel. Postcolonial melancholia, as we discussed in [chapter 4](#), can be seen as a subcategory of this affective scenario. An alternative subcategory of melancholia might be

the scenario where the experience of loss is met with an intensified identification with the lack of affective attachment, for example Lerner's protagonist identifying with detachment as a pathway to experiencing the virtual, or Nolens' protagonist indulging in phantasmatic delusion.

Typically, with melancholia the loss is only partially worked through and is not followed by a rearticulation of the subject's attachment to alternative objects whose promises are perhaps less cruel. A second affective scenario we have identified, then, can be called reparation. To be sure, melancholia and reparation differ only gradually, the latter distinguished by a more redeeming working through of the loss that opens up possibilities for a renewed articulation of the subject's attachments. Interestingly, in our body of work we observe reparative impulses in cases where the objects of attachment were rather prone to hold the subject in a relation of personal and/or social stuckness. From relatively underprivileged positions we see reparative attitudes that reassemble such objects – such as working-class masculinity in Louis' novel, the partial identities of being Muslim and being queer in Daas' novel, or the postimperial Francophone world of letters in Sarr's novel – into a newly composed infrastructure from which the subject can gain sustenance and move onwards. There may well be a generational dimension here, since in Smith's novel a somewhat earlier generational perspective on underprivileged coming-of-age tends towards defensive strategies of paranoid critique, hardening rather than loosening the affective crisis of detachment. While the affective crisis is most probably political, any perspective towards its politicisation may well have to pass through and feed back into affective reparation.

Note

1. The vocal is credited to Theodore Cale Schaffer.

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Affective Crisis and the Possibility of Attachment offers a comparative critical study of contemporary fiction. It intervenes in discussions about contemporary fiction in its literary-historical relationship to postmodernism and in its socio-historical relationship to neoliberalism. It argues that contemporary literature is dominated by affective questions that are rooted in, but not fully subsumed by, neoliberalism: 'How can I experience reality (as real)?'; 'How can I feel attached to someone?' This 'affective dominant' signals a diachronical shift from postmodernist fiction's pervasive epistemological and ontological reflections to a focus on questions of an affective nature in contemporary fiction. It also offers a perspective on contemporary fiction as mediating neoliberalism's double-edged dynamics of commodifying affective experience while privatising collective experience.

The book argues that contemporary fiction develops emergent mediations of neoliberal dynamics, with the affective crises the latter yield. It studies this affective crisis in relation to central themes as identity and climate crisis, and through prevalent contemporary genres as autofiction and coming-of-age narratives. The book explores a transnational corpus, including authors Heike Geissler, Ben Lerner, Édouard Louis, Valeria Luiselli, Ling Ma, Lieke Marsman, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, Niña Weijers and Alejandro Zambra, amongst others.

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