Intimacy, Detachment, and the (Post-)Postmodern Novel: Imagining Distance in Contemporary American Fiction

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Introduction

1 Most large-scale historical changes unfold slowly over long periods of time; only rarely are they permanent and immediate. In March 2020, we—meaning both the editors of this issue and most of us in Europe and North America—saw one such momentous shift take shape almost overnight: One day we were going about our daily lives, meeting in restaurants and on campus, shaking hands and sneezing in public, in short, taking for granted the numerous points of contact between ourselves and other people. The next, we were not. Even if many of the restrictions imposed then have since been relaxed (and then reimposed, only to be relaxed again, in the by now all-too-familiar merry-go-round), this awareness of our proximity to other people has not yet left us—perhaps it never will. When we responded to a call for proposals for *AmLit—American Literatures* with an outline for a pandemic-themed special issue two years ago, nobody knew how far-reaching these changes would turn out to be. Caught in what appeared to be an historic event yet to reveal its full magnitude, and stuck in our respective homes, we felt moved to do something but unsure of what might constitute a proper response. We were not alone in worrying about this: The editor of *The Quarantine Files*, an early collection of reflections on the pandemic by leading academics and public intellectuals put together for LARB, remarks on the equivocality of undertaking such a project in the first place: "What was the point of saying anything right now? Should we not spend more time reflecting on the significance? Might we not simply reaffirm our own privileged positions? Worse still, might our interventions come across as parasitic to the virus?" (Evans 5) These same questions on our minds, we (too) concluded that the lesser of two evils would be to 'intervene'

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in our own modest way. With no leading critical theorists on our speed dials, we set on a different course and asked instead how literature might help us think about the questions of proximity and distance that were accentuated by the pandemic. What does contemporary literature know about distance? Almost immediately, we discovered that even though we had proposed an examination of "fictions of distance," this term implies—in a sense, demands—a dialectics between distance, alienation, disengagement, and disconnect on the one hand and proximity, intimacy, engagement, and connection on the other. The remainder of this introduction will seek to unpack this dialectic of intimacy and distance by first looking at detachment as a critical practice and then turning to examine literature as a connecting medium.

Critical Detachment

2 Before asking what literature knows about distance, we can begin by asking what criticism knows. Questions of distance are a standard feature of epistemological debates, and, indeed, belong integrally to the project of philosophy itself. From the shadows cast on the wall of Plato's cave to the dawn of modern, critical thought during the Enlightenment, first critical distance, and then self-distance in the form of reflexivity have been considered intellectual virtues of the first order. Although certain nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century schools of thought have sought ways of knowing that challenged the ubiquity of detachment—phenomenology comes to mind—the veneration of distance as a critical ideal has received its most damning criticism after the 1970s, when critics began questioning the possibility, and the desirability, of scientific objectivity in earnest. "All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility," wrote Donna Haraway in her seminal 1988 essay "Situated Knowledges." Seeking to expose the "disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively" of the Enlightenment ideal of scientific objectivity, Haraway called for a more engaged, more "situated" way of knowing: "Passionate detachment" (583-85). Yet, as literary critic Amanda Anderson explains in *The Powers of Distance*, by seeking to expose how claims to objective knowledge are not made outside the force fields of power, and showing that seekers of knowledge are subject to the same biases as the rest of society, critics did not overcome distance. Instead, they exchanged an unquestioned veneration of distance for an increasingly self-reflexive—and therefore self-distanced—practice of critical detachment (23-25).

3 More recently, Anglophone literary and cultural criticism has witnessed another flare-up of debates over critical distance. In the so-called "method wars" (Anker and Felski 2) that have erupted in literary and cultural criticism

in the past few decades, various attempts have been made for overcoming exactly the kind of self-reflexive detachment practiced by critics in the seventies and eighties. As Rita Felski, one of the most influential proponents of "postcritique," explains, *their* critical practices ("symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism") demand "an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (*suspicion*)" and equate a pose of disinterested disengagement with intellectual rigor (3; emphasis in original). Drawing on theories of affect, the postcritical movement implies that critique has learned nothing from its own criticism of Enlightenment ideals but still thinks that aloofness equals intellectual adeptness. Hence, the need to move beyond critique itself and become *post*critical. Yet, by taking critique as the object of its criticism, postcritique may not be so much overcoming distance as once more extending the critical project, taking not merely critical methods but the very person of the critic—affects, feelings, attitudes, and all—into its fold. Self-evidently, such an attack on critical detachment and "suspicion" as the prevailing "mood and method" (Felski 1) of the twentieth century downplays the crucial role distance has played in the formation of the modern intellect more generally: If we believe Hannah Arendt, modernity was ushered in by Galileo, who used a telescope—a technology of distance, if there ever was one—to demonstrate that, contrary to sensory perception and common belief, the earth and its inhabitants are not the center of the universe. "The immediate philosophic reaction to this reality was not exultation but Cartesian doubt," Arendt writes, "by which modern philosophy—that 'school of suspicion' as Nietzsche once called it—was founded" (260). If distance, and by extension, suspicion (primarily the suspicion of oneself), is understood as the prevailing ethos of modern, post-Enlightenment thought, overcoming it by a simple tuning of one's "mood," as Felski suggests, seems unlikely and ultimately undesirable.

4 The way out of this critical impasse is indicated by Anderson. Lamenting what she takes to be "incoherence on the subject of detachment in contemporary theory," Anderson calls for a more nuanced understanding of distance as a distinctly modern intellectual practice. In her view—and the above overview seems to support this claim—"contemporary thinkers generate false oppositions and exclusions in their consideration of differing modes and practices of detachment," which results in "truncated forms of theory" (24). Instead of assuming that distance is both a constant and constantly good or bad, Anderson argues that being able to "imagine critical distance as a temporary vantage," and "disengagement" as a "'stance' . . . among others," allows us to see the value of detachment as "an aspiration more than a certainty" (32–33):

> The cultivation of detachment involves an attempt to transcend partiality, interests, and contexts: it is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity. The norms through which that aspiration finds expression may be situated, the aspiration may always be articulated through historically available forms, but as an aspiration it cannot be reduced to a simple form of illusion, or a mere psychological mechanism. There are practitioners of detachment who are . . . certain of their achievement . . . , but there are also practitioners of detachment who are ambivalent, hesitant, uneasy, and sometimes quite thoughtfully engaged in a complex process of self-interrogation and social critique. (33)

Like Enlightenment itself, which Anderson considers in Habermasian fashion not a "tainted" but merely "an unfinished project" (26), the cultivation of distance "is always an ongoing, partial project" (180). Ideally, Anderson concludes, critique advances by means of a "reflexive interrogation of its own practices" (180)—that is, through the cultivation of a critical distance to its own methods and accepted truths.

Theoretical Intimations

5 By focusing solely on distance, detachment, and disengagement with comparatively little attention paid to the corresponding notions of proximity, intimacy, and engagement, critical examinations of distance have frequently neglected the dialectic nature of these concepts. To a certain degree, this is true even of Anderson's otherwise excellent *Powers of Distance*, which attempts to redeem distance as a "distinctive topos" of Victorian literature, and modern thought more broadly, by examining detachment as an "aesthetic" and a form of "intellectual practice" (5). Against such intellectual and literary aesthetics of detachment, it is worth inquiring into a corresponding notion, which we propose to discuss as an aesthetics of *intimacy*.

6 Unlike distance—debates over which erupt here and there but rarely address the concept itself—intimacy has in recent years been subject to several inquiries, even though remarkably few have made any headway as to describing its exact nature. One of the more lucid accounts is literary critic Nancy Yousef's *Romantic Intimacy*. Derived from the Latin word "*intimus*," denoting "the 'most inner,'" Yousef explains, intimacy refers both to that which is most intimate and personal within us and to that which we share with our intimate others (1). For Yousef, the difference between intimacy, understood as "the feeling or sense of closeness," and "mere proximity" is that, whereas proximity is "without content," intimacy is endowed with significance and meaning (3). In this unbreachable gap between an undisclosable inner world and the profound need to find communion with others with equally unreachable depths, Yousef locates a condition of "being-alone-together," which she refers to as "the paradox of intimacy" (4). Intimacy, one could say, is thus not a measure of distance between objects in space but rather refers

to the potential for significant togetherness toward which human beings may aspire in their interactions with each other—a togetherness, however, which paradoxically consists of a communion between separate, distinct beings. According to affect theorist Lauren Berlant, on the other hand, intimacy is even less real than this; rather, intimacy denotes a "utopian" vision which operates in the interstices between fantasy and reality (282). For Berlant, intimacy does not constitute a feeling or specific kind of emotional attachment, as it does for Yousef, but "an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachments" (285).

7 If intimacy is rarely instantiated in reality—"virtually no one knows how to do intimacy," claims Berlant (282)—most critics seem to think that it is even less likely to find expression in virtual spaces. In *Alone Together*, psychologist and social scientist Sherry Turkle claims that digital technology has become "the architect of our intimacies," to the detriment of the real thing: "Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other," and instead of actual intimate connections, we settle for "our new intimacy with machines," which are by definition unable to hold up their end of the bargain by sustaining the sense of significant togetherness we crave (1-3). Whereas Berlant and Yousef emphasize the constructed, linguistically-mediated nature of all intimacy, Turkle draws a sharp distinction between "authentic" intimate bonds between human beings and the "inauthentic," simulated intimacies that occur in technologically-mediated environments, especially those that take place between human and non-human actors: For her study, Turkle interviewed hundreds of people whose desire for intimacy was not directed at other people, or even at pets or other non-human animals, but at sociable robots, such as Paro, the Japanese robot in the shape of a baby seal marketed as a companion for elderly people. Turkle's pessimism seems both reasonable and out of place: On the one hand, there is no question that the lonely and the isolated deserve more than battery-operated toys to keep them company; on the other, human beings have always relied on technology where actual face-to-face interaction is either undesirable or impossible. More broadly, Turkle's nostalgic yearning for a golden age of intimacy recalls deep-seated anxieties about technology and its capability to erode "authentic" human contact.

8 Such lamentations over a lost art of intimacy are especially compelling in the ongoing pandemic—and not entirely without cause, given the alarming spikes in reported loneliness and feelings of isolation after its onset. One way to gain some critical distance from these anxieties about intimacy in the digitally-mediated world is to examine an older, analogue form of mediated intimacy—one that predates social media, video conferences, and artificial intelligence: literature. If what makes digital technologies "seductive," in Turkle's opinion, is their ability to provide an "illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (3), then this is no less true about the allure of reading. Would

Turkle think that readers of literature also "navigate intimacy by skirting it" altogether (10)? Unpacking these prejudices serves as an exercise in critical (self-)distancing. Let us consider the young woman who tells Turkle that she would exchange her human boyfriend for a robot one in a heartbeat were such technology available. For Turkle, it comes as a genuine shock that certain people would find engaging in such "inauthentic" intimacies "preferable . . . to . . . the sometimes messy, often frustrating, and always complex" kind of intimacy found in the "real" world (7). Evidently, in Turkle's view, not only are there "authentic" and "inauthentic" kinds of intimacy, people might be unknowingly seeking illusory intimacies, the true nature of which it is the critic's job to expose. Were she less certain of her own objectivity, and more prone to the kind of hesitant, self-reflexive detachment called for by Anderson, Turkle might have noted the biases that underlie her questioning—at the very least by placing her inquiry in an historical context of similar anxieties concerning various new media. As literary critics, we suggest contextualizing such anxieties by examining the paradoxes of intimacy instantiated by the novel.

9 On the one hand, the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century coincides with what Jürgen Habermas has discussed as the demarcation of *Intimsphäre*, the intimate, private sphere of the bourgeois home, from *Öffentlichkeit*, the public sphere. Concomitant with this "transformation of the public sphere," Habermas argues, the relations between "author, work, and public . . . became intimate mutual relationships between privatized individuals," and especially the "author and the reader became actors who 'talked heart to heart'" (50). According to Habermas, the modern "psychological novel fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for his own, to use the relationships between the figures, between the author, the characters, and the reader, as a substitute for reality" (51)—or as a substitute for 'real' intimacy. The novel, according to this view, is from the start an art of the intimate, which affords readers an unprecedented familiarity with the intimate inner lives of (fictional) others, but also has the potential of entrapping them in a false, in Turkle's words "inauthentic," form of intimacy. Yet, Habermas argues, only between such psychologically self-distanced, self-reflexive individuals could "the public sphere of a rational-critical debate" emerge (51), proving that even "inauthentic" intimacy can have a potentially transformative effect on society.

10 On the other hand, the novel has been criticized exactly for the opposite reason—for a failure to sustain any form of intimacy. Thinking about the novel as an art of isolation could begin with Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller," which is rendered throughout in a language of intimacy and distance. Regardless whether or not one agrees with Benjamin's claim that "the

rise of the novel" brought about a corresponding "decline of storytelling" (364), Benjamin certainly makes a compelling case for thinking of the modern novel as an art of isolation. Embedded deeply in the social fabric of his community, the archetypal "storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers"—counsel which, "woven into the fabric of real life," becomes that rarest of things, "wisdom" (364). (Perhaps, were Benjamin to have stepped a little closer to these epic storytellers of yore, he might have noticed the gender disparity—many an ancient storyteller, perhaps even most of them, were women.) The modern novelist stands in contrast to the artisanal storyweaver, according to Benjamin: "The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (364). While "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (367), the novel is, at most, "like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play" (372). Similarly, the "man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller," even when the storytelling itself is mediated by writing, whereas the "reader of a novel . . . is isolated" (372).

11 Once more we find ourselves at a theoretical impasse. According to Habermas, the modern novel creates an unprecedented intimacy between readers and writer. Benjamin, by contrast, thinks that oral storytelling provides the most intimate form of connection, after which comes the epic, the romance, and other pre-modern literary genres, followed finally by the modern novel, with distance increasing—and intimacy decreasing—every step of the way. Despite their opposing views, neither Habermas nor Benjamin is able to render the novel solely in terms of either distance or intimacy; instead, what we find at the heart of both accounts is a dialectic of presence and absence, of proximity and distance, of connection and disconnection.

12 Deconstructing these oppositions was one of the great achievements of poststructuralist thought and provides a suitable conclusion to this theoretical overview. This final detour is also necessary for another reason: In contrast to the modern novel discussed by Habermas and Benjamin, the postmodern and post-postmodern novels discussed in the remainder of this issue are acutely aware, not just of distance and intimacy, but of the theoretical intimations we have been mapping thus far: The contemporary novel is, in Judith Ryan's phrase, the "novel after theory" in the sense that it can "be said to 'know about' literary and cultural theory" (1). Put another way, we began by asking what fiction knows about distance, but this question might be rightfully amended so as to also ask what fiction knows about *theories* of distance.

13 One of the most influential works in this regard is Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*, which argues that we falsely understand writing as a substitute

for the connection established through speech. "Writing," philosopher Barbara Johnson explains in her frequently-cited introduction to *Dissemination*, is considered "a second-rate activity that tries to overcome distance by making use of it: the writer puts his thought on paper, distancing it from himself, transforming it into something that can be read by someone far away, even after the writer's death" (ix). What Derrida aims at with his grammatology, an objective science of writing, is to show that our trust in the immediacy and self-evidence of the spoken word—what Derrida calls logocentrism—is itself misguided: The spoken word is constructed as immediate and intimate only in relation to the written word, so in fact, it is the "difference and distance," or *différance*, between these two terms which is significant to our understanding of both (cf. Johnson ix). Put another way, Derrida is suggesting that our belief in the immediacy and intimacy of spoken language is itself little more than a fiction: a fiction of presence. In a Derridean poststructuralist perspective, Turkle's longing for authentic, unmediated intimacy, and Benjamin's nostalgia for the present premodern storyteller, appear naïve: Whether spoken or written, language always mediates our experience of intimacy—including the physical, non-verbal kind, which remains at the level of "mere proximity" until it is elevated to the significant togetherness of intimacy by language, which alone is capable of signifying something. Unless we learn to merge distinct human beings into one body and soul—perhaps in the manner imagined in Plato's *Symposium*—there simply is no escape from these paradoxes of intimacy and distance.

14 As a conclusion to this overview, we can begin undoing some of the distance afforded by theoretical abstractions. Unheeded by Benjamin's worry about the hopelessness of finding communion—let alone intimacy—in modern literature, writers have kept on writing and readers have kept on reading throughout the violent upheavals of the twentieth century, just as they have persisted in writing and reading throughout the digital revolution of the twenty-first century. Even a brief glance at postwar literary debates proves that far from naïve or ignorant of the paradoxical nature of distance and intimacy, literature after World War II has, if anything, become more aware of the need for its connecting abilities without forgetting about the fraught basis on which such a communion is erected. While Theodor Adorno was wondering about the barbarous nature of writing poetry after Auschwitz, Paul Celan not only kept writing but insisted that he "cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem" (26).[1] This puzzling analogy has been read in a variety of different ways. In Emmanuel Lévinas's interpretation, by comparing a poem to a handshake, Celan is transferring language from the metaphysical to the physical, effectively claiming in poetry an "elementary communication" comparable to the mutual, tactile correspondence of a handshake, that

"moment of pure touch, of pure contact, of that grasping, that pressing which is, perhaps a way of giving even to the hand that gives" (Lévinas 16-17). Instead of constituting a mere theoretical abstraction, Celan's analogy suggests that poetry, literature, connects real people—whether it does so well or badly depends largely on the writers and readers who make up the poetic encounter: "Only truthful hands write true poems," Celan himself adds (26). Debating the possibility of a transcendent "language of and for proximity"—Lévinas's term for Celan's poetic vision (17)—is not necessary for drawing the unavoidable conclusion that, for better or for worse, we human beings are dependent on language as a means of seeking intimacy across the distances between us, faulty as this medium may be.

The Intimate Poetics of Postmodern Fiction

15 The paradoxes of intimacy are brought front and center in the postmodern novel, the quintessential form of which is metafiction. In the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut, elaborate metafictional plots and self-referential language discourage readerly identification with fictive characters. Such "fiction about fiction" assumes a self-reflexive, in Linda Hutcheon's terms "narcissistic," form of "textual self-awareness" (1). As these terms imply, even defendants of postmodern poetics (such as Hutcheon) frequently end up accusing postmodernism of solipsistic navel-gazing. On the other hand, such accounts imply that distance from, and disengagement with, the world must coincide with aesthetic self-absorption and narcissistic self-love—solipsistic, solitary intimacies. Yet, metafiction's apparent disengagement and dis-immersion with the fictive world is not gratuitous: Metafictional distance merely redirects readers to engage differently, by demanding that they grapple seriously with the idea of fiction itself. In this sense, the contrived metafictional plots of postmodern novels act as reminders of the original meaning of the word *fiction*, from the Latin *fingere*, to "form" or "contrive." The poetics of postmodernism, far from overly detached and disengaged, are revealed to be the very opposite of this: By seeking to represent the tactile act of crafting that is involved in the making of all fictions, postmodern fiction is a testament to the idea that the art of poetics is an inherently intimate one.

16 Beyond its intimate poetics, postmodern fiction also demonstrates a deep, if ambivalent, engagement with the idea of intimacy on the level of content. A comprehensive study of intimacy in postmodern fiction has so far not been undertaken, but our own ongoing research indicates potential avenues for conducting such a survey. Many classics of postmodern literature are doubtful or suspicious about the possibility of intimacy. Frequently, when the potential for intimacy emerges within the postmodern novel—whether between fictional characters or between the reader and the implied author—it assumes the

sinister form of complicity, coercion, or outright violence: A reader of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) who is too easily taken in by Humbert Humbert's intimations risks falling prey to the same manipulative tricks the narrator uses in coercing consent from his teenage victim. A similarly high degree of detachment would be advisable to readers of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), whose psychotic narrator is either unable or unwilling to differentiate between his homicidal and erotic impulses, or between real and imagined encounters. Instead of identifying with Patrick Bateman, readers of Ellis's novel thus find themselves in a position where they must learn to discern between various kinds of intimate violations—whether imaginary or frightfully real is never quite clear—the exact nature of which most would rather not contemplate at all. As these examples demonstrate, even those postmodern novels that have frequently been accused of encouraging detachment, even indifference toward the transgressions they depict, are deeply invested in paradoxes of intimacy and the ethics of intimate encounter. If anything, by forcing novel readers to become newly aware of the often uncomfortably intimate act of reading, postmodernism's intimate poetics can serve to attenuate the need to remain vigilant—as in self-critical and self-reflexive—about the distance between ourselves and fictive and real others.

Aesthetics of Intimacy in Post-9/11 Fiction

17 Around the millennium, following the attacks on September 11, several critics have argued that postmodernism has exhausted itself. On par with the waning of a postmodern aesthetic of detachment, a notably more optimistic perspective on intimacy began to be articulated in the works of a new generation of fiction writers. In contrast to a postmodern suspicion of intimacy and a poststructuralist skepticism about language as a medium, novelists such as Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Dave Eggers have turned to explore the possibility of intersubjective communication, both within their fictions and as a means of connecting with readers. In recent literary scholarship, this shift has been traced back to David Foster Wallace, who is seen as the forerunner of what has come to be called "The New Sincerity" in American fiction, and is thus cast as a key figure in the self-reevaluation of literature in the wake of postmodernism. In Adam Kelly's assertion, in New Sincerity writing, both author and reader "really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time" (206; emphasis in original). Through an emphatic acknowledgment of readers as present within their texts, the writers in question employ a rhetoric of sincerity to come out of 'hiding' and expose themselves with all

their anxieties and vulnerabilities. Intimacy is here neither undercut by ironic distance, nor does it signify a trap for the reader. Instead, it is rendered as an attempt at genuine communion between author and reader.

18 But what is new about The New Sincerity? Whereas Lionel Trilling's seminal *Sincerity and Authenticity* of 1972 still conceived of sincerity as a correspondence between two stable entities, "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2), New Sincerity writers are aware of the powerful poststructuralist critique of such simplified views of subject formation. Moreover, they explicitly draw attention to the precarity of their own literary endeavors: Instead of taking the veracity of their authorial voice for granted and expecting their audience to follow suit, they invite readers to judge for themselves. Such gestures reflect the insight that an informed conception of sincerity—similar to Yousef's "paradox of intimacy"—entails at least one double bind: Literature cannot escape the dilemma of, on the one hand, disavowing manipulative rhetoric through an endorsement of sincerity and, on the other, embracing the necessarily self-reflexive rhetoric of self-disclosure (Tolksdorf 17-24). Observing how some contemporary writers employ postmodern techniques toward different ends—for example through what Lee Konstantinou calls "post-irony"—, several scholars have commented on the dialectical relationship between this writing style and its postmodern predecessor. In *Succeeding Postmodernism*, Mary K. Holland observes that contemporary literature is cognizant of poststructuralist's skepticism about language as a connecting medium but nevertheless chooses to approach it as a tool for overcoming distance rather than as an obstacle in the achievement of intimacy. Rather than a regression to the naïveté of 'pre-postmodern' literary modes, Holland argues, this shows that 'post-postmodern' literature has learned from poststructuralism and now challenges some of its core tenets as it revisits these same questions of intimacy and distance (6). In her summary, the apparent paradox of "language as solution to the problem of language" is an accurate account of the corresponding authors' literary endeavor (3).

19 Even though neither intimacy nor sincerity, its rhetorical cousin, are any less fraught now than they were at the height of postmodernism, recent fiction seems more committed to both the possibility and the necessity of seeking connection. In the contrarian rationale of New Sincerity writers, artistic success depends on the courage that sincerity demands precisely because such an attitude appears unfeasible. These authors' trust in literature's ability to connect sets them apart from postmodern novelists' complicit depictions of intimacy. Against the postmodern aesthetics of detachment, their aesthetics of intimacy entail emphatic negotiations of proximity among individuals and institutions, including readers and authors, which gain their intensity and appeal through the reciprocal recognition and trust among those involved.

Whether this relational longing is fulfilled remains to be seen in each individual case, but the very desire for intimacy in environments that appear averse to it is itself notable. After all, as much of today's communication is perceived as corrupted by commercial or personal interests, 'true' intimacy—which, as Berlant noted, may well be a utopia in the first place—appears impossible.

20 As this brief overview of fictions of distance in contemporary American fiction demonstrates, the possibility of linguistic and literary communion should not be taken for granted, nor should a desire for intimacy be treated as naïve or even dangerous. Instead, in both life and in literature, intimacy becomes a question with no easy answer.

Imagining Distance in a Time of Crisis

21 The writers in this issue continue investigating the dialectic of intimacy and distance through essays on three novels, each of which 'knows' a great deal more about the paradoxes described above than it lets on. At first sight, the trio of essays seems to revolve around three unusually alienated and emotionally detached figures—three young women captured at three distinct moments of historic upheaval: In Maxime McKenna's essay on Joan Didion's breakthrough novel *Play It as It Lays* (1970), the sexual revolution and sixties' counterculture provide the backdrop for a Hollywood actress's private turmoil; in Marlene Dirschauer's essay on Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), the terrorist attacks of 9/11 loom at the horizon of the protagonist's drug-infused attempt to sleep through the year 2000; and in Sonja Pyykkö's essay on Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), a fictional pandemic displaces Occupy Wall Street as the instigator of a global cataclysm that leaves the protagonist, and the rest of the world, grasping for meaning. Yet, like the clichéd forest comprised of individual trees, when seen from the correct distance, something which would otherwise remain elusive suddenly becomes visible. Fiction provides a distancing effect in these novels, which offer new perspectives to the derisive cultural politics of the postwar U.S., the war on terror, and the financial crisis of 2008, respectively. That the characters in these novels themselves fail to grasp the significance of the events in which they are embroiled—much like we are now struggling to grasp the magnitude of what is unfolding around us—does not make these events any less pertinent to the readers of these novels.

22 Moreover, even if critics have tended to juxtapose detachment with intimacy, these essays demonstrate that fiction recognizes no such partition but finds a careful counterbalance between depictions of distance and of intimacy: McKenna examines how infrastructure—of the prosaic and easily-overlooked variety of highways and plumbing—provides a "fix," a means of connection, where social interaction fails, Dirschauer finds that art finally redeems and

connects the self- and world-alienated individual, and Pyykkö argues that nostalgia, as a form of sustained attachment with the idea of homecoming, has the potential of rooting the uprooted. The issue's title, *Fictions of Distance*, thus assumes a dual meaning, denoting both fiction's ability to provide distance and the fictive nature of distance itself. For better or for worse, it is part of the human condition, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, that we are never truly alone—even if we are never *not* alone, either. From the moment we enter this world, we are always already *alone together*. Setting out to ask not what contemporary literature knows about pandemics but what it knows about distance, we thus found ourselves back with the pandemic's paradigmatic ethos of social distancing. Perhaps this is an unavoidable consequence of an investigation born so clearly out of present concerns; in any case, the circular route demonstrates that literature knows a great deal about the subtle paradoxes inherent in the human condition, even if it does not always know what it knows.

Notes

[1] In a letter to Hans Bender dated May 18, 1960, Celan writes: "Craft means handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to *one* person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness. Only truthful hands write true poems. I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem" (26; emphasis in original).

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